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ROUNDTABLE

Contesting Collecting: Indigenous Material Cultures

James Poskett[1] and Lynette Russell[2]

[1]History Department, University of Warwick, UK and [2]Monash University, Australia
Corresponding author: James Poskett; Email: j.poskett@warwick.ac.uk

This dialogue explores how we understand and contest the collecting of Indigenous material cultures. Poskett, using several case studies explores how Indigenous and non-Indigenous perspectives can complicate fixed notions of materiality. Russell, drawing on her own heritage and interdisciplinary research, emphasizes cross-contextualization and the agency of Indigenous communities in shaping how cultural materials are interpreted. Together, they ask how Indigenous and non-Indigenous perspectives can reshape the history of science and museums.

James Poskett

In my opening remarks, I want to suggest how we can think beyond 'material culture' in the history of science. In particular, I want to argue that the 'ontological turn' in anthropology – as well as critiques of that turn – can usefully inform methods in the history of science. More pointedly, I argue that any meaningful attempt at 'cross-contextualization', in the sense advocated by Sujit Sivasundaram, requires rethinking our understanding of material culture itself. To keep things brief, I'm going to make three points, illustrated by three exhibits and three quotations.

Here is my first quote: 'What would an artefact-oriented anthropology look like if it were not about material culture?'[1] It recently surprised me to learn that back in 2007 material culture was old news. No self-respecting anthropologist would talk about it. This was not something I was informed of, working next door at the Department of History and Philosophy of Science in Cambridge, where all anyone could talk about was the 'material turn'. The quote is from an influential edited volume widely associated with the ontological turn, titled *Thinking through things*.[2] I'll get onto the specifics of what I think about this in a bit, as I'm certainly not a card-holding 'ontologist'. But as an opening quote, it is useful precisely because it helps us

[1]Amiria Henare, Martin Holbraad, and Sari Wastell, 'Introduction: thinking through things', in Amiria Henare, Martin Holbraad, and Sari Wastell, eds., *Thinking through things: theorising artefacts ethnographically* (Abingdon, 2007), p. 1.

[2]For earlier work on the ontological turn, see in particular, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, 'Cosmological deixis and Amerindian perspectivism', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 4 (1998), pp. 469–88.

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Exhibit A. Native Hawaiian *ahu*, Mauna Kea, Island of Hawai'i, 2015. Credit: Alamy.

get beyond a bounded notion of what constitutes material culture. For historians of science, material culture always seemed to mean something we found in the Whipple Museum, or the Science Museum, or a similar institution. In my view, this is unhelpful. We should instead be thinking more broadly in terms of 'material worlds'. We need to get outside of the museum. We need to explode the definition of material culture to ask what really constitutes the 'material' and indeed the 'culture' of that term.

That brings me to exhibit A. There are various artefacts in this photograph, none of which are usually found in a museum. In the foreground there is an *ahu*, a kind of shrine made by Kānaka Maoli (Native Hawaiians).[3] In the past, *ahu* were sometimes used for wayfinding. Now, they are often used as a site or even a means of protest. Next, there's the volcanic mountain itself, Mauna Kea, held sacred and animated by Native Hawaiian peoples. And on the horizon, there's a row of astronomical observatories built by various American universities from the late 1960s onwards. These observatories have long been a site of contestation between Native Hawaiians and American scientist-administrators.[4] Clearly, this image invites cross-contextualization in Sivasundaram's sense. For both American scientists and the Native Hawaiian islanders, Mauna Kea ties Heaven and Earth. However, the materials

[3]I have tried to avoid mixing 'ōlelo Hawai'i and English morphology. Therefore, I use 'Native Hawaiian' (without an 'okina) when spelling the English equivalent of Kānaka Maoli. Similarly, I use 'Hawaii' when referring to the fiftieth state of the United States of America and 'Hawai'i' when referring to the historical and geographical island.

[4]For the history of this site, and uses of the *ahu*, see Kepā Maly, *Mauna Kea science reserve and Hale Pōhaku complex development plan update: oral history and consultation study, and archival literature research* (Honolulu, 1999).

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and the cosmologies which are relevant to that connection are clearly quite different – an *ahu* and an observatory. How, then, to write a history of somewhere like Mount Kea? I argue that, to do justice to such a history, we need to broaden our understanding of what constitutes the 'materials' of material culture. The landscape, the observatory, and the *ahu* are all relevant here. As it happens, this is exactly the direction that Sivasundaram himself later moved into, working more with environmental history, particularly in his recent discussion of what he calls 'earthy' histories.[5]

Next, quote two: 'It is the capacity for communication that turns "things" into social beings.'[6] This statement comes from another book that I wish I had read earlier – *The occult life of things: native Amazonian theories of materiality and personhood*. Although focused rather narrowly on Amazonian anthropology, this book makes a move that I think historians of science should follow. Rather than taking 'materiality' as a transparent category, the authors instead chart the history and anthropology of very different conceptions of materiality. After all, anthropologists practising the ontological turn wanted to take Indigenous – especially Amerindian – cosmologies seriously. These cosmologies treat objects as persons, not in a metaphorical sense, but in a very real sense in which objects can have personhood, subjectivity, and the ability to communicate. We have to be careful when making such an argument. Too much of the anthropological literature on Amazonia tends to assume that so-called 'Western societies' make a strict divide between nature and culture, between persons and objects, between humans and non-humans, and so on. I think any historian of science would point out the problem with such an approach.

Which brings me to exhibit B, two objects in the collection of the British Museum. On the top, a page from a sixteenth-century Mesoamerican codex, illustrating a set of obsidian mirrors. These were instruments used for divination by Nahua peoples in early modern Mexico, typically to communicate with the god Tezcatlipoca, who himself possessed such a mirror. Then on the bottom, we have another obsidian mirror in the British Museum collection. It too was made by the Nahuas, probably in the fifteenth or sixteenth century, before it was stolen and brought to Europe by the Spanish. Later, it was purchased by the famous Elizabethan astrologer John Dee, who we are told on the attached label was able to 'call his spirits' into it.[7] For me, these two artefacts suggest we need to abandon a strict divide between Indigenous and non-Indigenous 'theories of materiality'. Instead, we can simply write the history of how different individuals – whether an Amerindian shaman or an English astrologer – came to understand artefacts as possessing a kind of vitality, perhaps even personhood. In short, we can properly historicize the 'material' of material culture, without resorting to exoticism.

[5]Sujit Sivasundaram, 'The global and the earthy: taking the planet seriously as a global historian', in Stefanie Gänger and Jürgen Osterhammel, eds., *Rethinking global history* (Cambridge, 2024).

[6]Fernando Santos-Granero, 'Introduction: Amerindian constructional views of the world', in Fernando Santos-Granero, ed., *The occult life of things: native Amazonian theories of materiality and personhood* (Tuscon, AZ, 2009), p. 10.

[7]Stuart Campbell, Elizabeth Healey, Yaroslav Kuzmin, and Michael D. Glascock, 'The mirror, the magus and more: reflections on John Dee's obsidian mirror', *Antiquity*, 95 (2021), pp. 1547–64; and Silke Ackermann and Louise Devoy, '"The lord of the smoking mirror": objects associated with John Dee in the British Museum', *Studies in the History and Philosophy of Science: Part A*, 43 (2012), pp. 539–49.

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Exhibit B. 'Codex Kingsborough' (*Memorial de los Indios de Tepetlaoztoc*), Am2006.Drg.13964, British Museum (*top*), and 'Dr Dee's magical mirror', 1966.1001.1, British Museum (*bottom*). © The Trustees of the British Museum.

Which leads neatly into my final quote: 'How could I take the spirits seriously as an anthropologist when the Yukaghirs themselves did not?'[8] This is from a great

[8]Rane Willerslev, 'Laughing at the spirits in North Siberia: is animism being taken too seriously?', *E-Flux Journal*, 36 (2012), pp. 1–6, at p. 1.

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Exhibit C. Tibetan amulet case and *tsa-tsa*, 1905.0519.115, British Museum, © The Trustees of the British Museum (*left*), and Grayson Perry, 'Shrine to Alan and Claire', Victoria Miro Gallery, 2011 (*right*). Photograph used with permission of the artist and Victoria Miro.

short article by the anthropologist Rane Willerslev. The basic question it asks is: what should we do when our ethnographic or historical subjects stop taking things so seriously? This gets to the heart of what I think are the more interesting criticisms of the ontological turn.[9] The problem with the ontological turn isn't really its metaphysical implications of importing agency to matter. Rather, the problem is that it leaves no meaningful place for difference or dissent within Indigenous (and indeed non-Indigenous) communities. The ontological turn, it seems to me, is a lot less radical than many of its practitioners make out. After all, what kind of 'radical' theory depends on cultures having relatively settled beliefs? Not all Amazonians agreed that a man could be a jaguar. Not all Native Hawaiians believe that Mauna Kea is a god. And, of course, not all Englishmen thought that John Dee could conjure spirits. It's taking *that* seriously, I argue, which is the real challenge of engaging with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous material cultures.

And so, my final exhibit (exhibit C) is, indeed, an exhibition. This is Grayson Perry's 'Tomb of the unknown craftsman', held in 2011 at the British Museum.[10] At the time, I was living in London, hoping to go back to study for the M.Phil. and Ph.D. It was also around the same time I read Sivasundaram's piece. For me, Perry's exhibition is a parallel example of cross-contextualization, or at least playful juxtaposition. Throughout the gallery, Perry placed his own artwork – tapestries, vases, votives, and alike – next to genuine objects from the British Museum collections.

[9]For a variety of positions on the ontological turn, see 'Ontology is just another word for culture', *Critique of Anthropology*, 30 (2010). My view broadly aligns with David Graeber, 'Radical alterity is just another way of saying "reality": a reply to Eduardo Viveiros de Castro', *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, 5 (2015), pp. 1–41.

[10]Grayson Perry, *The tomb of the unknown craftsman* (London, 2011).

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So here we have a Tibetan *tsa-tsa* next to Perry's own votive offering to his childhood teddy bear, Alan Measles. 'It amused me that there might be some confusion', quipped Perry.[11] His exhibition is another reminder that we need to take material culture seriously, but not too seriously. Dissent over the nature of materiality is, in my view, what makes culture possible in the first place.

Lynette Russell

It is a standard practice in my part of the world to acknowledge *Country*, which allows the wider community, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, to show respect and acknowledgement for the traditional owners and their rich culture. Because I wrote this on Aboriginal land, I acknowledge the traditional custodians, the Wurundjeri Woiwurrung people of the eastern Kulin nation, the land on which I live, which is now called Melbourne. Sovereignty was never ceded. This was, and always will be, Aboriginal land. Now I'm going to give you a little short bit about me. I am a professor of Indigenous Studies of history at Monash University. My Aboriginal ancestors were born on the lands of the Wotjobaluk people, which is in western Victoria – the most southerly mainland state, and my people came from the western part of that state. They then, through the colonial project, married into the Palawa people of Tasmania. And on the other side, my mother's side, I descend from convicts.

As an Australian historian, I'm rather uniquely placed in that I descend from, quite literally, both sides of the frontier. All of my work has been deeply interdisciplinary and collaborative, and thinking about cross-contextualization one comes up against the ideas of interdisciplinarity and multidisciplinarity over and over again. So cross-contextualization has lain at the heart of my research, all of which has a duty to judge over dynamism of Aboriginal culture, their agency and subjectivity. Before I took up history, I was an archaeologist, and then I decided that I didn't really like fieldwork of that kind. I'm grateful for the opportunity to return to Sivasundaram's 'Sciences and the global', because it has been profoundly influential on me and also my colleagues and the students I have taught. I point to four case studies of my own work and my own ways in which I've been thinking about cross-contextualization. The first one is the *Global Encounters and First Nations Peoples* project, which I have been working on for the last five years.[12] *Global Encounters* looks at the past 1,000 years of Australian contact with the outside world. Our aim is to put to rest the persistent sense that Aboriginal Australia was entirely isolated, and we were just sitting there waiting for Captain Cook to arrive in 1770. Of course, Indigenous Australians, in place, on country, were not waiting to be discovered. I set up this project, which was funded by the federal government to the extraordinary total of AUD 6 million, to look at oral history, linguistic histories, botanical histories, archaeological histories, material culture, linguistics, and even medical histories of those contacts from particularly across northern Australia and Western Australia. That's been the focus of my life for the last five years, and we hope to bring that to a conclusion towards the end of this year.

[11]'Grayson Perry: a journey through my mind', *YouTube*, uploaded 5 Oct. 2011, accessed 22 Aug. 2025, https://youtu.be/woHL5rwoGDs.

[12]https://globalencounters.net/; https://www.monash.edu/muma/research/global-encounters.

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The next project is *Australia's First Naturalists*, which I did with a zoologist.[13] It was a really interesting experience working with a hard scientist. We often were having conversations where we were not making sense to one another. There was at play a lack of mutual understanding, while ostensibly we spoke the same language the nuance was not immediately transferrable. I have a clear memory of discussing the Gunditjmara people down in western Victoria, with whom I worked, and who are eel farmers. They created paddocks and holding ponds for eels, and the eels which came would arrive as juveniles, but they started life up in the Coral Sea, up near Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands. And my co-author couldn't see that that was an important thing to include in this book, because it wasn't 'Indigenous knowledge' per se. She kept saying they could have no knowledge of that. It was very interesting to me, as it made me realize that if we're going to use cross-contextualization, we need to find the right language.

One of the key things I have been of late focused on is bringing community members to the archives, showing them our research approaches. For example, recent work conducted with German museums, and on material by William Blandowski, an extraordinary intellectual and feisty Prussian.[14] He went out into Victoria, Australia, and collected vast amounts of material. He engaged the Traditional Owners from the Murray River, and he paid them with sweets and treats and tobacco, sugar and flour. These trade items became the currency used to pay for their labour. We can question that, of course, but the main thing was the people voluntarily collected things for him, which then ended up in museums around the world. These are routinely regarded as natural history specimens. There is so much cultural knowledge in the records of these that they're anything but natural history specimens. I found myself writing, '*there is no nature*'.

Many binaries in contemporary Western civilization are being contested. Nature and culture are often presented as oppositional. Western Enlightenment intellectuals like Descartes and Kant influenced this distinction. According to this definition, nature includes woodlands, animals, and the weather without human involvement. Religion, art, and cities are examples of culture. Through two federally supported centres of research excellence, colleagues and I have begun to disentangle the nature–culture binary using the idea of '*Country*' in close interaction with Indigenous people across Australia. *Country* with a capital C. *Country* knows wisdom. *Country* is land, sea, and sky – it is ancestors and kin. It is vastly more than geography or place.

Blandowski's material is spread in museums around the world, in Australia, of course, but also throughout Europe.[15] These objects/specimens are often housed in natural history collections. Several natural history museums have been interested in finding out more about their Australian plant collections. Surprisingly, when we looked at the material, it's not always what I would call 'plant samples'. They're actually *artefacts*. They're material culture, sometimes they're baskets, they're weavings. But often museum catalogues do not describe them as that. They're described

[13]Penny Olsen and Lynette Russell, *Australia's first naturalists: Indigenous peoples' contribution to early zoology* (Canberra, 2019).

[14]Ibid., pp. 132–9.

[15]Harry Allen, Mark Dugay-Grist, Luise Hercus, and Brook Andrew, eds., *William Blandowski's illustrated encyclopaedia of Aboriginal life* (Canberra, 2010).

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Figure 1. Lola Greeno, Mapili rina (Lots of shells) held in the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) collection. Accession number 2006. 222 Copyright Agency Limited, permission granted.

as an example of grasses from a particular place. These records also have intimate Indigenous knowledge embedded in them. In an Australian museum collection for some of the fish samples, there were language terms for the different life cycles of the fish, a linguist colleague noted. This is in an area where the language is no longer spoken and language reclamation programmes are being developed. A deep understanding of cross-contextualization has been central to accessing such information. Similarly, consider an item such as this string of the most beautiful shells (Figure 1). Such artefacts come up in the catalogues of many museums of natural history as an example of shells from Tasmania.[16] Upon closer examination, these are clearly not just an example of shells. That's a Tasmanian Aboriginal women's necklace.[17] So, for me, cross-contextualization is about value-adding to the material that was collected in the nineteenth century, much of which is still often regarded as being natural objects. When I say that Aboriginal people would like to know where our stuff is, it is because it's not just stuff or just nature. It's cultural material. It is kin. At the very beginning of the first Centre of Excellence, I was a key researcher involved with an

[16]Robert Tiley, *Australian navigators: picking up shells and catching butterflies in an age of revolution* (Sydney, 2002).

[17]Dulcie Greeno, 'It was different in the old days', in Heather Felton, ed., *On being Aboriginal* (Lindisfarne, 1984), pp. 1–15, at pp. 5–14.

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Aboriginal community from far eastern Victoria who had said they wanted the excavated material to be returned to them and interned in the ground. Some observers were perplexed by this, noting 'but it's just dirt. There's nothing in it. We've taken all the cultural bits; it's just dirt.' And the elder just stood there very patiently and just said, 'it's *Country*, it's *Country*'. I think that we can reach something vastly bigger than the sum of its parts by returning to Sivasundaram's essay, making connections with the kind of co-design work that I've been doing, and – I hope – telling a story that is huge and it is global, even when it concentrates on a little community on the Murray River, or in western Victoria, or far eastern Victoria.

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