

THINKING WITH THINGS: REIMAGINING THE OBJECT LESSON AS A FEMINIST  
PEDAGOGICAL DEVICE IN THE HUMANITIES CLASSROOM

by

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## ABSTRACT

### THINKING WITH THINGS: REIMAGINING THE OBJECT LESSON AS A FEMINIST PEDAGOGICAL DEVICE IN THE HUMANITIES CLASSROOM

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Under the Supervision of Professor Merry Wiesner-Hanks

In this dissertation, I continue nascent discussions of incorporating material culture in humanities classrooms in higher education. Primarily, this conversation stems from the material turn in the discipline of history, and in the humanities, more generally. It responds to calls that students in higher education must acquire the modes of thinking particular to practitioners within their discipline. My contribution sits at the intersection of material culture theory, feminist pedagogy, and the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL), and is a work of feminist praxis.

I centralize my own teaching practice and draw extensively from my experiences developing curricula and facilitating spaces of teaching and learning. Knowing that the full breadth of the human experience cannot be understood from consulting written texts alone, I turn to material culture to address gaps and silences. This move, I contend, allows for teachers and learners to represent, highlight, and interrogate a broad range of identities. When rooted in material culture theory, it offers novel epistemological routes for exploring knowledge and meaning-making. My object-centered teaching and learning approach builds from an extant pedagogical form: the object lesson. In the nineteenth century, the object lesson emerged from the theoretical basis that knowledge is to be gained through sensation and reflection. Object lessons provide a scaffolded approach to learning through and with material objects. I have made

liberal use of the term and idea throughout this dissertation, as have other researchers and pedagogues.

By bringing practices of engaged pedagogy - that which seeks to create and maintain well-being within the classroom - to bear on object-centered teaching and learning, I make this a distinctively feminist endeavor. I address both *why* others should engage in similar practices and, through modeling and creating usable resources, *how* they could undertake such a pedagogical shift. I expand theoretical discussions on authority, identity, and unknowability and how they can be manifest in spaces of teaching and learning and the impact they can have on well-being. Thus, what is distinctive about my research is that I promote, not simply describe and analyze, a material turn in teaching and learning for a broad audience.

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## DEDICATION

I acknowledge that in Milwaukee we live and work on traditional Potawatomi, Ho-Chunk, and Menominee homelands along the southwest shores of Michigami, part of North America's largest system of freshwater lakes, where the Milwaukee, Menominee, and Kinnickinnic rivers meet and the people of Wisconsin's sovereign Anishinaabe, Ho-Chunk, Menominee, Oneida, and Mohican nations remain present.

First and foremost, I thank the ants on my peony bush, those women who come before and whose work (often invisible, silenced, and denigrated) has allowed this bloom to flourish. Your tireless and steady labor supported me well before I was aware of the scope of work I would take on and in times when I thought completing this dissertation was an impossibility. You took on jobs and fulfilled roles you did not ask for. Though we do not often talk about it, it is fully possible that you did not live the life you wanted to; perhaps you abandoned plans for a different path, or maybe your situation constrained you so that you could not imagine what could be possible if you were given a choice or an opportunity. I cannot name most of you, but I know that your names include Anna, Cecelia, Mildred, Audrey, Phyllis, Theodora, Juanita, Carol, Mary Jean, Debbie, June, Erlene, Shannon, JoBeth, Laurie, Jane, Sherry, and Debi.

I thank my family – my parents Mary and Joe, and my brothers, Joe and Tyler – who model for me the value of staying curious, never being too old to play, that many hands make light work, that you leave things better than you found them, and that you never forget the corners when you sweep the floor. I struggle to find words enough to thank my partner Scott, whose unwavering humor, compassion, and support see me through. I love you all.

This dissertation is the product of collaboration. Though many of my collaborators are mentioned in the content that follows, it would be impossible to create an exhaustive list of those

who have supported me and my work. So, to every person who has shared insight, time, labor, and talents: I thank you. I commit myself to supporting others, in kind, so that your work can continue to know value.

My sincere thanks to the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Merry Wiesner-Hanks, and the Chipstone Foundation – all who provided valuable resources and support, making it possible for me to research, write, and create this dissertation creatively and without compromise.

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## Chapter 1

### Thinking with Things: Introduction

This dissertation is a work of feminist praxis. It is meant to serve as a space for reflection: on my identity, my social locations,<sup>1</sup> my approaches to teaching and learning in higher education - and on how each of these facets square with available scholarship. Importantly, it is an opportunity to challenge conventions, including the form and structure of a typical dissertation as well as the possibilities for teaching and learning in a humanities classroom in higher education. I present this dissertation in a number of formats: in the written word, assignment sheets, and reflective and instructive videos. In each format, I hope to reach and impact a diverse audience of teachers and learners who, if they so choose, will use my suggestions in their own classroom spaces. I hope that what I offer will serve as a starting point for creating and maintaining well-being through and with objects in humanities classrooms in higher education.

I write this dissertation with equal training and footing in the disciplines of women's and gender studies (WGS) and history, and each comes to bear on my work in specific and enduring ways. First, informed by my work in women's and gender studies, I identify as a feminist pedagogue. For me, this means that engagement is at the heart of my approach to teaching and learning. I understand that my role in the classroom is to ensure that all members become active

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1. I identify as an able-bodied, cisgender, sapiosexual woman. I am white, a feminist, and a first-generation college student. While members of my family have had some access to higher education and have completed extensive vocational training themselves, I am the only person in my immediate family to receive a four-year degree. The relative stability of my economic and relationship statuses allows me the time and space to pursue advanced degrees and focus on my own education and teaching practice. I earned undergraduate degrees in both Classical Studies and Psychology, both from different institutions (Carthage College and North Park University, respectively); my master's level work was completed in Women's and Gender Studies (then, Women's Studies) at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM) and I completed my PhD coursework in the Department of History at the same institution. What appears to be a diverse course of study grounds me as an interdisciplinary scholar, teacher, and learner.

participants in learning: challenging, questioning, reflecting, and undertaking critical analysis. Along with my students, I engage to identify, and then seek to know my place within, the systems of power that privilege few and oppress and marginalize the greater majority in order to dismantle them.

Next, I continue my challenge to disciplinary conventions and employ what some might consider a rather loose definition or usage of the terms “history,” “history classroom” and “historian.” I build from the rather simple idea that history is a narrative (which may manifest in any variety of forms) that describes change over time. With this understanding, any number of disciplines, including women’s and gender studies, could be said to fall under the purview of history. Some institutions and individuals may think of the discipline of history as a discrete body, but in practice (and in my usage), the boundaries of history are quite porous. Therefore, I take a both/and approach here: history is both a discrete field of study and research *and* an inclusive approach to knowing and creating knowledge based on the paradigm of change over time.

Finally, building from my foundation in WGS and history, what I offer in the pages and resources to follow draws from material culture theory and is a contribution to the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL). What is distinct about this dissertation is that I promote, not simply describe and analyze, a material turn in the teaching and learning in higher education: in history, WGS, and in the humanities, writ large.

### **A Starting Observation: Teaching and Learning in History and the Humanities**

Introductory-level history students, ones taking a course perhaps to fulfill a general education requirement, do not necessarily have a significant impulse to engage in primary source research and position themselves as historians. Much of students’ contact with teaching and

learning in history asks them to memorize names, dates, and events. Rarely are students asked to engage in the kind of critical inquiry we historians ask of ourselves. Even more rarely do students seek to engage in this kind of critical work and production themselves. However, in recent decades, scholars, teachers, and administrators have sought to address the gap that separates “knowing history” (which may be rather useful for passing a multiple-choice test or your local bar trivia league) and “doing history.” Knowing history supposes that students ingest requisite names and dates and regurgitate such information when the classroom authority deems necessary. Doing history work relies on refined abilities to investigate, synthesize, ask questions rooted in a critical or theoretical stance, and deliver conclusions in (hopefully) intelligible ways. Those of us who “do history” know intimately that the long, lonely hours in our offices are decidedly not spent memorizing the type of information that is typically asked of our students, especially in K-12 classrooms. And we recognize that we did not suddenly and without work make the leap to doing history, a task that requires disciplinary habits of mind: the tools of the trade that enable our work as historians.

Institutions and individuals within the history profession and beyond are beginning to pay more attention to how students acquire disciplinary habits of mind that will enable them to move from *knowing* to *doing*. Initiatives include the American Historical Association’s Tuning Project,<sup>2</sup> the formation of the specialized, scholarly sub-field the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) in History (HistorySOTL),<sup>3</sup> and ever-more-  
numerous articles and think pieces that address practices of teaching and learning in the higher

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2. See “Tuning the History Discipline in the United States,” American Historical Association, accessed May 16, 2019, <https://www.historians.org/teaching-and-learning/tuning-the-history-discipline>.

3. See “Welcome,” History SOTL: The International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in History, accessed May 16, 2019, <http://www.indiana.edu/~histsotl/blog/>.

education history classroom.<sup>4</sup> As we exist in an academic world that increasingly calls for inter- or trans-disciplinary work, this is then a conversation that extends beyond the history classroom and into the humanities classroom. For example, *Exploring More Signature Pedagogies: Approaches to Teaching Disciplinary Habits of Mind* (published in 2012) offers chapters that discuss approaches to teaching and learning that ask students to do the work of disciplinary practitioners. The edited volume contains chapters that offer reflections and resources for teaching and learning in a broad range of contexts in higher education: the humanities, social and natural sciences, and interdisciplinary fields and programs (which includes a chapter about feminist pedagogy, a chapter I heavily lean on).<sup>5</sup> All of these examples point to the necessity of developing skills of critical inquiry, and they suggest a significant turn in how increasing numbers of instructors imagine their roles and responsibilities within the classroom.

As I'm reminded by Merry Wiesner-Hanks in the introduction to *A Concise History of the World*, history, itself, is a concept, an entity, marked by the development of writing. Traditionally, any narratives or accounts of the past before this all-important threshold are categorized as "prehistoric." Writing and capital-H "History" are inextricably linked.<sup>6</sup> It may come as no surprise, then, that most of the scholarship on teaching and learning in history

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4. Searching the online archives of *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Inside Higher Ed* turns up numerous results that address teaching and learning in history, see Louis P. Masur, "Why History Matters," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 16, 2019, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Why-History-Matters/245484>; Elizabeth A. Leffeldt, "Why Study History," *Inside Higher Ed*, January 9, 2019, <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2019/01/09/making-study-history-relevant-today-opinion>.

5. *Exploring More Signature Pedagogies: Approaches to Teaching Disciplinary Habits of Mind*, eds. Regan Gurung, Nancy Chick, and Aeron Haynie (Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2012); the editorial team published a first volume, *Exploring Signature Pedagogies: Approaches to Teaching Disciplinary Habits of Mind* in 2009.

6. Merry Wiesner-Hanks, *A Concise History of the World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 5.

focuses on skills related to texts, but, as I'll argue here, engagement with objects can also offer students of history a way to do the work of historians. With the so-called "material turn," history has (necessarily) drawn from archaeology, anthropology, and art history, fields that have established that knowledge gleaned through and with objects is valid and accurate, with the potential to challenge our text-based narratives. Despite historians' increasing recognition that material culture serves as a rich source for our practice of historical inquiry, literature that addresses both how and why to incorporate objects (as both a site of inquiry and a means of knowledge production) in our history classrooms is not well-established.

The term "material turn" describes how historians (and others within the humanities) realigned their methods and disciplinary outlook by acknowledging that a narrative of humans - their actions, interactions, and their cultures (what we call "history") - cannot be understood apart from their immersion in a material environment.<sup>7</sup> History's trend toward a serious consideration of objects has roots in Marxist dialectical materialism. According to Timothy LeCain, dialectical materialism lent the history, "the great insight...that human identities emerge from the way they interact with the material means of subsistence available at any point in time, including both raw materials and technologies. As humans change the tools and materials they work with, they also fundamentally change themselves."<sup>8</sup> This trend toward the material was also shaped the work of the Annales School. LeCain argues that the Annales School helped precipitate the move toward objects "with their argument that the *longue durée* material forces of

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7. Beginning more recently, historians offer critiques of the anthropocentrism within the discipline. The field of "Big History" is a reaction, in part, to this perceived anthropocentrism, see David Christian, *Origin Story: A Big History of Everything* (New York: Hachette, 2018).

<sup>8</sup>. Timothy LeCain, *The Matter of History: How Things Create the Past* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 44.

geography and climate shape the broad outlines of human history,<sup>9</sup> It was impacted by the rise of the “cultural turn” (and earlier “linguistic turn”) beginning in the 1980s. Marking a significant epistemological shift, historians and others began to question the methods (and efficacy of those methods) that dictate the creation of knowledge, thereby, “pushing historians to examine how their own methods of knowledge production had been and continued to be influenced by culturally rooted assumptions that reflected wider dynamics of power and control in society.”<sup>10</sup> In effect, the material turn in history, and in other disciplines in the humanities concerned with historical accounts, did not simply result in an “add-and-stir” incorporation of objects and material culture. It also called into question the practices and methods that allow historians to derive historical narratives from source material (whether written or material) in the first place.<sup>11</sup>

Since the material turn, historians have added to the research methods and theoretical standpoints available to those conducting object-based research, and made clear that doing the work of history involves considering objects. In their initial moves to incorporate objects, historians drew from other disciplines like art history, anthropology, and archaeology to assist in research. Increasingly, however historians have developed their own tools for incorporating objects as source material to produce historical accounts.<sup>12</sup>

These considerations of theory and methods have not extended to the classroom, however. If we instructors of the humanities are committed to utilizing our classrooms as laboratories for

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<sup>9</sup>. LeCain, *The Matter of History*, 46.

<sup>10</sup>. LeCain, *The Matter of History*, 55.

<sup>11</sup>. I provide a *very* abbreviated review here and acknowledge that I leave out significant writers and theories (including Bruno LaTour and Actor Network Theory). For a far more comprehensive discussion, see LeCain’s section “Marginalizing Matter” in *The Matter of History*, 38-63.

<sup>12</sup>. For an excellent example that clearly discusses methodology and in addition to providing a compelling historical narrative, see LeCain, *The Matter of History*.

investigation, creating not only history but also *historians*, then we must reassess how we seek to facilitate the development of historical thinking skills, including those involving objects. What I contend leads me to the question that directs my research: what are the possibilities of teaching and learning practices in a history (and, more broadly, in a humanities) classroom that ask students to both critically engage with and (sometimes) produce historical accounts through and with objects? To address this central question, we must consider both *why* we should pivot to object-based teaching and learning and also *how* this should and can play out. Each of these questions deserves attention.

To address the question of why, we need to first consider the current state of using primary sources in history teaching. Asking students of history to engage in primary source analysis in the classroom has become more common in recent years, even in introductory-level courses. In part, this is because this exercise is easy to implement. Textbooks routinely contain not just plates and illustrations that accompany the text, but also whole sections devoted to the presentation of primary source materials.<sup>13</sup> It is also easy to find primary source readers, even for many historical sub-disciplines.<sup>14</sup> What is notable in a review of these sourcebooks and readers is the distinct emphasis (if not complete reliance) on written source material. It is not *entirely* atypical to find visual sources included in these sections or readers, but these sources are often representations of two-dimensional objects: maps, photographs, and drawings. It is far less

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13. See Ellen Carol DuBois and Lynn Dumenil, *Through Women's Eyes: An American History with Documents*, 4th ed. (Boston, Massachusetts, Bedford/St. Martin's: 2015).

14. A quick search internet brings up primary sourcebooks that are organized by broadly and by chronology (Peter Stearns' *World History in Documents: A Comparative Reader*), but also by topic. For instance, readers that address food history (Albala, *The Food History Reader: Primary Sources*) or witchcraft (Breslaw, *Witches of the Atlantic World*) are widely and easily available.

common to find examples of three-dimensional material culture objects: clothing, food, or other ephemeral objects central to the goings-on of daily life, for example.

Many of the classroom exercises historians employ that ask students to conduct primary source research include a list of questions that prompt students to consider context. Following directions, students begin to identify and consider the implications of authorship, audience, time period, location, etc. Many a productive classroom conversation emerges from these exercises and it is here that we can help students to “think historically,” and investigate the “Five C’s of historical thinking:” change over time, context, causality, contingency, and complexity.<sup>15</sup> Such exercises go a long way in helping students learn to do history, but if we historians (and instructors of courses in the humanities) are truly seeking to use our classrooms as locations where students develop the skills we value as historians, then we must also include objects in the variety of source material we present in our classrooms. One reason for this is that since the material turn historians increasingly use objects, and if we are seeking to make historians out of our students they need to know how to as well.

Another reason is more philosophical and political. Most people’s (including many students’ and even some historians’) conception of history is that history involves that which is written down and recorded in the “annals of history,” what has been called the “tyranny of the text” phenomenon. But if we limit the aforementioned lines of questioning about change over time, context, causality, contingency, and complexity to written documents, we leave out important lines of questioning. By including objects, we can help students (and ourselves) begin to identify where critical gaps and silences emerge - what our sources *don’t* or *can’t* address.

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15. Thomas Andrews and Flannery Burke, “What Does It Mean to Think Historically?” *Perspectives* 45.1 (2007): 32-35.

This can help students to begin to recognize that not all names, dates, and events are represented in a way that accurately reflects reality in the “annals of history.” We can urge them to consider (and in many instances, consider ourselves) historically who has had the ability to write and what this slim portion of the population has deemed worthy enough to be written down. Charging ourselves to grapple with the implications of how the sources we turn to reveal, conceal, or even erase, we must use our relative power within the classroom and consider the ramifications of our pedagogical choices, leading us to consider another answer to the issue of *why*.

If we restrict the breadth of primary sources and continue to rely exclusively or even predominantly on written sources as our site for instruction of primary source research skills, critical gaps, silences, and omissions emerge. Primary source written documents are not all created by, for, and about the limited portion of the population that is man-identified, white, educated, wealthy, and generally in a position of relative social power. But the sources that are generally placed in front of students when we conduct classroom exercises are. For example, in the mid-2000’s, I enrolled in a course titled “Foundations of Western Thought: Ancient to Medieval,” an upper-level history course at the small liberal arts college I attended. Professors of classics and political science team-taught the course to a small group of students in a seminar-style classroom. Over the semester, in our interrogation of that which defines “western thought,” we students engaged in close and comparative readings of a small body of written texts, spanning from Homer’s *Iliad* to Augustine’s *Confessions*. What strikes me now about the exercise undertaken in this course (and the pedagogical decisions made) is the singular reliance on the written text in an effort to determine or point to something both as nebulous and as all-reaching as “western thought.” While I’m sure the course helped me to become a better, more analytical reader, it also assisted in the crystallization or reification of what I should consider valid and

authoritative as I investigated my intellectual heritage. Furthermore, it modeled for me that looking to written sources was all that was necessary for the kind of work serious historians (and academics in the humanities, in general) did. It took years of critical reading and reflection for me to first identify, then critique, and finally attempt to address through my own research and knowledge production, this written-andro-centrism that pervades so much of teaching and learning in history, even post-material turn.

What an example from my time as an undergraduate student attempts to illustrate is that our choices regarding how we develop assignments and exercises that help students learn the habits of historians are political. By continuing to rely on the same body of sources written by a relatively homogenous population, we amplify the views of traditional history-writers and only serve to replicate the (false) idea that the identities of those writing and written about were valued, powerful, or even existed. In my undergraduate classroom, I didn't see many important facets of my own identity (namely, that I am woman-identified) represented or positioned as an authoritative historical voice.

The tendency to circle back to the same bodies of source material means that many contemporary history and humanities instructors are currently unable to adequately construct teaching and learning environments that speak to, with, and for all members of the classroom. Elevating textual source material, and then only a limited share of these, has meant that vast numbers of practices, testimonies, and identities are absent from our received narratives. While student-centered (or learner-centered) teaching has long been a topic addressed by historians,<sup>16</sup> little work has been done to explore the impact of centering student identities by incorporating

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16. See Jonathan W. Zophy, "Student-Centered Teaching" *Perspectives on History*, February 1, 1991, <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/february-1991/student-centered-teaching>.

source material that embodies and/or points to these myriad identities. This response to the question of *why* is central to my own investigation and where I hope to offer the most insight.

Beginning with the general understanding that written texts, are, in fact made primary in most research and teaching efforts, then a simple answer to *why* is that it is imperative that we increase the breadth of historical narratives. Reflecting once again which historical actors had the ability to record written narratives and who and what, typically, they chose to write about, leaves us to conclude what a narrow picture of history is actually available. Actually addressing the centrality of text-based research and scholarly production calls us to consider how we may be limiting the possibilities of our teaching and research by the kind of primary sources we turn to. This conclusion has significant implications regarding how we all see each other and ourselves - imagining how we align with individual and group identities, ones that can transcend both time and location.

Knowing that a full breadth of identities cannot be interrogated or recognized from consulting written texts alone, I was pushed as an instructor from relying on this source material to fill my syllabi. Like many historians, archaeologists, and anthropologists before me, I turn to material culture to address the emerging gaps and silences. But I don't mean to "add-and-stir" and for this exercise to be simply recuperative. While incorporating objects can allow us access to the lives and actions of populations not represented in written accounts, it also calls us to adjust our methods of doing and teaching history. Turning to objects, I contend, allows for teachers and learners to represent, elevate, and interrogate a broad range of identities. When rooted in material culture theory, it offers the discipline novel epistemological routes for exploring knowledge and meaning-making, ones that seek to create and maintain inclusivity and an equitable environment. Material culture theory informs how we integrate objects in our

processes of research and knowledge creation. Notably, this approach helps us to understand how everyday objects can offer entry points to creating narratives that record the presence and contributions of often-marginalized or silenced historical populations, often times in ways that written source material is simply unable to. There are methodological and epistemological tools, albeit ones that require further development, at our disposal. Offering tools that guide research, writing,<sup>17</sup> and, to a lesser degree, teaching,<sup>18</sup> resources from the field of Material Culture Studies point us to questions related to *how*. Partnering these resources with scholarship from critical, feminist, and queer pedagogy deepens our ability to provide a rationale for how to conduct this work, and also offers another perspective on why we should pursue it in the first place.

### **Incorporating Engaged Pedagogy**

In the anecdote about my own experience as an undergraduate student that I shared above, I remarked that I did not see many of my own identities represented as I explored “western thought.” My identity as a woman, a salient category of identity that primarily dictates how I experience and navigate the world, was not represented or reflected in a way that made me feel that this identity was either valid or generative of authority. Though they figured prominently in the narratives I read, I did not see myself or what I value in Helen of Troy or in Monica, Augustine’s mother. I did not realize it at the time, but the portrayals of these women, the social scripts they presented, and behaviors they prescribed perhaps did more harm than good. With and through these figures, I could have been convinced about the vices of weaponizing physical beauty or the virtues of mildness and obedience. As with many other

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17. Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello, “Writing Material Culture History,” in *Writing Material Culture History*, eds. Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015) 1-14.

18. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, et al., *Tangible Things: Making History Through Objects* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

women-identified people, these characteristics and the figures who embodied them showed me little about myself and my experience - or how I wanted to project myself in the future.

Thankfully, I have more than Helen of Troy and Saint Monica to serve as historical representations of my shared experience of womanhood (and other aspects of my identity). A wider range of women appear in the textual record than those included in the course, and a course on Western thought could include these. However, as I've begun to address here, it is through material culture - extraordinary goods to everyday objects - that we can access and construct narratives about the actions and contributions of a far wider range of people, women included, and often in ways that the written record cannot. As it did for me, representation matters. The adage "you can't be what you can't see" highlights that it is nearly impossible to validate or legitimize an aspect of identity without knowing first that it exists.<sup>19</sup> The ability of material culture to make marginalized or silenced populations visible can quite literally make known to a teacher or learner that who or what they are or want to be is true or valid or possible. Therefore, incorporating material culture gives teachers and learners greater possibilities to learn through, with, and from a broad range of people, some of whose identities may echo their own.

Seeing aspects of oneself represented in historical narratives and having access to people with a broad range of identities from whom to learn through, from, and with, I argue, directly contributes to the possibility for teachers and learners to develop a sense of self and well-being. I follow feminist teacher-scholar bell hooks and maintain that creating and maintaining well-being is central to the feminist classroom, and actually to all good pedagogy.

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19. "You can't be what you can't see" is the tagline from the documentary film *Miss Representation*, a film I assign nearly every semester I teach Introduction to Women's and Gender Studies; reflecting on this line typically incites excellent in-class or online discussion. Directed by Jennifer Siebel Newsome, Los Angeles: Girls' Club Entertainment, 2011.

In the chapter titled “Engaged Pedagogy” in *Teaching to Transgress*, hooks presents a way of teaching and learning that values expression, empowerment, liberation, and risk-taking - all elements, hooks argues, that contribute to well-being.<sup>20</sup> She draws from her mentor, Paulo Friere, and similarly critiques a “banking model” of education that imagines assembly-line students who are forced into rote memorization. Both Friere and hooks argue that this kind of teaching and learning only replicates forms of domination. To combat the oppressive forces that manifest in education, hooks maintains that each member of a classroom is a unique being worthy of respect and care. hooks allows this outlook to frame an approach to teaching and learning: engaged pedagogy. In hooks’ conception and in my assessment, commitment to engaged pedagogy means hosting spaces and incorporating practices that create and maintain well-being.

I offer an amendment to hooks’ practice: coupling a commitment to engaged pedagogy with material culture-based teaching and learning practices presents exciting new possibilities for creating and maintaining well-being. Because material culture allows teachers and learners to see themselves and their identities represented in emerging historical narratives and understand that further pursuit of telling these kinds of narratives is valued and necessary, it presents another possible route for achieving well-being and serves as a feminist intervention.

I now return to my initial observation: that, although history and many disciplines in the humanities have taken up the charge to conduct research and create knowledge in ways that respond to the material turn, instructors within these disciplines have not adequately explored how the material turn comes to bear on practices of teaching and learning within higher

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20. bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

education. Learning through and with objects and drawing from material culture theory means that new pathways for research and knowledge creation are possible, not just to fill gaps and silences, but to re-think how and why we create the historical narratives in the first place. Drawing from engaged pedagogy allows us to theorize possibilities regarding what impact this can have on teachers and learners, especially as related to the development of well-being. Engaged pedagogy also offers a pathway for teaching and learning with material objects to serve a liberatory function. In its goal to empower, allow for expression, and promote risk-taking, engaged pedagogy compels teachers and learners to push the limits of what is possible.

### **Chapter Outlines**

In this dissertation, I am motivated by a central question: what are the possibilities for teaching and learning practices in a humanities classroom that ask instructors and students to both critically engage with and (sometimes) produce historical accounts through and with objects. To begin to answer this question, I draw from my own experience as an instructor at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM) in humanities (history, women's and gender studies) classrooms, where I have developed curricula that incorporates object-based teaching and learning and seeks to be inclusive and welcoming of people with all identities. I share reflections and resources in a number of formats: written text, assignment sheets, and teaching and learning video resources. Each body chapter is a combination of these three formats, and each focuses on a particular course. Additionally, I engage in theoretical discussions in which I pursue a topic that has particular bearing on the themes emerging in the course/chapter at hand. The three chapters focus on authority, identity, and unknowability, as outlined by feminist, queer, and other critical approaches to teaching and learning. I return to these in an expanded discussion of engaged pedagogy in the conclusion to this dissertation.

In the review of literature that follows (chapter two), I survey three fields of study and scholarship: material culture studies, feminist pedagogy, and the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL). When made to intersect, they offer exciting possibilities for teaching through and with objects in a humanities classroom in higher education. In the close of the review of literature chapter I point to a pedagogical antecedent - the object lesson - that foregrounds my own theorizing and contributions.

Within the body chapters in this dissertation (chapters three through five), I illustrate how I engage in praxis, allowing the theories and ideas I identify here, and the multiple ways in which they intersect, to bear on my practices of teaching and learning through and with material culture. Through theoretical engagement and in modeling possibilities from my own teaching practice, I promote a material turn in teaching and learning. Each of these chapters opens with a brief object history which features an object or set of objects that was important in the creation or facilitation of the curricula therein. The format of these Object Histories follows examples from large-scale public history projects like Wisconsin101 and the *Encyclopedia of Milwaukee*; each brief history provides further context about the object/s and is also meant to whet the reader's intellectual appetite.

In chapter three, I open with an Object History about a relish tray (or Lazy Susan) gifted to me by my grandmother and note the role of the relish tray in Midwest dining culture, both past and present. Then, I recount my experience teaching HIST 243: History of Women in American Society. Students in HIST 243 created *The Supper Club*, a final project that was part research project and part art installation. Drawing from *The Dinner Party*, Judy Chicago's foundational work of feminist art, in *The Supper Club* the students and instructor figure women in Wisconsin's history – many of whom are missing from or for whom only traces exist in the historical record –

as historical subjects with a seat at the table. Because the course, and final project especially, called students to consider historical authority and their own (emerging) positions of authority within the classroom, academia, and wider world, I focus in particular on authority in this chapter.

Chapter four opens with an Object History about a set of educational dolls created by Women Against Rape (WAR) for use in Milwaukee-area classrooms in an effort to teach children about sexual assault and violence. Then, it explores how I undertook a massive pedagogical shift to orient a course toward object-based teaching and learning. After teaching WGS 201: Introduction to Women's and Gender Studies in a relatively consistent format for nearly a decade, I observed a shift in student needs, knowledge, and identities; in part, my shift toward object-based teaching and learning responds to that, and this chapter focuses in particular on identities. As part of my curricular redesign that included a new course textbook and updated assigned readings to better reflect the variety of identities I wish to teach to, with, and for, I introduced a new assignment series I called "Object Lessons." This semester-long series asked students to engage in object-based learning.

Both chapter three and four allow me to discuss my own experience in the classroom and provide classroom-tested strategies and resources for a wide audience of teachers and learners. In chapter five, I venture into the unknown and describe my collaboration with a local public history project, *The Encyclopedia of Milwaukee (EMKE)*. I start this chapter with an entry I wrote for *EMKE* about Holy Hill, a local religious landmark. The entry is the basis for part of my curriculum design work. During the Spring 2019 academic semester at UWM, I was asked to serve as the Curriculum Consultant for *EMKE*, developing materials for classroom use. Because I did not have the opportunity to pilot any assignments of activities in classrooms, and because

how students and teachers might ultimately respond to the questions I ask them to consider and the sources I encourage them to interrogate could never be known to me, I frame this chapter with a discussion of the unknown and unknowability.

In the conclusion, chapter six, I return to the question I pose at the outset: what are the possibilities for teaching and learning practices that ask students to both critically engage with and (sometimes) produce historical accounts through and with objects. I also extend my discussion of well-being and describe how authority, identity, and unknowability (and the intersecting permutations of these topics) impact efforts to create and maintain well-being in the humanities classroom in higher education.

In all, my work here contributes to SoTL and extends the conversation of engaged pedagogy, suggesting how incorporating objects, object lessons, and object-centered narratives and histories opens avenues for co-creating and maintaining spaces that foster well-being. This project is multifaceted: it furthers feminism, taking a decidedly intersectional approach; it recognizes democracy, something to be achieved through engaged citizenship, as an unfinished project; and it argues that we must fight to assert the necessity of the humanities within higher education, particularly as humanistic disciplines have routinely been subject to censure, cuts, and attack. My work is recursive, co-constituted, cyclical, and collaborative. Each node identified above relies on the others - not as a foil, but as a part intrinsic to itself. In this work, I present myself as a teacher-activist, as my presence in the classroom is the primary way that I engage in feminist praxis.

## Chapter 4

### *Memory Keepers: Objects in a Women's and Gender Studies Classroom*

#### **Object History: WAR Dolls**

Created in the early 1980s, these dolls served an important function in a four-part lesson plan developed by members of Women Against Rape (or, WAR), a Milwaukee-based activist group.<sup>21</sup> Titled *The Four Elements of Prevention: An Abuse and Assault Prevention Program for Children and Adults*, the lesson plan was created by Virginia Ray, a founding member of WAR, in 1983.<sup>22</sup> It was utilized in various contexts within the City of Milwaukee and, notably, within Milwaukee Public School (MPS) classrooms as part of the Human Growth and Development Task Force.<sup>23</sup> The lesson plan, along with WAR, sought to end sexual assault, violence, and rape and saw education as the primary means to ensure systemic change.

Each about three feet tall, Ms. Orange Pumpkin and Mr. Green Johnboy (as they are named in “Volume 1: Awareness,” the first part of the abuse and assault prevention curriculum), were handmade out of bright orange and green cloth, filled with batting, and sport soft yarn hair in a contrasting color. Their faces include finely embroidered features and their expressions are

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21. Anatomically Correct Instructional Dolls [undated], Boxes 13 and 14, Women Against Rape Records, Archives at Golda Meir Library, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee, WI; “Cut it Out Or We’ll Cut it Off!,” University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Archives, June 28, 2018, <https://uwmarchives.tumblr.com/post/175339560526>.

22. *The Four Elements of Prevention: An Abuse and Assault Prevention Program for Children and Adults* [ca. 1983], Box 6, Women Against Rape Records, Archives at Golda Meir Library, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee, WI.

23. The entire four-part program was piloted at the Milwaukee Boys’ Club Hillside Community Center and was taught by Ms. Lucy Feinberg, MSW. According to the curriculum plan, the children in the pilot course ranged in age from six to thirteen and were educated in classrooms segregated by gender. Feinberg also hosted outreach and educational efforts for the mothers of the children enrolled in the program, “Volume 1: Awareness” [ca. 1983], Box 6, Women Against Rape Records, Archives at Golda Meir Library, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee, WI.

placid, inviting children to explore and play with them. Both Ms. Pumpkin and Mr. Johnboy wear purple terry cloth robes with the letters “WAR” emblazoned in sequins across the back. Underneath the robes, buttons, embroidery, and more batting-filled-cloth represent anatomically correct genitalia; according to the lesson plan, teaching children to identify body parts was the “primary method of awareness.”<sup>24</sup>

The dolls discussed here are the second batch of dolls created by members of WAR for use in *The Four Elements of Prevention* program. The first set of dolls, which had dark brown cloth for skin and sported short, curly brown hair, were critiqued as having “stereotype features.” The second set was created to respond to these complaints. Noting this controversy, in a message to program facilitators, Ray explains, “the dolls still have the same features (we used the same face on all dolls) but they do not specifically seem to represent any one race but rather every man & woman and that really is something for the teacher to be aware of and prepare accordingly. Make sure your dolls are done in fantasy skin tones so children get the point that all races are the same under the clothes.”<sup>25</sup>

WAR had aspirations of expanding their community education arm as well as the abuse and assault prevention program. For example, with grant monies, they hoped to “[develop] and [implement] structures to facilitate instruction in MPS,” design a “new sex education curriculum” for MPS, and “involve the survivors of child sexual assault, abuse, or neglect in [a]

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24. It should be noted that the makers of the dolls relied on a strict male/female sex assignment dichotomy and corresponding secondary sex characteristics. “Volume 1: Awareness” [ca. 1983], Box 6, Women Against Rape Records, Archives at Golda Meir Library, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee, WI.

25. “Volume 1: Awareness” [ca. 1983], Box 6, Women Against Rape Records, Archives at Golda Meir Library, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee, WI. Examples from both sets of dolls are visible in *Memory Keepers*, Krista Grensavitch and Allain Daigle, “Memory Keepers,” filmed April 2018, video, 7:13, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2dWmPOFxo9U&t=3s>.

campaign to implement the sex education curriculum through personal testimony and direct action.” However, the proposal was denied funding (\$35,000) by the Wisconsin Community Fund. Without the necessary funding to support its robust initiatives and goals to “ensure equitable and fair treatment of women at the law enforcement, legal, social service, regulatory, and judicial levels,” WAR disbanded in 1984.<sup>26</sup>

## **Introduction**

What calls for a shift in pedagogy? Why might instructors move away from or toward particular frameworks for teaching and learning? In this chapter, I reflect on pedagogical shifts in my own teaching practice. In particular, I will focus on shifts within my Introduction to Women’s and Gender Studies (Intro, Intro to WGS). Drawing from nearly ten years of experience, I will discuss my decision to overhaul Intro to WGS curriculum that took place in the most recent years of my teaching. Responding to perceived student needs and knowledge, social and linguistic changes, the introduction of a new textbook format and several examples that utilized this format, and a dearth of source material that speaks to, with, and for some of the marginalized populations under consideration in the course, I developed an innovative, object-centered approach to teaching and learning.

Often utilized to describe the migrations of people over time, I find that the ‘push-pull’ paradigm is useful for assessing the questions I pose above. First proposed in 1966, scholar Everett S. Lee suggested that certain, unfavorable conditions (push factors) motivate people to leave a particular area. Other conditions (pull factors), ones that may offer a more favorable set of outcomes for a given population, cause people to move toward another location.<sup>27</sup> For

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26. Grant Proposals, 1981-1983, Box 6, Folder 5, Women Against Rape Records, Archives at Golda Meir Library, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee, WI.

27. Everett S. Lee, “A Theory of Migration,” *Demography*, 3 no. 1 (1966): 47–57.

example, one can evaluate Polynesian exploration from the fourth to twelfth centuries CE and assess the motivations for traveling across great, unknown ocean distances as a combination of push and pull factors. High population density on the relatively small islands and diminishing food supplies may have pushed people to seek out new lands. At the same time, the prospect of greater access to natural resources, freedom from social or political systems, and even a sense of adventure might have pulled explorers to board their rafts and venture across the open sea. Since I was introduced to this framework as a graduate teaching assistant, I have found it useful for conducting historical analysis. It allows for, even encourages, nuance and complication. Often, a messy matrix of factors emerges through an application of this analytical framework, emphasizing the complexity of the historical narratives we tell and receive. I think it useful to apply the paradigm here, where I assess my motivations for undertaking such a substantial curricular shift. As I will illustrate, there is no singular or mono-directional reason for the overhaul I managed.

#### *Accounting for Push and Pull Factors*

Introduction to Women's and Gender Studies is a course I am well-familiar with, though it is a course I never had the experience of taking, myself. I began teaching Intro to WGS as a graduate teaching assistant (TA) for Women's Studies at UWM in the spring semester of 2012. I have taught the course nearly every academic semester since, sometimes multiple sections per semester in face-to-face, online, and condensed formats. From the first semester, I was allowed the academic freedom and authority to design my own assignments, means of evaluation, and curriculum. However, as many first-time teachers intimately know, building a course from the ground up is a daunting task. As a TA, I was a member of a small mentor group that met weekly. As a member of this group, I shadowed an experienced WGS instructor's Intro classroom and

was given full access to their course materials, which I was encouraged to utilize and alter as I needed. These resources I had access to through document sharing and class shadowing - a syllabus, course schedule, reading list, sample assignments and in-class activities - were essential as I entered a classroom as instructor of record for the first time. I drew heavily from those resources, especially that first semester.

Since my first semester as instructor of record and in each semester thereafter, I re-evaluate both the content and my mode/s of delivery, responding to student needs, social and political events, and scholarly trends, both in terms of available content as well as insight and new suggestions for 'best practices,' which often emerge from the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL). Adjusting curriculum, which includes both content and delivery, also responds to my own needs as a teacher-learner within the classrooms I facilitate. Teaching the same course semester after semester can be seen as an onerous chore for some (I can't imagine the boredom that must manifest from reciting the same lectures every semester) or a great comfort for others who enjoy the stability of having prepared and rehearsed lectures. I have always seen this cycle as a site for opportunity. The certainty of change over time means that as semesters progress, new insights, scholarship, and relevant case studies emerge; I would be remiss if I did not account for academic developments as I developed curricula. Furthermore, my own feminist activist practices call me to remain engaged in ongoing conversations about the state of our field. Parallel to the changing academic landscapes that impacts my curricular development, I observe changes in my students and the socio-political landscape in which we all reside.

In the near decade that I've served as an Intro to WGS instructor, I've noticed significant changes in my students regarding the knowledge and, to a lesser extent, the skills of critical analysis they bring with them - even on the first day of class. These changes are push factors that

call me to re-evaluate and even change my approach to pedagogy. I recall that in the first semesters (in 2013 and 2014), a few students in each section might be familiar with the concept of gender as a social construct (the phenomena of social construction can apply to any category of identity). Perhaps they didn't understand the implications of or the theoretical nuance required to make this argument, but the general idea that gender is both constructed and performative was not a foreign concept.<sup>28</sup> As the semesters progressed, I can say anecdotally that increasing numbers of students enrolled in class possessed the sophisticated understanding that gender assignment, gender identity, and gender expression, for example, do not refer to or mean the same thing. In 2014, about the time that I started the first class meeting with round-robin introductions that called students to introduce themselves by name (and later, chosen name) and preferred pronouns (and later, pronouns-in-use), inevitably I had to explain to visibly confused students what pronouns were and why it mattered that we explicated them. To do so, I would turn the question to the class and at least a handful of students would offer an explanation to their classmates. By 2018, asking students to introduce themselves in this same way would induce nary a bat of the eye.<sup>29</sup> At the same time, students might arrive to the first class meeting of an Intro to WGS classroom wearing a T-shirt emblazoned with the phrase "my feminism will be

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28. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, when this theorizing of gender was first introduced by scholars like Judith Butler, the idea that gender is both constructed and performative *was* groundbreaking, see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity* (Routledge, 1990).

29. The assessments I offer here are based on my observations and impressions, not on quantifiable data. While it would be possible, even easy, to create a survey asking students to identify terms and concepts set to be introduced over the course of the academic semester with which they are familiar, I fear that doing so might serve as a kind of gate-keeping, making students feel as though they need to enter the classroom with a certain level of disciplinary knowledge (which is not actually required of them).

intersectional or it will be bullshit.”<sup>30</sup> Just a year or two previous, if students had a firm understanding of intersectional feminism by the *last* day of class, I was pleased.

Where and how, then, were students accessing this information, and becoming comfortable with what some would call inclusive teaching and learning practices - and doing so with increasing frequency? Here I can point to instances of feminist activism impacting and altering our socio-political landscape. Since the start of 2017, we have witnessed the largest single-day protest in U.S. History - the Women’s March on Washington - and the rise of the #MeToo Movement. Both received (and continue to receive) significant attention from news media outlets and they remain a topic of conversation on social media platforms. In the present day we are witnessing an explosion of feminist and queer activism on social media platforms like Twitter and Instagram.<sup>31</sup> The public discourse about the meaning, impact, and future of both the Women’s March (the group that organized the event as well as the movement that has followed)

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30. A t-shirt like this evokes complicated (and necessary) discussions about capitalism coopting the feminist movement as well as how “intersectionality” is wrongfully deployed as a term that simply calls for an analysis based on the multiple identities a person may occupy at any given time. Analysis using an intersectional lens demands that we consider how systems of power that oppress and deny has bearing on the slippery, multiple, and intersecting identities we occupy, see Aja Romano, “This Famous Feminist’s Quote Has Been Seen All Over the Internet. She Hasn’t Seen a Cent,” *Vox*, August 12, 2016, <https://www.vox.com/2016/8/12/12406648/flavia-dzodan-my-feminism-will-be-intersectional-merchandise>; Merry Wiesner-Hanks, “Early Modern Intersectionalities and Activism,” *Society for the Study of Early Modern Women*, accessed February 1, 2019, [http://ssemw.org/blog/wiesner\\_hanks/](http://ssemw.org/blog/wiesner_hanks/).

31. Conversations about the role of social media, especially Twitter, as a force to incite socio-political activism and change began in 2011 with the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, see Philip N. Howard and Muzammil M. Hussain, *Democracy’s Fourth Wave? Digital Media and the Arab Spring*, (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013). An image of Alaa Salah, a young woman dressed in white and surrounded by a sea of raised smartphones, has quickly become the symbol of the ousting of Omar Hassan al-Bashir, the (now) former President of Sudan. The image, taken by photographer Lana H. Haroun and shared via Twitter on April 8, 2019, quickly went viral, Shirin Jaafari, “Here’s the Story Behind the Iconic Sudanese Woman in White,” *Public Radio International*, April 10, 2019, <https://www.pri.org/stories/2019-04-10/heres-story-behind-iconic-image-sudanese-woman-white>.

and the #MeToo Movement is extensive and ongoing. Importantly, these conversations have addressed issues regarding diversity and inclusion, asking us to consider who the movements benefit and - at the same time - who they silence or marginalize.<sup>32</sup>

Knowledge emerging from feminist and queer theory and activism achieved a significant marker of reaching the mainstream in the late-2010s: recognition by various English-language dictionaries. Based on observed trends in usage, Merriam-Webster added the words “cisgender,” “genderqueer,” and the honorific “Mx.” to their dictionary in 2016.<sup>33</sup> Notably, in 2017, Merriam-Webster named ‘feminism’ its word of the year.<sup>34</sup> The gender neutral pronoun set they/them/theirs has gained significant traction and recognition as grammatically acceptable for use with the third person singular.<sup>35</sup> Commentary from the *Oxford English Dictionary* illustrates how the institutions that dictate proper usage instruct English language speakers on the use of the singular they. To frame the practice, the institution points to the instances of acceptable use by referencing historical antecedents as well as a perceived uptick or shift in contemporary usage.<sup>36</sup>

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32. For a discussion about how participation in the 2017 Women’s March shaped her activism in terms of recognizing racial equity (or the lack thereof) in the feminist movement, see Rachel Cargle, “This Photo Of Me At The Women’s March Went Viral And Changed My Activism Forever,” *HuffPost*, January 20, 2018, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/black-women-march-viral-photo\\_n\\_5a6215cfe4b0125fd6362e7b](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/black-women-march-viral-photo_n_5a6215cfe4b0125fd6362e7b).

33. Niraj Choski, “Why Merriam-Webster added ‘cisgender,’ ‘genderqueer,’ and Mx.’ to the dictionary,” *The Washington Post*, April 26, 2016.

34. The word of the year is selected based on a number of metrics, including year-over-year increases in online look-ups, “2017 Word of the Year: Behind the Scenes,” Merriam-Webster, accessed April 18, 2019, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/video/2017-word-of-the-year-behind-the-scenes>.

35. For an extensive and nationally-recognized guide on pronoun usage, see the one developed by UWM’s LGBT Resource center, “Gender Pronouns,” Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Resource Center, accessed April 19, 2019, <https://uwm.edu/lgbtrc/support/gender-pronouns/>.

36. See Dennis Baron, “A Brief History of Singular ‘They,’” September 4, 2018, in *OED Blog*, <https://public.oed.com/blog/a-brief-history-of-singular-they/>.

During my time as WGS instructor, the department-like-body at UWM changed its name from Women's Studies to Women's and Gender Studies, following a strong disciplinary trend. Insight from queer theory along with an increased emphasis on trans- and cross-disciplinary scholarship and learning expanded the purview of many Women's Studies programs across the United States. Increasingly, explorations of gender (including masculinity studies) and sexuality became central to the content presented as well as the theoretical frameworks utilized. Many institutions sought and seek to reflect these changes by changing the program or department's name.<sup>37</sup>

I note both these examples to emphasize the role that institutions play in the inevitability of linguistic change over time. By inclusion in the dictionary or through official departmental name changes, it remains clear that institutions seen as social authorities wield the power to validate the changes in language and naming that many activists (including our students) see and use, often far before institutions affirm this usage. Propelled by social media and validated by institutional powers, the language of women's rights, survivor's rights, and the rights of people of color has quickly become part of our vernacular. Perhaps it should *not* be surprising that students would enter my classroom with this knowledge and a vocabulary shaped by feminist and queer activism. Here, too, changes in language (which evidence changes in social attitudes, values, and even disciplinary goals) as validated by institutions push me to modify my pedagogy.

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37. Not all institutions follow this specific shift - typically, programs and departments once know just as "Women's Studies" may now be titled some variation of "Women's, Gender, Sexuality, Queer, Feminist, etc. Studies." Even across the University of Wisconsin System, there is great variation in program/department naming practices. For instance, UW-Superior hosts a Gender Studies department while UW-Parkside hosts Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies department, "Gender Studies," University of Wisconsin Superior, accessed April 18, 2019, <https://www.uwsuper.edu/acaddept/si/gender-studies/index.cfm>; "Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies," University of Wisconsin Parkside, accessed April 18, 2019, <https://www.uwp.edu/learn/departments/wgss/>.

Shifts and changes in student knowledge and language are significant push factors in my decision to overhaul my approach to teaching and learning in Intro to WGS. Meeting students where they are - in terms of knowledge, accessibility-related issues, format and delivery methods - is central to my teaching practice. I found that as students came to class with a worldview and language informed by feminist and queer epistemologies, I could place more emphasis on the development of critical thinking skills and disciplinary habits of mind, as opposed to spending time ensuring that students left my class with a sound understanding that sex (assigned sex) is not the same as or determinant of gender (gender identity). This shift would serve to challenge both me and my students.

When I began teaching Intro to WGS, I used *Women's Voices, Feminist Visions*, a textbook favored by WGS (then, Women's Studies) at UWM.<sup>38</sup> Currently in the sixth edition, the text introduces feminist knowledge, theory, and concepts thematically in separate chapters with titles like "Inscribing Gender on the Body" and "Systems of Privilege and Inequality." Along with my students, I felt a growing aversion to the textbook. For example, the chapter titled "Health and Reproductive Justice" spurred intense conversations about the lack of representation of trans people and their health and reproductive justice-related needs. More than one student felt marginalized, even erased, by the text's presentation of content.<sup>39</sup> In simpler matters, the book is large, heavy, and expensive; students often could not afford the text and, by virtue of its size,

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38. Susan M. Shaw and Janet Lee, *Women's Voices, Feminist Visions: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, 6th ed. (McGraw Hill Education, 2014).

39. Conversations about the text's erasure of trans health and reproductive justice issues inspired a conference panel presentation. Along with Casey O'Brien, another Intro to WGS instructor, and several students, I presented "Negotiating Conflict: Learning and Discussing Health and Reproductive Justice in an Introduction to Women's and Gender Studies Classroom" at the 2016 Summit on Women, Gender, and Well-Being at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

often opted not to bring it to class meetings, though they were instructed to do so. Pushed by these factors, among others, I sought out new textbook options.

At this same time, I witnessed changes in the format, content, and embedded teaching and learning goals of newly-published Intro to WGS textbooks. Precipitated by developments in SoTL, new approaches to teaching and learning in Women's and Gender Studies (along with other disciplines, to be sure) called for instructors to facilitate the acquisition of disciplinary ways of thinking, habits of mind, and threshold concepts.<sup>40</sup> In short, research and insight from SoTL began to call us to position our students as practitioners of our discipline and not just as passive vessels waiting to be filled with knowledge originating from that same discipline.<sup>41</sup> Therefore, a mixture of push and pull factors account for my shift to a new textbook.

*Threshold Concepts in Women's and Gender Studies: Ways of Thinking, Seeing, and Knowing*, first published in 2015 and currently in its second edition with a third edition in the works, represents a significant development in how WGS is taught within the higher education classroom. Explicitly resisting the coverage model, the text's authors Holly Hassel and Christie Launius advocate for instructors to facilitate the acquisition of disciplinary ways of thinking. The text is meant to help students position themselves as practitioners of women's and gender studies. In the introduction to their text, Hassel and Launius explain that threshold concepts "provide a feminist lens across the disciplines and outside the classroom" and are "core disciplinary concept[s] that [are] both troublesome and transformative."<sup>42</sup> Using threshold concepts - here, the social construction of gender, privilege and oppression, intersectionality, and

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40. See the Introduction and Literature Review chapter for a comprehensive discussion.

41. Find an extended discussion of this in the Introduction and Literature Review chapters.

<sup>42</sup> Holly Hassel and Christine Launius, *Threshold Concepts in Women's and Gender Studies: Ways of Thinking, Seeing, and Knowing*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2018), vii.

feminist praxis, as frameworks for analysis and interpretation, students become familiar with tools and insights utilized by intersectional feminist theorists.<sup>43</sup> Another WGS text, *Everyday Women's and Gender Studies: Introductory Concepts* written by Ann Braithwaite and Catherine Orr similarly moves away from the topic-based textbook model that characterized much of Women's Studies textbook writing and format.<sup>44</sup> It bears significance that both titles include the word "concepts" in their title, owing to the influence of SoTL. Both texts draw from the language of threshold concepts to first introduce and then facilitate the acquisition of tools and skills utilized by practitioners within the discipline.

After lengthy consideration and two semesters spent piloting modules built around content from these new textbooks, I settled on *Threshold Concepts*. The textbook is significantly cheaper and its size and organization allow for greater flexibility. The slim volume and close-of-chapter suggestions for additional resources and readings, and not the inclusion of said resources and readings as it is in *Women's Voices, Feminist Visions*, and *Everyday Women's and Gender Studies* allows for greater flexibility and control. Here, instructors can choose auxiliary and supporting content and activities that reflect student needs and interests, current events, and their own approach to teaching and learning. Students can reference these suggestions and turn to important feminist, queer, and transdisciplinary contributions that address their own emerging interests and identities. For me, this additional content serves a variety of functions: it illustrates the ideas, theories, and frameworks presented in the textbook chapters; it offers alternate and challenging viewpoints from the chapters; and it encourages further exploration and suggests opportunities for linking theory with practice.

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43. Hassel and Launius, *Threshold Concepts*.

44. Ann Braithwaite and Catherine M. Orr, *Everyday Women's and Gender Studies: Introductory Concepts* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

Reflecting the ways in which the identities of those in the classroom were and were not reflected in the course content and assignments leads me to note the final push factor that spurred my shift. As I mentioned above, realizing that transgender people (an identity that some of my students occupy) and their needs were not included in discussions about reproductive health and justice in the old textbook started a greater impulse to reflect on other people, identities, events, and locations that were perhaps missing in the course as I had designed it. I perceived that my curriculum lacked source material (most often, text-based) that spoke to, for, and with this and other marginalized identities. If I wanted my pedagogy to be truly student-centered and inclusive of diverse identities, then I had to make revisions. A first response to this is to simply seek out and draw from a more diverse group of writers and scholars. Through my own research and by consulting with others, I found chapters and articles that could supplement the introduction of threshold concepts, as presented in the course text. These new readings are written by and about identities formerly under-represented in my syllabus.

As many historians acknowledge, written texts provide source material for knowing about only some portions of the greater population. For myriad reasons, whole populations of people are absent, missing, or silenced in the written record. Often, these populations experience marginalization in social and political settings, and not just in the archives or narratives. If I were to be wholly reliant on written chapters and articles to deliver content, it could then be possible - even likely - for me to omit the intellectual contributions and presence of people who occupy marginalized categories of identity. Knowing that a full breadth of identities could not be interrogated or recognized from consulting written texts alone, I was pushed from relying on this source material to fill my syllabus. Like many historians, archaeologists, and anthropologists before me, I turned to material culture to address the gaps and silences. To use Lee's language of

push and pull factors that I referenced at the start of this section, the prospect of a more favorable set of outcomes pulled me to incorporate objects (material culture, stuff, things, etc.) in my Intro to WGS curriculum. Turning to objects, I contend, allows for teachers and learners to represent, elevate, and interrogate a broad range of identities. When rooted in Material Culture Theory, it offers the discipline novel epistemological routes for exploring knowledge and meaning-making.

As part of my curricular redesign that included a new course textbook and updated assigned readings to better reflect the variety of identities I wish to teach to, with, and for, I introduced a new assignment series I called “Object Lessons.” This semester-long series asked students to engage in object-based learning. In the sections to follow, I will provide examples illustrating how shifting my pedagogical approach to account for student knowledge, interests, social and linguistic changes, and a new textbook, led me to incorporate an object-centered approach to teaching and learning. A reciprocal arrangement is also true, I find. A shift in pedagogical approach to include objects also requires curricular accommodations. Upon reflection, identity emerges as a theme that directs the push and pull factors I identify above: student understanding of their own identities, as shaped by their social and political surroundings; disciplinary movement toward a teaching and learning paradigm that helps students critically engage with identity; and the recognition that source material and course content typically turned to for use in classroom settings often is not representative or inclusive of a broad range of identities. I continue this discussion in the next section.

### **Discussion: Identity**

How do we know who we are, what to call ourselves, how that dictates the ways we interact with others, and why this line of questioning even matters? Countless academic disciplines address these same questions - questions about identity. Here, I won't provide a

lineage of how writers and scholars and thinkers have formulated ways of discussing identity. These are important and interesting paths to follow, but it's not my intention here to do that work. Instead, I build from other writers, namely feminist and queer theorists and writers, who have sketched out for us that identities are socially constructed, that they are mutable, changing and changeable, and become salient depending on context and location.<sup>45</sup>

In some way, each of the push and pull factors I identify in the previous section addresses identity. Accounting for identity happens in several locations in my teaching and learning practices. As I develop curriculum I make space to recognize and interrogate:

- The identities of teachers and learners who occupy the classroom space together
- The identities of scholars, writers, activists, makers, etc. whose work and intellectual contributions make up a large part of the sources and resources we consider over the academic semester
- The identities that can possibly be accounted by, through, and with assigned course content, discussion prompts, and other classroom activities and assignments

The categories I list above often overlap and intersect. The list is not meant to be exhaustive, but rather is a list-in-progress that marks this current stage in the development of a teaching and learning practice that seeks to be inclusive of a broad range of identities, some of which cannot be accounted for because I (along with others) am unable to conceive of them.

In my position as an instructor of Intro to WGS, one of my primary goals is to get students to begin to think critically about identity, if they haven't already. This is challenging work. I continue to be challenged as I work to name and understand my own identities. For many students - indeed, many people - realizing that they identify and are identified in particular ways is at first like realizing that, although you have known you were a fish all your life, that you are

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45. For an excellent example of a work that does chronicle how feminist and queer theorists formulate an understanding of identities, see Susan Stryker, "Contexts, Concepts, and Terms," chap. 1 in *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution* (New York: Seal Press, 2017).

surrounded by and dependent on water. Furthermore, an investigation of individual identity necessarily calls us to then grapple with how other people identify, what social systems shape the process of identification, and how we can work to resist, dismantle, or reshape these systems.

The course textbook, *Threshold Concepts*, was one of my tools. Building from preceding chapters that introduce threshold concepts “The Social Construction of Gender” and “Privilege and Oppression,” the chapter titled “Intersectionality” helps students investigate identity in a way that builds from these concepts and sharpens their skills of critical analysis. The text introduces the idea, arguing that “the notion of ‘intersectionality’ is at the heart of feminist analysis” and states, “different groups benefit from or are disadvantaged by institutional structures, and this chapter will review how overlapping categories of identity profoundly shape our experiences within institutions...although gender as a category of analysis is useful, it is incomplete without understanding that other categories of identity...are equally as important in gaining accurate knowledge about people’s lives and experiences.”<sup>46</sup>

Though they have become rather common terms in feminist, queer, activist, and even mainstream contexts in recent years, “intersectional,” “intersectionality,” and “intersectional feminism,” and the critical analyses of identity they call for were invented by and have long been taken up by women and feminists of color. From the late 1970s,<sup>47</sup> Barbara Smith and the Combahee Collective as well as legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw provided a framework for the

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46. Hassel and Launius, *Threshold Concepts*, 114. This statement, in that it emphasizes that identities other than gender must be taken into account when engaging in feminist analysis, illustrates the disciplinary changes that precipitated the shift from “Women’s Studies” to “Women’s and X, etc. Studies.”

47. Some may argue that this call occurred as early as 1851, in the speech Sojourner Truth gave to those assembled at the Women’s Convention in Ohio that has come to be known as the “...ain’t I a woman?” speech.

intersectional analysis we undertake.<sup>48</sup> These scholars call us to consider categories of identity like gender, race, class, ability, sexual orientation, age, etc., interrogating how these identities intersect in particular ways, given a particular context, and fix individuals within systems of privilege and oppression. Built from a critique of mainstream feminism by feminists of color, this intensive analysis works to ensure that we do not homogenize experience based on a single category of identity, like gender. For example, in today's political landscape, increasing calls for pay equality often homogenize "women" into a single group. A quick internet search for "pay gap" turns up results that address the "gender pay gap" and report that as of 2017, women earn eighty percent of what men earn.<sup>49</sup> A statistic like this calls into question "which women?" Applying an intersectional lens illustrates stark wage differences for white women, Black women, Latinx women, and Native American women. Presenting information about a "gender pay gap" thereby erases the huge discrepancies in pay between these groups of people, who all identify as women.

With the mainstream use of the terms (which often correlates to the ways in which white feminists/forms of hegemonic feminism take up the term), we see a dulling of intersectionality's critical edge, and even full misapplications of the term. In the previous section, I mentioned that our students may arrive in our classrooms wearing t-shirts that proclaim "my feminism will be intersectional or it will be bullshit." While I may agree with this message, I have my doubts that students entering an Intro to WGS classroom comprehend what it means to engage in

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48. See "The Combahee River Collective Statement, Combahee River Collective, accessed April 11, 2019, <https://combaheerivercollective.weebly.com/the-combahee-river-collective-statement.html>; Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, (1990): 1241.

49. The calculation is based on an earnings ratio that divides women's median earnings over men's median earnings, see "Economic Security," AAUW, accessed April 22, 2019, <https://www.aauw.org/research/the-simple-truth-about-the-gender-pay-gap/>.

intersectional analysis of identity. I notice, then, a new challenge in helping students to develop skills that allow them to think from an intersectional feminist perspective. In some ways, we have to help students not just learn - but re-learn - what an intersectional analysis offers and how to apply an intersectional lens to their object/s of study. The course textbook *Threshold Concepts in Women's and Gender Studies* identifies this "learning roadblock" and suggests that,

We find that [undergraduate students] are readily able to grasp the notion that the experiences and perspectives of women differ in relation to various additional aspects of identity, and they generally need to look no further than their fellow classmates to understand this...students from impoverished and working-class backgrounds know from the start that their lives have differed from their middle-class peers in fundamental ways that shape their perspectives on a wide number of issues...while this way of understanding intersectionality can be a productive entry point, it is not meant to be an end point. More specifically, the challenge is to think about those differences among women in the context of systems of privilege and oppressions. Otherwise, we lapse into relativism and lose sight of the significance of implications of those differences in terms of power and privilege.<sup>50</sup>

Therefore, teachers and learners in an Intro to WGS classroom must be careful not to default to a pedagogy based simply on difference, or on the recognition of differentiations in the way that individuals identify. Drawing from this perspective, but pushing past it is a distinct challenge for teaching and learning efforts in WGS classrooms. In my experience, students begin to comprehend this idea through assigned readings, like the "Intersectionality" chapter in *Threshold Concepts*, as well as through supporting assigned readings.<sup>51</sup> It is by applying the ideas, concepts, and lenses from the readings onto their own lives and experiences that they begin to develop a deeper level of meaning.

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50. Hassel and Launius, *Threshold Concepts*, 120-1.

51. For the Intersectionality module, I assigned the following auxiliary readings: bell hooks, "Feminist Class Struggle," in *Feminism is for Everybody*; bell hooks, "Women at Work," in *Feminism is for Everybody*, Gloria Anzaldúa, "La Conciencia de la Mestiza;" Audre Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference;" and Margo DeMello, "Racialized and Colonized Bodies."

*The Gender Norm Violation*<sup>52</sup>

Several years ago I began asking students to complete an eye-opening exercise I called a Gender Norm Violation as a way to think about identity, its social construction, and how expressions of gender identity are policed in the wider world.<sup>53</sup> In this assignment, I asked students to identify and break a gender norm and then reflect, through writing, on their experiences doing so.<sup>54</sup> For example, I suggested to students that they could wear clothing assumed appropriate for another gender or that they could insist to hold the door open for others in public. In any violation they choose, I instructed, they must first think about what practices are considered socially appropriate for their own gender and then assume a behavior considered unsuitable or at least challenging to their own gender identity. This assignment prompted students to think about the way they have internalized gender norms and social scripts, those things understood to be socially acceptable behavior given a person's gender identity. In choosing to perform an action considered unsuitable or contrary to the norms established for those who shared their same gender identity, students began to interrogate several important ideas: that gender is performative, that such performance is ruled by a set of (often unspoken)

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52. Knowingly, I ask my students to engage in a bit of strategic essentialism here. I recognize that gender identity cannot be extricated from the complicated and slippery matrix of identities we occupy. Invariably, issues of race, age, ability, etc., come to bear on how my students identify and experiment with their own gender identity, gender expression, and practices of adhering to or subverting socialized gender norms. In the course schedule, the Gender Norm Violation/Gender Journal assignment comes before the module on Intersectionality. Therefore, most students are not equipped with knowledge of this threshold concept and the critical lens it provides our analyses. However, I offer an extra credit assignment later in the semester called "Revisiting the Gender Journal" that asks students to apply an intersectional lens to the activity and revisit their initial reflections.

53. This assignment was adapted from one developed by Casey O'Brien.

54. When choosing a norm to violate, I asked students to violate a "folkway," what sociologists refer to as those behavioral and performative practices societies develop to frame and ease social interactions.

expectations, and that how others perceive gender can differ from how one understands them self to be gendered.<sup>55</sup>

Over time, I observed that my students commit these so-called gender norm violations on an increasing and regular basis. Anecdotally, I can report that many woman-identified students<sup>56</sup> shared in classroom conversation and in assignment submissions that they don't regularly shave body hair, that they wear men's clothing, or that they did not wear makeup - all examples of gender norms ascribed to women-identified people that students report regularly violating. However, these behaviors are not terribly surprising given recent data regarding social attitudes toward gender. While our society still relies heavily on a gender binary to dictate social norms and mores, research indicates that thirty-five percent of students who belong to Gen Z know someone who uses gender-neutral pronouns (for example: they/them/theirs) and that they increasingly understand gender as well as sexual orientation to be best understood as on a spectrum.<sup>57</sup> Therefore, I began asking students to instead complete a Gender Journal, an assignment that asks students to take stock of their gender identity (wherever it falls on the gender identity spectrum) and reflect on their experiences living as knowingly gendered persons going about their daily routines over the course of one week. Several prompts they may consider as a starting point for creating an entry include: "did you find yourself violating any gender

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55. For a useful and regularly updated guide that defines gender expression, gender identity, and numerous other terms pertinent to (and often conflated with) gender identity, see Sam Killermann, "The Genderbread Person v4," It's Pronounced Metrosexual, accessed January 12, 2019, <http://itspronouncedmetrosexual.com/2018/10/the-genderbread-person-v4/>.

56. In every semester that I have taught Introduction to Women's and Gender Studies, the vast majority of the students in my class identify as women.

57. "Gen Z More Familiar with Gender Neutral Pronouns," Pew Research Center: Social and Demographic Trends, accessed April 22, 2019, [https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2019/01/17/generation-z-looks-a-lot-like-millennials-on-key-social-and-political-issues/psdt\\_1-17-19\\_generations-02/](https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2019/01/17/generation-z-looks-a-lot-like-millennials-on-key-social-and-political-issues/psdt_1-17-19_generations-02/).

norms?” “where do you feel safe/not safe expressing your gender?” and “what do you feel you are permitted/not permitted to do because of your gender identity?” This assignment builds from the former Gender Norm Violation assignment and extends the intended investigation, which prompts students to both understand and begin to push the boundaries of what it means to have a gender identity, express that gender to social others, and do so within institutions that dictate privilege and oppression.

Reflecting on the more than ten sections of this course I have taught, what becomes clear from student submissions from both assignments, is that an early and frequent way students begin this gendered self-assessment and experimentation with pushing society’s strictures for communicating gender is through and with their use of objects. How students begin to understand and investigate their identities often starts with how they use - or don’t use - things. From makeup, to clothing, to deodorant, students note how experimentation with gender expression through and with things allows them the necessary time and space to develop a deeper understanding of gender identity - whether it is their own or others’. For example, several semesters ago a woman-identified and feminine-presenting student reported in their reflection, which was then shared in a wider classroom discussion, that they decided to wear men’s deodorant to their place of work, a children’s daycare center. While going about the usual business of caring, the student reported that one of the children remarked to them that they didn’t smell right. Eager to probe the ways in which children are socialized both to be gendered as well as police others’ expressions of gender, my student asked their charge what they meant. The ensuing conversation, which was reported during a face-to-face class meeting, helped those in attendance understand the breadth of the social construction of gender as well as how it is policed - even by children.

For many students completing the Gender Norm Violation/Gender Journal assignments, everyday objects feature prominently in reflections about their experiences as gendered people or as they discuss the process of breaking gender norms. Objects like deodorant, clothing, makeup, even writing utensils,<sup>58</sup> despite being central to our mundane performances of gender, seem to recede from view until an interrogation of gender and gender performance is called for.

Quotidian objects, then, like gender identity and expression, become naturalized and are part of the ‘gender water’ that surrounds us. Through this assignment, students begin to realize how the ways in which we identify dictates our use of objects, mundane or otherwise. Conversely, using objects has great bearing on how we - and others - express and read gender and other identities.

#### *Identity from a Material Culture Perspective*

Continuing this analysis from a material culture perspective, that students process their understanding of gender and other categories of identity through and with objects is not surprising. While scholarship addressing the exploration of identity through and with material objects is lacking from feminist pedagogy literature<sup>59</sup>, there is fertile ground from which to start.

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58. In 2012, Ellen DeGeneres comedically critiqued a new line of pens intended exclusively for a woman-identified consuming audience on her daytime television talk show, *Ellen*. I show this clip from DeGeneres’ show when introducing the Gender Norm Violation/Gender Journal Assignment to help students begin thinking about the ways in which our use (or explicit non-use) of mundane objects takes on gendered meanings, “Bic Pens for Women,” *YouTube*, accessed April 25, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eCyw3prIWhc>.

59. Anne M. Derosie and Vivien E. Rose propose teaching Women’s History with objects to investigate populations underrepresented in the annals of history, but I can find no example of scholarship that scaffolds higher ed student learning and analysis of identities - whether of the self or others, see Anne M. Derosie and Vivien E. Rose, “History You Can Touch: Teaching Women’s History through Three-Dimensional Objects,” in *Clio in the Classroom A Guide For Teaching U.S. Women’s History*, eds. Carol Berkin, Margaret S. Crocco, and Barbara Winslow (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 239-252. There is some precedent, however, for interrogating identity through and with photographs (a type of material culture). After I developed a very similar activity that I assigned in my Introduction to WGS course, I found that another instructor utilized Lois Bielefeld’s series of photographs titled *Androgyny* as the basis of a chapter in a resource text meant to guide teaching and learning for the K-8 classroom. Both

Scholarship emerging from material culture theory posits that objects and identities are co-constituted and entangled, existing in a complicated matrix that requires care, labor, and near-constant consideration.<sup>60</sup>

In *Stuff*, Daniel Miller makes a compelling argument about the power and influence of mundane objects. Like gender identity (and other identities), quotidian objects seem to recede from our view and become part of the ‘gender water’ I mention earlier in this section.<sup>61</sup> Miller suggests that everyday objects tend to fade from our immediate view and become seemingly unimportant or unremarkable. By virtue of “the humility of things,” he argues, those objects which are common, familiar, mundane, or everyday also are relegated as secondary or even as completely unimportant in interrogations of identities or the past, for example. However, these objects tell us much about ourselves and illustrate what we communicate to others about ourselves: what we eat, how we care for our bodies, and what we value. By narrowing our analytical gaze and assessing these objects, we can begin to tap into the wider networks of production and consumption and to posit not just how but why people are socialized in particular

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assignments (mine and Kim Cosier’s) ask students to consider Bielefeld’s photographs in order to unsettle assumptions about gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation, see Kim Cosier, “Framing Identity: Using Photographs to Rethink Sexism, Gender, and Sexuality” in *Rethinking Sexism, Gender, and Sexuality*, eds. Annika Butler-Wall et al. (Milwaukee, WI: Rethinking Schools, 2016), 397-407; Lois Bielefeld, *Androgyny*, 2014-2015. Photographs, Video, and Audio. <https://www.loisbielefeld.com/androgyny>.

60. See Myriem Naji, “Gender and Materiality in the Making,” *Journal of Material Culture* 14 (2009): 47-73; Ian Hodder, *Entangled: An Archaeology of the Relationships between Humans and Things* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).

61. I don’t mean to suggest here that people can be “gender-blind” (thinking this way parallels other problematic and damaging ways of thinking in which people claim they, “don’t see color” or “treat everyone equally”), but that gender, as a dichotomous and biologically-derived system of naming difference, is naturalized within our mainstream cultural context. This naturalization means that gender identity usually goes unquestioned. The *Threshold Concepts* chapter “The Social Construction of Gender” helps students begin to dismantle these culturally-derived notions of gender, if they haven’t already.

ways.<sup>62</sup> Here, we can begin to investigate how objects connect and indicate relationships between identities and institutions: schools, governments, corporations.

Building from the central tenet that people things make people and people make things, Ian Hodder's *Entangled* is a significant work within the field of material culture studies that allows me to expand my own thinking about the relationship between objects and identities. Building from the supposition that "humans depend on things" and "things depend on humans" (both are chapter titles), Hodder draws from scholarship which argues that the development of human cognition was dependent on things and our increasingly complex interactions with them. Citing studies that suppose the co-emergence of human language and use of tools, Hodder proposes that "human existence is thingly, irreducibly so."<sup>63</sup> Providing more than a spark or conduit for the development of human cognition, our interactions with objects - in flows, streams of energy, and through smells, sounds, and feelings - continue to shape our experience of the world as well as our identities. Hodder expands:

Familiar things are absorbed into our sense of identity; they become recognized and owned... There is a dependence of humans on things. We move towards things and take them in. But also we object. We move away from dangerous things, we only eat certain foods...[a]t the personal level we form identities by rejecting things, refusing to do things in certain ways, denying certain ways of seeing, feeling, acting, doing things.<sup>64</sup>

In Hodder's assessment, identity manifests itself from our interaction with familiar things, objects we reject, and stuff that surrounds our everyday life. Based on our acceptance or rejection of things, we create, confirm, and maintain our identities.

Attending to identities matters in our practices of teaching and learning. As I understand myself to be constituted of a complex and shifting matrix of identities, I must also recognize that

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62. Daniel Miller, *Stuff* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010).

63. Hodder, *Entangled*, 38.

64. Hodder, *Entangled*, 38.

my students and colleagues are as well. How each of us is situated impacts what we learn, how we learn, and how we do (or don't) carry that information forward.<sup>65</sup> Emerging scholarship from SoTL and other pedagogically-focused sub-fields emphasizes why this matters.<sup>66</sup> Material culture theory offers the necessary amendment that attending to identities can happen through and with objects. Associated methodologies offered by material culture theorists suggest further rationales that links objects and identities and propose *how* teachers and learners can investigate identity through a consideration of objects, even everyday objects.

Given that Intro to WGS and other WGS, History, and humanities courses more broadly explore and interrogate identities outside of the heteronormative, androcentric, and white-centric mainstream, it can often be a challenge to find source material that supports activities and assignments that ask students to apply knowledge gained from the course textbook and readings. Similar to Derosie and Rose's rationale for turning to material culture (or, as they say, three-dimensional objects) to explore the lives of historical "others," I, too, contend that a shift to object-based teaching and learning is necessary when teachers and learners investigate those under- (or not) represented in textual records. How to facilitate this kind of investigation of

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65. First suggested by Donna Haraway, "situated knowledge" dictates that knowledge is not objective, but is always subjective and formed within particular contexts (that can align with locations, identities, time periods, etc.). Furthermore, situated knowledge always provides partial accounts of reality and must be congregated in order to provide a larger (and nuanced) account. Situated knowledge directly contests the possibility of scientific objectivity and the white/andro/hetero/Western context from which it emerges, Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 575-99.

66. In recent years, there has been a significant uptick in available scholarship that addresses the need for inclusive teaching and learning, see DL Stewart, "Language of Appeasement: Why Colleges Need a Language Shift." *Inside Higher Ed*, March 20, 2017, <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2017/03/30/colleges-need-language-shift-not-one-you-think-essay>; Kevin Gannon, "The Case for Inclusive Teaching," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 27, 2018. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/The-Case-for-Inclusive/242636>.

identity through and with the use of objects is distinctly missing from feminist teaching guides and pedagogical resources. As I stated in the introduction, I created the Object Lesson assignment series for Intro to WGS so that students could continue their exploration of threshold concepts and attend to identities often missing from text-based sources. While I don't ask my students to become fluent in language from material culture theory, it does significantly inform my design of the assignment.

### **Designing an Introduction to Women's and Gender Studies Course**

As I noted in the opening section, in the Spring 2018 semester, I chose a new Intro to WGS text book, which allowed me flexibility in my curriculum planning. Shifting to a new textbook significantly altered my organization of the course, also calling me to reorganize the course schedule. Based on the five body chapters in *Threshold Concepts*, I constructed the course around five modules that lasted two weeks each. As the academic calendar dictates that this course met twice per week (for a sixty-five minute class session), I could dedicate four class periods to each module. For a typical, fifteen-week semester, this allowed for two to three "open" weeks, after I accounted for a week each for course introduction and wrap-up and final presentations (typically, I assign a final project for the face-to-face sections of Intro to WGS). In my near decade of teaching Intro to WGS, I found that students respond well to structured modules that have a regular pattern of readings, activities, and assignments. Providing patterns and clear expectations for assignments and due dates is one simple way that teachers can support learners who juggle busy lives full of significant responsibilities outside the classroom. Therefore, I chose to make each of the five modules based on a *Threshold Concepts* chapter follow a regular sequence of assignments and due dates. An additional module that focused on a

special topic (gender violence and consent), lasting just one week, followed parts of this regular pattern.

I distributed the course schedule on the first day of class (and made it available on the D2L course site accessible by each of the students) and students found a regular pattern for each module.<sup>67</sup> During the first week, all students would complete: an assigned reading (one chapter from *Threshold Concepts*) and one written assignment (a reading response, based on a prompt I provided). The topic of the *Threshold Concepts* chapter dictated the topic of the module and the reading response asked students to both illustrate they read and retained information from the assigned chapter reading and begin to critically engage with the ideas that were presented in the chapter. Additionally, each student offered a discussion question that could be posed to the class. This part of the reading response helped to direct in-class discussions for the span of the module as well as to indicate ideas, terms, and topics that they were having difficulty understanding. In the second week of the module, all students would complete: assigned article readings (typically, three articles that continued, challenged, or otherwise extended the ideas from the assigned chapter reading), an assignment I called an Engagement Activity (this activity asked students to consider resources including photographs, podcasts, and videos and apply their developing knowledge of that module's threshold concept in a brief analysis), and an in-class activity I called Object Lesson.<sup>68</sup> The Object Lessons were held on the final class meeting of the module and served both as a culmination to the module and a way of extending and linking each of the threshold concepts, as presented in the chapter readings.

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67. The course schedule from Spring 2018 is available in Appendix G.

68. For the one-week module on gender violence and consent, students completed a hybrid/condensed version of the typical pattern: two assigned article readings, a reading response, and an object lesson.

I take care to attend to student needs, identities, and ways of knowing as I design course curriculum. Part of this, as the Engagement Activity assignment hopes to achieve, is meeting students where they are. In this sense, “where they are” does not refer to ability; rather it is an idea that informs my choice of location in terms of where content and resources are hosted and available (even popular). Working to personalize content, whether choosing from a prescribed list or seeking out additional resources on our own, directed much of the content and work I incorporated as I laid out the revised class schedule. By personalize, I mean to suggest that I was motivated to make both the content and mode of delivery relevant to my students. For example, I intended for each of the five activities Engagement Activities to meet students where they were in terms of where they access and process information. As I discuss in the Objects and Public History chapter in this dissertation, increasingly, students both access and process knowledge on social media platforms (like Twitter and Instagram). Additionally, they often seek out resources presented in formats that are not written texts (like videos, vlogs, and podcasts). To link content from the class to “real-world” ideas and platforms, each Engagement Activity called students to access content in ways that were likely familiar to them. For example, in the “Social Construction of Gender” module, I assign students to view *Androgyny*, a photography and video/audio series by artist Lois Bielefeld.<sup>69</sup> In a written reflection, I instruct students to complete a series of prompts that ask them to think critically about how they read others’ gender expression and identity.<sup>70</sup> See Appendix I for an example of the Engagement Activity assignment and these prompts.

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69. Bielefeld, *Androgyny*.

70. While photographs can certainly be analyzed from a material culture perspective, asking students to do so was not my intent for this Engagement Activity. I reserved a material culture theory-informed analysis of objects for the Object Lesson assignment series.

“Where they are” in terms of a fixed, geographic location is an element I also take into consideration. As many undergraduate students who attend UWM come from the State of Wisconsin - eighty-two percent of students are Wisconsin residents - I often incorporate information and sources from and about the state.<sup>71</sup> Bringing in objects and narratives about and from the local context added something new to the curriculum I developed and helped me to recognize student identities in a way that most other course materials did not allow. This element of curriculum design had great bearing on fulfilling my goal to meet students where they are in terms of geographic location. In turn, asking students to interrogate objects and documents from their immediate surrounds ensures, in part, that they have the opportunity to engage with ideas that are personally meaningful. What material culture theorists have to say about the co-creation of objects and identities comes to bear on this aspect.

Building from successes and great experiences I had collaborating with library colleagues at UWM while teaching other courses (including HIST 243: History of Women in American Society, a course I discuss in another chapter), I consulted Abbi Nye (then, Interim Head of Archives and currently, Reference and Instruction Archivist) and Max Yela (Head of Special Collections), both from UWM’s Golda Meir Library. Both Special Collections and Archives contain a wealth of information, resources, and objects about UWM and its surrounds.<sup>72</sup> Because

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71. “UWM Facts,” UWM Facts Database, accessed April 26, 2019, [https://uwm.edu/facts/?fwp\\_facts\\_search=wisconsin](https://uwm.edu/facts/?fwp_facts_search=wisconsin).

72. UWM’s Golda Meir Library is unique in that it hosts both the Archives Department and Special Collections. Together, they make up the Archives and Special Collections Division at the UWM Libraries. In my experience, staff in both routinely communicate and collaborate to ensure that UWM’s collections are accessible to all. Collecting initiatives in UWM’s Archives focus more on documents and from UWM and the metropolitan Milwaukee area, though in their holdings, Special Collections hosts a UWM authors collections as well as objects from the Milwaukee Handicrafts Project (a Works Project Administration program) and Milwaukee German-Language publications, for example, “About the Archives,” University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries, accessed April 30, 2019, <https://uwm.edu/libraries/archives/about-the->

of my developed working relationship with Nye and Yela, I knew I could approach them without a definitive plan. Building from our established collaborative relationship and my understanding that they are engaged colleagues eager to work out details of a proposed project as a group, I approached them when I had just the basis of my idea for the Object Lesson assignment series. In these past projects, Nye and Yela shared with me their extensive knowledge of the material holdings in both Special Collections and Archives, graciously sharing with students approaches and methods for learning through and with those sources, often examples of material culture.

### **Memory Keepers**

Teaching and learning through and with objects is not new. However, as I outlined in my Review of Literature chapter, few scholarly resources (especially in feminist and history pedagogy in higher education) exist that address incorporating teaching and learning through and with objects in the contemporary classroom. One useful chapter advises regarding the use visual sources (one type of source material utilized in this assignment series), and one provides reflections about teaching and learning with three-dimensional objects, but no single contemporary source provides a satisfactory discussion of both *why* and *how* - elements central to my own investigation here - one might begin to teach through and with objects.<sup>73</sup> In my assessment, a pedagogical form that anticipates and prefigures my suggestion/contribution exists: the object lesson. By virtue of its long history and its development over time by the many hands, minds, and initiatives it meant to serve, the object lesson is an ideal pedagogical form for

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archives/; "Special Collections at UWM Libraries," University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries, accessed April 30, 2019, <https://uwm.edu/libraries/special/collections/>.

73. See Tracey Weis, "Teaching Women's History with Visual Images," in *Clio in the Classroom: A Guide For Teaching U.S. Women's History*, eds. Carol Berkin, Margaret S. Crocco, and Barbara Winslow (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009) 223-238; Derosie and Rose, "History You Can Touch."

contemporary consideration, especially for those looking to expand their teaching practice to include objects and attend to identity-related issues. Furthermore, historicizing the object lesson provides avenues for addressing questions related to both why and how to develop an object-based curriculum.

Building from historical form and teaching precedent, I began devising the Object Lesson assignment series for use in my Intro to WGS classroom.<sup>74</sup> It's important to note that, historically, object lessons took a variety of forms and served a broad audience of teachers and learners: from kindergarteners to college-aged students. There is no singular orthodoxy or orthopraxy for creating and facilitating lessons in this form. It is entirely possible that object lesson pedagogues Mary Sheldon Barnes or Elizabeth Mayo would look at the curriculum I developed and take umbrage with my usage of "Object Lesson." In my own adaption, I intended that the semester-long assignment would challenge students to consider what they were learning from textual sources when that knowledge was brought to bear on material objects specially selected for particular, thematic course units. Extending student acquisition of threshold concepts, the assignment series would facilitate an investigation of a central question: "where do texts fail us?" Pushing this interrogation a step further, I proposed, "...and how are objects uniquely suited to respond to gaps and silences in the historical, textual record, and, drawing from our interactions with these objects, how do we fill them?" This kind of inquiry draws from a basic observation Carter makes about the role and function of the object lesson: they "link between learning how to observe and learning how to think."<sup>75</sup> Marrying frameworks for

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74. See the Introduction and Review of Literature in this dissertation. From this point forward, I will refer to the assignment series I created as "Object Lessons." When referring to the general pedagogical form, I'll use "object lessons."

75. Carter, *Object Lessons*, 67.

observation from material culture studies with threshold concepts, as informed by SoTL and feminist pedagogy, along with my intention to attend to identities - mine, my students', those of often under-represented communities - pushed me to consider other non-textual forms of source material and ways of knowing. Refining this initiative further to account for the geographic and cultural origins of those within a UWM classroom, I made the decision to draw from locally-held resources.

I brought these central questions and initiatives, with a revised course schedule in hand, to the first curriculum planning meeting with Max Yela and Abbi Nye in the months before the Spring 2018 semester. To start our meeting, I shared context for the course overhaul, as I explain earlier in this chapter. Knowing that I could rely on their extensive knowledge of objects, photographs, and texts available in UWM's collections, I shared each of the topics I wished to pursue through and with objects. Four topics followed threshold concepts from the course text and the final was based on a special topic, my way of responding to coverage in popular news and media outlets - a topic, I observed, that had come to the forefront of many discussions, and not just those that emerge in WGS classrooms. They are:

- The Social Construction of Gender
- Privilege and Oppression
- Intersectionality
- Feminist Praxis
- Gender Violence and Consent

In our meeting, we moved sequentially through each of the proposed topics. I gave a bit more contextual information about the topic and the sub-themes we were to explore during that module and Nye and Yela suggested objects and resources in UWM's holdings. I countered with my own suggestions and the subsequent hour of fruitful conversation and strategizing passed in a flash. Our conversation led us to a wide range of objects: from books, to photographs and

greeting cards and requests for name changes, to handmade cloth dolls. For each Object Lesson class period, students would consider a range of objects from a given collection. We intended that the range would help raise and answer a variety of questions and the general abundance of objects would mean that nearly every student would be able to materially engage at the same time. Shortly after, I followed up with a general schedule and outlined logistics including meeting location and plans for object transportation. This schedule, which includes the full list of topics and objects, can be found in the Course Schedule (Appendix J).<sup>76</sup>

On the class first meeting of the semester, I introduced the course to my students and explained the kind of work and assignments I would ask them to complete. As it was the assignment pilot, I was sure to devote class time on that first day, briefly explaining to students my own academic research goals (in short: why and how to teach through and with objects), and outlining what purpose this assignment would serve. Asking them to first read through the course syllabus (Appendix H) on their own, I instructed them to arrange themselves into small groups and discuss the prompt: “what does it mean to analyze critically or critically engage?” Then, I asked students to read through the Course Schedule, which includes a detailed, week-by-week summary of assigned readings, activities, and other important notes or due dates. Here, students saw a separate table with the dates, topics, and objects to be considered in the Object Lessons assignment series. Again, students formed small groups and they discussed a slight variation on the first prompt: “what value might objects bring to our critical engagement and ability to

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76. While the Object Lesson series followed a regular pattern, there were two notable exceptions. I invited a guest facilitator, Dr. Brice D. Smith, to assist with the first Object Lesson and this lesson took place within our own classroom. Given that the objects we considered were books, Nye was able to transport the objects from Special Collections to our classroom. I held the fourth Object Lesson in the Emile H. Mathis Art Gallery, located within UWM’s Art History department and planned this lesson in collaboration with Leigh Mahlik (Curator, UWM Art Collection and Galleries).

critically analyze?” I did not record my students’ responses to the in-class discussion prompts, though they did share back to the larger group after each of the two small-group discussions. I was less concerned with the substance of their answers than I was introducing terms like “critically engage” and “object-based analysis” - terms that would become central to our teaching and learning over the next fifteen weeks.

The Object Lesson assignment series made up fifteen percent of the final course grade and students received an Object Reflection (OR) worksheet for each of the Object Lesson class periods, making each of the four graded ORs worth three-and-three-quarter percent of the final course grade. Thus, each OR was a fairly low-stakes assignment and I graded ORs on a pass/fail basis. I delivered paper copies of ORs on the day of the Object Lesson; each was a two-sided sheet of paper that contained four separate prompts. The questions followed a regular pattern. First, I asked students to complete a “Pre-Object Encounter” which asked them to consider how objects might extend, challenge, or otherwise impact their understanding of the threshold concept or special topic under consideration for the given module.<sup>77</sup> For example, OR5 asked students: “How do you imagine an object might be able to challenge your understanding of the topic we’ve been investigating for the last week: ‘Consent?’ How might an object be uniquely suited to explore the topic, perhaps in a way that the texts we’ve read weren’t able to address?”<sup>78</sup> In the

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77. As four of the five lessons were held outside of our classroom space, students would often gather just outside of our designated meeting locations upwards of fifteen minutes before our scheduled start time (I recognize that I had a very timely bunch of students for the Spring 2018 semester!). As students gathered well before our allotted time in Special Collections or in the Emile H. Mathis Gallery, they had time to address the first prompt. If students did not arrive early, they typically had five to ten minutes to complete the prompt at the start of the class meeting, when my co-facilitator and I went through “housekeeping” and general introductory points.

78. All five assignment sheets for the Object Reflections are included in Appendices K through O.

five ORs I created, this question varied little and generally asked students to think back to the readings, discussions, and activities completed during that same module and identify any lingering questions or gaps they may have observed.

After brief introductions to the objects under consideration for the given Object Lesson, the students spent the bulk of the class meeting engaging with the objects themselves. I did not assign students to work in groups, pairs, or alone; rather, I let students self-direct and choose how they wanted to spend their time addressing the second prompt on the OR sheet.<sup>79</sup> This prompt remained consistent over the course of the series and, under the heading “Investigating the Object,” asked students: “Provide a brief sketch (in words, drawings, diagrams, etc.) of the object under consideration (attach additional pages, if necessary) – please choose a single item to investigate. Imagine, observe, and speculate and consider: [a list of bullet-pointed prompts available in Appendices K through O].” To create the bullet-pointed list, I drew from a number of established frameworks developed by: Jules Prown, the Wisconsin 101 Project, and World History Matters.<sup>80</sup> With ten to fifteen minutes left at the end of the class meeting, I solicited the classroom’s attention and facilitated (usually, along with Yela and Nye) a group discussion. During this time, I welcomed students to share impressions about the objects under consideration, how the objects and narratives that emerged challenged their assumptions about

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79. In my observation, students usually completed some combination of all three. Depending on how they moved around the room to engage with the objects, they worked in solitary observation or chatted with a classmate or two. When acting as facilitators, Max Yela and Abbi Nye spent considerable time engaging with students during this exploration period. Additionally, I surveyed the room and engaged with students, asking them about their progress, their observations, and generally engaged in object analysis alongside and with them.

80. See Jules Prown, “Mind in Matter,” *Winterthur* 17 (1982): 1-19; “What is an Object History,” Wisconsin 101: Our History in Objects, accessed May 1, 2019, <https://wi101.wisc.edu/object-description/>; Daniel Waugh, “Material Culture: Objects,” World History Sources, accessed May 1, 2019, <http://chnm.gmu.edu/worldhistorysources/unpacking/objectsmain.html>.

the module topic and their own understandings, and any general questions or observations they wanted to share. These were engaging and fruitful discussions. Because I spent the class period engaging in critical object analysis alongside my students, I had my finger on the pulse of how they were looking, how they were reacting, and how they were learning and I drew from this knowledge to direct this final part of the class meeting.

With their own impressions and with words from their classmates and co-facilitators still ringing in their ears, students left the classroom instructed to respond to two final OR prompts under the heading “Post Object Encounter.” These prompts were particular to each Object Lesson and contained the greatest variety in what I asked students to consider. One prompt asked students to critically engage. Often, this prompt asked students to recall an idea or passage from reading assigned earlier in the module. For example, OR5 asks students, “Identify at least one passage/point from the three assigned articles for this unit (“Cat Person,” Roupenian; “Consent Accidents and Consent Violations;” “A Plea to Stop Saying Yes to Sex When You Really Want to Say No”) and describe how your encounter with the object, our class discussion of it, or any reflections you came away with challenges your understanding of consent. Pay special consideration to audience in your critical analysis: consider who the dolls are meant for and who the intended audience of the articles is – discuss how recognizing audience might impact your understanding of consent.” The other asked students to reflect. Again, in OR5, I asked students: “Consider your encounter with the objects in conjunction with the MPS (Milwaukee Public Schools) curriculum resources presented by Archivist Abbi Nye. Cite an example from the curriculum resource that stood out to you – explain why it stood out to you. How does considering this source in conjunction with the dolls help expand your understanding of consent? How does considering this source in conjunction with the dolls help expand your understanding

of feminist praxis?” ORs were due on the following class meeting. As Object Lessons were held on the final class meeting of the module (Thursdays), this meant that students had until the following Tuesday before they had to complete their responses.

Above, I strategically shared prompts from the fifth (and final) Object Lesson. This lesson asked students to explore the topic “Gender Violence and Consent,” a topic that did not have a corollary chapter in *Threshold Concepts*. Rather, I arranged for this to be our final topic of consideration, a site where students could practice using the theoretical lenses they began to acquire and explore through the *Threshold Concepts* modules. Notably, the directly preceding module explores feminist praxis, a concept that asks students to link theory with practice and think about how they could use the knowledge and ways of knowing they developed over the course of the semester in the “real world.” I intended for them to begin their own foray into feminist praxis with the fifth module and Object Lesson. In order to learn more about assignment outcomes and student reflections, view *Memory Keepers*, a pedagogical resource and teaching reflection I co-created to accompany the written text of this dissertation.<sup>81</sup>

With the generous support of the Chipstone Foundation, and with filmmaker Allain Daigle, I created *Memory Keepers* and call it a Teaching and Learning Video Resource.<sup>82</sup> This short video presents a mixture of in-class footage from the fifth and final Object Lesson session and interviews with me (in the role of curriculum developer and instructor) along with Max Yela and Abbi Nye. In regards to how the content of the video fits with this chapter, in short, it

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81. See, Krista Grensavitch and Allain Daigle, “Memory Keepers,” filmed April 2018, video, 7:13, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2dWmPOFxo9U&t=3s>.

82. *Memory Keepers* is one in a series of Teaching and Learning Video Resources I created in my multi-modal dissertation. In Chapter 3, I present *Creating The Supper Club* and in Chapter 5, I present “Experiment in Education: Holy Hill” and “Experiment in Education: Increase Lapham”

provides insight about student experiences with the Object Lesson assignment series and highlight the importance of collaboration. The video showcases a combination of in-classroom evidence, reflection, and critical analysis - all elements typically included in the ‘outcomes’ section of a written chapter like this one. The Chipstone Foundation hosts the video on its YouTube channel,<sup>83</sup> where the following text provides context for the video resource:

This video traces the production, presentation, and reflection on a semester-long assignment series in an Introduction to Women’s and Gender Studies course taught in the Fall of 2018 by Krista Grensavitch at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM). In this course, students completed a required assignment series titled Object Lessons, which asked students to both deepen and challenge their understanding of course content. The course text, *Threshold Concepts in Women’s and Gender Studies* (Launius & Hassel, 2017), along with other course content and the instructor’s pedagogical approach, introduced students to disciplinary ways of thinking, a means of developing critical thinking skills that extend a culture of learning beyond the space of the classroom (Hassel and Nelson, 2012). Here, students were asked to think like and engage as practitioners of women’s and gender studies. In each of the object lessons, students learned through and with material objects, continually pursuing a central question: “where do texts fail us, and how are objects uniquely suited to both identify and fill these silences?” Participating in feminist praxis, students then utilized threshold concepts as tools of engagement and knowledge production. Each of the five object lesson class sessions was held in collaboration with local authorities, both scholars in the community and experts on UWM’s campus. This teaching and learning resource records the fifth and final object lesson, held in Special Collections at UWM’s Golda Meir Library. During this lesson students drew upon their knowledge of threshold concepts in women’s and gender studies and investigated the idea of gender-based violence and consent. Considering both curricula from Milwaukee Public Schools as well as dolls meant to teach young children about sexual violence and consent, students utilized lenses like intersectionality and privilege in their investigation of creating and maintaining consent. Additionally, they pursued larger questions related to identity and well-being.

In addition to serving as the “outcomes” section of this chapter, *Memory Keepers*, along with the other Teaching and Learning Video Resources, are meant to impact a wide audience and remain accessible to a diverse group of teachers and learners. In the case of *Memory Keepers* and *Creating The Supper Club*, I do not intend for teachers or learners to exactly replicate the work I

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83. See, Krista Grensavitch and Allain Daigle, “Memory Keepers,” filmed April 2018, video, 7:13, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2dWmPOFxo9U&t=3s>.

do with students and collaborators; rather, I hope that the videos serve as a point of inspiration and pedagogical grounding for others.

Dear readers, please watch *Memory Keepers* before continuing to the conclusion to this chapter.

## **Conclusions**

In their original setting, something for which we have no first-hand account to turn to, we can only imagine the classroom lessons that taught school children about violence, consent, and their own bodies. In the present day, we can just speculate as to how these issues were mapped onto the bodies of the dolls and how the dolls served to mediate the lessons and conversations. In the original setting, children learned through and with material objects. Thus, without naming it as such, teachers and learners engaged in a pedagogical form reminiscent of the object lesson. I will not take any time here to develop this point, though it bears mentioning in order to note the life span of the dolls. Material culture theorists often refer to an object's life span, emphasizing that it is important to consider how the function or use of an object has changed (or remained constant) over time. The dolls were created in order to fulfill a specific function: to educate children in Milwaukee classrooms about violence, consent, and their bodies. Students in Intro to WGS also explored these topics - especially violence and consent - but did so in a different context and for different means. In our hands and through our examination, the function of the dolls changed.

Imagination and empathy were required as we teachers and learners in Intro to WGS worked to learn through, with, and about the dolls. While we have just trace, archival evidence about the specific context surrounding their creation,<sup>84</sup> we do know much more about the wider

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84. See the Object History before the Introduction to this chapter.

social and political forces that made creating these dolls necessary: a culture that allowed (and continues to permit) the rape and violation of people, including young people. Despite the historical context we can more easily access, along with corollaries from the news media or even our own experiences, we cannot know anything about the children who allowed their thoughts and experiences to be mediated through these dolls. We do not know their names, their genders, their races, or even their favorite colors. Coming to this realization, as individuals and as a class, was sobering. At times, it left members of the class unable to approach the dolls - for coming too close to an object that had mediated the realization of violence was understood (implicitly) as another possible iteration of violence.

What should we allow ourselves to imagine, then, if we are faced with potential acts of power and violence committed against children? In this case, speculating in generalities and not attending to the realities of a lived experience could be a means of ensuring our own well-being, especially if mention of gender violence and consent is triggering. For if we travel too far down the rabbit hole, we may call ourselves to imagine individual acts of violence committed against real and individual people.

With the Object Lessons assignment series, and in particular, the final Object Lesson session that introduced students to these dolls, it was never my intention to use the documents and objects under study to recover children's voices, experiences, or reconstruct their experience of trauma. Instead, I implored students to refine their skills of observation and to gain experience applying lenses like privilege and oppression or intersectionality in their critical analysis of an object of study. As I stated in *Memory Keepers*, under examination, objects can offer us insight into the lived reality of individual people: how they react, participate, resist, and belong. On their own, with their classmates, and in collaboration with instructing figures in the classroom,

students asked questions of the objects. They recognized identities possibly left out of our consideration of gender violence and consent. Learning though and with the dolls, students critically engaged with issues of identity. Any creative imagining that took place, considering that violence did occur and that violence came to bear on the lives and identities of real people, perhaps began to build empathy.

*Object Lessons: The Ultimate Pull Factor*

My knowledge that the object lesson as form of teaching actually *did* allow for teachers and learners to attend to various identities, pulled me into developing my own riff on the object lesson.<sup>85</sup> Sarah Anne Carter lays the groundwork in her own historical investigation of object lessons, explaining both why and how pedagogy and teaching approaches change based on student identities. She rightfully points out that, historically, attending to student identities through the use of object lessons was often racially-motivated and informed by racist politics that suggested, depending on identity, some groups of people were better suited for certain modes of learning, or, in contrast, other groups had inherent or immutable intellectual capacities that were not suited for higher-order intellectual pursuits. Carter states, “Some white Southerners may have assumed that African Americans sensed differently and relied more on ‘lower’ senses - touch, smell, and hearing, rather than sight - which were heightened through use. Their supposed ability to sense more acutely than whites could make them appear to be particularly susceptible to the study of material things.”<sup>86</sup> Here, the question of *why* centers of learning like the Hampton

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85. In using the term object lesson, both in my summary of Carter’s work and in the appropriative sense (as the basis for the assignment series I develop), I do not mean to homogenize the term or practice. In the hands of various pedagogues since its inception in the late 1700s, the object lesson has existed in a variety of forms, has been delivered in a variety of modes, and - along with my contribution here - continues to be created by and for a wide range of teachers and learners.

86. Carter, *Object Lessons*, 96-7. See “Object Lessons in Race and Citizenship” for a full

Normal and Agricultural Institute centralized the study of material objects is answered by racist logic that cast African American and Native American students as both intellectually inferior, though possessing ‘in-born’ skills that figured their perceived perceptual abilities as the only path to learning. The answer to *how* is inextricably linked: based on these perceived abilities, teaching domestic service skills through and with objects “would have rendered object lessons the ideal pedagogy for this situation, leveraging this presumed ability to observe as a way to improve intellectual development.”<sup>87</sup> Perhaps it can be argued that, in some cases, object lessons functioned as a tool of oppression - informed by epistemologies and stereotypes that cast women, some children, and people of color low on the hierarchy of intellectual ability and promise.<sup>88</sup>

I hope I have made quite clear that this is not the case in my own appropriation of the pedagogical form. However, attendance to identity in both historical forms of the practice, as well as my own, presents a compelling case for how teaching through and with objects or developing an object-based curriculum offers opportunities for shifting pedagogy based on student identity/ies. In my case, I knowingly subvert historical precedent and shift to objects as classroom source material in order to account for several ways in which I see issues of identity emerging in the contemporary humanities classroom:

- Students enter classrooms with increased and more nuanced understandings of identity, including that it must be understood and analyzed from an intersectional perspective. This shift is shaped by the social and political contexts that contribute to the creation of knowledge about identity/ies and is made accessible by the social media platforms which encourage sharing and adding to that body of knowledge.
- Disciplinary trends increasingly prioritize student acquisition of discipline-specific methods, lenses, and means of knowledge production over memorization of content. This trend is meant to impact student identity, both in the way instructors see their students

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discussion, Carter, *Object Lessons*, 93-116.

87. Carter, *Object Lessons*, 97.

88. Here is a fruitful path for further investigation.

and how students begin see themselves: as practitioners within a particular discipline who can claim authority.<sup>89</sup>

- The developing understanding that relying on written, documentary evidence silences, omits, or otherwise marginalizes people, their contributions and identities. While “the tyranny of the text” is most often addressed by researchers and scholars within academia, as the point above emphasizes, disciplinary trends call us to position our students as practitioners and this means calling students to similarly respond to the hold that text-based evidence has had on our processes of learning, teaching, and knowing.<sup>90</sup>

It is my goal to further the work of inclusive teaching and learning and engaged pedagogy as I address each of the goals I identify above.

In my case, *why* to turn to object-focused teaching and learning is not as closely linked to *how* as in the past. To address the question of *why*, I formulated the Object Lessons assignment series to allow us (here, I use the collective ‘us’ as I am referring to the work I conducted along with my students and collaborators) to think more deeply about the threshold concepts and special topic we investigated. After reading the *Threshold Concepts* chapter, a set of related articles, and engaging in class discussion, I intended for the objects to introduce another layer of understanding for each concept – at the same time, challenging all of us to critically engage with the content – calling us to complicate the understandings we had recently developed.

Specifically, I included objects in the curriculum this semester to reach the following learning objectives:

- Explore themes and concepts with wide-ranging (global) impact through a local lens – most selected objects somehow representative of Milwaukee/UWM/geographical region.<sup>91</sup>

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89. See the Review of Literature chapter for an extended discussion about the contributions of SoTL and feminist pedagogy.

90. See the Review of Literature chapter for an extended discussion about the contributions of SoTL and history pedagogy.

91. A life-long Wisconsin resident, myself, I often make a conscious decision to incorporate objects and narratives from and about our local context. In any classroom, I work to create community for the singular goal of creating a safe environment for students to learn with and from one another. I offer something to consider about inclusive teaching practices and utilizing local resources, objects, and narratives: perhaps there is an argument to be made about local

- Emphasize the value of considering material culture/objects/things in discussions related to (marginalized) identities.
- Pursue the central questions: where do texts fail us? How are objects uniquely suited to respond to gaps and silences, and how do we fill them?

To answer the question of *how* to shift pedagogy toward object-based teaching and learning, I urge my readers to consider this chapter a model. In the aforementioned appendices I provide course material that I developed especially for this case. Additionally, I offer *Memory Keepers*, a Teaching and Learning Video Resource, to illustrate the work, reflections, and possible outcomes of a shift toward object-focused teaching and learning ([link](#) and more information in Appendix P).

In the introduction to this chapter I shared that shifting my pedagogical approach to account for student knowledge, interests, social and linguistic changes, and a new textbook led me to incorporate an object-centered approach to teaching and learning. Building (and, in some ways, strategically departing) from a historical precedent, I developed the Object Lessons assignment series. A reciprocal arrangement is also true, I find: a shift in pedagogical approach to include objects also requires accommodation. It calls for intensive collaboration, willing collaborators, support from outside the academy, and for students to take a leap into the unknown with their instructor.

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teaching/teaching from the local with promotion of safe and brave spaces.

