THE MATERIAL CULTURE OF WRITING

EDITED BY
CYDNEY ALEXIS AND HANNAH J. RULE

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FOREWORD

Laura R. Micciche

Moleskine notebooks, ink and paper, heirlooms, baby books, conservation materials, visitor books, and personal letters: What do such objects reveal about writing practices and their sociocultural contexts? What relationship do objects have to one's writing identity? While exploring these questions, *The Material Culture of Writing* makes a compelling case for treating objects as capable of facilitating our literate lives in ways that may otherwise escape notice. It does so by focusing on ordinary objects like paper and desk chairs, part of literacy's "aboveground" (Deetz) composed of visible, expected objects that populate everyday writing activities.

Such ordinary objects are mined by the contributors, inviting readers to reflect on how exactly "writing and its practice [happens] *through* things," as Cydney Alexis and Hannah Rule contend in their introduction. More precisely, though, the collection asks us to take "things" seriously not only because they have agency and persuasive power, a claim familiar to object-oriented work in writing studies (WS), but because things like ink pots, filing systems, and writing furniture can serve as portals into writing culture, history, and identity. Jenny Krichevsky's life-history interviews with Russian-speaking immigrants, for example, attach transcultural significance to reference books, bookcases, passports, and military medals passed across nations and generations. And Emilie Merrigan's chapter illuminates how mothers use the materiality of the baby book genre, initially created to serve "scientific motherhood," to create "pathways to social power and individual agency" (Epps, chapter 10). Across this collection, the authors' attentiveness to discrete artifacts shows how people creatively use objects with and against their intended usage in order to construct identity, preserve connection to one's history, and articulate a future for oneself.

Attention to small artifacts is complemented by the authors' acknowledgment of the larger contexts in which objects circulate. To that end,

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Alexis and Rule write in the introduction that their collection aims to "trace sociocultural and sociopolitical resonances of writing artifacts." This focus is achieved through contributors' investigations of individual, communal, and sociohistorical identity work achieved by objects, a line of inquiry shaped by the material culture studies (MCS) dictum that "to be human is to consume."

But, as this book demonstrates, consumption only gets us so far in understanding how objects are used and integrated into our writing lives. While MCS scholars describe usage and adaptation of objects as a way to singularize or decommodify possessions, *who* has access to objects in the first place strikes me as an especially timely matter that is brought to life with thick description throughout this book. The term *access* is not emphasized evenly across this volume, but I think it's a useful lens for naming a significant contribution this book makes to WS. I was frequently drawn to the surprising ways in which mundane objects illuminate privilege in both the foreground and background of writing practices—a topic of urgent interest in WS and beyond as struggles for social justice grow across every sector of US society.

Who can imagine themselves as writers and gain access to objects that facilitate a writing identity? Moleskine notebooks, the subject of Alexis's chapter, are sacred objects to many users in part because they link to a history of esteemed artists like Vincent Van Gogh and Ernest Hemingway (Alexis points out that Hemingway's actual usage may be a myth). However, not everyone can imagine themselves in a lineage of such artists, nor, more practically, can everyone afford to spend $8.00 to $15.00 on a hardbound notebook. Writing objects are permeated with racialized significance in Desirée Henderson's chapter on depictions of white women writers in nineteenth-century fiction. Henderson explores associations between writers' inky hands and perceptions of these women as masculinized domestic failures "stained" by black ink, associations that impose racist connotations on "the visual dimensions and color contrasts inherent to the material objects of writing." In the second half of her chapter, Henderson describes African American authors' efforts to resist racialized associations with writing objects and challenge impediments to access through creative improvisation. Describing writing instruments as "emblems of white supremacy," Henderson shows how Frederick Douglass nevertheless crafted his writer identity from makeshift materials: "board fence, brick wall, and pavement; my pen and ink was a lump of chalk."

Diane Ehrenpreis's study of Thomas Jefferson's writing suite may be read in direct contrast to Henderson's. Jefferson could write in his suite

while leaving "the mundane responsibilities of plantation life for others to shoulder." In material ways, slavery enabled Jefferson's writing life and identity as a writer. And because he owned property and had the means to secure his legacy, family members were able to preserve his possessions, creating "a nearly complete record of the material culture of Jefferson's writing practice." His private room with locks on the door, Ehrenpreis points out, allowed him a space that no one else on the estate grounds could claim. Cultural power in tandem with gender and race privilege are the conditions of Jefferson's life that made possible his writing life at Monticello.

No doubt my mind has gone to access and privilege because of the moment we're living right now. As a parent, I receive bi-weekly announcements from my kids' schools about access and writing objects. How and where writing can happen is a pressing issue for schools as COVID-19 surges across the United States. Where I live in Cincinnati, Ohio, the public school district is distributing thirty thousand digital devices to students in K–12 schools—iPads for second and third graders; laptops for everyone else—equipped with school-approved software. In partnership with local technology companies, the district is also providing free Wi-Fi access to all student households, as schools try to anticipate and address the inequity that online education lays bare. Writing assignments are to be completed in Google Classrooms, as they are for many during ordinary times when students meet face-to-face in classrooms. As of 2019, 68 percent of secondary schools in the United States reported usage of Google Classroom in their districts (Kajeet). When my thirteen-year-old son composes in a Google document, he does so with a knowledge of process and revision that astounds me. "Nothing is final," he tells me if I try to offer a suggestion. "My group members and my teacher will add comments. I'll make changes after that."

For him, and probably for other users who have grown up using this technology, writing is naturally mediated and changeable, a relationship that the field of WS has sought to cultivate for some five decades. This volume illuminates the fact that experiencing writing as a process (or whatever else) is due not only to persuasive research by writing scholars but also to the widespread availability and affordability of tools that have made process a material reality. In other words, a philosophy of writing becomes a practice by way of tools.

As suggested by my son's assurance that readers will offer feedback, he experiences online writing spaces as social. Within WS, however, the usual baseline for considering writing a social act is a face-to-face write-on-site model located in rooms and realized through peer groups and in-class

collaboration. In this volume, too, physical proximity is the presumed condition of writing in Deborah C. Andrews's chapter on academic makerspace design. Yet, her attention to environment-structuring, involving choices of furniture, surfaces, and space-separators, offers a productive model for thinking about how to structure online writing environments to approximate a "neighborhood" that welcomes conversation, real-time collaboration, and "the mess that often accompanies innovation" within aesthetically and creatively inspiring spaces. Andrews's chapter encourages reflection on what constitutes a writing workspace and how such a space always responds to context-specific needs. While academic makerspaces are on trend because they materialize community-university partnerships that serve the economic interests of both partners, the surge in online teaching as the condition for education (not complement or last-resort) is driving new (old) conversations about the design of online spaces. Increasingly, these spaces are expected to serve the social fabric of learning as well as the delivery of content. For example, in the spring of 2020 when schools went online, my kids' teachers held weekly videoconference check-ins for students who wanted to talk about how they were doing or simply see other peoples' faces.

In short, COVID-19 is forcing online writing environments to address the social and material infrastructural limitations of brick-and-mortar schools designed for togetherness, not apartness. I kept thinking of this when reading Anne MacKay's "Assembling the File, or, How Conservation Works," where, among other things, she draws on information scientist Steven Jackson's concept of "broken world thinking" while discussing the wear, damage, and decay of conservation infrastructure. For MacKmay, analysis of "damage and deterioration . . . [creates] a pathway . . . back to an accomplished form of the object, which was unknown at the beginning of the process." Thinking of traditional school infrastructure as fragile and in need of repair has potential for rethinking what's required for maintaining schools in both ordinary circumstances (cracked plaster, nonworking toilets, unmovable furniture) and extraordinary ones: Should innovators in education partner with disease specialists? When is community and collaboration not a social good and how can material structures address that? What material infrastructure offers the most flexibility for learning and teaching as well as for public safety? Does thinking of education as a "safe space" end up endangering students and teachers?

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As the above suggests, reading this book in the summer of 2020 made me look differently at the stuff around me. In addition to making me

reflect on education in a COVID-19 world, I began thinking of *streets*, the ultimate "aboveground" of most US cities, as writing artifacts—large public canvases for personal and cultural expression. In the aftermath of George Floyd's murder by police officers and the newly energized Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement fueling worldwide protests for racial justice, my thoughts went to BLM street murals painted on roadways across the United States. Before reading *The Material Culture of Writing*, I'm not sure that I would have viewed the mundane surface of streets as ripe for *written* activism.

The first BLM mural appeared on Sixteenth Street in front of Lafayette Square, leading up to the White House, an area renamed Black Lives Matter Plaza by DC mayor Muriel Bowser. In fifty-foot all-capital yellow letters stretching two city blocks, "Black Lives Matter" commands the street and draws the attention of anyone driving, crossing, walking alongside, or flying over it. While some members of the DC BLM chapter have criticized the mural as motivated by the mayor's contentious relationship with Donald Trump, rather than by her support for meaningful political change, there's no denying that the mural is a defiant occupation of space. What the mural communicates is that the street—and the communities it borders—belongs to the city's inhabitants, a more than 45 percent Black population, and not to the government.

BLM street murals have since appeared around the United States, from Hollywood, California, to Raleigh, North Carolina, to Denver, Colorado, where artists painted a mural on Broadway near the state capitol building. In Cincinnati, a collective of seventeen Black project managers and seventy local artists known as Black Art Speaks, led by organizer Alandes Powell, designed and created a mural on Plum Street in front of City Hall (see fig. 0.1).

City Council passed an ordinance approving the project, demonstrating that mural installation is not a lawless activity but one that goes through established local government and city channels. And the cost of materials is not necessarily covered by local funds; in the case of Cincinnati, paint, materials, and artist fees were covered by a GoFundMe account that generated nearly $150,000.

Not adhering to the usual design of most BLM murals (yellow letters that stretch street-wide), Cincinnati artists designed a mural in which each letter, created with bold Pan-African colors (red, black, and green), is inspired by a line from Powell's poem, "We Want What You Want." Wearing facemasks, artists painted the mural in two days, enduring blistering sun and stifling humidity punctuated by short bursts of rain, in time to unveil the finished mural on Juneteenth. The artists designed each letter

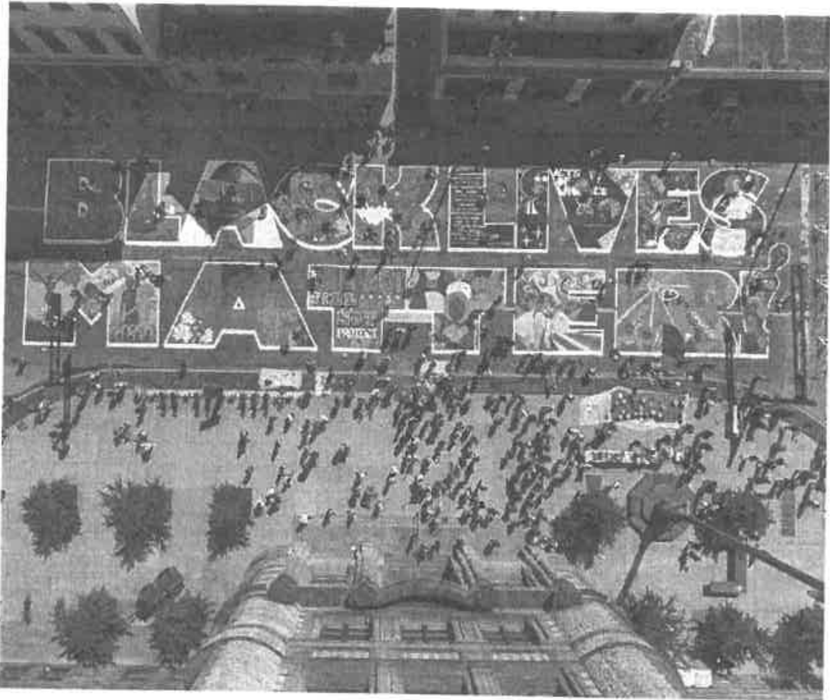

Figure 0.1. Black Lives Matter! mural in Cincinnati, Ohio. Image from https://www.reddit.com/r/cincinnati/comments/hc4tv8/cincy_blm_street_mural/. Courtesy of Austin Neal.

of the mural with specific goals in mind, beginning with hand-drawings on paper that were the basis for chalk outlines on the street, which were then filled in with paint applied by brush and roller. Artist Michael Coppage describes the idea behind his "L" in "Black": "The fist punching through a pool of blood is representative of the resistance to barriers of institutionalized obstacles and how no matter what, Black people push through" (Rice and Haselhorst). Describing her design of the "K," Tamia Saunders chose to use "unrestrained, free-flowing" lines in an effort to "emphasize inclusivity" so that the mural can be meaningful to everyone, not just Black people (Rice and Haselhorst). In her "I," Hannah Jones features a woman with an afro and a transgender symbol, a set of images that she finds personally empowering: "Race is introduced to you from everybody else in the world. . . . They tell you where you do or don't belong. It is really important and cool that I'm involved in this, because my Black community saw me even though I am half white" (Rice and Haselhorst).

Powell has said that the Cincinnati mural paint is expected to last five years. If its message is not realized by 2025, she plans to fundraise

to repaint it. Street murals are created with the expectation of material deterioration. Paint doesn't last forever, especially not in high-traffic areas where murals get lots of wear and visibility. Mural placement on streets near seats of power in cities around the United States emphasizes the potency of public streets for political messages, even if those messages fade over time or get vandalized, as has already happened here, nearly a month after the mural's installation. Several hours after someone poured red paint over large swatches of the mural, City Council members and artists began planning its repair. Defacement and decay are an inescapable material reality of street murals, and maybe that's nothing to mourn. The processes of creation and ruin are keeping conversations about race alive in Cincinnati in ways that a more permanent installation might not have done.

Another effect of BLM street murals relevant to this book is that they make us see and experience ordinary streets in a new light. Painted streets can't be seen as solely navigational, as enabling passage from one place to another. They are surfaces for challenging the commonsense of a place by proclaiming racial injustice a part of the everyday, the very ground we travel when moving through a city. The street is an often-overlooked utilitarian object that has been turned into a staging ground for seizing narrative control over whose lives matter during this tumultuous summer of 2020.

Alexis and Rule note in their introduction that material culture analyses help us appreciate "complex interrelations among human cognition, cultural-historical moments, scribal acts, and writerly identities." The editors' and authors' efforts to reveal those interrelations are refreshing and will, I think, make us look anew at seemingly mundane objects in order to tell diverse stories about writing artifacts, identity, and power. The book may also inspire us to pay attention to the creative possibilities that mundane objects offer us as composers, researchers, and citizens.

JULY 2020

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1

INTRODUCTION
The Material Culture of Writing

Cydney Alexis and Hannah J. Rule

This book originated out of two scholars' love for the material culture of writing—those objects, artifacts, possessions, and goods, animate and inanimate, we write with, on, and around. These goods support us and, at times, thwart us. We have been interested in the study of material culture specifically for its ability to reveal unknowns and complexities of writing identities, practices, and processes. In our home field of writing studies (WS),[1] it is impossible not to notice that objects are everywhere. How could they not be? Objects populate homes, writing desks, personal lives, offices, composing processes, classrooms, family rituals, writing centers, and other university spaces—in short, they fill or constitute every contour of historical, social, cultural, and individual (writing) lives. Along with being a cognitive, social, and cultural practice, writing is a material practice.

Three observations motivated us to create this edited collection. First, despite the proliferation of interest in the materiality of writing in writing studies in recent years, there remained a lack of qualitative research on writing's material culture. Second, the scholarship that did exist rarely explicitly engaged with the vast, interdisciplinary work in material culture studies (MCS)[2] that had proliferated since the 1970s and legitimized the study of everyday, vernacular artifacts. This includes work in a parallel field, consumer culture theory, that—while drawing on its own scholarly consumer research corpus—bears a similarity in purpose and interest to MCS.[3] Third, when we prepared to teach seminars on the material culture of writing, we could not find a textbook specifically dedicated to objects of writing and their sociocultural histories. We think writing studies is the perfect discipline to undertake this work (as opposed to, say, library studies/history of the book, art, or history). Writing studies scholars might, for example, study the objects that motivate their writing practices

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and populate their offices and classrooms. And we might study the history of writing artifacts, as Denis Baron did in his history of writing technologies that included a discussion of Thoreau's ten-year endeavor to improve the American pencil, and as did Laura Micciche in her short history of writing boxes, dating back to the seventeenth century, as a kind of mobile writing device. And we might expand on the study of rituals and habits of writers in context, as did Susan Wyche (who is no longer an academic) in both "Time, Tools, and Talismans" and her unpublished dissertation on writers and ritual, in which she studies two classes of academically "at risk" students at San Diego State University in order to discover more about their situated writing behaviors. Taking a psychophysiological approach, Wyche's work establishes the importance of qualitative investigation into the integral roles that objects, material environments, and rituals play in college students' processes and their senses of themselves as writers, foci that anticipate the field's interest in how writing environments, rituals, and time structure writing processes (Prior and Shipka; Rule).

While it may seem intuitively true that objects matter, and it might seem more true in 2020 than at the time that Baron and Wyche were writing, scholars of writing haven't very much or for very long noticed it, especially where qualitative, quantitative, and longitudinal studies are concerned. In some of writing studies' landmark scholarship from parallel disciplines such as literacy studies, such as Shirley Brice Heath's *Ways with Words*, Deborah Brandt's *Literacy in American Lives*, and Prior and Shipka's "Chronotopic Lamination," objects appear on every page (again, how could they not?), but they remain in the background. As literacy scholar Nigel Hall highlights, the study of writing (across disciplines) has always tended to overlook, or look through, writing tools and objects. In Hall's words:

> In the study of writing, particularly its history and development, the materials and objects people use to write (apart from those used by printers) have been studied much less than the meanings and products of the writing process, or their economic, political or pedagogical relationships. On the whole, little has been written about the materiality of writing and it is probably the very everydayness of such artifacts, and the fact that the mind of the user is mostly focussed [*sic*] upon what is being created by their usage, that makes for them being so taken for granted that they become virtually transparent to their user. (83)

Our collection, instead, wishes to foreground objects, as they are one key part of the situated contexts of writing.

We are often asked what is novel or important about a material culture approach and how it differs from other recent work interested in objects and materiality. Our answer, one we hope is evidenced in the chapters in this volume, is that a material culture approach foregrounds and maintains focus on the everyday artifact as meaningful and as a revealer of culture and history, as a way to account for the experiences and lives of particular people, as well as communities, in situated contexts. Again, in Hall's terms, an MCS approach prods the researcher to treat objects as material realities that demand historical accounting and research.

Such centering on the artifact is an approach in some contrast to recent material-focused work in WS that largely centers on theoretical approaches that disrupt humanist subject-object dichotomies and critique views of objects as inert, passive vessels of human will. This body of work, often engaging theories such as object-oriented ontology (OOO) and new materialism (e.g., Barnett, "Chiasms"; Barnett, "Toward"; Barnett and Boyle; Gries; Lynch and Rivers; Rickert),[4] has brought attention to writing's materiality by highlighting the ranging and interconnected materialities of writing, often conceptualized in large-scale metaphors like ecologies, networks, or complex systems (Edbauer; Hawk; Syverson). For as much as it pushes the field toward materiality, and though MCS itself has engaged some of these theoretical frameworks, when reading this scholarship, we have sometimes thought, *where's the stuff* and *where are the people?* As feminist critique of OOO emphasizes (Behar), the theoretical ambitions to sunset notions of human subjectivity through hyperfocus on nonhuman things is problematic when we live and breathe in material worlds where agencies and access are far from a given for all people. MCS emerged out of interest in real people and the life circumstances that brought certain objects to bear on, and to have meaning in, their lives. *The Material Culture of Writing* aims to connect writing studies to work in MCS and related fields as an effort to add to the intellectual lineage of material work in WS.

The idea of everyday artifacts being meaningful in themselves for their potential to reveal human cultures and histories is what motivated interdisciplinary scholars throughout the 1970s and 1980s to study how everyday objects mattered. These scholars, who included artists, art historians, folklorists, historical archaeologists, psychologists, and consumer researchers initiated a movement that validated the "low-art," ordinary, everyday artifact as worthy of scholarly study.

For emeritus professor of folklore Henry Glassie, the importance of studying material culture developed out of a concern that histories are incomplete without attention to vernacular artifacts. In *Folk Housing in Middle Virginia*, he writes: "a philosophically and socially valid history must come out of painstaking analysis of direct cultural expressions that

the analyst can study at first hand. Many of these expressions will be documents, but when no documents are available, we must study other sorts of artifacts rather than consigning the great bulk of humanity to historical oblivion" (12). Historical oblivion would face, for example, those whose stories are not preserved in written records, those without the power or access to represent their histories through written texts or high-art artifacts of dominant cultures. Glassie stresses how "dreary" it would be if the only known histories were that of those who can read or write (or who have access to writing materials) (*Material Culture* 46). More aggressively, he asserts that "politically, the study of material culture confronts prejudice and seeks justice, resisting forces that deny art or history—excellence or significance—to human beings on the basis of gender, say, or race or class or culture. It demands the construction of an idea of art and an idea of history that can meet the needs of all people during their struggle to shape for themselves fulfilling and decent lives" (68).

Historical archaeologist James Deetz stresses similar concerns throughout his scholarly corpus. In his 1977 *In Small Things Forgotten*, Deetz defends his interest in the "aboveground," that which had been considered trivial objects and artifacts by archeologists and museums (7). He argues that while digging up belowground artifacts has its merits, the aboveground artifact—that which would have been considered "low" culture and therefore unworthy of preserving in a museum at the time he was writing and still, in many instances, today—has the power to reveal an enormous amount about human culture. While he acknowledges that what we find in museums is a small piece of the historical record, like Glassie, he questions the privilege, capital, and other sociocultural factors that favor "survival of certain objects and the disappearance of others" (8). Everyday aboveground objects are valuable for the rich(er) stories they tell. He writes:

> In spite of the richness and diversity of the historical record, there are things we want to know that are not to be discovered from it. Simple people doing simple things, the normal, everyday routine of life and how these people thought about it, are not the kinds of things anyone thought worthy of noting. We know far more about the philosophical underpinnings of Puritanism than we do about what its practitioners consumed at countless meals. But all left behind the residue of their existence, and it, too, is worth study. (11)

Scholars such as Deetz and Glassie were concerned that the high-art artifact, encountered in a scholarly text or museum, tells a fragmented, incomplete story and thus attention should turn to the "everyday" household structure (such as the vernacular house types Glassie

studies in his landmark *Folk Housing in Middle Virginia*) or household artifact—objects some might even consider mundane.

Understanding everyday objects and how people use or consume them in context is what motivates Glassie, in his 1999 *Material Cultures*, to trace the journey of one carpet made by Turkish weaver Aysel Ozturk, from the animal, to the loom, to the market, to the buyer, theorizing this movement along the way. Glassie demonstrates the power of staying both focused on the carpet and also the different contexts that surround the making, distribution, purchase, and use of any artifact. Glassie provides three "master contexts" (creation, communication, consumption) and fourteen sub-contexts within these three (such as learning, collaboration, commerce, and assimilation) that a student or scholar could use when trying to understand an artifact's history. His point in suggesting this method is that in order to understand artifacts most completely, the historian must contend with many contexts not observable on the surface, such as its life before purchase, the collaborative skills needed to produce it (in Aysel's case, she was a master weaver taught by her family and with other makers she weaves near), and the way that families integrate the artifact into their lives. These are the dimensions of histories, lives, and cultures that focus on objects in context can make available, dimensions that might be cleaved away, even lost entirely in more traditional historical records, research methods, or museum curation.

Some of the other theoretical and methodological touchstones for our approach to material culture in this book come from canonized work in interdisciplinary fields. Like Glassie and Deetz, Yale emeritus professor and art historian Jules Prown penned a methodology for studying artifacts that has been hashed out in various articles, reprinted, and widely read and taught in material culture studies classrooms ("Style;" "Truth"). This methodology asks students and scholars to begin with an artifact and to study it extensively as a material thing, obsessively recording its features and potential uses and even relying on metaphoric association in order to uncover unknowns about an object's reach, potential, and history. With Kenneth Haltman, Prown published *American Artifacts: Essays in American Culture*, an edited collection each chapter of which features the results of a semester-long, graduate-level investigation of one artifact (these analyses were produced in Prown's Yale art seminar). *American Artifacts* presents essays on objects such as lava lamps, a lighter, and the telephone, and we could see the potential of such a collection focused on writing objects. Indeed, one of the chapters in this volume, Emilie Merrigan's, emerged out of a graduate class taught by coeditor of this volume Cydney Alexis and relied on Prownian analysis to unravel the tangled principles

of scientific motherhood that circulated around early twentieth-century mothers and was presented to them through baby books, in which mothers created counter-narratives of their daily parenting practices.

Other touchstones for us of the power of object research is the work of Daniel Miller, through which he studies countless objects—including writing artifacts such as shopping lists (*Material Cultures*). In a fascinating piece on the shopping list, Miller demonstrates how women who grocery shop utilize stored memories of store architecture to organize their lists, leading to efficiency while shopping (*A Theory*). Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton's *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self* also tracks countless artifacts meaningful to everyday people throughout their lifespan; they demonstrate how attachment to particular types of goods changes from youth to old age. In consumer research, particularly generative is the work of Epp and Price. In their widely cited "The Storied Life of Singularized Objects," Epp and Price collect qualitative data on the life of one table in several generations of a family, and they use actor-network theory to expose how family practices are disrupted as the table moves from central locations and into storage. Epp and Price's findings (in this article and others) could have enormous impact in WS, as they demonstrate the importance of the ways that families construct identities around objects and practices, as well as the ways that objects facilitate certain types of family engagement. Writing objects and spaces in the home, at work, and in the classroom are ripe for study.

The prolific Russell Belk has detailed historical scholastic engagement with possessions from William James to the present day and qualitatively studied innumerable objects and artifacts with various contributors, including immigrants' possessions, shared possessions, and digital objects (Belk, "Extended Self" and "Sharing;" Mehta and Belk). In his canonical 1988 "Possessions and the Extended Self," Belk provides a theoretical framework for understanding how humans extend the self-concept to inanimate objects, often rating inanimate objects as more tied to their sense of self than certain parts of their body (such as the throat). He theorizes that people connect most intensely with objects they are able to manipulate and control; in WS, we might think of digital technologies such as the laptop, the phone, screen readers, and assistive technologies that help with writing and communication.

Coming out of literary studies, one of the most engaging books we have returned to frequently in defining our approach is feminist literary scholar Diana Fuss's *Senses of an Interior: Four Writers and the Rooms That Shaped Them.* Fuss pushes against the common notion that

positions creativity, genius, or authorship as "unfettered imagination" that transcends "base materiality" (1). Fuss's "miniature biographies" (215) of authors' material spaces show, on the contrary, how writing is always a situated and contextual act, "a place animated by the artifacts, mementos, machines, books, and furniture that frame any intellectual labor" (1). Particularly generative is Fuss's chapter on Helen Keller, which reveals not only Keller's fascination with objects but the tight link between the design of her home, the objects within it, and her productivity, which declined when a fire forced her to move into a new space that was designed without a visually impaired person's needs in mind. This chapter resonates with recent work in WS and specifically disability studies, such as that by Jay Dolmage and Stephanie Kerschbaum, that interrogates ableist approaches to writing, teaching, and design, including the design of university spaces (and writing spaces such as Keller's for, as Fuss reminds, Keller was a prolific writer). The "stuff of great literature," Fuss shows, is nothing less (or more) than objects, sacred and mundane—"things as seemingly inconsequential as an open door, a broken relic, a warm hand, or a crumbly teacake" (Fuss 214). Though Fuss writes about four famous literary figures, her approach might be adopted to study the vernacular writing contexts of everyday writers and the artifacts they write with (such as Alexis' work on the Moleskine, in this volume, and the writing of enslaved worker Israel Gillette, referenced in Diane Ehrenpreis's chapter on Jefferson's writing suite).

The recent proliferation of interest in materiality in both popular and scholarly culture, including in writing studies, has led to much work that is sympathetic to our interest in this volume. This was the case when we read Gouge and Jones's groundbreaking and intellectually exciting special issue of *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, titled "Wearable Rhetorics: Bodies, Cities, Collectives." In this volume, Gouge and Jones and their contributors expand the purview of what might be considered a rhetorical, communicative, or writing artifact. Each article centers on such an artifact, such as the breast pump, ostomy pouch, and cell phone. This special issue highlights the intellectual yield of honing in on artifacts to reveal unknowns of human life. Jordan Jack, for example, reads the wearable technology of the breast pump as an "idealized object" (202) preloaded with marketing, cultural, and social meanings, the promise of a seamless and simultaneous embodiment of the roles of mother and career professional. Undermining the control of those messages, Jack's study prioritizes everyday, "actual use *in practice*" (208) of such objects, a method that reveals how use "depends on performances of status and gender, policy frameworks, space-time arrangements, and the material

design of technologies themselves" (208). The cascade of contexts of situated use that hover around this object, that emanate from and back to it, for us harkens back to Glassie's master and subcontexts. Maybe it's Jack's mention of the seventeenth-century invention of the air-pump or the editors' emphasis on what it means to "wear" an object in its small-scale, intimate, embodied, and rhetorical dimensions but, to put it plainly, we see a strong investment in material culture in this special issue. We read this kind of material work for its potential expansion of what counts as writing objects of study for our field, and we wonder about the many ways MCS (and consumer research) scholarship could help advance it.

MCS may also become an ally to literacy scholars calling for attention to the sociomaterial dimensions of literate practice. Generally, these efforts serve to ground the social and cultural situatedness of literate practices emphasized in New Literacy Studies. Focus on literate objects and materialities opens access to practices, meanings, behaviors, and interconnections not otherwise observable, as literacy and education scholar Kate Pahl emphasizes. "By seeing literacy as material," she writes, "I can recognize the ways in which literacy practices are linked to other practices. . . . By extending the lens of what is important, a much wider meshwork of symbolic practices come to the fore, instantiated within the material world" (19–20). And that meshwork is never neutral, as literacy scholar Lesley Bartlett reminds. In 2005, she argued that "the lifelong process of literacy learning relies, in part, on symbolic self-making through the use of cultural artefacts" (4). She gives the example of a Eunisia, a woman of African descent living in Brazil, who tells a story about going to get her voter's card and being terrified because she did not know how to read and write and was not sure she would be able to sign her name, a requirement for the card. Her friend had relayed a story of being called an epithet when she had to sign by fingerprint. In this story, Bartlett demonstrates how the inkpad used for fingerprinting, as well as the pen, are more than neutral, simple tools. They are social and political artifacts that reveal systemic issues related to how literacy is wielded as a barrier to access and representation.

Within WS, literacy scholar Kate Vieira similarly makes an explicit call for this "sociomaterial approach to transnational literacy" (423), one we align with. Her work on "writing remittances," material objects that travel between migrant and homeland, supporting literate and material development at home, shares a material culture spirit. It expands upon the work of scholars such as Brandt, who frequently references both the material practices of writing and writing's material culture,

particularly as they serve as markers of points of access to or denial of literate resources.

This collection, then, takes its inspiration from a wide-ranging collection of sources. It aims to build connections to work in material culture and consumer culture studies, build on scholarship in WS that has called attention to the importance of writing materials, and build from literacy studies' call for sociomaterial approaches to writing practice. Its contributors zoom in on the material culture of writing—the everyday, often overlooked objects, tools, and artifacts that accompany writers and help them perform their work. They investigate a range of these artifacts—digital and analog, historical and contemporary, familiar and less so—situated in literate acts across ranging historical, geographic, and sociocultural moments. In our call for submissions to this volume, we asked: What can writing artifacts tell us about writing as a material practice? How do particular writing objects help us understand writing processes? What stories do writing objects reveal about writers enmeshed in their sociocultural moments, about cultural mores, about genres as sociomaterial practice, and about individuals' identities or professional practice?

We selected proposals from scholars across (sub)disciplines including WS, museum and conservation studies, literary studies, history, and technical communication. Of the approximately seventy proposals we received, we chose work centered on material culture artifacts, spaces, and contexts. We wanted chapters that kept their sights on material goods, mingling perspectives of MCS, WS, and contributors' own disciplines. We also wanted to expand what counted as writing or what could count as writing studies research. This is what appealed to us in chapters such as one on the conservator's file or the Victorian guest book. But looking across the collection now, we wonder why *wouldn't* their foci—the inscriptional practices of Victorian-era travelers; the gendered and racialized associations of writing tools in the nineteenth century; the writing practices of professional conservators or of Renaissance letter-writers; the desk innovations of a complicated historical figure—be of central and paramount interest to scholars of writing, and to those in WS in particular? Each chapter provides distinct methods to approach writing-related things across time, location, and culture, methods that intervene in questions in contributors' own disciplines while at the same time speaking to WS' interest in writers and writing practice. Toward the latter purpose, we have organized the chapters into three parts—Writing Identity, Writing Work, and Writing Genre—and for each, we provide a contextualizing introduction. We see these sections as porous more

than delineated, as questions of identity, work or practice, and genre are at stake in some ways in nearly all the chapters in relation to writing objects and spaces. In addition to introducing the chapters themselves, the introductions imagine further possible directions for WS research facilitated by MCS frameworks and approaches.

Contributors focus us on notebooks, ink and ink pots, hotel visitors' albums, baby books, writing implements, and furniture, among other artifacts. They demonstrate how focus on such artifacts stretch our conceptions about literacy, workplaces, genre, curation, literary authorship, and access. Ultimately, we hope the chapters inspire readers to engage in studies of their own that animate the sociomaterial lives and histories of the writing objects that populate their and others' writing lives. The intersection of MCS and WS offers incredible potential scholarly space for those interested in understanding how everyday writers, now and historical, such as manual writers, ghost writers, activists, cookbook writers, mothers, fathers, soldiers, children, nurses, mechanics, politicians, and infinite others interact with the objects that sustain their work. In the same vein as Deetz and Glassie, we note the potential of material culture study to uncover structural inequities in access to literacy, education, and material goods that are built into the fabric of American society.

The Material Culture of Writing offers just some of the yields made possible by mingling work in MCS and WS. Our intent is to reveal unknown histories of objects significant to our field's research and history, trace sociocultural and sociopolitical resonances of writing artifacts, and give the discipline access to MCS frameworks and scholarship that can propel more such interdisciplinary research focused on things that animate writers and writing practices. We hope this collection builds conversation around and scholarship on writing's material culture within WS.

POSTSCRIPT: WRITING IN THE SPRING AND SUMMER OF 2020

We have been revising this book throughout the spring and summer of 2020, in the context of both a global pandemic (COVID-19) and widespread global antiracist protests triggered by police brutality against Black people in the United States. This cultural moment has once again pointed a spotlight on systemic injustice faced by Black Americans, as well as other people of color, in far too many sectors, such as policing and the justice system, healthcare, housing, finance, and publishing. These issues have always demanded reflection, response, action, and change. An academic book is far from direct action. But on the smaller scale that is an academic edited collection, as editors we have reflected on the choices

we've made in this volume, those we didn't, and those we'd do differently if we could start all over. It has had us thinking about what actually matters in our call for attention to the material culture of writing.

As Glassie emphasizes, we can turn to material culture artifacts, as have so many material culture scholars before us, to understand the complex entanglement between material culture and systems of oppression and injustice. Some of these artifacts might be more obviously in need of study. One that comes to mind is the face mask. The mask recalls for us Gouge and Jones's expansion of what it means for an object to be an object of writing and raises a meditation similar to Micciche's on the street, in the foreword to this volume. The mask has become not only a political and personal symbol charged with personal identity values but also has highlighted problems of access and power. In terms of wearing masks in public, Black communities have called attention to how systemic racism puts them in jeopardy of being racially profiled as "criminals," a reality that has been documented as Black men have been targeted by police in disproportionate numbers when wearing masks and unequal penalties have been applied to white and Black communities for not wearing or having access to masks. At the policy level, corporate entities have placed frontline workers in jeopardy in the healthcare, retail, and food production sectors with unclear policies around masks, lack of access to personal protective equipment (PPE), and even the outright refusal to let workers wear masks because it conflicts with the company's branding (Alfonso III; Boyd; Cineas; Graham; Noor). The pandemic has evidenced the greater health risks Black communities face due to the disproportionate effect of systemic injustice and disparities in health care, which amplifies the potential impacts on such communities when white people protest wearing masks or Black people choose to refrain from wearing a mask in order to protect themselves from racial profiling (The Center for Disease Control; Oppel et al.; Saini).

Using everyday objects to reveal the systemic inequities that are either invisible or denied in American and global culture aligns with MCS's attempts to redress inequities in whose histories are told and which artifacts are used to corroborate and understand human experience. Glassie asks, "How can you study a society if you attend only to the expressions of a small and deviant class within the whole?" (*Folk Housing* 8–9). He was referring in this instance to the historical problem with studying only those with the ability to read and write, but this applies to current questions of representation, equity, and injustice as well. How can we document the material and literacy histories of those whose lives have not been as meticulously preserved as those of presidents,' or

famous literary authors, or other privileged and powerful persons? This collection only begins to answer to this question. But we are reminded of Glassie's sentiment that it is an ongoing *aspiration* of material culture studies to reveal people's diverse ways and means of material meaning-making in the "struggle to shape for themselves fulfilling and decent lives" (*Material Culture* 68). We have more to do.

NOTES

1. We call our field writing studies, rather than composition studies or rhetoric and composition, to reflect current trends in naming (e.g., Adler-Kassler and Wardle; Harris; Moxley). But we also choose this name to push the conventional boundaries of our field's interests. In this, we follow after Charles Bazerman, who sees "the study of writing [as] a major subset of the study of the history of human consciousness, institutions, practice, and development over the last five millennia" (36). We take similar direction from Susan Miller, and her call for writing studies as "a way to describe the cultural work undertaken in any act of writing" (41). Writing studies investigations take an interest in "acts of writing and their products as evidence of a particularly crucial cultural work . . . [which] does not detach 'popular' from 'high' texts, nor does it separate 'ordinary' from 'creative' writers on the basis of relative revisionary talent or levels of access to the ethical and economic status requisite to authorship" (S. Miller 42; see also Alexis, "Stop"). For us, these perspectives make our field's purview plain and spacious: any act of writing, investigated as at once a cultural, social, material, and individual act, or in Miller's words, "what, who, to what ends, and especially, how people have written and do write" (52).
2. As a loose orientation rather than a defined field, work in MCS spans disciplines including art, art history, consumer research, historical archaeology, social psychology, and English, to name a few. Hence, much work that is significant in MCS might be produced by scholars who do not necessarily identify as such (including, for instance, consumer research scholars, who do work on how humans make meaning of the consumer goods they pull out of the commodity realm by purchasing and using them). We refer to the discipline throughout as MCS, despite this naming issue, to identify work that foregrounds an MCS orientation.
3. Consumer Culture Theory is a branch of the field of consumer research composed largely of marketing scholars. Its scholarship addresses the "cultural dimensions of the consumption cycle," including the "sociocultural, experiential, symbolic, and ideological aspects" (Arnould and Thompson 868). Rather than attempting to construct a "unified, grand theory," CCT "refers to a family of theoretical perspectives that address the dynamic relationships between consumer actions, the marketplace, and cultural meanings . . . within the broader sociohistoric frame of globalization and market capitalism" (868–869). For a broad overview, readers might turn to Arnould and Thompson's "Consumer Culture Theory (CCT): Twenty Years of Research" (see Works Cited). Much, but not all, of this research is qualitative, and the *Journal of Consumer Research* is a locus point for this scholarship. This research shares the spirit of much work in MCS, and many of its scholars utilize it in their teaching and scholarship. In no way do we mean to collapse into one term the dispersed, varied scholars who work in MCS and CCT; both of these research areas, however, provide context for the intellectual and material orientation of this collection. For the purposes of simplicity in this collection, although we do reference

CCT as a distinct field, we are also thinking of it as a component field when discussing MCS texts, concepts, and scholars.

4. We recognize in this "material turn" the efforts of cultural rhetorics scholars and others (e.g., Clary-Lemon; Grant; Powell et al.; Todd) who have detailed the much longer and non-Western lineages of ideas central to OOO and new materialism.

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