

Material Culture studies at the American Anthropological Association

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A Congress of different cultures: the General Assembly of the United Nations (in lieu of a conference photograph from the AAA)

Last week I attended the annual meetings of the AAA held at San Jose. I went along with a group of students, staff and ex-students from University College London to present a panel concerned with studies inside and outside the home. As usual we are fairly up-front in presenting ourselves under the auspices of 'material culture studies'. But while this term seems to have established itself as fully as one could wish outside of the US, in the anthropology of places as diverse as Australia through to Brazil, US anthropology continues to exhibit some reticence with respect both to the terminology and its associated conceptualisations. An example was a panel for which I was discussant, held on the topic of Caribbean Movements: linking people, objects and places. Every paper within this panel was of interest. Topics ranged from Flemming Daugaard-Hansen on the difference in fate between the house and its internal possessions for migrants returned to Belize from the US, to the contrast between Dominican and Haitian paintings sold in Santo Domingo by Erin Taylor, though to the importance of shopping and sending back goods for Jamaican's on temporary labour schemes in the US by Deborah Thomas. I couldn't help thinking, however, that the papers would be less constrained if they were given license to explore the ways relationships are constituted by these contrasts in materiality, rather than remains common in the US the need to ground such papers back into arguments over identity politics and representation.

I felt the same about the next panel I visited on the topic of Virtual Worlds. Again Tom Boellstorff started promisingly with the motif of the virtual as the not fully realised, rather than merely the simulation of the off-line. There were some excellent papers such as Mizuko Ito and Heather Horst on how a site such as [Neopets](#) can become almost a precursor to share trading in that which is created as value within the site. Still, in some of these papers, including Boellstorff, I felt there is a retreat back to the fascination with simulation of the off-line, in his case arguments over real-estate, rather than keeping hold of the way other possibilities are constituted precisely by the different materiality of virtual worlds. I felt this is in part a constraint that comes with a the reluctance to see off-line worlds as equally consisted by specific materialities, in which case virtual worlds would start to emerge as perhaps less special, but perhaps more different. I would never wish to advocate any special status for material culture, or that it either is or should be a discipline or sub-discipline. It is more that the AAA affirmed a sense of what motivated many of us, quite some time ago, to take a particular interest in this area. More a feeling of something lost by the suppression of potential insight.

But I am curious to know if these are views shared by anthropologists in the US. Is there still the same pressure to justify ethnographic papers in terms of identity politics and is there still a reticence to advance one's work under the explicit title of material culture within mainstream cultural anthropology?