

REVIEW ESSAY

Craft and Objecthood

The American Manufactory: Art, Labor, and the World of Things in the Early Republic.

LAURA RIGAL.

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998.

253 pp.

The Age of Homespun: Objects and Stories in the Creation of an American Myth.

LAUREL THATCHER ULRICH.

New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001.

501 pp.

A common complaint about the study of material culture is that it proceeds backward and in doing so merely confirms what we already know. As Cary Carson, a historian and vice president of research at Colonial Williamsburg, stated the problem at a conference on American material culture a decade ago: “[R]esearch often starts not with questions worth asking but with a collection of objects searching for something worth answering” (qtd. in Martin and Garrison, 411). Scholars in literature, a field increasingly orienting itself toward material culture, may not recognize this as a problem. After all, we routinely assemble and display what we take to be interesting textual (and increasingly, material textual) objects. Our sense of scale, the feeling that a single work is a proper unit of analysis and worthy of chapter-length treatment, derives from older forms of textual appreciation and explication, forms that might seem antiquated in light of the historicism of recent decades but are hard to shed and are generally taken to be constitutive of literary study itself. We often begin with intensive textual analysis and claim to move outward from particular textual objects to some general understanding of culture, though it is obvious that we also spend much of our time situating the objects that interest us in preexisting interpretive frameworks. We imagine that we are still largely a field of

(independent, exporting) textualists rather than (dependent, importing) contextualists, and there is no doubt that other disciplines have benefited from our methodological exports, but how frequently does the promise of textualism become realized in the form of truly novel contexts? How many studies of literary history end up merely offering additional examples of phenomena we are already familiar with, fleshing out long-standing frameworks, drawing upon preexisting interpretive contexts to confirm what we know? To put the question bluntly: Are scholars of literary and cultural history really just collectors and curators at heart, gathering textual and material objects for exhibition and display in advance of hard and meaningful questions for which the intensive study of those objects is a means to an answer?

The fields of literary and social history are in the midst of an object turn, a turn taken earlier (though in appreciably different ways) by anthropologists, archaeologists, art and architectural historians, folklorists, museum curators, and sociologists. The books under review, one on the “Age of Manufactures” and the other on the “Age of Homespun,” invite cultural and social historians to rethink basic disciplinary assumptions of their crafts by thinking about and with objects. They take different approaches, some governed by discipline, but they share a number of common features beyond their attention to craft and objecthood. In an age of consumption studies, both books center on production. In a scholarly climate that increasingly takes nationalism as its topic and the nation as the basic unit of analysis, they are both unapologetically regional studies. They both deserve readers beyond their primary disciplines, but both importantly use their periods to reflect on the current practices of their disciplines. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, for instance, sees Horace Bushnell’s 1851 “Age of Homespun” address as a founding document of social history, embodying both its strengths (an attention to everyday material life in an almost Braudelian way) and its weaknesses (an anti-institutional and anti-individual bias that freezes people into a “collective anonymity that denies either agency or the capacity to change” [20]). For her part, Laura Rigal hopes to exploit and critique the representational practices she studies, characterizing her own work as a cultural historian as counter-assembling materials and discovering “a mode of analysis as well as a mode of production in the uneven, multiform, quintessentially intermediate processes signified by the American manufactory” (17). Taken together, these books occasionally exemplify

but more often offer ways around some of the problems of material culture studies, and it is perhaps not surprising that they largely do so from a position outside of the traditional and evolving practices of the interdiscipline of material culture. Ulrich delivers a social history of objects and a meditation on what attention to “the mnemonic power of goods” might do to and for social history (395). Rigal, in a book as much about collecting as about collectivity, sketches a labor history of objects, showing how Early Republican culture dedicated itself to the representational practices of “collection, description, illustration, classification, publication, and display” (5). At their most basic, these books examine and historicize the relationship between words and things and between objects and stories.

The tension between language and artifact—between word and thing, story and object—has been a crucial governing conceit of material culture studies.¹ Important early manifestos of the American material culture movement by Henry Glassie (1977) and Jules David Prown (1982), in different ways, place writing in opposition to material culture. For Glassie, as for many who preceded and followed him, the study of material culture offers the chance to supplement the omissions and to overcome the obstacles of what can be teased out of written records. The impetus behind this version of material culture studies has in part been the pledge to change the way in which we understand and tell stories about American history by incorporating the histories of the illiterate and inarticulate. Objects, in this model, stand in for, speak for, and hold out the promise of unmediated access to the lives of ordinary people, the kind of access denied to students of elite culture by the medium of writing. Prown’s own scholarly work tends to focus on the environment of elite culture—paintings by John Singleton Copley and Benjamin West, fine furniture, decorative arts—but he shares Glassie’s presumption of the relative immediacy of objects. Objects, for Prown and many others, allow us to catch cultures at their “least self-conscious” (Prown 223) and thus are to be distinguished from “[p]urposive expression—for example, a diplomatic communiqué or an advertisement” (223). Art stands apart from material culture (and hence the subtitle of his recently collected essays, *Art as Evidence: Writings on Art and Material Culture* [2001]) because, like writing, it constitutes “self-conscious, intentional expression” (223). But “artifacts do not lie” (224). Material culture scholarship has not always settled for Prown and Glassie’s rough divide between writing and material culture—indeed, one of the

most illuminating recent books in the field, Robert Blair St. George's *Conversing by Signs: Poetics of Implication in Early New England Culture* (1998), is centrally concerned with resuscitating links between words and things in a culture too often figured in terms of language alone. Nevertheless, the dominant framework has been to describe nontextual objects as "expressions" of culture that embody mentalities in ways that are less mediated (if they are mediated at all) than the expressions of culture found in written objects.

At the same time that the ideology of material culture studies opposes word and thing, the methods of material culturists routinely translate thing into word and render objects as stories. A "Prownian" analysis typically begins, a recent collection of essays by former students in Prown's seminars on "American Art and Artifacts: The Interpretation of Objects" at Yale University explains, by "translating material object into narrative description . . . in an attempt to recreate an object's visual and physical effect in words" (Haltman 4). "[W]e do not analyze objects," Kenneth Haltman argues in *American Artifacts: Essays in Material Culture* (2000), "we analyze our descriptions of objects" (5) and it is the "object as *described*, that represents the primary evidence" (8). This places an enormous stake in an analyst's phenomenological experience with an object, and in her or his ability to render that experience in words. For Prown himself, "[a]rtifacts constitute the only class of historical events that occurred in the past but survive into the present. They can be reexperienced; they are authentic, primary historical material available for firsthand study" ("The Truth of Material Culture" [1993] in Prown 2001, 221). For Prown, objects embody cultures and express mentalities: "A chair is Philadelphia of the 1760s because it embodies elements of what was believed in Philadelphia in the 1760s" (223). It is no accident, given Prown's predisposition to see the material culture analyst in an experiential relationship to the object, that (judging from the essays collected in *Art as Evidence* and *American Artifacts*) Prown and his students are typically more interested in the users of objects than in their makers, seeing "mind in matter" in relation more to the experience of the object as a secondary consumer (however understood) than as a secondary producer. Focusing on and historicizing phenomenological experience can produce stunning results (as demonstrated recently by Alexander Nemerov's *The Body of Raphaelle Peale: Still Life and Self-hood, 1812-1824* [2001]). Prown's readings of objects are always rigorous and illuminating,

and his influence has been widespread within and beyond art history, but the claim that a particular object embodies a collective mentality or culture (“A chair is Philadelphia of the 1760s”) clearly rests on a vision of artifacts as found objects and identification of the analyst as its ultimate consumer. The focus on consumption in material culture studies reflects larger trends, of course. In the last two decades, a number of high-profile books and articles (by T. H. Breen, Elizabeth Cohen, and Lori Merish, for example) have brought the significance of consumption to students of early American culture. On the whole, scholars of history and literature are still more likely to write about production than consumption, though they are curiously much more interested in consumers than producers.² The products literary scholars commonly treat now, however, are just as likely to be discursively produced (identities or rhetorics) as manufactured.

Rigal’s *American Manufactory* places production (“the repressed, operative term in American art and culture after the Revolution” [17]) at the center of analysis, though this is ultimately less a book about production in itself than about what she calls the “cultural production of production” (8), a phrase that highlights the extent to which representation and production mirror each other in Rigal’s dazzling and revisionary cultural history of the Early Republic. In Rigal’s Early Republic, the urban artisan is the major character, though the culture of production is both its protagonist and antagonist (11). The book reminds readers of the links between labor and art in the period, indeed of the historical identity of these divided spheres. In a series of balanced readings of largely underappreciated textual and visual material, Rigal broadens our sense of the “arts” (a term that folded fine and mechanical artisans into a single category) and rescues the period from the preindustrial nostalgia that (from the left and the right) sometimes marks the study of Early American working life. Radically different from recent studies that turn to familiar writers in Philadelphia (Charles Brockden Brown, Benjamin Franklin, Susanna Rowson, or Benjamin Rush) for evidence of putatively national sentiments, Rigal’s book should force readers of those authors to do what Rigal herself scrupulously declines to do in her “counter assembly” (11): resituate their objects in a “world of things” alongside steamboat inventor John Fitch, ornithologist Alexander Wilson, and locksmith Pat Lyon. Rigal’s Early Republic is transitional and intermediary, always covering over fault lines of class by appeals to a vocabulary of self-production or nation-production. By focus-

ing on production and representation, Rigal treats a number of practices—the festive culture of nationalism, publication and display in natural history books and museums—and provides some of the most compelling readings of major paintings by Charles Wilson Peale and John Neagle. Rejecting at times a material culture approach, Rigal does not really practice art historical object analysis either. Her readings of Peale’s and Neagle’s painting (and, in a stunning stand-alone article on West and the political culture of nonconsumption published since the book in *American Literary History*) help make sense of these images in terms of central but overlooked debates, debates that are not always available to or from formal analysis. Her larger subject is capitalist expansion, and she discovers its logic in an insistent and transparent link between words and things.

Rigal is one of the few literary scholars of the period to join social historians in placing class at the center of the story of the Early Republic, but despite her rigorous attention to class, this is not a study of worker culture or artisan agency. Rigal’s topic is less “the enormous condescension of posterity” (to use E. P. Thompson’s famous phrase) than condescension within the past, and specifically the conspiracy through which elites managed to co-opt the artisan language of production while pushing artisans themselves away from the center of politics they had occupied during the American Revolution. As such, in her account of the Grand Federal Procession of 1788, she seems less interested in craft self-presentation than in the elite repackagings of the parade by Francis Hopkinson, James Wilson, and Benjamin Rush. Her reading thus differs from other recent treatments of festive culture, such as David Waldstreicher’s, which see events like the procession as genuine sources of “federal feeling” (a phrase Rigal shares with Waldstreicher). Her reading of John Fitch’s “Autobiography” and “Steamboat History,” manuscripts deposited at the Library Company of Philadelphia by Fitch and published for the first time in 1976, offers a case study in the way in which one mechanic struggled and failed (as Franklin had succeeded) “to translate Revolution into Union, private interest into public good, or words and persons into things” (56). Her attention to labor and culture distinguishes her work and sets the stage for other studies, but some readers may feel that the book plays at too high a level of abstraction, or that it settles for representations of labor when it might plumb what we think of as (for want of a better phrase, one that Rigal might reject) the real lives of laborers. Rigal is by and large interested in other

things than worker's literature (as say, Jacques Ranciere and Jonathan Rose are, in very different ways) or working-class culture and politics (as Gary Nash, Sean Wilentz, Alfred Young, Ronald Schultz, and Billy Smith are). Though centrally concerned with gender, a category she places at the heart of her discussions of natural history, Rigal's book offers few sustained reflections on female production—domestic labor and household production of the sort that Ulrich treats is absent here. Slavery, the “international trade in human products” (121) alluded to in a number of places in the text, clearly fits with her general sense of the federal fusion of word and thing (indeed, it may represent the *ne plus ultra* of such fusions), but readers are likely to desire more analysis of black workers, free and unfree.

One effect of Rigal's attention to representations of labor and class is the collapse of a Federalist-Republican binary as a meaningful way of understanding the culture of the early national period. For Rigal, this is a distinction that masks a larger (what she terms “federalist” and “federalizing”) solidarity on matters of production. Rigal does not find genuine ideological conflict in the period, at least at the level of national politics, though this hardly aligns her with an earlier generation of consensus historians: “party politics and decision making took place within a shared, federalizing structure that constituted Union as the production and display of productive persons” (132), she observes in a chapter dedicated to the “Lounger,” the “virtuoso consumer” (121) persona of Joseph Dennie's *Port Folio*. For Rigal, Jeffersonianism represents less a break with or alternative to Federalism than a continuation of its primary modes in different dress. While Rigal is certainly right to claim that we spend too much time interpreting the culture of the period (especially the 1790s) through the bifurcated lens of factionalism, the economic policies of the Federalists and the Democratic-Republicans were obviously not identical, especially as they related to labor. Some of these differences are rhetorical; others (the issues of tariffs, artisan suffrage, and the basic respect granted to labor) are not.

As should be evident even in small citations of Rigal's text, she employs the vocabulary of late eighteenth-century American politics—terms like “federalism” and “actual representation”—in ways that are deeply metaphorical and unlikely to be immediately recognizable by political or legal historians. They should pay attention, though, for her expansive readings are not so much applications of political terms to the sphere of culture as

revivifications of the deep history and meaning of those terms as they were appropriated by politics. For Rigal, “actual representation” names a larger preoccupation with the connection between words and things; its proponents are as much natural historians (people like Charles Wilson Peale and Alexander Wilson, the subjects of two of the best chapters) who follow Linneaus in identifying word and thing as political critics of the representational inequities of the British empire or (later) of the Federal Constitution. Rigal’s “federalism” is irreducible to divisions of power or to the text of a written constitution. Instead, “federalism was both artifact and agent of the changing technologies of American manufacturing itself, a fabric or frame ‘raised’ . . . by the dense intersections of technologies of representation, technologies that made and displayed production itself as the founding principle of union” (9). What Rigal calls “the larger framework of federalism” is its union of “persons with objects, words with things” (119); it is sustained through “the graphic connection between words and images” (140) and by what she calls “the nation-making juncture of word with image, language with graphic design” (186). “The federal state was located, . . . in the multiple media, arts, professions, and occupations that raised themselves into view by constituting and dividing themselves as artifacts of representative self-production” (120). Antifederalism is a word that rarely appears in this book; Rigal is more likely to write of “counter-federal” and “nonfederal” (12) movements and moments, treated here in the writings of men like John Fitch and Pat Lyon whose representational failures are shown to be counterproductive and impossible to incorporate in the cultural nexus of industrial capital and federalist technography that Rigal demarcates.

Rigal offers us a radically new and critical cultural history of the American Enlightenment, less a world of thoughts than a “world of things.” Her account of the objectification of labor differs from Marx’s, who described in 1844 how the valuation of “the world of things proceeds in direct proportion [to] the devaluation of the world of men” (Marx 71). For Rigal’s “federalism,” above all a “man-making culture of production” (141), these worlds are hardly distinguishable. Rigal’s world of things is a world of people collected, described, classified, published, and displayed. (The small scale and sometimes poor reproduction-values of the images included with this text do not always allow readers to follow adequately the brilliance of Rigal’s readings, a fact that marks the distance between the imperatives of display

in the period she studies and the publishing moment we ourselves inhabit.) Republican personality is said to be “an artifact of mechanical production and its display” (140); it partakes of “a subjective interiority that is inseparable from the production and display of objects” (106). Consumption is hardly a force here. Even what some might be tempted to describe as a form of consumption, spectatorship, is imbued with a productive side—looking is a form of labor in her account of the 1788 procession and in Peale’s *Exhumation of the Mastodon*. Peale’s Museum itself is a space where viewers “learn to regard” themselves as “artifacts of aesthetic and scientific significance” (102). Exemplary producers are objects of their own making who articulate the link between individual and collective self-production (104), and the nonexemplary are those who are rendered objects by others. Rigal’s book registers the frustration with an understanding of culture as a world of language and discourse alone, and she turns to the world of things for grounding, but ultimately this is a book about cultural representations of things rather than (in the eighteenth-century phrase) “things as they are.” As such, it offers one of the best and most convincing accounts of the cultural origins of American capitalism.

Like *The American Manufactory*, Ulrich’s *The Age of Homespun* takes as its occasion the relationship between words and things, and like Rigal, Ulrich is concerned with production and representation and with the deep connections between economy and culture. This is a book about “the objects nineteenth-century Americans saved, the stories they told, and the stories that got away” (7), and it demonstrates what a brilliant and highly experimental gender and social historian can do with and for the study of American material culture. Though it both begins in the nineteenth century, with an account of the Horace Bushnell address of 1851 that gives the book its name, and ends in the nineteenth century, with an account of the relationship between female household production and women’s rights, Ulrich’s objects (textiles and the means of producing and storing them) and stories are centered in the eighteenth-century cultures of domestic production, the period following the seventeenth-century moment when cloth-making “lost its artisan identity as it became a female occupation” (104). She has much to say that will interest literary scholars. Her ensemble cast includes a number of familiar literary and cultural figures—Edward Taylor, Mary Rowlandson, Joseph Johnson, John Trumbull, Royall Tyler, Lemuel Haynes, Sarah Apthorp Morton, Susanna Rowson (and her academy in

Newton, Massachusetts), William Cullen Bryant, William Apess, James Fenimore Cooper, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Lydia Sigourney, Bushnell himself. She is centrally concerned with treating imbalances in the archives of objects and writings, and tells us that “[p]erfection in stitchery was more important than mastery of language, which is why letters like those of Esther Burr are so rare and Irish-stitched pocketbooks so common” (148). And she informs us that one of the uses of print in the Early Republic was to line woodsplint baskets made by American Indians (342). The ever-present conceit in Ulrich’s book—though thankfully it never reaches the period’s own narrative fascination with the self-narrating artifact—is that the objects in effect tell their own stories. Ulrich has put in an enormous amount of work to accomplish this, and the results are nothing short of amazing.

Though dependent upon an archive assembled by nineteenth-century collectors who sought to preserve and display what they took to be simpler preindustrial times, Ulrich employs her material in ways that resist sentimentalism and nostalgia. She asks big questions and makes convincing connections between macro- and microhistory. In an early chapter centered on spinning wheels, she details how cloth making is “a story about empire as well as rural economy, about Atlantic trade as well as household production, and about Irish migration as well as English expansion” (79). Looking at an embroidered chimneypiece made by Eunice Bourne in Boston in 1753, she asks, “How does the seemingly private life of households relate to the public worlds of commerce and politics? And what, if anything, do women of different classes and races have in common?” (143). For Ulrich, the pastoral chimneypiece “is a document in the history of female education, a marker of gender and social inequality, and a repository of powerful ideas about the nature of human happiness. Closed in on itself, it opens a window on three seemingly unrelated stories—the transfer of pastoral imagery from Europe to America, the efforts of the newly organized Society for Encouraging Industry and Employing the Poor to open a spinning factory, and the crusade of the Indians of Mashpee to free themselves from the guardianship of her father” (145). Ulrich appreciates Eunice Bourne’s pastoral embroidery (and she delights in the fact that it hangs in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, while the written works of her better educated brother are long forgotten), but she also recognizes that the ability to embroider pastoral imagery was a certain sign of a young

woman's having escaped rural work (154) and that to take the pastoral imagery too literally or to celebrate the object simply as an emblem of female production is to miss the real occasions, the conflicts on the level of class and race, that made such objects possible. In some of the strongest and most revealing chapters, Ulrich's questioning of objects leads her to narrate "the complex intertwining of cultures" in colonial New England (260). The textile metaphor was perhaps irresistible given her objects, yet it minimizes the extent to which many had no desire to weave their lives with others and it does not do justice to the work that Ulrich has done to make this book one of the most inclusive histories of early New England, to use almost every object and every chapter as a way into seeing the presence of Africans, African Americans, and native peoples.

Ulrich gets caught up (and catches her reader up) in the stories she tells, but her attention routinely jumps from particular makers and products to larger cultural meanings. She observes that "needlework was simultaneously a site of cultural production and a field for personal expression" (40), but she is also quick to point out that Eunice Bourne's chimneypiece is "not a personal document, but a cultural artifact. It helps us to see some of the assumptions, hopes, dreams, and evasions available to her generation" (153). In different ways, how we distinguish between "personal document" and "cultural artifact," how we classify something as representative cultural expression rather than exceptional and "personal expression," how we generalize from the particular, are problems at the heart of both literary and social history. It is a testament to Ulrich's power as a historian that she is often able to see her objects in terms that render the personal cultural and the cultural personal, but scholars interested in the actual objects themselves are likely to find Ulrich's persistent promotion of individual works to the level of cultural expression unsettling.

It is the accumulated contexts, rather than the objects themselves, that allow Ulrich to put forth provocative new interpretations of the long eighteenth century, the most compelling of which is the relationship between household production and female rights consciousness. This is decidedly not a book devoted to the study of objects as texts, and Ulrich does not employ anything like Prown's protocols of object study. The readings of the objects themselves can sometimes seem flat, but employing "style as evidence" or discovering "mind in matter" through intensive formal analysis is simply not a primary concern for Ulrich. She marks the places (such as

women's moveable property and spinning wheels) that have been understudied and that require further attention from specialists, but for the most part this is a book that is interpretive and contextual rather than descriptive. Ulrich sees her objects as beautiful but more important as historical documents. "These bed rugs are masterworks of homespun and documents in the history of the American Revolution," she writes in one of the central chapters (209). In the end, it is the documentary quality of the objects that render them suitable vehicles for the larger stories she wants to tell. Her acknowledged task is to overturn the linear narrative of the transition from household to factory production, but one of the largest effects of her efforts is to place household production, rather than reproduction and child-rearing, at the center of the story of women's political power in the preindustrial period. Ulrich's episodic narrative begins with the feminization of weaving in the seventeenth century and ends in the early nineteenth century with an account of rights consciousness as the product of domestic production. The relationship between rights and household work surfaces in a number of places, most clearly in the chapter on boycotts and the American Revolution. She recounts how one minister in 1767 hoped that by filling the void created by nonimportation with homespun, "women might recover to this country the full and free enjoyment of all our rights, properties and privileges (which is more than the men have been able to do)" (183). Women emerged as models of political self-sufficiency at such moments. "The spinning bees were less an attempt to politicize the household," Ulrich observes, "than to feminize the body politic, to build public policy upon the example of New England's industrious daughters" (184). In the final chapter, set 70 years later, she describes an article in *The Liberator* in 1837 that "located female power in the household economy rather than in religion or moral sensibility. Women deserved to be heard because they were workers, not because they were morally superior to men" (390). It is certainly tempting to see in this rhetoric a departure from the discourse of Republican Motherhood, and Ulrich offers us glimpses of similar thoughts at other points in the texts. Readers would do well, however, to measure Ulrich's enthusiasm for such statements in the final chapter against her skeptical reading of Bushnell's address that constitutes her introduction: "Locating the sources of American character in the preindustrial household allowed writers to elevate women's work without challenging the nineteenth-century trope of separate spheres. . . . Bush-

nell's celebration of household self-sufficiency challenged the materialism of his own age while leaving its structure intact" (24). It is moments like these, and there are many of them, that reveal the extent to which Ulrich must (like Rigal) cut against the temptations of a seemingly celebratory cultural representation in order to highlight the dark sides of preindustrial working life for real people.

Taken together, these books provide convincing arguments against the common claim of the methodological "backwardness" of prioritizing material culture. The payoffs are substantial. The resurfacing of questions of production and its representation in these two works can contribute to a new history of the relationships between the Industrial and the American Revolutions. Rigal and Ulrich can also help us measure the costs of our current interest in consumption, or more precisely, in consumers. But by tying their own scholarly productions to a history of production, Ulrich and Rigal ask readers to reconsider current scholarly practices as well. By centering her own narratives around everyday household objects, Ulrich discovers a way of describing women's work that not only resists the nostalgia attached to these goods by archivists of another time but fully acknowledges the contexts of colonial conquest that made the products in the archives possible in the first place. By historicizing the "world of things," Rigal's book recovers a radically new American Enlightenment and simultaneously gives us a way to think through the deep histories of the curatorial practices that can pass for cultural studies in our time.

These books are working examples, not manifestos, but they provide glimpses of how a new wave of material culture studies, one attuned to both literary and social history, might orient itself around an object. New material culturists should refuse curatorial models in favor of more rigorous engagements with the historical relation between objects and subjects. Scholars should resist, as much as possible, the assumptions of presentist consumerism inherent in prevailing methodologies that privilege a narrativized phenomenological relation between object and analyst. Students of material culture must inevitably deal with objects in language, but their efforts should focus on historicizing the particular languages and phenomenologies by which objects have been described, used, and textualized; they should not imagine themselves as the ultimate consumers of an object. Literary historians can learn from the new social history of objects, but we also have an important role to play in contributing to and

remaking the study of material culture. We should not settle for importing methods of material culture study but should theorize how period-based literary historical and literary critical understandings of objects and artifacts are both compelling and available for export to the wider domain of material culture studies, a domain that persists in seeing objects as supplements to texts (for views of everyday life) or as unself-conscious alternatives to texts (somehow closer to real life than literature). Literary historians should remind material culturists that written texts, the very sources most comfortable to historians, are inevitably instances of material culture but we also need to temper the familiar pull of material culture studies to see nontextual objects as “expressions” of culture embodying mentalities in ways that are less mediated (if they are mediated at all) than the expressions of culture found in written objects. And, finally, we should remind ourselves that, when the topic is words and things or objects and stories, verbal culture is already half of the discipline of material culture, whether verbal culturists choose to participate or not.

NOTES

1. Though interdisciplinary, material culture has rarely been an attractive mode for literary scholars, in part perhaps because of the inherited and ingrained opposition between discourse and artifact. The standard anthologies and essay collections of the last 20 years show how recently literature has taken the object turn, though these anthologies do not track the long-standing interest among literary scholars and bibliographers in the sociology and material culture of texts. See Arjun Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things* (1986); Robert Blair St. George, *Material Life in America, 1600–1860* (1988); Steven Lubar and W. David Kingery, eds., *History from Things* (1993) and *Learning from Things* (1996); and Ann Smart Martin and J. Ritchie Garrison, eds., *American Material Culture: The Shape of the Field* (1997). A number of contributors to a recent special issue of *Critical Inquiry* devoted to “Things” are literary scholars, though as Bill Brown argues in his introductory essay, “things” (a subject-object relation) must be rigorously distinguished from “the order of objects” (“Thing Theory,” 3–5). Brown’s conclusions in *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (2003) about the ways in which “objects mediate relations between subjects” and “subjects mediate the relation between objects” (18) in industrial and postindustrial American literature provide stunning evidence for the importance of moving beyond the level of material reference or representation; his questions could productively be imported into studies of early American literature, though the terms in which

they are formulated would obviously require adjustment for thinking with and through preindustrial things.

2. For the period 1999–2003, authors in all fields were twice as interested in “production” as in “consumption” and in “producing” as “consuming” but approximately 20 times more interested in “consumers” than “producers,” or at least this is what is suggested by a cursory search of titles of all books listed on WorldCat. On a smaller scale, the evidence from article titles in humanities journals listed on Project Muse shows a similar pattern, though authors here are only seven times more titularly interested in “consumers” than “producers.” Given the fluidity of studies of production and consumption, this is obviously a highly flawed way to quantify current preoccupations, but it nevertheless highlights the extent to which production remains visible in a climate of consumption studies.

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