Imperial Matter
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Between 1801 and the 1890s, the production and consumption of soap in Britain increased exponentially, from barely 25,000 to as much as 260,000 tons per year. Manufacture and marketing of this everyday substance developed into an imperial commerce that pushed Victorian cleaning habits to the farthest colonized corners of the globe, just as it brought images of empire into the most intimate spaces of British homes (McClintock 1995: 209–210). In a wide-ranging study of gender, race, and class in imperial Britain, Anne McClintock has shown how advertising campaigns for the mass-produced Pears’ soap (figure 11) contributed to a larger system of representation that unified the new commodity economy of nineteenth-century market capitalism under the “celebration of imperial spectacle” (1995: 219). Pears’ soap was one of several domestic things at the vanguard of this “commodity spectacle,” playing a leading role in the drama of colonialism alongside tobacco tins and whiskey bottles, biscuits and toothpaste, toffee boxes and baking powder. To McClintock, in the hands of Britain’s advertisers and marketers, everyday things became intermediaries for semiotic manipulations that allegorically displayed jingoistic messages of imperial success. Soap in particular served as a “mediating form” (208) that embodied such middle-class values as monogamy (“clean” sex), industrial capital (“clean” money), and the civilizing mission (cleaning the savage). The industry surrounding this cheap and portable thing prospered in part because “it could persuasively mediate the Victorian poetics of racial hygiene and imperial progress” (209).

McClintock’s telling of what she calls the “soap saga” has much to teach us about the ways in which imperial agents harness the material world to further projects of colonial rule. Her account is also, however, one that reduces imperial things
themselves to a condition of bondage, in thrall to human intention and a tyranny of signs. A parallel analysis of soap in late-nineteenth-century Britain casts this mundane matter in a rather different guise. For Simon Schaffer (2008: 148), the story of soap is a story of science, and of the “eloquent objects” of soap physics, namely bubbles. To be sure, Shaffer also attends to soap's commodification and the combination of market forces that made it possible, from the accelerated production of alkali, to the extraction of palm oil and copra from colonial plantations in West Africa and the South Pacific. But his main concern is the project of Britain’s classical physicists to establish and communicate the underlying laws of material science through work and play with bubbles. Britain’s public scientists, intent on demonstrating to receptive popular audiences the achievements of physics in deriving general scientific principles pertaining to the structures of matter, looked as closely as was then conceivably possible at suds themselves. These evanescent things contributed to the development of microphysics, time-lapse photography, and cinematography, as scientists worked to describe the properties of bubbles (their dimensions, colors, formation, duration, oscillations, etc.) and to stabilize them despite their inherent transience.
I begin this chapter with these two contrasting stories of suds and spectacle in late-nineteenth-century Britain because, examined side by side, they bring to the fore the critical challenge that attends our understanding of the relation between imperial power and things. The two studies nicely illustrate what Lorraine Daston (2008: 16) has called the paradox of matter: “On the one side, there are the brute intransigence of matter, everywhere and always the same, and the positivist historiography of facts that goes with it; on the other side, there are the plasticity of meaning, bound to specific times and places, and the corresponding hermeneutic historiography of culture.”

McClintock and Schaffer bring this paradox into high relief. On the one hand, following Marx on the mystique of the commodity fetish, McClintock (1995: 220) addresses not the “brute intransigence” of the thing itself, or even its use value, but only “its potency as a sign” that was open to manipulations of meanings tied to imperialism and domesticity. Schaffer, on the other hand, is more concerned with the sensible materiality of soap and the “positivist historiography of facts” that was built around it, directing far less attention to its interpretation in a cultural system of value centered on the civilizing mission. McClintock (1995: 220) gives little thought to humans’ tactile confrontation with the thing itself, instead forwarding human contact with the abstraction of “commodity culture” embodied in the advertisement. In contrast, Schaffer’s history leans in so closely to the encounter of London scientists with soapy suds that the wider political context of global soap consumption is lost.

Finally, the two accounts also part ways when it comes to the capacities that each accords to its nonhuman protagonists. To McClintock, it is not so much soap that has an autonomous effect on the world, but the commodity form that it takes. Soap is an “agent” in the civilizing mission only when it is “abstracted from social context and human labor” (1995: 221–222). Schaffer’s bubbles are rather more powerful. Their very physical properties and the independent temporality of their lives impel scientists to devise instruments to suspend their movement. It is these same properties, according to Schaffer, that entice physicists and publics to apprehend and appreciate the very laws of nature. When Schaffer speaks of soap bubbles as “eloquent objects,” he picks up on Daston’s (2008: 12) idea that things do not merely repeat the human voice, but themselves “press their messages” on us. They too “have a say” (Olsen 2010: 31).

How, then, are we to discover a working analytic for imperial things that conjoins in equal measure the force of both matter and meaning in shaping satrapal conditions? How can archaeologies of empire discover the nodes of intersection between the physical properties that things possess and impose on us, and the politics in which we enlist them, individually and in assemblage? And how are we to do this analytically, in a way that rises above the limitless multitudes of things that abound in specific imperial times and places, while at the same time
remaining beneath the soaring register of ontology, where the sociopolitical specificity of things is lost to the cause of philosophical abstraction? This question matters because things are not everywhere and always the same. It may be the case that their abilities emerge in part from the inherent physical properties that allow them to stand up to us, to make a difference in the world, to invite some kind of tactile encounter, to conjure some kind of affective response, and to compel some kind of dependence. But the forms of those encounters, the substance of those affects and differences, and the strength of those dependencies arise from the particular political and social constellations that humans and things together create. This is not to suggest a social “a priori” into which things enter (Olsen 2010: 36–37), but to accept that the collaborative work of humans and things can give rise to different kinds of nonrandom associations.

With five millennia of macropolitical power behind us, for example, students of empire have come to understand that the relations between humans and things recurrently produce a cluster of interlinked associations of coercion, violence, extraction, compromise, affiliation, mimicry, complicity, and revolt, played out across vast distances and across sundry social boundaries. Humanity’s role in this bundle of associations that we have come to call imperialism is by now rather well documented. But in this chapter I want to make the case that we have yet to think concertedly about the collaborative capacities of nonsentient things in realizing the conditions and conditionals of empire. Humans alone are not the sole protectors of effective imperial sovereignty, any more than they are independent actors in their ambivalent attempts at bricolage or the determined exertions of dissent. Such efforts are made possible, encouraged, and at times undermined or enforced by decidedly nonhuman partners.

Three steps lead us in this chapter to a conceptualization of the things that work to produce satrapal conditions. The first section, by way of background, distills a selection of key interventions in post-phenomenological and post-Marxist philosophy, social theory, political theory, and archaeological thought that have made it possible to recognize confederacies of things as efficacious participants in social and political life. Several materialist perspectives emanating from a range of scholarly locations that have come to constitute the “material turn” have carefully diagnosed and contested the gradual exile of things from the humanistic and social sciences—how it happened that language, reason, and culture eclipsed matter, how we came to be so deeply distrustful and disdainful of things (Frow 2010; Olsen 2010; A. T. Smith 2015). I shall not retread the philosophical historiography that has long branded as “fetishistic” the supposedly misplaced gaze that rests too long on putatively passive and inert stuff, instead of hastening to discover the primary concerns that lie behind the “mere surface” of things (Olsen 2010: 25, 57, 64). Even if not yet back from banishment, things are nevertheless slowly making their return to philosophy and social theory. Thus, the question that I pose in the first
section of this chapter is: How are we coming to terms with them? How are philosophy, social theory, and archaeology conceptualizing their capacities, affordances, and relations with humans? In this highly selective and abridged introduction to material theory, my concern is less to explore the most fundamental questions of the metaphysics of things (e.g. Harman 2002, 2010) than, rather more modestly, to broadly synthesize the terms now on hand to describe what things are able to do independent of the human-ascribed work of semiotic projection with which archaeologists, as we saw in the previous chapter, are already well familiar.

From this general background discussion of the material turn, I turn in the next two sections to the crux of the matter: a diagnosis of the conspicuous lacunae in material and colonial thought that has left us without an adequate account of imperial things. Several recent political theories of matter have heterodoxically asserted the determinative role of things in making political association possible. But at the same time, these bodies of thought have arguably set the limits of the political quite narrowly, in such a way as to exclude imperial polities from the reach of their concepts. Conversely, anthropologies of colonialism have placed at the center of their analyses precisely the unique relations of power that obtain in imperial formations. Yet like McClintock’s soap saga, those historical ethnographies that cast things prominently in the theater of colonialism tend to leave unresolved Daston’s paradox, short-changing things in their abilities to shape imperial projects, quite apart from the intentions of the humans who make them, use them, and conscript them to the work of signification.

To address these lacunae requires an analytic that is expressly centered on the politics of matter in imperial formations. Such is the extended focus of the final section of this chapter, which develops a schema for imperial things that pivots around the four material concepts that I call delegates, proxies, captives, and affiliates. As we shall see, each is distinctive for the different interventions of its constitutive matter in sociopolitical life, as well as for the nature of its relations to the others and to human makers and users, from the most privileged imperial agents to the subjugated whom they rule. Yet despite the varying ways in which delegates, proxies, captives, and affiliates make and modify imperial projects, they emerge analytically out of the well-founded postulate that virtually all things are bound up in human–thing assemblages that make some sort of difference in the world. Coming to grips with such capacities is a prerequisite for recognizing delegates, proxies, captives, and affiliates as serious matters of empire.

**WHAT CAN THINGS DO?**

At the heart of most efforts to reclaim a place for things in the commotion of existence is a withering critique of two intertwined orthodoxies: the distinction and centrality of the human in philosophy and social theory, and the tyranny of
semiotics that long rendered things inert and passive receptacles for the imprint of culture and meaning. “Post-humanist” arguments that check the “long dictatorship of human beings in philosophy” (Harman 2010: 2) and the “narcissistic reflex of human language and thought” (Bennett 2010: xvi) have struggled to demolish the long-cherished view that intention and cognition warrant a hierarchical figuring of humans and nonhumans in their capacities to make a difference in the world (Harman 2002: 167). Things, these arguments hold, are not ontologically exhausted by the representational qualities of signification that we assign to them. As Olsen (2010: 10) aptly summarizes, things “do not just sit in silence waiting to be embodied with socially constructed meanings. Landscapes and things possess their own unique qualities and competencies that they bring to our cohabitation with them.” It is through these unique capacities for action and their intrinsic material properties that things are able to commingle both productively and obstinately with humans to generate the associations that we call polities and societies. Yet how are we to characterize these actions? A highly abridged synthesis of four perspectives drawn from contemporary social, political, and archaeological thought provides a broad sense of both the emerging transdisciplinary consensus on the power of things, and the range of ways in which that power can be conceived.

“They have to be actors . . . and not simply the hapless bearers of symbolic projection” writes Bruno Latour (2005b: 10) in his polemical introduction to actor–network theory, a framework that forcefully forwards the unqualified agency of things in the associations that continuously gather together “the social.” The key insight of actor–network theory is that social aggregates are not held up by “social forces,” but endure because of a heterogeneous array of human and nonhuman actors that continuously associate in impermanent networks. What allows the various institutions that we conventionally understand as social or political to obtain with any degree of endurance is our interactions with things of different durability, which lend a quality of stability or security to such associations, without which the fleeting “social” could never be recognized as such, let alone reproduced (Callon and Latour 1981; Latour 2005b). The actions of such nonhuman things can be seen all around us: “kettles ‘boil’ water, knives [sic] ‘cut’ meat, baskets ‘hold’ provisions, hammers ‘hit’ nails on the head,” provided we accept that action may be linked not to intention but to the ability to alter a given state of affairs (Latour 2005b: 71). Things that make a difference are themselves actors, participants, or “actants,” which describes “any entity that modifies another entity in a trial” (Latour 2004: 237). In their capacities as actors, things can “authorize, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, render possible, forbid, and so on” (Latour 2005b: 72). Not all things are equal in their agentive possibilities, being efficacious to different degrees. Nor are they fully autonomous, because every acting thing mobilizes a number of other things in its efforts. But agency is dispersed across the full range of entities that differentially intervene in the
world (see also Gell 1998). Latour unequivocally divests agency of its traditional associations with human motivation, stripping it down to the most basic capacity to produce effects. It is a justifiable redefinition since, as others have noted, even cognitive capacities for symbolism and self-awareness, insofar as they inescapably emerge from human corporeality, are themselves “indelibly material in their provenance” (Coole and Frost 2010: 21), and thus provide something less than a primary, determinative basis for the allocation of agency. Yet Latour’s democratic redistribution of what has long been regarded as the human being’s most singularly distinctive quality, however expressly redefined, might still sit uncomfortably with those concerned to avoid any whiff of anthropomorphism in our efforts to make sense of nonhuman things on their own terms (e.g. A. T. Smith 2015).

As we saw in chapter 2, Latour also draws an important distinction between a thing as a mediator and as an intermediary. An intermediary does nothing more than convey or transport meaning without causing any change (2000: 18). It is a messenger that reflects, represents, expresses, or projects already existing meaning: “Defining its inputs is enough to define its outputs” (Latour 2005b: 39). Intermediaries are the stuff of “material culture,” collections of things whose actions and influences amount to little more than the passive projection of society (84–85). Mediators, in contrast, do not singularly signify meanings assigned to them, but instead cause transformation: “Their input is never a good predictor of their output. . . . Mediators transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning [of] the elements they are supposed to carry” (39). Reassembling the social requires bringing mediators out of the shadows and not mistaking them for mere faithful intermediaries. Intermediaries are rare exceptions in a world brimming with mediators. Mediators do not only symbolize relations, like “humble servants . . . on the margins of the social” (73), but productively generate social action. Things exist in at least these two modes, though more often as mediators. The challenge is to discern them (79–82).

Latour’s formulations have reverberated across many fields in the humanistic social sciences and beyond, from archaeology (e.g. Knappett 2008; Webmoor 2007; Witmore 2007) to political theory (Bennett 2010). For Jane Bennett (2010: viii), materials enjoy a quality of “vitality,” which refers to “the capacity of things—edibles, commodities, storms, metals—not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own.” These active powers of nonsubjects are intrinsic to matter itself, and not acquired through an external force that comes to inhabit any given body. Echoing and building on Latour, Bennett speaks of material agency, the effectivity of nonhumans, and most especially, of “thing power”—the tendencies of matter to persist, to issue calls, to provoke affects, to act, and to produce effects (2–6). Thing power is “an efficacy of objects in excess of the human meanings, designs, or purposes they express or serve” (20). In suppressing the
determinative weight of human design, Bennett means not to deny the existence of intention, but to view it as “less definitive of outcomes” (32). Thing power stems from a vitality, a kind of life, that is inherent in all matter, and is marked by a propensity of things to “actively endeavor to express themselves” and their emergent qualities, which external forces like human artisans can only bring forward, but not endow (56; see also Ingold 2007: 12, and below). Importantly, Bennett speaks of things rather than objects, for the latter are in her view only partial things, insofar as they are products of human semiotics whose intrinsic existence is thus less than fully realized. Or, in Bill Brown’s (2001: 4) words, an object is what we look through to see what it reveals about society, culture, and most of all about us, while a thing (at least in its nonambiguous sense) confronts us with its very own material presence. Like Latour, Bennett (2010: 5, 10) holds that objects ought to be philosophically forgotten, replaced instead by “actants” in all their thing power.

Yet thing power on its own is insufficient for grasping the agency of the material world, because it suggests an overly fixed and atomistic order of things. Following Deleuze (and earlier, Spinoza), Bennett (2010: 21, 23) insists that agency resides not in individual things, but in the “agentic assemblage” of ontologically diverse and vibrant entities that come together in ad hoc groupings. Things have a tendency to “conglomerate,” to collaborate, to act in “confederations” of humans and nonhumans, which demands a “congregational understanding of agency” (xvii, 20–21, 23). In assemblages, effects result not from root causes residing in a subject, but in the vast “swarm of vitalities at play” (32). This emphasis on the tangle of the assemblage has been taken up and rethought by others concerned to move beyond the singular object to the coalescence of multiple thingly components (A. T. Smith 2015).

Like Latour, Bennett explodes the distinction between life and matter. In apprehending a kind of vitality in “inanimate” things she trespasses a most sacrosanct boundary of post-Enlightenment metaphysics. It is in much the same vein that Lorraine Daston radically redistributes the capacity for speech among organic and inorganic beings. To Daston, in their own nonverbal way, things can be said to talk. They do not only ventriloquize or project human speech, but themselves “press their messages on attentive auditors” (2008: 12). Daston works to check the “narcissism” of Cartesian anthropocentrism, which “asserts a monopoly on language for human beings” and “condemns things merely to echo what people say” (11). Things do not merely repeat. By virtue of their inherent material properties as well as their cultural significance, they have their own say. These ideas finds echoes in Walter Benjamin’s (1996: 73, quoted in Olsen 2010: 2096) interest in “the material community of things in their communication,” which makes it possible to attend to the ways things express themselves. Much like spoken speech, things talk by conjuring certain “ways of thinking, feeling, and acting” (Daston 2008: 20).

In contrast to Latour and Bennett, Daston here crosses over from a literal to a metaphorical analytic for things. When Latour and Bennett speak of material
agency, they do not mean that things are active in a manner akin to humans, but that they manifest their own forms of action and livelihood. It is more difficult to get away from a metaphorical understanding of thingly loquaciousness (without doing considerable violence to the meaning of the word “talk”), and to look past Daston’s flirtation with an anthropomorphizing of things, their colonization under the overbearing weight of the humanist discursive trope. But we can nevertheless observe across these thinkers a shared project to dismantle the old certainty that “subject” and “object” exist in stark opposition, and “acknowledge things not as a backdrop to, or embodiment of, remnants of societies and cultures, but as an inseparable part of their very constitution” (Olsen 2010: 149).

Social theory has thus largely propelled the “turn to things.” And yet, as some archaeologists and anthropologists have been quick to note (e.g. Hodder 2012; Ingold 2007; Olsen 2010), ironically these bodies of thought have in many cases maintained a remove from actual things in themselves, rarely pausing long enough to undertake a sustained and serious examination of any particular thing—its material properties, intrinsic capabilities, and what Hodder calls “entanglements.” As the discipline with the deepest expertise in the points of encounter between humans and things, archaeology has entered the conversation on matter in some instances with an eye to “theoretical repatriation, that is, reclaiming a concept” that has long occupied the center of the field’s theories and methods (Olsen 2010: 152; but see Fowles in Alberti et al. 2011: 898). For Ian Hodder, a new way of thinking about things entails not necessarily a redistribution of agency, but a turn to how thingly and human existence evolves out of deeply mutual and multifaceted entanglements with one another. At the heart of Hodder’s theory is the concept of dependence. Humans depend on things because they enable our existence through their affordances, and at the same time as we rely on them to secure life’s routines, they can constrain us in less than productive ways (dependency—Hodder 2012: 17–18). Our existence as humans is irreducibly “thingly” (38). Yet at the same time as we rely on things, things rely on each other. “Things assemble” (8). They are connected, entwined with one another and engaged in collective work in a manner perhaps akin to Bennett’s assemblage. Things also rely on humans. If we want them to persist in a particular state of being that is important to us, we must accord them our care, for things can break down if left unattended, given their own nonhuman temporalities. This dependence of things on humans “draws humans deeper into the orbit of things” and imposes on us a “double bind, depending on things that depend on humans” (Hodder 2012: 86, 88). It is this mutual, dialectical entrapment that Hodder means when he speaks of an “entanglement” between humans and things. In an important departure from Latour and others, Hodder maintains that to understand such entanglements requires a very close look at things in themselves, their physical properties and the “non-human ecologies in which they interact,” as well as their fluctuating hold over humans (93–94). Hodder calls for
a shift in focus from “how things make society possible to the thing in itself” (3), yet this cannot be realized if the social dominates our approaches to things, and if the boundaries between humans and things are relentlessly effaced to make way for dispersed networks of undifferentiated actants. Entanglements are physically as well as socially constructed, and archaeology is particularly well positioned to probe their relatively neglected former dimension (95).

These and other invitations to realize the existential autonomy of things, the compass of their abilities, and the tangles in which they and we are ensnared, exhort us to utterly recondition both our innate sense and our analytical stance on the very nature of existence. They provide the primal resources of the new materialisms, the philosophical grist for deliberating their first principles and forward bearings. Yet there is also a quality of relative tranquility in the atmospheres of being that they call up, auras of thought that are free of struggle or contestation over the proper distributions of energies and effects. How, in other words, do such tranquil ontologies hold up against the agitations of political life?

THE POLITICS OF THINGS

It is perhaps a mark of a second wave in the material turn that things appear increasingly inseparable from matters of politics, forcing yet another reconditioning, this time of political philosophy. As “the victim of a strong object-avoidance tendency” (Latour 2005a: 15), traditions of political thought from Hobbes to Habermas have long written things out of the body politic, where only human participants assemble, authorize, and speak (see also A. T. Smith 2015). Yet in response to calls for a post-humanist political theory that addresses the material constitution of political association, things are increasingly being recast from outcasts to participants in the political arena. Such a turn to take seriously the “stuff” of politics (Braun and Whatmore 2010a: ix) would seem to open productive inroads into rethinking the matter of imperial formations. And yet, as we shall see, there is an emerging tendency to narrowly circumscribe the scope of either the material or the political in attempting to define the relations between them. The result is that recent materialist political thought, while offering critical insights on the thingly qualities of our political lives, nevertheless offers insufficient analytic purchase on the distinctive operations of materials caught up in the undemocratic politics of imperial formations.

For example, to some critical thinkers of the “new materialism” the politics of matter is quite exclusively a politics of the body. We learn from Coole and Frost (2010: 15–24), for instance, that the revolution in biomedicine and biotechnology has denormalized received wisdom on the proper subject of political action and the just locations of political culpability. They note that the deleterious health effects of environmental toxins raise new questions about how processes that
impact the materiality of the body have consequential policy implications. Our bodily encounters with fertility and marriage, epidemics and food hygiene are the realization of state intervention (23). One limitation of this concern with “biomaterialism” is its exclusive focus on the body as the material site of the political (19), to the radical exclusion of the vast world of nonbiological matter that brings bodies into being. Such a politics that is centered wholly on the body, even in its most visceral, corporeal mode, appears rather less “post-humanist” than the “new materialisms,” as Coole and Frost understand them, would seem to otherwise endorse.

Other renegade strands of political thought, which have allowed for a more capacious universe of material participants in public affairs, simultaneously advance a rather constricted sense of the political. Latour (2005a: 16), for example, calls for an “object-oriented democracy” that is alert to the long-neglected res of the res publica, or the “things” of the public. He puts into play an expansive world of things that moves far beyond the clearly delineated matter of traditional object ontology. The things of Latour’s “Dingpolitik” range from the objects of the assembly and the instruments of a parliament, to the “matters-of-concern” that divide a public and the evidence that can settle or sharpen them. Such things join in a participatory public sphere that assembles humans and nonhumans “in hybrid forums and agoras”—the physical, institutional, and virtual arenas that are able to bring to life gatherings of various sorts (23). Of concern here is a sense of politics inextricably tied to the public assembly.

Yet, as Latour and Weibel (2005: 47) themselves note, this kind of politics is one that “entire empires have survived without.” It is the politics of democracy in places like modern and contemporary Europe and America, where political representation is a “Western obsession” (Latour 2005a: 34). For Latour the only apparent alternative is the rejection of politics itself, which to him is equivalent to the rejection of political assembly. Such objections can be detected far and wide beyond the Western world, from the traditions of the Jivaros and Jihadists, to China and Japan. Can these traditions count as political traditions, Latour skeptically asks (35)? “Can we enlarge our definition of politics to the point where it accepts its own suspension?” Yet perhaps the more immediate question to ask is whether we should accept a definition of Dingpolitik that applies only to what Latour himself reckons to be a mere “fraction of humanity.” In millennial terms, compared to democracy, imperialism has been the far more enduring form of association in humanity’s (and indeed Europe’s) political repertoires (Burbank and Cooper 2010), a coercive approach to aggregation that is premised not only on the rejection of assembly but on the denial of the very option to those thus amassed. Yet Dingpolitik admits of no such thing as the res imperia.

Latour is not alone in locating the matter of the political in the res of the res publica. In Bennett’s telling too, “vibrant matter” appears to exist exclusively in the public sphere of the democracy. The capacities of nonhumans for political activity
require our heightened attention only, it would seem, in the production of the pluralist demos (2010: 30). Bennett draws on the theories of democracy advanced by philosophers John Dewey and Jacques Rancière to locate the political materiality of things in their role as members of a public. Her appropriation of Dewey’s formulations suffices to demonstrate the politically constricted pertinence of her vitalist materiality.

In *The Public and Its Problems*, Dewey defines a public as one of many coexisting, contingent, and temporary collectivities that arise in response to a shared experience of a harm that eventually turns into a problem (see Bennett 2010: 100). Such problems are the result of what Dewey calls “conjoint action,” which involves initiatives undertaken alongside a swarm of countless other actions in a crowded field of human endeavor and consequence. Indeed, this constant fluxing of simultaneous acts and consequences that limits the possibility for full control is what, for Dewey, makes a political system akin to an ecology. As in a natural ecosystem, the inescapable interactions of overlapping initiatives mean that no conjoint action can be fully controlled by plans and intentions. Thus, in Dewey’s theory, publics arise not out of will but out of consequences. While Dewey himself recognizes only human origins for these actions, it is in his focus on outcomes over intentions that Bennett sees the opportunity to admit all material bodies as members of a public. Publics of human and nonhuman members coalesce around the need to tend to a shared problem that results from conjoint action.

I have described Dewey’s idea of a public because it provides one window onto the difficulty of extending Bennett’s (2010: 106) “materialist theory of democracy” to contexts of macropolitical dominion. To make the case, let us continue with Bennett and Dewey’s metaphor of the ecosystem. Imperial polities are made up of such staggering “ecological diversity” (which is to say, diversity of political systems) that it is impossible for a mass of humans and nonhumans existing in different ecosystems to be affected by, and respond to, a common harm. We may of course conceive of multiple publics within empires, just as Dewey allows for multiple publics within democracies. But the multiple publics of a democracy emerge out of a shared ecology and the conjoint actions of its multitudes. So while it might be possible to speak of the multiple publics in an empire, there can be no “imperial public.” And to the extent that, for Bennett, political actions of nonhumans are effected through their participation in a public, we are once again left with no way to think about the actions of nonhumans in the production and reproduction of imperial sovereignty.

Perhaps the most developed alternative to date to a materialist theory of democratic politics hails from archaeology. In his “object-aware account of sovereignty,” Adam T. Smith (2015) seeks to reground the polity writ large “in the machinery of sovereign reproduction.” For Smith, the political machine invokes the “logics of material assemblages in addition to . . . the agency of humans” that together drive
sociohistorical transformation. The conditions for such reproduction are three: a coherent public (in this case a human collective) defined by relations of inclusion and exclusion, the figure of a sovereign (or total sovereign establishment), and an apparatus capable of formalizing governance. All three of these conditions are materially produced through encounters of human-and-thing assemblies—encounters that are grounded in the material workings of “sense” (which concerns the evocative work of things), “sensibility” (which relates to the physicality of things), and “sentiment” (which pertains to the imagined capacities of things). There is no teleology underlying Smith’s theory of sovereignty; but at least the first of his three conditions—a cohesive public—is quite clearly a precondition for the other two.

Smith provides a tight and elegant political theory of sovereignty as it obtains in the relatively small and nascent polities of prehistory (the focus of his case study) and, presumably, the nation-states of today. And yet the compelling suite of concepts in Political Machine are imperfectly suited to making sense of the political matter of empire. To the extent that Smith’s three conditions obtain through accretion, he provides a robust analytical armature for tracing the work of things in the incipient formation of sovereignty within a relatively cohesive and emergent political community. Yet his emphasis on the necessity of a “cohesive public” effectively excludes imperial polities from his theory of sovereignty. As we have already seen, there can be no cohesive “imperial public,” no matter how efficacious is the world of matter in creating encounters of sense, sensibility, and sentiment. Smith leaves to others the question of the formation and reproduction of sovereignty when instantiated in an aggrandizing modality that inherently refuses the possibility of “a” public.

Traditionally, as Jennifer Pitts (2010: 212) has noted, “political theory has come slowly and late to the study of empire,” and early signs suggest a similar inattention in its new materialist orientation. Latour, Bennett, Coole and Frost, Smith, and others certainly make it possible to imagine a kind of analysis that allows room for nonhumans as efficacious participants in the political affairs of imperial macropolities (see also Bennett and Joyce 2010; Braun and Whatmore 2010a: ix). But when it comes to rethinking in detail the work of political matter in the layered sovereignties of empires, these important perspectives provide inspiration more than an analytic schema. Political association is not exhausted by Western humanity’s democratic projects, nor by other small-scale political projects grounded in the materially mediated relations between a contained public and a sovereign. The view of politics as a question of assembling is one shared by only a small slice of humanity. A “more fully materialist theory of politics” that recognizes the powers of nonhumans in political affairs (Braun and Whatmore 2010b: x) is perhaps best reformulated in the plural, to allow for multiple theories of the political that can account for the different ways in which humans and things come into association under different constellations of power.
COLONIALISM AND THE MEANING OF THINGS

If materialist political theories take us only part of the way toward a conceptual reckoning with imperial matter, can materialist theories of colonialism bring us any closer? While thus far the new materialisms have largely assumed the representational democracies of the present as their historical laboratory, their twentieth-century precursor, materiality studies, often centered precisely on the human–object encounters wrought by the nexus of European imperialism and colonial capitalism. It would therefore be a mistake to suggest that a concerted interest in the matter of empire is somehow new. In the 1990s, the meaning of things occupied a prominent place in several seminal historical anthropologies of colonialism, providing a critically important foundation for the present inquiry.

And yet, as we shall see, these foundational efforts also left unresolved the problem of matter itself, the physical properties of things and their capacities to transform human users. A close look at three influential accounts suffices to acknowledge the important precursors to *Imperial Matter*, as well as to press the case that anthropologies of colonialism have taken the things of empire quite seriously, and at the same time not quite seriously enough.

One of the earliest extended efforts to contend expressly with the materiality of colonialism was Nicholas Thomas’s *Entangled Objects* (1991), which afforded a penetrating view onto the ensnarement of things in regimes of exchange and commodification (see also Mintz 1985). Thomas’s concern was to direct anthropology’s attention concretely toward “the variety of liaisons men and women have with things in the conflicted, transhistorical history of colonialism” and away from the “abstracted domain of man, subject, and object” (1991: 26) that had preoccupied the revitalized material culture studies of the 1980s (Miller 1987). To Thomas, the diverse liaisons of humans and things involved mutual appropriations and crossing currents of two-way traffic. For example, in the nineteenth century, European commodities infiltrated indigenous societies of the Pacific islands, while indigenous objects found their way into the private and public collections of European travelers and institutions. What held Thomas’s attention were the encounters with the unfamiliar entailed in these exchanges, and the incorporation of the exotic into new regimes of value. On the European side, collecting practices exposed the ambiguity of curiosity that surrounded European interests in, and apprehension of, indigenous artifacts and their makers. On distant colonial shores, the responses of Pacific islanders to the European objects brought by traders—iron axes, hatchets, muskets, gunpowder, whale teeth—revealed the ways in which a desire to acquire such goods arose not from “the irresistible magnetism of white commodities” (Thomas 1991: 87) but out of local political and cultural agendas.

Thomas’s work introduces a style of engagement with objects that is common to the anthropology of colonialism: one that privileges meaning and its malleability
over matter and its physicality (Daston 2008: 17). Like McClintock’s study of soap and commodity spectacle in the British Empire, Thomas is quite deliberate in his inattention to the brute and durable physicality of things. His central purpose is precisely to counter the notion that a thing has a stable identity in its “fixed and founded material form,” focusing instead on how “objects change in defiance of their material stability” (1991: 4, 125). Even so, despite their apparent prominence, it is fair to say that the things of Thomas’s study are largely epiphenomenal. That is, indigenous objects matter only to the degree that their acquisition and representation illuminate the sentiments and ethnological inclinations of the explorers, missionaries, and settlers who collected them. For Thomas, the objects-turned-curios and artifacts are the passive casualties of colonialism, not quite accorded powers of their own to transform, but instead subject to the dispositions and desires of acquisitive colonizers. Powerless, too, are the European objects that enter indigenous worlds, which figure in Thomas’s story only to illuminate their appropriation and recontextualization in Pacific exchange regimes. When Thomas writes evocatively of the “promiscuity of objects,” (27) or of their inherent “mutability” (88), he is not referring to their own capacities for unpredictability, in a manner akin to Latour’s “mediators.” What mutate as objects cross cultural regimes are, rather, the values and meanings that human agents ascribe to them, and their standing in relations of exchange, variously as commodities, gifts, or prestige valuables. It is this act of crossing, “the movement and displacement of competing conceptions of things,” that concerns Thomas, more than the things themselves (123). Thomas’s “entangled objects” are thus ensnared not in immediate, human–object dependencies, but in the abstract transactional relations between givers and receivers. These are metaphorical entanglements of culture and meaning, of Western and non-Western peoples, in which objects are inextricably if collaterally swept up. As Hodder (2012: 90) notes, what is missing from Thomas’s study is “an adequate engagement with the object nature of things. The focus is on relationships between people, how things connect opposed categories and allow for hybridity and transformation.”

Though foundational, Entangled Objects provides only a partial springboard toward the satrapal condition also because of Thomas’s conspicuous silence on power. A contrasting yet complementary case is to be found in John and Jean Comaroff’s (1997) telling of the nineteenth-century encounter between Britain’s Nonconformist missionaries in Africa and the people of southern Tswana. The Comaroffs attend to the everyday forms of consumption in homes, fields, and missions that brought the Tswana into the global order of capitalism and contributed to the rise of modernity in Europe, Africa, and beyond. For their purposes, materiality means rather more than a concerted disposition toward things. The critical intervention that puts materiality into play is a rebuke of the approaches to colonialism centered on the “psychic forces” of “discourse and dialogics” (410) that
cut colonialism off from the realities of social, economic, political, and cultural experience. No mere “cultural formation” or “discursive field,” no mere problem of “consciousness, representation, subjectivity, textuality,” colonialism is to the Comaroffs in large measure about “material production” (19–20). Their primary concern is the commodification of Tswana and its forced entry into the order of capitalist relations. “Material” is here a capacious idea that accepts in its broad folds all of colonialism’s lived realities on the ground—mundane human practices, unequally distributed agencies, the tastes, styles, and gestures of quotidian life as it is actually lived, as well as, to be sure, material things of the most solid and chunky sort—cotton clothes and brass bedspreads, plows, cupboards, and windowpanes.

Such an expansive mandate does not necessarily call for close dissection of the affordances of things, assemblages, and their close-up encounters with their makers and users (though nor does it foreclose such engagement). What matters more is how objects are embedded and deployed in regimes of value and desire, in projects of commodification, consumption, and civility. Objects and architecture are very much present in this account. More often than not they figure as tools—powerful ones, to be sure—of human intention, particularly the intentions of the evangelists who worked to remake personhood, habits, and notions of virtue and value in southern Tswana through clothing and the design and trappings of the home. The instrumental and semiotic logic of the object is clear: “Western clothing, the social skin of civility, was to be both a sign and instrument of this metamorphosis” (227, emphasis added; see also 267). The evangelists were not the only ones who harnessed objects to their desired ends. The Tswana also used European clothes, house furnishings, and architecture, sometimes unconventionally, in acts of anachronism and bricolage that lay somewhere between rejection and acceptance, and served as “a riposte to the symbolic imperialism of the mission tout court” (241).

However unequally, the generative forces that changed the Tswana world emanated from humans, who wielded their power through European objects—paradigmatic “intermediaries” in the Latourian sense. It was the human colonialist who was in the business of “making subjects by means of objects” (218). Such asymmetry in the distribution of effort and effect lurks behind a language of subtle displacement that stops short of the emancipation of the thing from the over-determinacy of human agency and perception. Thus it is “style,” not the cotton of cotton clothes, that fabricates “new Southern Tswana social cleavages and alliances” (255). It is “style,” not the wool of woolen blankets, that was part of the “very making” of realities (273). One finds in this analysis a deliberate effort to provenience effects not in matter per se, but in the meanings that cloak objects and put them to work. To get this subtle nuance wrong requires correction: “African subjects were reoriented and reoriented themselves, in large part, through recommissioned European objects; more accurately, through regimes of such objects”
Precisely speaking, it is the systems of value in which objects are ensnared that made the African subject, not the objects themselves. A more recent effort to rethink the relation between colonialism and things represents the beginning of a significant shift toward according matter powerful capacities to shape colonial encounters. In *Archaeology and Colonialism* (2004), Chris Gosden defines colonialism as “a particular grip that material culture gets on the bodies and minds of people” (3) or “a process by which things shape people, rather than the reverse” (153). Of vital importance to Gosden is the production and transmission of value, which occurs through our somatic relations with material culture. It is the attachment of human values to things that empower material culture to “move people,” to cast them in their “thrall” (5, 20, 41, 81). Thus, we are to understand that value-affixed things “grip” and “move” people in ways unique to colonialism (though precisely how they generate these affective states, and how they do so differently than in noncolonial contexts, is not quite clear).

Gosden’s emphasis on the human-ascribed values attached to things means that they are not quite yet mediators, able to bring about effects independent of humanity’s plans for them. Yet at the same time, he clearly empowers things sufficiently to suffer that most classic critique voiced by the material turn’s skeptics: he has been said to fetishize material culture, to accord it too much determinacy at the expense of human agency, to confuse human relations as relations between humans and things (Dietler 2010: 20–21). Dietler urges us to resist the seductive trap of fetishism to which, in his view, Gosden has succumbed, instead preferring to return things to their proper place as “tools” and “symbolic markers” of control and cross-cultural engagement—important tools and signs to be sure, but instruments nevertheless, fettered to human choices and desires (20, 60, 63). But are not human relations both relations among humans and among humans and things? Far from over-empowering things, I would instead suggest that Gosden does not go quite far enough.

As others have noted, one of the main points of divergence between material culture studies and the turn to matter is the differential emphasis placed on consumption. Thomas’s *Entangled Objects*, the Comaroffs’ *Of Revelation and Revolution*, and Gosden’s *Archaeology and Colonialism* vigorously push the material world to the front of their analyses of colonialism, but they do so only once objects, embedded in putatively pre-existing social relations, have been tagged with meanings and values that allow them to fashion subjectivities. They do so primarily at the point of consumption (see also Dietler 2010). These accounts “take as a starting point a world of objects that has, as it were, already crystallized out from the fluxes of materials and their transformation” (Ingold 2007: 9). They are concerned with objects that work instrumentally because they have been “turned into signs and consumed as signs” (Olsen 2010: 32), in the Tswana case under a close colonial gaze. Insofar as value and signification are what empower things, they serve as Latour’s intermediaries, which cause the secondary occurrences put in motion
by human cognition. To study satrapal conditions is by no means to turn a blind eye to consumption, use, and value, as we shall see in chapters 4–6. But it does entail allowing matter—its vitality, properties, and the dependencies in which it is entangled—to have a say in shaping imperial projects. Such is the work of delegates, proxies, captives, and affiliates.

**DELEGATES**

“I found Rome built of clay: I leave it to you in marble” (Dio 1987: 245). The famous boast of the emperor Augustus gives poetic voice to perhaps one of the most unmistakable constellations of delegates in imperial history, the iconic marble monuments of the Roman Empire. In the first several centuries A.D., the city of Rome and countless other urban communities across the Mediterranean became ensnared in a relationship with marble that was so ardent, it can fairly be described as enslaving. From civic architecture to sculptural arts—basilicae and temples, baths and theaters, fountains and statues—untold tons of this metamorphic rock of recrystallized carbonite minerals made possible the practical mediations of Roman authority. Marble permeated the public sphere, constituting the spaces of assembly, commerce, and ritual, defining the terms of political competition, leisure, and conspicuous consumption. Imperial agents came to rely on its affective and practical contribution to the reproduction of Roman imperium as ideology and practice. To feed the dependence on marble, Roman emperors expropriated and exploited marble quarries in conquered lands from Asia Minor to North Africa, from southern Spain to the French Pyrenees, sometimes transporting the stone on purpose-built carriers to reach the marble-yards of Rome. This in turn set in motion practices of patronage and emulation by civic elites across the Roman world, who refashioned their cities in Rome’s image to win favor with citizens and sovereigns alike, fueling a complex commercial marble industry that extended beyond the control of the imperial center (Long 2012). Marbles of all sorts ensnared countless people in their use and care, from slave laborers to rural landowners, from artisans to architects, from contractors to patrons, from traders to pedestrians (4). The Roman Empire as we know it is simply unthinkable without marble, a powerful substance that palpably made its own difference in the perdurance of Roman sovereignty. But the political fixation with marble came at a cost, fettering imperial agents to a material without which the total apparatus of imperial sovereignty could not be maintained in its desired form. Marble necessitated ever-expanding workforces and administrative resources. And at the expense of civic prosperity, it entailed exorbitant expenditures that may have led to stagnation in the growth of the Roman economy (284, 292).

Like the marble public buildings of the Roman Empire, delegates are things that take a share in the preservation of the very terms of imperial sovereignty through
the force of both their material composition and the practical mediations they help afford. They are devilish things, however, for in return for their collaborations with the human agents of empire delegates in a certain sense come to govern the very entities that empower them. The effects of delegates are unattainable by humans alone, but this is not to deny a human role in their emergence and workings. Because imperial agents appoint delegates to assist in their plans, such things are kinds of representatives, conglomerating or standing in for the will and worldview of many. Yet delegates are delegates less because of the source than the outcomes of their actions, since their continuously unfolding effects are always in excess of their assignments.

The designation of a thing as a “delegate” has a well-known precedent in science and technology studies. Latour (1992) used the term to refer to a very particular class of things, namely technological mechanisms, like hydraulic door closers and automated turnspits, that are tasked into action by humans in order to make easier those functions that would require more effort if people had to carry them out on their own (a porter to close a door, or a cook to turn a skewer). This is not, however, what I mean by a delegate. Indeed, there is a curious elision in Latour’s conception, a conspicuous silence on the political connotations of a word that is ultimately concerned with empowerment. The focus of his formulation is on the replacement of the human by the nonhuman, rather than on the element of designation or authorization entailed in this transference. Latour’s (1992: 229) notion of delegation involves “shifting down” to nonhumans work that humans could also do if only they could be bothered or trusted. It is apparently an apolitical process of substitution. But of course, not all nonhuman things accomplish their work by standing in for us. Indeed, the vast majority of things that humans make and use act in ways that are wholly beyond autonomous human capacities.

In the sense forwarded here, delegates are less technological than political entities, and thus they produce political effects. To restore the political connotations of the term is to acknowledge three key qualities of delegates. First, since delegation always entails the ceding of the prerogative to bring about effects from one entity or assemblage to another, human or nonhuman, material delegates come to play a role in the forces of political transformation under empire. They do so by mediating, through direct somatic encounter, the practices that reproduce a sovereign’s prerogative to rule. These nonhuman imperialists make their own difference in the routines and rituals that sustain the values and institutions of an imperial polity. As we shall see in chapters 4 and 5, it is not that delegates passively facilitate such practices in dutiful accordance with the intentions of their creators. Delegates are not intermediaries, obediently expressing or carrying out prescribed purposes. They instead bring about effects that emerge from their own physicality, which may block or facilitate, attract or deter, invite or impede, conjure or refuse, and thereby keep the machinery of empire in motion. Delegates attain such efficacy
in imperial reproduction not through their singular operation, but in confedera-
tion with an extensive assemblage of other delegates, as well as privileged human
agents, who together collaborate in ad hoc groupings.

Second, once empowered, delegates in some measure come to hold sway over
those who entrust them. It is the reliance that imperial agents come to have on
delegates, on both their physical materials and their political effects, for the pres-
ervation of the very terms of imperial sovereignty, that are most critical to their
definition. Things of empire are delegates when the sovereign establishment is to
some degree fettered by its own need for the materials out of which such things are
made—the palm oil of British soap, the marble of imperial Rome, the alpaca wool
of the Incas, the silver of Achaemenid Persia. In such cases, sovereignty comes
to be contingent on the delegate materials on which it relies. The polity becomes
unviable or inconceivable in their collective absence. Such “contingent reliance” on
matter (Hodder 2012: 17–18) leads to a host of institutional effects—the extraction
of materials, the regulation of flows, the imposition of standards, the specialization
of skills—all vigorously ensured by the assemblages of violence. Importantly,
when it comes to delegate matter, instrumental and affective dependences come to
blur. Rome is no less conceivable without marble aqueducts than without marble
statuary. In this sense, in certain modes delegates are akin to Heidegger’s “gentle
things”—things that bring forth the material itself, rather than dissolving sub-
stance into utilitarian purpose. Metals, once formed, come to glitter and shine;
rocks once polished reveal their colors and patterns. Such gentle things are the
work of poiesis, bringing forth the material and calling for its care (Olsen 2010: 83).
It is when materials compel imperial agents not only to instrumentally use them
but also to care for them through regimes of affect that the things forged of such
materials can be said to be delegates. Delegates and human imperial agents are
thus enmeshed in mutual dependence in Hodder’s sense, the former dependent
on the latter for their emergence, appointment, and care, the latter reliant on the
former for the continuance of the social order that upholds their positions in the
political community.

PROXIES

The allure and efficacy of delegates can paradoxically lead to the slow ero-
sion of their own powers. Their desirable qualities and effects can trigger what
Michael Taussig (1993: 2) has called the mimetic faculty, which by its very force
“shares in or takes power from the represented.” That is, delegates can give rise
to what archaeologists and art historians of empire sometimes call “copies” or
“imitations”—things conventionally taken as local emulations of imperial canons
in alternative materials and modified forms. In contrast to delegates, such as the
marble public buildings of ancient Rome, proxies defy singular exemplification,
precisely because they are not exemplary but derivative. But terms like “copy” and “imitation” are unfortunate misnomers because they implicitly repress the properties and political potentialities of things under the replicative aspirations of their makers.

As their name implies, proxies, like delegates, are involved in the work of political representation. Like delegates, they also emerge out of assignments to act that derive from sources outside themselves. These sources are both human and non-human; mechanically speaking, proxies are made out of the conjuncture of human design and material affordance. Behind the human design are one or more material delegates that provide their templates for the proxy replacement that stands in its place. Delegates confer the prerogative to act down the line to their less authentic proxies, whose representations can attenuate or dilute the delegate’s force. Proxies are in this sense at times rapscallion siblings of their delegates, whose political mischief can arise out of (at least) two possible opportunities for slippage.

The first opportunity can derive from their material properties. Unlike delegates, proxy matter does not entrap the most privileged human agents of empire into relations of dependence, any more than proxy matter requires their care and attention. The viability of imperial sovereignty is not necessarily contingent on its extraction, regulation, policing, and concern. The differing relational properties of delegates and proxies between their chemical composition and the humans groups they ensnare give rise to a constitutional potentiality for proxies to bend the rules. This possibility begins at the very point of production. As Timothy Ingold (2000: 60) has argued, all material production takes place through a process of interaction between material properties and a “field of forces” from the environment to the human artisan. Human-made things are never merely the successful outputs of the transcription of preconceived form onto raw material. The template of the craftsperson does no more than set the parameters of the process that gives rise to a thing, but does not exhaustively foreshadow the resulting form, because form “is not imposed upon the material but arises through the work itself” (61).

As Ingold notes, materials engage their makers as much as the makers ply their materials (see also Malafouris 2008). In this mutual engagement, “the properties of materials are directly implicated in the form-generating process” (Ingold 2000: 61).

Since proxies can be made up of different materials than delegates, their properties can press themselves on their makers during the form-generating process in different ways than delegate matter, in turn producing forms that may differ, to greater or lesser degrees, regardless of the precision of the craftsperson’s template. The maker of the proxy has in mind a design, but the material does not follow blueprints or dictates, governed as it is by its own movements and tolerances. It is thus both the properties of the materials and the designs of the makers that can account for the formal variance between delegates and proxies, whether significant or slight. Proxies are never really copies after all, or at least not “faithful”
copies (Taussig 1993: 52). The dissimilitude between delegates and proxies that results from this work is in part what invites the possibility of roguery. It precludes the possibility of successful emulation and, as we shall see, it can support efforts at mimicry and bricolage, or makeshift creativity.

A second opportunity for unruliness can stem from the company that proxies keep, which is to say the immediate assemblage of humans and things with which they collaborate in the production of social life. Proxies make a difference in the world through their cooperation in assemblages usually made up primarily of other nondelegates. The dutiful mediation of proxies in the practical reproduction of rule can be attenuated if delegates reside at the peripheries of the assemblages in which proxies mingle. I noted above that delegates are most efficacious in supporting the institutions of imperial sovereignty when they work in confederation with other delegate partners. Proxies are more shallowly entangled in the work of effective sovereignty because they act in relative isolation from a broader world of nonhuman imperial agents.

To be sure, human intention plays an important part in the work of unruly emulation. Proxies can provoke dilutions of the values and ways of doing promulgated by their material masters when human users deliberately harness them to such unruly ends. Since the mid-1980s, social theory and postcolonial thought have provided a well-worn vocabulary to capture this kind of human unruliness. From Homi Bhabha’s (1997) concept of mimicry, to Michel de Certeau’s (1984: xviii) analysis of the everyday tactical acts of “artisan-like inventiveness,” it is by now clear that, operating within the bounds of dominant orders, humans can “make do” through minor and creative appropriations and disruptions that “lend a political dimension to everyday practices” (xvii). De Certeau and Bhabha alert us to the unanticipated effects attendant on the replication of established logics of practice, and thus fracture the metaphorical mirror that putatively represents imperial values in the enamored consuming subject.

But human intention alone cannot possibly realize the unanticipated effects of bricolage and making do. What is left unsaid in these accounts is how matter participates in the acts of mockery and play that Bhabha’s “mimic men” and de Certeau’s “users” undertake (Khatchadourian, forthcoming). In the case of mimicry, while it may be tempting to simply add materiality to its conceptual force field (Fahlander 2007: 27), Bhabha’s own formulation simply does not permit this. His mimicry is analytically limited by the denial of its practical operation beyond the discursive field. Mimicry, to Bhabha, is not an agentive capacity of a colonial subject (much less of matter), not a strategy of practice, but a pathology imposed on the subject by the authoritative voice of colonial power in a space of discourse that is, even if ambivalent, nevertheless closed (Aching 2002: 32–38). De Certeau may offer more scope for the admission of matter into the tactical art of imitation by the consuming masses. In a certain sense, however, he observes the tactical
practices of subjects whose capacities for creativity emerge *in spite of* a backdrop of constraining objects. Thus bricolage operates in the ways that a given text is read, or a planned city is walked, such that tactics become tactics only when the subject escapes or subverts the prescriptions of the object.

A consideration of the unruliness of proxies shifts the analytical emphasis from the craftiness of users to the craftiness of the craft itself, and explores how material things can be accomplices in human acts, not impediments or passive props. Due to the ways in which they deviate from delegates in their material properties and in the company they keep, proxies encourage and invite human efforts at gentle play in the arts of production and consumption. Proxies themselves can help diffuse the hegemonic force of that which the dominant make available. It is in the material and contextual distance between delegates and proxies that things can go wrong (or go right, depending on one's vantage), that the practices and principles of an empire can be dulled by what are, in effect, material malcontents. The challenge is to distinguish between poor and proper proxies, between those things that act in accordance with the delegates that authorize them, and those that may help their makers and users tinker with, poach from, or evade the expectations that their delegate assemblages recommend or impose.

**CAPTIVES**

If proxies originate from the centrifugal flows of delegates that stream outward, however periphrastically, from centers of imperial cultural production, captives are displaced things moving in reverse, deported along centripetal routes that lead on a straight course toward imperial centers. Captives are political things compelled to collaborate with the sovereign in reproducing the terms of authority and subjection. We need look no further than the idols of the conquered in the Inca Empire, in many ways consummate material captives, to appreciate the role that captivation can play in the making of satrapal conditions. According to the Spanish Jesuit missionary Bernabé Cobo (1990: 3–4), the Incas purloined the idols of subject lands and brought them to the imperial capital of Cuzco as hostages:

*When some provinces rebelled against them, the Incas ordered the protective native gods of the rebellious province to be brought out and put in public, where they were whipped ignominiously every day until such province was made to serve the Incas again. After the rebels were subdued, their gods were restored to their places and honored with sacrifices. At this time the Incas would say that the province had been subdued through the power of the rebels’ gods, who wanted to avoid being insulted. And it is even said that the majority of the rebels surrendered just because they heard that their idols were exposed to public insults.*

Material captives are the consequences of theft that come to assume a share in the work of political and cultural domination. They are the casualties of what
John MacKenzie (1995: 53) has called “that ultimate imperial act,” and they can take several forms. Captives were the spoils marched through the streets of Rome during triumphal processions, eventually to adorn public buildings and private homes alike as constant reminders of conquest and as a continuing “incentive to glory” (Beard 2007: 30). Captives are the “curiosities” from colonized lands that British explorers, missionaries, officials, and ethnologists, with the approval of the state, the navy, and the Royal Society, acquired and subsumed under the authority of disinterested science, or harnessed to the emerging imperialist narratives of evolutionary hierarchies, or destroyed in the name of idolatry, or objectified in the name of colonial knowledge and control (Thomas 1991: 138–139, 153, 175). Captives too were the countless antiquities that British and French scholars and bureaucrats took from their colonial possessions in order to fill private collections and museums in Europe with artifacts that affirmed the manifest destiny of Western civilization (e.g. Bahrani 2003; Cohn 1996: 76–105). Finally, no less captive are those provincial things that become targets for innovative replication and co-optation in the imperial metropole—the weak prey in the theft of ideas on materials, their forms, and forces. Redeployed to metropolitan ends, these borrowings too are things of imperial appropriation, from the imitation orientalia of nineteenth-century Europe’s world exhibitions (Mitchell 1988) to, as we shall see in the next chapter, the co-opted and adapted architectural canons of ancient Persia’s urban landscapes.

Captives, then, are things in states of displacement and dislocation, things wrested from their embedded dependencies in now subjugated communities and thrown into new entanglements. Conscripted into the work of imperial reproduction, captives often undergo a modal shift, transmogrifying from captives to delegates. Captives, in other words, are liminal, chameleonic things, irreducible to the cultural property of either sovereigns or subjects. They are, like proxies, things that disrupt those very social categories, things that—through their crossing—blur the boundaries between conquerors and conquered and make possible the willing or unwilling incorporation of the latter into the work of imperial hegemony (Gramsci 1971).

AFFILIATES

“Missing masses” is what Latour (1992) called the overlooked, mundane, non-human mechanisms that hold societies together, a term that also best describes imperialism’s unnoticed affiliates. By affiliates I mean the great throngs of inconspicuous things that reproduce social life under empire, even as they preserve an inviolable space of experience within it. I am speaking of local habitats and habiliments, apparatuses and adornments, foods and furnishings that bind people under empire into distinct collectivities. Unlike delegates, proxies, and captives, affiliates
become imperial things by sheer happenstance, carried along by the human and nonhuman forces that brought them under the net of empire. Whereas delegates, proxies, and captives come to directly mold and modify the logics of imperial sovereignty, stimulating new practices, affects, values, and dependencies among imperial agents in metropoles and provinces alike, affiliates stand at a considerable remove from the human agents and centers of state power, falling beyond the gaze of sovereigns and satraps, and instead bound in mutual dependencies with commoners in homes, villages, towns, and cities.

The forms and effects of affiliates are pervasive and varied, but nevertheless unified by the way in which such things maintain, deepen, and impel affective and practical ties to place and to the community of human agents who collectively depend on them. Affiliates are the things that make it possible to preserve difference among the disparate groups that imperial formations envelop into their folds—the distinctive forms of dress or dwelling, the tools of subsistence and the paraphernalia of ritual, the things of leisure and luxury that to some degree retain an existence despite or alongside imperialism’s new “gifts.” While, through movement and display, delegates, proxies, and captives variously traffic in the spread of practices and principles across social boundaries, to the point where they become unequivocally imperial things, affiliates mark the limits of such diffusion and the unmitigated imperial conquest over the material world. Such armies of things, the immense masses with which most imperial subjects daily interact, keep their distance and hold their ground, passively affiliating with empire only by virtue of their existence within imperialized social worlds that had no direct part in their genesis.

In this way, the work of affiliates is ambiguous, on the one hand affording the practices of everyday life that make possible the exploitation of resources and bodies, and on the other hand preserving the possibility of imagining a social existence once again unanswerable to distant sovereigns. This work is accomplished through the material properties of affiliates themselves, and the “local” entanglements and webs of dependency in which they and their human users are mutually enmeshed.

The schema of delegates, proxies, captives, and affiliates does not aspire to comprehensively envelop all the molecularly or ethereally constituted entities contained by the concept “thing.” Nor does this conceptual apparatus attempt to do work at the fuzzy boundaries where organic and inorganic, human animal and nonhuman animal, blur—where “the us and the it slip-slide into each other” (Bennett 2010: 4; see also Latour 2000; Stengers 2010). This framework does not invest heavily in policing what does and does not count as matter, nor does it utterly transcend old dualisms, as the “new materialisms” espouse (Coole and Frost 2010). It
is possible to recognize the vitality of matter in the imperial enterprise, decentering the human as the locus of all agency, without refusing the different forms that such vitalism can take as a matter of degree and not kind. Human and nonhuman organic bodies of course belong to the universe of matter, and themselves have fluid existential boundaries. And while all material beings may be mutually generative in their emergence, a fully “monological account” (Coole and Frost 2010: 8) of existence runs the risk of effacing the “presumption of difference” to which different kinds of beings are entitled (A. T. Smith 2015: 20; see also Olsen 2010: 96). To build a theory of imperial things around the ordinary things that humans experience in everyday life and suspend judgment on living, highly transitory, incorporeal, or marginal phenomena is not to deny them materiality. Nor is it to fall into the trap of Cartesian oppositions, since all matter is here accorded some efficacy, and humans are deprived of the fiction that “we’re really are in charge of all those ‘its’” (Bennett 2010: x). But the approach advanced, which readily curtails the human monopoly on “agentic efficacy” (Coole and Frost 2010: 14), takes as a starting point the nonsentient but by no means inert materials that can perhaps be said to have come to occupy the center of thing ontology, or the space where ontological debates on things today hold the lowest stakes. We have yet to come to grips with how the solid, chunky, bounded objects of traditional ontologies inflict “some kind of blow” on imperial realities, to paraphrase Graham Harman (2010: 20), much less living species and microorganisms, bodily reactions, and other natural or transitory forces. One way or another, if inquiry centered on things is to move beyond problems of ontology to politics or society, it becomes necessary to somehow heuristically segment the mind-bogglingly infinite world of nonequivalent matter, and to focus on certain things—things that may possess certain degrees of nonsentience—embedded in the relational webs that link them with others.

In chapter 1 we saw that the satrapal condition registers two dialectically related phenomena, on the one hand conjuring the experience of subjection, as it is generated through human encounters with the material world, and on the other hand recognizing the limits of imperial sovereignty, as these are produced in the relations of humans and matter. In the latter sense the satrapal condition acknowledges the potential attenuation of imperial rule as a very consequence of its extensive reach. I suggested that such limitations, restrictions, or modifications arise from the inevitable dependencies of imperial agents on the practical actions and material entanglement of their subjects. We can now be more specific in naming some of the material actants responsible for such conditions of effective and attenuated sovereignty. The reproduction and attenuation of imperial sovereignty depends in part on the variable roles played by delegates, proxies, captives, and affiliates in social and political life. These material participants are by no means predestined to create particular satrapal conditions, but they do exhibit
predilections or tendencies depending on their relations, properties, and mediations, as well as on the confederacies of humans and other things with which they assemble. On a heuristic continuum, taut entanglements with assemblages dense in delegates, captives, and proxies will be efficacious in the reproduction of conditions of imperial subjection, while tight mutual dependencies between humans and confederacies of affiliates and proxies will generate the conditionals of imperial rule, opening the possibilities for autonomous action, deviation and deviance, indifference, or the imagination of alternative futures. In reality, of course, there are limitless permutations between these poles, and it is hardly the point to advance a cookie-cutter model of the relations between sovereigns, subjects, and things that obscures the untidy contingencies of imperial histories. Indeed, as we now turn in part 2 to the Achaemenid Empire, precisely such complexities and ambiguities will come to the fore. Yet we approach the expanse stretching from the windswept mountains of the Caucasus and the Armenian highland to the plains of southwest Iran now equipped with the analytical tools for conceptualizing the variegated work of things in the making and experience of satrapal conditions.