My presentation today derives from an independent study I conducted while completing my MLIS degree. However, the themes that I want to talk about - the physicality of things, hidden labour, our ongoing inability to see objects for what they are - have been of interest to me for a long time. And the more that I study these ideas, the more that I'm convinced this such a relevant area for library research that deserves more attention and more critical inquiry. That's what I'm hoping to achieve today - to talk generally about what Material Culture Studies is and then specifically about what it could mean for librarianship.
Before I say anything else, I’d like to immediately give credit to my supervisor Sarah Roberts. She was fantastic and volunteered her time and mentorship. She also does amazing work on digital labour, so if you enjoy this presentation at all please go look her up.
Now, you might be wondering from the name of my presentation - why objects? I’d like to set the stage with this quotation: “things do not exist without being full of people”
This is true in both their origin and in their effects. We are so intertwined with the objects that we make, that we use, that we live beside - their purpose is our purpose, their design, our design.
Trying to separate people from the material facts of our existence is like trying to separate your cream from your coffee after you’ve already stirred them together. How?
How could you talk about people without talking about objects - our bridges, our farms, our hot beverages, our art?
Now - Material Culture Studies specifically is an area of research that derives from anthropology, where “material culture” refers to object remnants that we can use to study the people that created them. For instance, an anthropologist might look at clay pots from a previous civilization to discover cultural practices about cooking, or olive oil production. Looking at material culture is a way to learn about the culture that created it.
For instance, what kind of culture created objects like these? In the 1980's this theory started moving into humanities departments (after having already thoroughly colonized museum studies). In the humanities, it was used to address and to build on various, different critical inquiries: phenomenology, structuralism, constructivism, and post-modernism, to name a few. It generally kept the catch all term “Material Culture Studies” but as it morphed and grew, it developed related areas of inquiry - thing theory, object theory.

The applications for its study are diverse, and, I think, fascinating.
For instance, it can be used to look at the hidden history of objects, as Elaine Freegood does by focusing on the use of mahogany in her literary critique of *Jane Eyre*. And here, I have a film still of Jane in the infamous red room, which she was locked in as a child and which is lined with the rich, red wood.

*major spoiler in case you haven't read Jane Eyre* Jane’s love interest, Mr. Rochester, has a secret wife that he keeps locked in the attic. He acquired his wife, who is mixed-race, while living in the Caribbean, also the location for his wealth deriving from slavery, and the origin of mahogany. The wife’s secret, unwanted presence, her madness that lies just below the surface of Mr. Rochester’s respectable life, stand in for the slavery that is never represented in the novel but which account for the genteel English life it does depict. At the end of the novel after Betha’s death, Jane decorates her house lavishly in mahogany. It’s a sign of her new wealth and her triumph over the defeated wife - and it’s tied both to the horror of slavery and this terrible memory from Jane’s childhood. Mahogany is a metonym, or a stand in for slavery that lurks just below the surface of luxury and respectability.
To use a contemporary example, it wouldn’t be that different from looking at the owners of smart phones and looking through them to see the heavy metals that make up our technology and that whole ecological disaster. I think Michael Dudley covered this really well yesterday in his talk on the future of libraries, if anyone had the chance to see that.
Material Culture Studies can also be applied to examine how we project our ideas onto objects. As another example, John Plotz in his work *Portable Property* looks at how objects change meaning when they cross borders. He’s interested in English empire, and how objects like strawberries become symbolic of home and symbols of a specific culture when taken abroad. The strawberries change meaning, from being an average food to being a signpost of culture.
Of course, as signposts of culture, clothes are a fascinating example of objects that have a visible history - the history of a culture, the history of appropriation, a personal history, a shared identity. They’re easily read - but most objects are shallower than this. They don’t easily reveal their complex histories.
By way of comparison, I'm thinking here of a certain genre of pop history books where the authors have done extensive research into otherwise opaque objects like Salt, or Cod, to see how they have shaped human history.
Coming at this from a different critical bent, Donna Haraway looks at the possibilities of objects to enable agency, and proposes that we are all hybrids (part machine, part human) or, to put it another way, cyborgs. Her description of a cyborg is more mundane than just *the terminator* (although that works too) - she proposes that we are cyborgs whenever our bodies mesh with those of machines. When you’re using a computer, when you’re opening a door handle, or anytime you’re driving and the movement of your hands on the wheel and the movement of the car’s wheels becomes part of the same, inseparable process, you’re a cyborg. Cyborgs can free themselves from bodily oppression, to some extent, which explains their role in feminist critical theory with its concern with the body. This is why I’ve chosen Furiosa as the poster-child for this. She literally uses driving (or, being a cyborg) to free women from slavery.

I’ve listed out some examples of the application of Material Culture Studies within the humanities in order to entice you to the possibilities of its use. It has so much critical potential. In librarianship, I feel that we’re sometimes afraid to admit our connection to objects. We’re about information with a capital I - not
books, or wifi, or reading spaces, despite the fact that our patrons love us for providing these, and would probably list those things first if asked to do a library word association game.

We are object-centric in so much of what we do, but we aren’t object-critical. Where are our articles about the role that library materials have played in global slavery and Victorian hypocrisy, in empire building and feminist agency? That’s what I want to read, and material culture studies could be a stepping stone to get there.
And, even though it would be great rhetorically, I can’t pretend that there aren’t library articles and books about objects - because of course there are. They’re about how library architecture is intimidating, how the development of MARC has been limited by the machines it was built for, and how the badass librarians of Timbuktu saved their library materials from islamic extremism and destruction. Those are great. They just need a more unashamed focus on the objects in the narrative in order to shift the critical tone.
I’d like to move now to a slightly more difficult but equally fascinating theory that looks more at science - and which we can tie more closely to librarianship.

The principal proponent of Actor-Network Theory is Bruno Latour, a French sociologist, anthropologist, and philosopher whose focus is on the idea that humans and objects are best seen as hybrids and collaborators. (ANT still within the umbrella of Material Culture Studies). While Material Culture Studies is not often cited in library criticism, his work sometimes is.
The first thing that Latour does, in his criticism, is to break down the subject-object divide by renaming everything. Instead of humans and non-humans, we only have actants, or things that do action. If it doesn’t have any action, it doesn’t matter. Latour envisions all actants as existing in a network, like so. (It’s also possible to think of this as a field of action or rhizomatic - it’s non-hierarchical)

This leads to a radical rethinking of labour - as we have effects on objects, and objects have effects on us, in turn.
When we collaborate (like a reader and a book) we’re hybrids. This vision of action has implications for object design:
Think about a construction site. It’s possible for a human worker to stand around all day, directing traffic - it’s also possible to replace this person with a sign, or with a speed bump and achieve similar results. The speed bump does work for the human who designed it and set it in place - it’s at once a radical new way to think about objects as creations that do labour and also basic, common sense. The relationship between human and immovable stone isn’t hard to see.

Most of the time we don’t think about design that’s this subtle, because it’s such an integral part of our day. We only notice when the design isn’t working - when trying to drink from a coffee cup with a handle that’s too small - or when the design of an object is remarkable enough that it stands out.
This is a clever example of the latter. This little guy is called le petit Bertrand, and he lives in an old French hotel. The movement from a human actor moves the rotisserie, but it gives the appearance that this little man is doing the work - a subtle joke on the fact that we allocate work to machines.
One of Latour’s best examples of the interplay between human and nonhuman comes from his work analyzing the scientist Louis Pasteur in his book *Pandora’s Hope*. Pasteur, of course, was a scientist best known for his instrumental work in developing germ theory. While developing the process of pasteurization, Pasteur worked with dairy samples, taking a microbial sample, leaving it in the lab, and returning to discover that it had grown and changed. The “work” was really equally divided between the scientist and the sample - the scientist collects a sample and treats it, and the sample reacts - the scientist responds by altering the sample, and it reacts again - the scientist then analyzes the results. The process is a hybrid interplay between human and non-human actants, where the human learns to read the non-human and better understand it - in this case by developing germ theory.
To take another example not from French philosophy but from American stand up, John Mulaney has this great bit about how useless detectives were before forensics. In the past, before we knew about DNA evidence, blood couldn’t speak to us. Its evidence was mute. Just like the bacteria that Pasteur studied, it had no impact until we learned to work with it, to learn from it - until we put it to work and gave it agency to act. The impact of objects is seen in people - whether we’re fighting crime or conducting research.
In many ways, the objects that Latour writes about are no different than the types of objects that we work with in a library. A book, for instance, is an extension of the mind of its creator. Books have influence - they come into your life and change you irrevocably. They can impact other cultural works, and impact society itself. They are potent actors.

What is different about books as compared to other objects is that books are composed of two parts. They are both the work (the physical iteration) and the text (or the sign that remains the more or less the same from differing edition and format). For this reason, it's easy to think of texts as being ethereal - after you read them they live in your head, and the content doesn't change whether you're reading a passage from a physical piece of paper or a powerpoint slide.

Camerado! This is no book;
Who touches this, touches a man;
(Is it night? Are we here alone?)
It is I you hold, and who holds you;
I spring from the pages into your arms—

-“So Long,” Walt Whitman
What makes them just like every other object, though, is that they always require a physical manifestation. We have paper books, we have audiobooks, and we have digital books that we view with screens - but we have not yet invented a book that doesn't rely on the senses in order to be read.

That's why, even though libraries are so much more than our collections, collections are our core. We are object-oriented institutions.
To put it in a new light, we are the overseers and enablers of a vast and complex network of patrons and resources. We are most successful when this network is composed of objects that matter - books that influence research, GIS projects that dynamically portray complex statistics, papers that influence researchers who go on to write new, exciting, transformative papers. Here’s my modest proposal - that as the gate-keepers of library collections, it’s our job as librarians to enable the creation of hybrids - to allow objects to have an effect. To enable object agency.

We already enable hybrids on a regular basis: when we conduct reference interviews, help with literature reviews, and set up 3-D Printers. This is just a critical reframing and reorientation. Here are three ways that such a reframing might shift our focus if we did the absurd and took objects seriously:
Drawing on Material Culture Studies recasts academic libraries as active participants in the success of research. The mental leap from cultural objects being dusty old books to lively, active participants in scholarship is a major one, and one which we should encourage for the sake of library advocacy. Object agency is tied up with our agency. It is astounding to me that information is such a valuable commodity within capitalism, but librarians are nonetheless so undervalued.
And yes, this is when I cut to a screenshot of a woman who has endured the worst fate imaginable - she’s a spinster librarian.
Tomorrow’s keynote speaker Lisa Slawniowski says it very well. We are not valued for our work in the way that we should be, given the value of information within society and our role in producing it.

We need to take credit for our work and shut down narratives that depict us as turnkeys to the book tomb. That’s not what we’re about. We’re about books that are living, and peer-reviewed articles that make a difference, and impactful film. We’re about objects that make a difference, and we’re the ones who make connections happen.
Two: Drawing on Material Culture Studies forces us to be conscientious of design. Better design: better services. Focusing on objects might make it seem as though we’re neglecting what’s really important: people, our patrons. But, we’re actually looking at objects in order better understand the human experience of using them.
I don’t think that the Mount Pleasant Branch Library, pictured here, took human use into account when setting up these stairs to nowhere - actually a former entrance. Objects are consistently ignored and overlooked - they’re designed to be unobtrusive - and cultural works, as I’ve mentioned, can seem ethereal. A greater critical focus on objects, and a willingness to see them as partners, can prevent bad design - in library spaces as well as information sources. The accessibility librarians, the user-experience librarians, the information behaviour experts - you all know what I’m talking about. We have to design for use - for access - and to do that we have to take objects seriously.

As a small example of one way that digital objects are affecting the world as we know it, Canadian law didn’t used to take online citation seriously. If you were a lawyer and you cited the online version of a case, the judge would be unimpressed: you weren’t citing the real case. That’s slowly changed as legal information sites like canlii have gain more credence and respectability. This, in turn, has actually affected the law itself. As more old legal cases are being digitized and put online, lawyers are increasingly
using them for precedent. When they're successful, these old, forgotten cases then become important once again. The fact that the law is online is actually changing the future of the law.
Finally, granting that objects matter also means paying attention to their material specificity. Is reading a manuscript version of *Leaves of Grass* the same as reading it from a newly printed book? How about on a kindle? Materiality and format matter for reading experience, and influence what the reader takes away from the text. Paying attention to library materials as objects forces us to acknowledge that access to information is mitigated by physicality. This is an issue for all librarians, not just a specialty for archives and special collections (although you do have the nicest toys to play with).
Put more elegantly: Maryanne Denver asks in “Provocations on the Pleasures of Archived Paper”: “But what if we took seriously the thing that is paper by looking at it rather than always overlooking it or looking through it?” (177).

I would add - what would happen if we allowed ourselves to critically examine all those aspects of librarianship that we’re supposed to suppress in the service of information with a capital I - if we interrogated the joy of reading and discovery, or the personal experiences we have when we encounter a new film or an old book?

I’m willing to bet that the collections repercussions would be phenomenal- at the very least, perhaps, it would help us get a better handle on why zine collections delight and inspire students and somehow
stacks of periodicals like this fail to incite much interest.
My overall question today has been just that: a question: What would happen if we took objects seriously? If we looked through them to see their history, if we learned to read them, and to understand their impact?

Objects have an incredible impact on our lives - so much so that we can’t separate what’s us from what’s them. As an object-centric profession, librarians are responsible for creating hybrids: for enabling library materials and spaces to make a difference. That impact deserves attention and study, a concerted effort to see what’s normally invisible and overlooked.
References


WeRateDogs™ @dog_rates · Apr 12
This is Wiggles. She would like you to spot her. Probably won’t need your help but just in case. 13/10 powerful as h*ck pic.twitter.com/2d370PDEeg

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