PREFACE

The title of this book was first conceived for an essay written in 1995 (Pels 1998; now Chapter 3). At the time of writing, I was not completely sure what it meant, and this book tries to spell out what in 1995 may have been an educated hunch. Pressed to sum it up, I would now say that the spirit of matter haunts a modern set of cultural patterns that have tried to assert the sovereignty of mind over matter, in a kind of "manifest destiny"—the North American political reference is intended— that subjected nature, human bodies and relationships, and all other raw materials of planet Earth to what it regarded as rational designs for a better future "for all." The subtitle of this book, equally oxymoronic, brings dominant items of this haunting together: "modernity" and modernist self-representation manifested themselves in discourses and practices that claimed to achieve universality because of the secular and "natural" foundations of knowledge by which mind could conquer matter. Yet it ubiquitously and ceaselessly employed metaphors of religion in an attempt to exorcize the powers of objects as survivals of so-called traditional and past beliefs. Modern people thereby *performed* "tradition," but such wishful uses of religious metaphors indicated deeply rooted modern anxieties instead—a kind of double consciousness: the near-conscious suspicion that these performances and designs were insufficient and unsuccessful in keeping at bay (human) nature and the vagaries of how the planet materially responded to these designs.

My main target in this book, therefore, is modernity: how its self-conceptualizations try to subordinate, yet are haunted by, material manifestations of its own making (cf. Pels 2003a). My career has been largely devoted to the anthropology of modernity, contributing to the effort to decolonize a discipline that has too often focused on others, and failed to cross boundaries with other social sciences that focused more exclusively on modern selves. Neighboring disciplines like sociology have neglected those others, not least by preferring to ignore that colonialism was integral to modernity's constitution. Such a focus rarely addressed the cultural patterns by which modern people

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(re)invented the traditions that their self-images required, traditions usually evoked by something modern people call religion or magic. As the chapters in this book testify, there is no secular modernity without "religion" or "magic," just as there is no social life without (excessively) religious things. But religion and magic have been, at least since the second half of the nineteenth century, "provincial" and *Indigenous* North Atlantic concepts (cf. Chakrabarty 2000). Not only was "religion" since that time transformed to support modern claims to universality (Masuzawa 2005), but the concept may also not (yet?) be sufficiently valid to apply to other parts of the world (Engelke 2015; Meyer 2020). The simultaneous denial and reinvention of magic in modernity shows how it expresses modern desires and contradictions more than it describes what other people, presumed to be racially or ethnically different, do (Pels 2003a, 2014b). While this book does claim to say sensible things about what modernity is, it is not meant to define or explain "religion" or "magic"—although its arguments cannot be made without magico-religious things taking central stage.

This is because its core topic is the power of objects—and yet, "the spirit of matter" indicates that this is a topic that can be approached only indirectly, by a kind of circumlocution, as a presence that cannot be fully represented by words. (Indeed, the seeds for this project were sown in a book on material culture that focused on objects in "unstable spaces" [Spyer 1998].) Put differently, people can usually *feel* they are affected by certain objects' "thing-power" coming at them from an "outside"—to use Jane Bennett's (2010: 2) felicitous phrases—but they find it far more difficult to give a transparent explanation of *why* these objects do so. Such powers are literally occult: difficult to *see*, because, as the chapters that follow will document, their power arises from a contingent dialectic of objectification and embodiment in which the performance of the object calls up multiple times and places in the affective subject: pasts, futures, and hyperreal elsewheres that these objects make materially present by their performance, yet that depend on how the objects move their subject's (sub)consciousness. However, I will argue in Chapter 2 that I am not happy with the dichotomy of subject and object: instead, I use an analytic stressing the dialectic of objectification and embodiment that confronts material bodies with equally material things. Even more, this involves things that are also produced by nonhuman beings (that grow by themselves, for example). Material culture studies has far too long taken artifacts as its point of departure, feeding an implicit *hubris* about manufacture that may call forth the wrath of present-day equivalents of the Greek Gods.

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This last reference to a European "future past" (cf. Koselleck 2004) indicates the specific role that my interest in the anthropology of modern time came to play in this project. If this book is not intended to discuss (or, if you want, define) the "real" of "religion," "magic," or "fetish"—I may still attempt to do so, but not in the following pages—the presence in modernity of the kind of pasts that these concepts evoke is necessary for my arguments. Moreover, these pasts call up their own futures—as Parts I and III show, often negatively, and as especially Part IV shows, in a kind of "future positive" mode in the case of techno- and commodity fetishism. My focus on time and temporality is crucial to my arguments because of several reasons: firstly, modern claims to universality are based on a classical Enlightenment model of knowledge that stresses its timelessness, rooted in "objective" nature and its unchanging "laws"—a conceit of having arrived at and consecrating history's *telos* that betrays that modernity's attempts at secularization of humans and history are still partial at best. Secondly, this book tries to rehabilitate the methodological necessity for the humanities as well as social sciences and field sciences of contingency: the ways in which time *constitutes* rather than inhibits social knowledge (see especially the end of Chapter 2). Thirdly, I would not be faithful to the preceding point if I would conceal that these chapters were written at different times, for different purposes, and that more than half of them were (largely) written before the idea of writing a book about materiality and modernity crossed my mind. The decision to republish certain chapters (especially in Part II) is meant to give readers access to such historical contingencies. More importantly, as especially Part IV brings out, an awareness of the contingencies of human-thing entanglements—of putting back time in things—may help to solve some of the conundrums that social theory faced due to essentialization, both "folk" and academic.

Time is also important because this book has been long in gestation, and much has happened in the field of material culture studies in the meantime. An important publication like Rosalind Morris's masterly "After de Brosses" (2017) appeared well after most of these chapters were written, and while it proves useful in the following pages it addresses discourses of fetish*ism* rather than fetishes or excessive objects as such—as the contrast between her focus on Karl Marx's texts and my focus on Karl Marx as suffering fetishization himself (in Chapter 8) brings out. I already enlisted the support of Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter* (2010) in this preface, also published after many of my chapters were finished, but her philosophical and political-ecological interest is far more general, and less concerned with the specific in-

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sights we can gain from studying *excessive* objects. I did not learn about Jean-Pierre Warnier's older discussions of praxeology (2001) until recently, but his emphasis on the shifting *material* boundaries between bodies and objects supports my use of Bourdieu's dialectic of objectification and embodiment, and how it should lead to a critique of the distinction between subjects and objects, or meanings and things. I have more difficulties with the "ethnographic theorizing" of "artifacts" by certain self-confessed proponents of an "ontological turn": it seems to me that to "treat meaning and thing as an identity" so as to arrive at a more "radical" essentialism (Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell 2007: 3) in fact imports modern cultural presuppositions (such as the early nineteenth-century notion of essentialized identity employed by Jeremy Bentham—see Chapter 1) through a methodological back door.[1] The turn to ontology may be more complex than that, but this particular gesture strongly resembles the kind of double consciousness that also characterizes Arjun Appadurai's "methodological fetishism," criticized in Chapter 3 (Paolo Heywood similarly criticizes the ontologists' claim to develop "just a method" [2017]). In any case, I employ an older and more social conception of ethnography throughout this book, which—rather than putting the difference of indigenous meanings center stage—draws on exploring the gap between native points of view and how they are realized in social practice (a seminal statement being Bronislaw Malinowski's discussion of "the Ideal in its actualization" [(1926) 1972: 119]). I also apply it to modern selves rather than reinforcing anthropology's classic obsession with others.

However, this book *does* try to make a contribution to the theory of materiality, especially in Chapters 2 and 4. Chapter 4 was originally a contribution to a symposium that led to Daniel Miller's edited volume (2005), but he wanted me to revise the essay in a way that disagreed with my conception of it (see the Introduction to Part II). In the meantime, much has happened in Material Culture Studies at University College London, as a recent edited collection shows. While its researchers mostly continue to focus on artifacts, many have "come to trouble the subject-object dyad" that was still prominent in Miller's 2005 volume (Carroll, Walford and Walton 2021: 8). Issues of time and scale (see Chapters 9, 10, and the Conclusion) have become more central to material culture research, and a suspicion of linguistic models of representation that was at the basis of my 1998 essay has also become more common (Carroll et al. 2021: 14). I am not aware, however, that the Material Culture Studies unit at UCL has ever studied the Auto-Icon in the UCL South Cloisters, by which I introduce the main topic of this book.

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Finally, time was crucial because delays in finding a publisher for this book crucially affected my perspective on it by the occurrence, in the meantime, of three major social upheavals outside of academia: climate activism such as Extinction Rebellion, the onslaught of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the effects of Black Lives Matter and Rhodes Must Fall. Climate activism, in particular, made me realize that my students no longer faced the kind of open future that seemed available when I started my academic career, and the pain of witnessing their anxieties made me lose some of the motivation for working on a pursuit that seemed esoteric at times (but it does so no longer). The pandemic, on the one hand, affected my motivation to work on the book in a similar manner, but, on the other, modified our dialectics of objectification and embodiment so drastically in 2020 that it confirmed the analytic focus of this book, and reinforced my suspicions about the antisocial effects of digitization (see the Conclusion)—as the collective sense of relief among a majority of teachers and students on being allowed back into a "real" classroom in 2021 demonstrated. In contrast, the response of Black Lives Matter to the public resurgence of white racism (especially in the guise of a president of the United States), not least when reinforced by the decolonial agitation of Rhodes Must Fall spreading from Cape Town, gave me a different sense of engagement, with immediate effects on my academic activities (see Pels 2022). In revising the book, I repeatedly confronted, but also resisted, the temptation to update my thoughts about human bodies and possessive individualism in response to people's growing awareness of the afterlives of slavery and colonialism in the present. Such an awareness is crucial to the effort of desacralizing and decolonizing the forms of humanism that this book so often targets. Moreover, Igor Kopytoff (1986) demonstrated early on that the relationship between humans and things is brought into sharp relief by rethinking chattel slavery, and I do touch on the topic obliquely by discussing how human bodies have been treated as things (see Chapter 2). However, it would be more honest to say that my thoughts about materiality and the spirit of matter allowed me better purchase on the complex problem of understanding racism and race, than that it happened the other way around. (That may be white privilege speaking.) Moreover, addressing such burning topics by adding parentheses and footnotes to texts that I had already written would be disrespectful toward a topic that should receive undivided attention. I therefore decided to explicitly address racism and race only where the ramifications of my approach for understanding them might raise misunderstanding (as in my use of W. E. B. du Bois's "double consciousness"), or where its

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relevance to such issues should be made apparent (as in my discussion of ethnic labels like "Africa" in Part III). I have become increasingly interested in researching transatlantic "African" heritage recently and hope to give the topic of racism the attention it deserves in forthcoming publications that derive from it.

This book does not give an exhaustive overview of excessive objects. In fact, such a project of surveillance seems somewhat foreign to the book's topic, since it would replace the contingent surprises of excessive objects with the pretense to neutralize them in a universally rational and encompassing scheme. Excess leads to understanding, but, almost by definition, inhibits the realization of the desire to make that understanding all-encompassing. It might be better to say that the book claims to illuminate and understand certain crucial modern paradoxes: that modern people aspire to be free from materialism yet constructed a consumerist and materialistic society; or that consumers usually strive for possession, but equally often concede that possession does not lead to fulfillment (the first global pop song was, after all, "Can't Buy Me Love"). Excess and paradox are joined by a further imbalance resulting from the fact that the chapters in this book reflect the contingent development of my own research interests—a development that, like collecting objects, may pretend to be coherent, but in fact shifts register in the course of its own unfolding, adding counterpoints to earlier statements. In fact, that is where the book started in the first place, deriving, in particular, from William Pietz's pioneering work on the fetish (1985, 1987, 1988; see also Apter and Pietz 1993 and Spyer 1998), in a kind of counterpoint to the simultaneously developing interest in more mundane material culture (Appadurai 1986; Miller 1987; Thomas 1991). I hope it shows that such thinking by counterpoint is an endeavor worth our while.

Note

1. Vigh and Sausdal (2014) in fact make the ontological turn into a far more Eurocentric endeavor than I do here.

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Several colleagues have contributed to different chapters in this volume. I thank those who helped with individual chapters in the footnotes to those chapters themselves, but some of them also influenced this book as a whole. Nicholas Dirks and the late Fernando Coronil commented on an early draft of Chapter 3 and thereby helped set the stage. Daniel Miller was responsible for the invitation that led to the writing of Chapter 4, and I have been in (sometimes unilateral) conversation with him since. Birgit Meyer invited me to the EASA panel that led to Chapter 7, stimulated the publication of Chapter 4, and continues to be an important interlocutor ever since we started our PhD research at more or less the same time on a very similar topic (and with the same supervisor). Pieter ter Keurs, Michael Rowlands, Oscar Salemink, Wayne Modest, Rogier Bedaux, and Harrie Leyten

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helped me to develop the arguments in Part III in general. Dan Hicks and Mary Beaudry made me write an essay on magical things that has left traces, especially in the Conclusion to this book, as have my discussions with Stef Aupers, Dick Houtman, and Dorien Zandbergen in the context of the "Cyberspace Salvations" project. Without Sabine Luning, intellectual sparring partner for well over a decade now, the book would not have developed its reflections on economic anthropology, commodification, and scale in Chapters 8 and 9, just as the reflections on methodology in Chapter 2 could not have been written without discussions with other Leiden colleagues, and Igor Boog in particular. The "temporal spirit" of the book owes a debt to colleagues and friends in the "Futurities" project: Erik Baehre, Bart Barendregt, Andrea Cerda, Zane Kripe, and Marianne Maeckelbergh; and Zane and Andrea helped organize meetings with colleagues on (African) futures, among whom Elizabeth Ferry, Jane Guyer, Juan Obarrio, Achille Mbembe, and Charles Piot were particularly influential for my thinking. My more recent collaboration with Jasmijn Rana on diversity and democratizing heritage institutions has led to a perhaps even steeper learning curve on my part. I am very grateful to Dan Hicks for a meticulous, generous but also profoundly critical review of the book for an earlier press—this has become a much better book due to him—and two anonymous reviewers for Berghahn Books for their constructive comments. I thank David Gellner and David Parkin and the staff at Berghahn—especially Tom Bonnington—for finally turning this into a real book. Finally, I owe a word of thanks to Phineas Taylor Barnum: while he anticipated Donald Trump's career as a professional liar by more than a century, he still taught me more about modernity than many a social scientist.

I am undoubtedly forgetting important interlocutors here and apologize to them for it. None of those involved in the book's making is, of course, responsible for the views expressed in these pages, although I sincerely hope they will like what they see.

Acknowledgments of permission to use earlier publications appear in those chapters themselves.

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