Chapter 2
People Without Things

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> *"… well then, let's have less of that. Let's have radically, radically less of that."*
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> – John Zerzan *(in Versluis 2008:160)*

Introduction

It is easy to understand the puzzlement of colleagues who are unsure what to make of the increasing number of anthropologists who bemoan anthropocentrism. We can forgive their sideways glances when they hear that social scientists are "now look[ing] to gain maturity by burying the corpse of our imperial majesty: society" (Miller 2005: 37). Or when they learn that posthumanism is a growing project in the humanities (Wolfe 2003). Or that the latest iteration of phenomenology has little to do with people and is instead concerned with how objects perceive one another (Harman 2005).

What is going on? Why are so many scholars in the humanities and social sciences eager to write about everything *except* actual people? "These days," observes Bill Brown (2004: 2), "you can read books on the pencil, the zipper, the toilet, the banana, the chair, the potato, the bowler hat…" – not, mind you, books written by pencil manufacturers or by agri scientists detailing the best ways to grow bananas and potatoes. Rather, these are books written within disciplines that not so long ago only had eyes for other eyes (that is, for other humans) but now find they have much more to say about zippers and telephone poles.

The "turn toward things" in late twentieth and early twenty-first century social theory could be variously interpreted, but most regard it as a critical response to the textual turn of the 1970s and 1980s, which, in its excessive variants, reduced the world to a series of texts authored and read by culturally situated human

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subjects. "The culture of a people," wrote Geertz (1973: 452), "is an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles, which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong." Importantly, the "culture of a people" within this body of theory included not only structured practices such as cockfights, but also structured matter itself (i.e., material culture), all of which was of analytical interest only insofar as it transmitted encoded human meanings.

It is now generally acknowledged that the textual turn's privileging of the human interpreter and its reduction of the material world to mere semantic placeholders went too far. We are all, suggests John Frow, working in "the *aftermath* of a theoretical paradigm which sought to imagine the world rigorously in terms of a play of representations" (Frow, 2004: 347, emphasis added). The recent focus on materiality, in this sense, can be understood as a response to a world reduced to discourse, filled with unstable meanings that have been cut free from anything solid or unproblematically "out there". It can be understood, in other words, as a corrective to certain strands of late twentieth century social theory in which the real seemed to be lost in the hyperreal and in which the world was left feeling a bit like shadows and fog.

The result has been a remarkable interdisciplinary effort to raise the status of *things*, to tip our hats to their agentive presence in the world, to explore their hidden materiality, and to expose the powers they command. Old understandings of the social as an exclusively human phenomenon are being reassembled and recast as a vast brier patch of relations in which multitudes of nonhumans get caught up – an imbricated collective of people and things. In this bold new vision of the social, objects take center stage: the humble air pump becomes the co-author of modernity (Latour 1993), and Marx's actual felt coat co-authors the discursive coat that emerges in *Capital* as an exemplar of the commodity form (Stallybrass 1998).

To a certain extent, the argument being advanced in this work is that by attending to things in themselves, we stand in a much better position to understand people in themselves, due to the inescapable conclusion that people and things are mutually constitutive. There is, however, a more radical extension of this argument that draws upon overtly postcolonial language to make the claim that the traditionally heavy focus on the human in the humanities is not only analytically limiting but downright immoral. We are told that "the imperialist social and humanist discourses" (Olsen 2003) have debased the world of nonhuman objects by treating them as "subalterns" (Olsen 2003) who have been "colonized" (Pinney 2005) by human "tyrants" (Miller 2005).[1] Things, concludes Latour (1999: 214), "deserve better. They deserve to be housed in our intellectual culture as full-fledged social

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[1] It was remarked by the editors that to interweave the essays by Olsen (2003), Pinney (2005) and Miller (2005) in this way does a disservice to their individual arguments, insofar as each essay has its own broader agenda. This is a fair critique; however, all explicitly draw inspiration from Latour who is largely the originator of the postcolonial thing-rhetoric in which Olsen, Pinney, and Miller all indulge. And it is this common rhetoric that I find noteworthy, particularly so, because it seems to be deployed toward numerous ends.

actors." Needless to say, this is strong language that needs to be unpacked in a more extensive treatment than I am able to offer here. Nevertheless, its mere invocation provides a sense of the broader agenda and passion underlying the recent theorization of things, materiality, and nonhuman agency. Things, rather than people, have become our subjects as part of a strange project of decolonization in the humanities, designed to establish a new form of democracy extended to both humans and non-humans. This is the liberatory politics of what Latour (1993) refers to as symmetry, a concept I will return to shortly.

The turn toward things has much to recommend it, but let us not fool ourselves into thinking that it has finally offered a comprehensive view of the world and its doings. Every car has its blind spots, and my primary argument in this chapter is that thing theory's[2] major blind spot is, quite literally, that which is unseen – or, rather, that which is absent but nevertheless experienced as a presence precisely because its absence is marked or emphatic. Indeed, my worry is that in the rush to take things seriously, we have over-privileged a crude notion of presence linked to physicality and tangibility, as if the only meaningful relations were those between entities that can be seen, smelt or felt. My worry is that this new materialism tends to blind us to that more complicated world of relations in which, packed between the multitudes of self-evident things, are crowds of non-things, negative spaces, lost or forsaken objects, voids or gaps – absences, in other words, that also stand before us as entity-like presences with which we must contend.

The reason for this blind spot, it seems to me, is closely linked to the particular brand of "posthuman postcolonialism" just noted. If much of the motivation behind the turn toward things has been to empower the position of nonhuman objects by demonstrating that they are truly self-standing presences in the world – presences that follow their own agendas and are not, therefore, reducible to human discourse about them – then absent objects emerge as an especially awkward category. One might say, for instance, that a set of keys jangling about in one's pocket has its own autonomous steely quality that permits it to have an effect upon the actions of key-users. But consider the keys that have been misplaced and so are present only as an absence. These absent keys also impinge upon us in a strongly sensuous fashion: one registers the absence of keys with distress, gropes about the emptiness in one's pocket, and, defeated, is left standing in the cold outside one's apartment. Both the keys and the absence of the keys have material effects on the world. And yet, while we are able to write about the present key as a viable actor (e.g., Latour 2000), it is more difficult to write about the absent key in similar terms, for the latter only appears to exist when acknowledged by a human subject. The absent thing, in other words, seems to rely upon at least a mild anthropocentrism, and it is precisely this anthropocentrism that we are increasingly encouraged to reject on both philosophical and ethical grounds.

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[2] Or its variants: materiality studies (Miller 2005), material engagement theory (Renfrew 2004), symmetrical archaeology (Shanks 2007; Witmore 2007), and the like.

The remainder of the essay is divided into two parts. The first part expands upon the core paradox just noted: that absence seems to be both derivative and strangely autonomous vis-à-vis the perceiving human subject. In the process, I revisit a classic example of symmetrical analysis within Latour's writing to underscore the challenges presented by this paradox to contemporary studies of the relations between people and things generally. The second part moves beyond critique to consider what is to be gained by following Bille, Hastrup, and Sørensen's (this volume) lead in granting absence its presence. As an archeologist of "pre-modernity," I have special interests in what is to be gained vis-à-vis our understanding of those indigenous societies that, in the older literature, were defined precisely by what they lacked – the so-called stateless societies. As I suggest below, it is here that the flickering relationship between absence and presence casts a particularly intense light on the politics of attending to what is missing and why.

The Carnality of Absence

Let me begin, then, by briefly returning to the celebrated turn toward things. As much as it marks an entrée into a new domain of inquiry, it is also, quite clearly, a reactionary move designed to counter the excesses of certain variants of social constructivism in which one cannot talk about the world except as something that is talked about. In contrast, the response in recent years has been to emphasize the resistance of things to what we may say or think about them, to focus upon the alterity and autonomy of nonhumans, even if that alterity can only be vaguely sensed rather than rigidly defined. Standing in opposition to ideas or meanings, things are "what's encountered as opposed to what's thought," writes Bill Brown (2004: 5). They are defined by their carnality, by their ability to sensuously intrude upon our lives. There is a "suddenness with which things seem to assert their presence and power: you cut your finger on a sheet of paper, you trip over some toy, you get bopped on the head by a falling nut" (Brown 2004:4).

If we imagine a fundamental division between things and ideas about things, between what is encountered and what is thought, then the absences of the world might be viewed as somewhat closer to ideas. We can imagine scenarios in which a spouse is gone on an extended journey, leaving the one at home to feel the acute pain of the spouse's absence. More grandly, we can follow Marx in thinking about history weighing like a nightmare on the mind of the living. At either scale, that which is gone or has passed – that which is absent – certainly has a powerful presence, but one might explain away these present absences by saying that it is really the *idea* of the loved one, or the *idea* of the past that weighs upon us. And this would be to argue, therefore, that we are not in the province of materiality, not in the world of things.

Still, there are other species of absence that are encountered more suddenly as object-like entities that stand over against us and demand response. The absence of

people on the city street at midday can make you stop and hurriedly wonder, "Where did all the people go? What's going on?" Or you may reach for your wallet only to find it missing – stolen – pulling the rug from beneath whatever your plans for the day had been. These sorts of absences have greater impact. Like Brown's falling nut, they intrude on your life and bop you on the head.

When absences become object-like, when they seem to exist not merely as an afterthought of perception but rather as self-standing presences out there in the world, they begin to acquire powers and potentialities similar to things. Object-like absences (or what Fuery (1995: 2) refers to as quasi-presences), in this sense, become full participants in the social characterized by their own particular politics and, at times, their own particular emotional and semiotic charge.

Zoe Crossland (2002) writes of precisely this sort of phenomenon in her work on the disappeared of Argentina, those thousands of individuals abducted and killed during the period of military rule in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Crossland attends to the problem of absence as it evolved in the aftermath of this extremely violent and unstable time in the country when clandestine commando units took individuals from their homes with neither warning nor trial nor official acknowledgment. Thousands of gaping physical and emotional holes were suddenly carved out of the families of the disappeared, and Crossland reveals the manner in which these absences shifted from negative to positive as they became critical political objects around which communities rallied in protest.

It is telling, in this regard, that some vocal Argentinean families vigorously opposed the efforts of the forensic archeologists brought in as part of the formal judicial inquiries to exhume and identify the individuals anonymously interred in the military's mass graves – not, of course, because they opposed the effort to publicly acknowledge the violence, but rather because the presence of the disappeared's remains threatened to bring about a premature closure to the political struggle for accountability. Like Barthes's (1981) photograph – which offers us a presence (the photograph) that is immediately overwhelmed by a deathly absence (the photographed scene, now passed) – the identification and return of corpses paradoxically consummated the disappearance of the disappeared, pushing them into the category of the "that-has-been". Absence, in this case, was actively maintained and protected, for it was there that surviving families found the power of protest.

This is to say that absences perform labor, frequently intensifying our emotional or cognitive engagement with that which is manifestly not present. Lately, this point has even come to be made by archaeologists struggling to understand societies deep in antiquity (Fowles 2008). Douglass Bailey (2007), for instance, has recently revisited the curious case of the faceless figurine, a common archaeological object of the Neolithic and earlier periods in Europe. How, asked generations of archaeologists, are we to understand a figurine with detailed genitalia and body decoration but with a face that is either entirely absent or reduced to an indistinct nubbin? Unsurprisingly, most commentary has concluded that presence and value must be positively correlated (so great is the bias toward presence). Hence, large breasts and genitalia are regularly taken to indicate a concern with the female body and its

fertility, while the absent face supposedly reveals a disinterest in what was going on above the neck. Bailey, however, offers an entirely different reading, drawing upon work in cognitive psychology to suggest that we take the absence of the face as evidence of the face's *enhanced* significance. "One is forced to ask: Where is the detail of human expression, the face, the head?" (Bailey 2007: 118). And one is also forced to fill the gap, to project a face or subjectivity or emotional state onto the void. The missing face, then, is not a text to be read so much as it is an inscrutable thing that demands the construction of a text.

This is to say, again, that absences cannot be reduced to ideas. Regardless of the meanings that we, as semiotic animals, may nail to their doors, absences – no less than presences – also inhabit the material world on the far side of signification. They come both before and after human perception, and in this way gain a kind of independence from the perceiving human subject. Absences push back and resist. They prompt us into action. And like present things, absences also have their distinctive affordances and material consequences that are not only prior to meaning but can, of their own accord, direct the process of signification itself.

This is perhaps most evident in the way so many religious traditions have relied upon voids both to signify and, more importantly, to provoke novel reflection upon the divine. The empty throne icon in early Buddhist art directed the viewer's attention toward the transcendence of the Buddha (Tanaka 1998), and in the ancient Nabatean tradition the deity was made present by a niche within a niche, a void within a void (Patrich 1990: 51). We are most familiar with such negative signification as it has figured in the Abrahamic religions where the paradox of God's simultaneous presence and absence in the world is an obvious theme. Mary Magdalene did not go to Christ's tomb, find it empty, and say, "Ah well, there's nothing here; we can all go home now and worry ourselves with other matters." The emptiness, of course, was *constitutive* of Christ's divinity, a basic theological stance that has also underwritten a long history of Judeo-Christian and Islamic iconoclasm in which the faithful periodically reinstated the supposed purity of iconographic absence (see also Engelke 2007).

For Daniel Miller (2005), the religious examples just cited are properly viewed as components of a much more basic tension between the material and the immaterial. "Humanity," he writes in the introduction to a recent volume entitled *Materiality*, "constantly returns to vast projects devoted to *immateriality*, whether as religion, as philosophy, or... as the practice of finance" (Miller 2005: 28, emphasis added). As should be clear from this comment, Miller treats "immateriality" as an umbrella term to describe not only the spiritual realm, but also everything from academic theories to exchange value. What unifies them all, he contends, is that each rests "on the same paradox: that immateriality can only be expressed through materiality" (2005: 28). This is an important point, and there is a sense in which the tension between immateriality and materiality highlighted by Miller parallels the tension at the heart of the present volume, insofar as one might equally say that absence can only be expressed, paradoxically, through presence. However, the comparison can only be taken so far. Miller's immaterial stands on the side of

Brown's world of ideas as that which is thought rather than encountered,[3] and the goal, as I see it, must rather be to draw the immaterial into the field of encounter and expose the ability of non-things no less than things, immateriality no less than materiality, and absence no less than presence to intrude upon human lives and stand, object-like, before perceiving subjects.

I want to expand upon this observation with a brief example drawn from the work of one of the great champions of material things, Bruno Latour. The example I have in mind is Latour's (1999: 176–180) analysis of the ontological status of guns in the debate between the National Rifle Association and anti-gun lobbyists. It is an example that has the advantage of being widely regarded as an exemplar of posthumanist or symmetrical analysis and, as such, has been rehearsed in the related literature with remarkable frequency (e.g., Dant 2005: 81–2; Ihde 1990: 26–7; Knappett 2008; Robb 2004; Smith 2003). A large part of its appeal lies in the simplicity of the example: in one corner, anti-gun activists brusquely claim that "guns kill people", and so they would like to see gun sales restricted; in the other corner, the NRA counters by claiming that "guns don't kill people; *people* kill people." Hence, they argue we should crack down on criminals and not the guns themselves, the latter of which they present as neutral objects, mere tools that can be used properly or improperly.

Latour steps into this debate by posing a rhetorical question designed to expose the underlying biases of both sides: "Which of them," he asks, "the gun or the citizen, is the actor in this situation?" His answer, of course, is that, strictly speaking, neither citizens nor their guns are culpable when viewed as discrete agents. Rather, responsibility must lie on the shoulders of *someone else*, on some new hybrid agent, on the "citizen-gun" or the "gun-citizen":

> You are different with a gun in your hand; the gun is different with you holding it. You are another subject because you hold the gun; the gun is another object because it has entered into

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[3] This read of Miller's recent work was contested by the editors; however, I stand behind it. For Miller, the "world confronts us as material culture" (2005: 8), whereas "humanity reaches toward the *conceptualization* of the immaterial" (2005: 28, emphasis added). True, Miller lays great emphasis upon the supposedly dialectical manner in which people and things bring each other into being. This he refers to as the process of objectification: "In objectification all we have is a process in time by which the very act of creating form creates consciousness or capacity such as skill and thereby transforms both form and the self-consciousness of that which has consciousness, or the capacity of that which now has skill" (2005: 9; see also Miller 1987). Or as he puts it more simply: "we need to show how the things people make, make people" (2005:38). This is all well and good, but it is an odd dialectic indeed that begins with an opposition between consciousness and form *and also ends* with an opposition between consciousness and form, or both begins and ends with people and things, or subjects and objects, or what have you. More to the point, however, by stressing the opposition between materiality and immateriality, Miller moves away from an understanding of materiality as a culturally specific understanding of the material world, to one in which materiality is concrete rather than abstract and sensuously encountered rather than imagined. This is how he is able to claim that "immateriality can only be expressed through materiality."

> a relationship with you. The gun is no longer the gun-in-the-armory or the gun-in-the-drawer or the gun-in-the-pocket, but the gun-in-your-hand, aimed at someone who is screaming. (Latour 1999: 179–180).

Latour, then, offers a characteristically simple and elegant twist on an old debate, a move toward analytical symmetry that places the presence of things and people on a level playing field.

But has he really done justice to the debate and the various positions involved? Without question, a turn toward things is achieved, and we begin to appreciate the world as a network of actors, some human and some nonhuman, whose encounters and alliances transform the state of affairs and collectively lead to violence or non-violence. Nevertheless, as the relations between hard material things become illuminated, a shadow is simultaneously cast upon the many absent things that have their own part to play in the action.

This becomes clearer when we suspend the project of symmetry for a moment and consider more carefully the situated positions of the humans involved, particularly the members of the NRA. What would they have to say about Latour's seemingly straightforward contention that "Citizen+Gun=CitizenGun"? To be sure, they might argue that the gun is neutral and so should not really enter into the equation at all. But the core of their argument has consistently been that an American citizen is not a full citizen without a gun or, rather, without the possibility of owning a gun. Hence, their endless references to the Second Amendment, the alleged insurance that citizens as citizens have the right to bear arms. For the NRA, in other words, there is no CitizenGun, precisely because citizenship has already been defined in hybrid terms as the union of a person and a gun (or potential gun). Take away the guns, and what one is left with is not a society of peace-loving citizens, but a society with no citizens at all. One is left with a society of individuals stripped of true citizenship, individuals who carry with them the stigma of absent rights as much as absent guns. In other words, if…

person + gun (or potential gun) = citizen
… then following the NRA's mathematics…
citizen – gun = less-than-a-citizen + ~~gun~~.

What the NRA is centrally concerned with is *the spectre of the crossed-out gun*. The person-plus-gun-minus-gun, in their analysis, cannot walk away a citizen precisely because this new hybrid carries in its hand a politicized absence rather than a gun. It carries a denial of a right that, if not exactly god-given, then was at least given by a semi-mythical group of founding ancestors. And this is the funny thing about humans: one cannot add and subtract relations without leaving residues. "You are a different person with the gun in your hand," notes Latour (1999: 179). But you are also a different person having formerly had a gun in your hand. That is, you are a different person when gripping a crossed-out gun. On the battlefield you may be a prisoner-of-war; in American politics you are – so claims the NRA – another-disenfranchised-victim-of-liberal-big-government.

Naked Society

It makes sense that the dedicated participants in the turn toward things would have little to say about *absent* things.[4] Despite their material impact and the relative autonomy they achieve, absent things fall into the blind spot of thing theory due to the stigma of their unseemly origins – their illegitimate birth in human perception. If one roundly rejects phenomenology in favor of a posthuman relational philosophy (as does Latour), then one is far more inclined to write essays about hard, metal guns as opposed to absent or banned guns. And if one rejects idealism in favor of a new materialism (as do an increasing number of anthropologists and archaeologists), then one is far more inclined to write essays about the physicality of the decaying corpse as opposed to the strange and ghostly presence of the absent family member.

And yet, if we turn to consider earlier periods in the history of anthropology, the situation does not look much better. The problem of absence has always been a peripheral concern at best, which is surprising insofar as the discipline's dominant subject matter, until relatively recently, was comprised of non-Western societies defined precisely by what they lacked. Stateless society, pre-capitalist economies, tribes without rulers, people without history – these were the curiosities of the colonial frontier that animated most early theory-building in anthropology. "Acephalous" was another term sometimes used to describe such societies, and here we might draw a comparison between the archaeologist holding his faceless Paleolithic figurine and the ethnographer struggling to grasp the logic of the apparently headless (leaderless) tribe. If, for Bailey (2007), the absent face of the figurine implicitly prompts us to fill in the gap and project a missing subjectivity, then the missing head of the tribal society in Africa, Australia, or the Americas surely served as its own prompt for the early twentieth century ethnographer. How was social order maintained in the absence of true government and strong leaders? What filled this curious gap? Generations of scholars steeped in functionalist theory advanced their own answers, building models in which religion, kinship or some other phenomenon stood in for the missing political system.

I do not intend to revisit these dusty anthropological arguments in any length. But I do want to emphasize the degree to which a vast swath of humanity has become tangled up in the problem of absence, albeit implicitly. Take, for instance, one of anthropology's founding texts, Lewis Henry Morgan's *Ancient Society*, and the manner in which absence served as a key concept in both the method of cross-cultural comparison as well as Morgan's resultant theory of social evolution.

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[4] In discussing what he refers to as "delegation," Latour (1999: 189) does observe that by using and engaging with crafted artifacts "we hourly encounter hundreds, even thousands of absent makers who are remote in time and space, yet simultaneously active and present." But this is a separate issue. Indeed, there is a certain irony here as well insofar as we only "encounter" Latour's absent makers from the situated perspective of the (human) analyst standing outside the action and tracing out indexical relations – the very sort of anthropocentrism Latour typically opposes. Be that as it may, the absent things discussed above always seem to fall outside a Latourian analysis.

Significantly, Morgan approached the question of stateless society by working backward from the present; the task of the ethnologist, he suggested, was to begin with the modern nation-state and, through a process of elimination, to successively remove evolutionary benchmarks, working one's way through the ethnographic diversity of the world down to the most primitive of tribes. Morgan put it this way:

> … [by following] along the several lines of human progress toward the primitive ages of man's existence, and removing one by one his principal institutions, inventions, and discoveries, in the order in which they have appeared, the advance made in each period will be realized. (1974: 29).

"The principle contributions of modern civilization," he continued, "are the electric telegraph; coal gas; the spinning-jenny;" etc., and so the ethnologist must begin by stripping society of these and the many other technologies introduced during the Industrial Age. Then "should be removed the modern sciences; religious freedom and the common schools; representative democracy;" etc. (1974: 30). Remove coinage, civil law, and cavalry. Then poetry, the potter's wheel, the popular assembly. On and on, down through domesticated plants and dug-out canoes, until, "when this work of elimination has been done," when humanity has been stripped of all its things, "we shall have approached quite near the infantile period of man's existence" (1974: 36) – which in the anthropology of the day was essentially equivalent to aboriginal Australia or Tierra del Fuego.

Morgan's model was not merely teleological. Certainly, his founding principle was that the modern European or Euro-American state marked an endpoint toward which all non-modern societies have naturally aspired as part of the grand "plan of the Supreme Intelligence" (1974: 563). What I find more interesting, however, is the analytical method he employed to draw non-Western societies into the evolutionary metanarrative. Morgan stripped away things and institutions as a means of revealing and situating primitivity, an act of methodological disrobing that cannot be divorced from the deep-seated Victorian preoccupation with the nakedness of native peoples. During the nineteenth century "nakedness symbolized readability and legibility" writes Philippa Levine (2008: 198–199). "To unclothe was to uncover the truth about the native." Thus were indigenous bodies on the colonial frontier systematically disrobed and photographed as a form of scientific documentation and anthropometric study. Such photographs, mailed back to Europe, became iconic evidence of the native's lack of civilization and their generally abject state of humanity left unfulfilled. "The scantily-clad native," observes Levine (2008: 196), "was doubly marginalized – by clothing, or its lack, as well as by culture, or its lack. Lacking history, lacking shame, lacking clothes, the native epitomized the absence of civilization…" (see also Stevens 2003).

Nineteenth century prudishness undoubtedly imbued the colonized subject's lack of clothes with a special charge, but there was more at work here than the mere sight of skin. In this respect, we might contrast the documentary photograph of the "naked" native taken by the colonial traveler, with its alter-ego, the painted "nude" of Victorian high art, which also exhibited the disrobed body according to very particular conventions. The key difference between the two is that, unlike the image of the naked

native, the aestheticized "nude" of the artist was not truly "lacking clothes," if by this we mean that it was somehow considered less than complete. The nude painting was presented to the nineteenth century consumer of art as a whole specimen that lacked nothing – indeed, it served as the very image of human perfection (Clark 1956). The nakedness of the native, on the other hand, was fundamentally a thing of deprivation. The Victorian blushed before the naked native as a way of acknowledging that something morally required was missing (clothing, but perhaps also an appropriate sense of shame), while he could gaze upon the painting of a nude in a gallery with impunity, for the nude was as she was meant to be.

To be naked is also to stand in a very particular relation to desire, and in the case of the scantily-clad native, she (the gendering here is necessary) was frequently represented as the object of a voyeuristic colonial gaze. Louis Montrose (1993: 179–81) comments upon Jan van der Straet's late sixteenth century illustration of Vespucci's "discovery" of America (Fig. 2.1) to make this point:

> Here a naked woman, crowned with feathers, upraises herself from her hammock to meet the gaze of the armored and robed man who has just come ashore; she extends her right arm toward him, apparently a gesture of wonder – or, perhaps, of apprehension. Standing with his feet firmly planted upon the ground, Vespucci observes the personified and feminized space that will bear his name. This recumbent figure, now discovered and roused from her torpor, is about to be hailed, claimed, and possessed as *America*. (Montrose 1993: 179–180)

The native – and the virgin resources of the landmass she represents – are clearly what the European explorer has longed for during his months of sea travel. But more importantly, the discourse of desire within the image seems to go in both

Fig. 2.1 "Vespucci Discovers America," by Jan van der Straet (ca. 1580)

directions, for van der Straet has presented the native as both desired and desiring. With her arm extended, she reaches as if to touch not only an excessively clothed man, but also a man laden with wondrous material *things*. Ships at his back, a sword at his hip, a cruciform staff in his right hand, and an astrolabe held forward in his left hand, dangling before the native like a hypnotist's watch, Vespucci's presence on the shore reveals to the native, in an instance, that she is impoverished, that she is a creature of absence.

As typically understood, absence is equated with incompleteness and so becomes a source of longing. This assumption was made particularly explicit by Freud in his infamous contention that the woman's missing penis led both men and women to accommodate the physiological absence in deep, psychological ways: women were driven to envy, men to fetishistic substitution. But it also underwrote the European colonial project. Below, I will suggest that we should be suspicious whenever we encounter a theory that takes the link between absence and longing for granted. Returning to *Ancient Society*, however, one could say that the primitives of this and many other early anthropological texts were naked rather than nude because, while they may not have been cognizant of their lack of coinage, the potter's wheel, writing, history, religion, government, etc., they were nevertheless tragically incomplete. The Victorian's primitive was like Freud's woman: driven by an unconscious desire, as it were, to fill a void. The very notion of evolutionary progress relied upon a hidden teleological compulsion for society to acquire more and more of its missing things, gradually filling out a checklist of civilization's predetermined accomplishments. Progress was driven by the phantom pains of the acephalous society as it subconsciously sensed its own headlessness. Whether they knew it or not, the naked native *desired* to be modern – this, at least, was the conceit of the time.

Of course, the nineteenth century ended long ago, and it is reasonable to ask what any of this has to do with twenty-first century anthropology, particularly insofar as most contemporary ethnographers seem so preoccupied by postcoloniality that they cannot be bothered to think about the precolonial world. But to ignore the precolonial or premodern is to do merely that; indeed, without a viable alternative to the myth of progress, the old evolutionary metanarratives tend to linger in the shadows. (Are not premodern societies still being defined by what they lack, that lack simply now having become "modernity" itself?) This point is not lost on Latour who has, with characteristic daring, offered his own revised history of the world or, as he puts it, his own "servant narrative" to counter the master narrative of the West (Latour 1993, 1999: 198–215).[5] This is not the place to discuss Latour's broader claims, his careful dissection of the genealogy of "purification" and his critique of the modernist

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[5] Very much in the style of Rousseau's (1992) *Discourse on Inequality*, Latour is explicit in denying the factuality of his counternarrative; it is, he suggests, purely a rhetorical strategy to assist us in imagining alternatives to the myth of progress (Latour 1999: 201). And yet, Latour's counternarrative, like Rousseau's, is only compelling because he seems to convince himself of its empirical validity in the course of its presentation.

separation of nature and culture. I do, however, want to briefly draw attention to certain features of Latour's narrative that, ironically enough, are shared with Morgan's and are likewise bound up with the problem of primitive absence we have been considering.

The most obvious similarity is that both Latour and Morgan imagine a world history in the singular, proceeding along a unidirectional trajectory from an early society with few things to a modern society with many. Of the two, Morgan is more explicit and includes long lists of technological devices, instruments, property types, and institutions acquired over the course of evolutionary time. However, Latour is writing in a similar vein when he stresses the growing "scale of collectives and the [increasing] number of nonhumans enlisted in their midst" (Latour 1999: 195). Indeed, both seem to regard time's arrow as if it were affixed to a giant historical scale designed to measure the world's mounting and increasingly unwieldy mass. Morgan writes that,

> Since the advent of civilization, the outgrowth of property has been so immense, its forms so diversified, its uses so expanding and its management so intelligent in the interests of its owners, that it has become, on the part of the people, an unmanageable power. The human mind stands bewildered in the presence of its own creation. (Morgan 1974: 561)

Latour is similarly struck by the degree to which "modernity" has come to be overwhelmed by the swarms of objects that act more like subjects and vie with us for control over events. Following Michel Serres (2007: 224–34), he refers to these nonhuman actors – guns and astrolabes, for example – as "quasi-objects," subject-like things that constantly mediate our experience and transform our goals. Today's world is thick with such quasi-objects, while the premodern world, Latour contends, was less burdened.[6] Be that as it may, the more general conclusion that humans have come to inhabit increasingly heavy and entangled material worlds over the past 40,000 or so years is taken by many to be inescapable.[7] Ever more things, it would seem.

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[6] Ever slippery, Latour both supports and denies this trajectory in his writings. Here, I am concerned with his discussion in *Pandora's Hope* where Latour's story is one "in which the further we go the more articulated are the collectives we live in" (1999: 212), in which "time enmeshes, at an ever greater level of intimacy and on an ever greater scale, humans and nonhumans with each other" (1999: 200).

[7] The notion that the world has somehow become thicker with things over time is implicit in many disciplines, but it tends to be archeologists who truly make this explicit. Ian Hodder (2006), for instance, has recently discussed the Neolithic Revolution as a process of intensified entanglement with nonhumans that has propelled us down the road toward our current material heaviness. The problem is that the "material heaviness" of society is typically measured by the quantity of *artifacts* (see also Dant 2006) – in other words, by the quantity of human-constructed objects that have come to occupy a world formerly filled with "natural" materials. Which is to say that the notion is premised upon a division between the things of nature and the things of culture, only the latter of which are assumed to mediate human lives and contribute to the overall material burden of society. And this division is precisely what Latour (1993) refers to as the untenable practice of analytical purification. Below, I will also suggest that the seemingly simple assumption that modernity is characterized by an ever greater material burden falls apart further once we accept absent things as viable participants in human entanglements.

Significantly, both Latour and Morgan also assume that history involves the *accretion* of certain sorts of material objects, those of subsequent ages adding to, rather than replacing, those of prior ages. Morgan may have written in terms of the growth of property while Latour stresses the accumulation of human entanglements with nonhumans, but each founds their argument on an additive principle. And this is why Latour, like Morgan, also finds it useful to recount his history of world by working *backwards*, stripping away successive relations between people and things from the present down through the ages:

> To tell my tale, I will open Pandora's box backward; that is, starting with the most recent types of folding [i.e., the most recent exchange of properties between people and things], I will try to map the labyrinth until we find the earliest (mythical[8]) folding. As we will see… no dangerous regression is involved here, since all the earlier steps are still with us today. (Latour 1999: 201–202)

At the end of the story, we are left standing in Latour's own basement, his primatological "Level 1." Morgan went a step further, digging all the way to what he referred to as "the zero of human society," but in both accounts the result is the same: an act of disrobing, a work of elimination designed to reveal our naked beginnings.

Needless to say, the comparison I have just drawn is hardly fair to Latour's project, which he undertakes precisely to oppose the modernist myth of progress as exemplified in the writings of Morgan. But while one might write off the similarities as superficial, I have highlighted them to make a somewhat deeper point. Much contemporary scholarship, even when it explicitly critiques modernist narratives, remains wedded to an understanding of premodern societies as "societies without." Absence, in other words, continues to be central to the conceptualization of premodernity, and we find that we have not moved far beyond the old image of the impoverished forager roaming the landscape with his absent modernity silently in tow. Modern is to primitive as presence is to absence – this is what it means to be naked, to be stateless, to be without a head.

Should we aim, then, for understandings of nonmodern and non-Western societies that solely attend to that which is present? Should we find ways to discuss gift economies that are not "precapitalist," or stone tool technologies that are not "pre-Industrial," or kin-based societies that are without the underlying stigma of statelessness? This would seem the reasonable solution.

There is, however, a second option that promises, I think, to take us further. What if, rather than ignoring the absences that seem to cling to anthropological models of non-modern societies, we took these absences seriously, wiped them clean of their stigma, granted them their presence, and explored their material effects? What if we approached the missing things of society – and here we should speak of all societies, be they primitive or modern – as possessions precisely because they are missing or not present.

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[8] See footnote 5.

The challenge presented by this second option is not just to overcome the materialist impulses of contemporary social theory in which our only meaningful encounters are with the hard, present things that press against us. We must overcome the insidious affiliation of absence with *longing* and *desire* as well. That is, we must do away the assumption that every absence in the world is a void in need of being filled. As noted above, this assumption has, in part, a Freudian heritage, but its sources can also be traced in the deeper progressivist discourse of colonialism. Europeans clearly took it for granted that native people on the colonial frontier, once they were made aware of their nakedness, would naturally desire to clothe themselves. (The missionary's retelling of the Biblical story of Adam and Eve was, after all, meant to transform nudity into a nakedness in search of clothing.) But they also extended this logic from clothing to things like domesticated plants and animals, all the way up to political institutions. Once made aware of their lack of agriculture, foragers would, naturally, want to correct this absence and become civilized farmers. Once they realized their acephalousness, the natives would obviously long for a head of state.

The alternative to this sort of conceit is to acknowledge that absence need not be a source of longing at all. Quite to the contrary, absence can be aggressive; it can be cultivated; it can mark the *overt rejection* of that which is not present. Consider the gun debate discussed in the previous section. If we indulge in imagining a future in which handguns in the U.S. have been banned, there is no question that members of the NRA would regard their crossed-out guns as painful absences, as a palpable lack in need of remedy and renewed lobbying. But for those lobbyists who fought for the ban, the crossed-out gun would be experienced as a kind of fulfillment and a completion of true citizenship as they envision it. Now consider a much more radical example: the increasing number of people in far left circles who advocate doing away with, not just guns, but *all* mass-produced things, indeed who advocate doing away with "civilization" itself. Often referred to as primitivists or neo-Luddites, this community is certainly engaged in their own work of elimination, but instead of an act of disrobing that results in an image of deficiency, here one encounters elimination as a constructive act aimed at building greater levels of individual autonomy and ecological sustainability (see Shepard, 1998; Zerzan 1994a). Doing without, in this context, is a way of embracing absence and making it perform political work.

Transfer this vision to the ethnographies of the colonial frontier, and we no longer find ourselves confronted by a congeries of unevolved societies lacking government. Rather, we are in a very different terrain of deliberate or object-like absences, a terrain famously referred to by Pierre Clastres as the "society against the state."

> Even in societies in which the political institution is absent, where for example chiefs do not exist, *even there* the political is present, even there the question of power is posed: not in the misleading sense of wanting to account for an impossible absence, but in the contrary sense whereby, perhaps mysteriously, *something exists within the absence*. (Clastres 1987: 22–23)

For Clastres, that something was a paradoxical "powerless power" in which certain individuals were granted empty positions of leadership precisely so that would-be dominators could be kept in check by the community at large.

Two assumptions underlie Clastres's argument. First, it is taken as axiomatic that "the State" was not a novel institutional apparatus cut from whole cloth in the Near East some six millennia ago, but is better understood as a frightening image of systematic domination that has always haunted human societies. David Graeber (Graeber, 2004; see also Fowles 2010) has recently extended Clastres's argument, observing that ethnographers have, in fact, encountered this very image of domination in the relationships egalitarian societies frequently have with a violent and despotic world of spirits. In such societies, observes Graeber, the effort to thwart would-be despots in day-to-day human interactions "appears to spark a kind of equally elaborate reaction formation, a spectral nightworld inhabited by monsters, witches or other creatures of horror. And it's the most peaceful societies which are also the most haunted" (Graeber 2004: 25). There is much more to this argument, of course, but the central claim is that it was precisely because they were able to imagine what they were missing that non-state societies were able to be "non-state" for as long as they were.

The second assumption follows from the first: insofar as the State has always been with us as a dangerous possibility, it is never merely absent. The stateless society, for Clastres, is always a society against the state, which is to say it is a society with a ~~state~~ led by leaders with extreme ~~power~~… similar to the way the NRA is worried about becoming a society filled with ~~guns~~, or the way neo-primitivists aim for a world with ~~cell phones~~, ~~SUVs~~, and ~~computers~~. None of these absent things come naturally. Like a dugout canoe, all require a great deal of excavation to construct. And neither the society clothed by the state nor the society clothed by the ~~state~~ is any more naked than the other.

Conclusion

I began this essay by commenting on the recent turn toward things in social theory, and so there is a certain irony in ending with references to neo-primitivists and "societies against the state" who have turned away from things – or, at least, who have turned away from a wide array of things they find offensive. The move was intentional, however, for it is in those moments when something has been actively rejected and aggressively avoided that we become especially aware of the flickering nature of absence and presence. "Well then, let's have less of that. Let's have radically, radically less of that," proposes John Zerzan (Versluis 2008: 160) in classic Luddite fashion. Less technology, fewer possessions, no political representatives, no agriculture even. Certainly, this sort of project presents a challenge to the materialism of contemporary society, but my argument has been that it also presents a challenge to the materialism of contemporary social theory. The world sought by Zerzan is one in which absences (of planes, of stockyards, of the state) are embraced and regarded as their own sort of highly evolved artifacts, wonderful possessions

that the neo-primitive explorer boldly carries with her as she confronts a slumbering and complacent modernity that lacks such absences.

Thus, we arrive at a final question: once we accept the presence of absence (already a significant move away from the plenism of much recent writing on materiality, actor networks, and the like), are we then left to think through the absence of presence? Perhaps so. Indeed, how else are we to understand the neo-primitivist's characterization of the material heaviness and clutter of consumer culture as a "*landscape of absence* wherein real life is steadily being drained out by debased work, the *hollow* cycle of consumerism and the *mediated emptiness* of high-tech dependency" (Zerzan 1994b: 144, emphasis added)? Presence and absence seem to collapse in upon themselves when we realize that, for the neo-primitivist, what is absent from modern consumerism is absence itself, now encountered as freedom from the chains of high-tech things. To lack an absence, in other words, is to be burdened by a present thing that makes one incomplete.

In sum, absences are a special category of things. I have suggested that they must be regarded as part of the material world, part of the world of encounter that stands over against us. And yet, they are also foreign to that world, insofar as an absence always marks one or a limited number of nonpresent things drawn out of the infinite number of things that are, in fact, not present in a given context. This makes the absent thing an odd expatriate of the world of ideas that has taken up residence in the world of encounter. Once we have come to terms with this fact, we will be in a position to see both the naked native and the naked emperor in a somewhat different light. And from amidst the crowds in attendance, we will be able to exclaim, with ironic sincerity: "Look at the Emperor's new clothes. They're beautiful!"[9]

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[9] Cf. Miller's (2005: 32) use of the tale of the emperor's new clothes in which this classic fictional meditation on absence serves as a prompt for a discussion, not of clotheslessness, but rather of material clothes themselves and the manner in which they transform us into a "clothing/person." Miller's argument follows in step with Latour's analysis of the citizen-gun and is born, I suggest, of the same sidestepping of the presence of absence as a matter of theoretical inquiry.

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