Multiracial Identity presents an air of inevitability regarding the unfolding future of a multiracial America. The film cites a Bureau of the Census prediction that by 2050, one in five Americans will identify as multiracial. Interracial relationships are on the rise, already constituting one-eighth of households in California, for instance, and multiracial celebrities and public figures increasingly populate the American cultural and media landscape. Of those that chose multiple racial categories in the 2000 census, 42% were under the age of 18, signaling a youthful charge against the country’s monoracial fixity. Public or institutional acceptance of these changes will not happen automatically, however. As the narrator concludes, “Too much of our everyday life in America is invested in racial differences to accept the overlapping multiracial existence.”

Multiracial Identity is well suited for university undergraduate instruction. The film could be effectively paired both with conventional scholarly treatments of race in the United States and with anthropological or comparative studies of race in other countries and regions. As the film explores advocacy largely oriented around the positive valorization of racial identity, it not only complements more common treatments of race’s discriminatory dimensions, but it could also be used in dialogue with scholarship on ethnicity. The latter would be particularly useful given the overlap between public debates and political reaction surrounding both the “browning” and the so-called “hyphenization” of America. All told, Multiracial Identity offers an insightful and accessible contribution to the urgent and ever-shifting debates on race and identity, in America and beyond.

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The Cognitive Life of Things

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Cognitive archaeology faces a peculiar epistemological challenge: the prevailing understanding of the ontological status of the mind is actually not very friendly to archaeological inference. Based as it is in Cartesian dualism, the cognitivist approach places the mind squarely inside the head. Mind and thought result from the activity of neurons and networks of neurons that compute responses to stimuli and adaptive problems. This understanding of mind as a centralized, computational processor is quite remote from the artifacts and features that archaeologists find and analyze. To reach even modest conclusions about past minds, archaeologists must carefully build a series of linked arguments: from material traces to past activities to what went on in the heads of the actors (Botha 2008, 2010; Wynn 2009). And if one acknowledges that each link in the argument has at best only a certain probability of being true, then the prospects for a robust cognitive archaeology seem dim. It is not that cognitivism is wrong: it has, after all, provided significant dividends in most branches of cognitive science. But it is arguably not ideal for archaeology. In How Things Shape the Mind, Lambros Malafouris presents an alternative ontology of mental life in which artifacts are not remote epiphenomena but instead are equal partners in cognition. In doing so, he makes a case not just for how this alternative ontology helps us understand the past, but also how archaeology can contribute to the understanding of mind itself.

Malafouris presents Material Engagement Theory (MET) as having three dimensions: extended cognition, enactive signs, and material agency. Extended/embodied cognition is a perspective on mind that arose from the failure of computationally based, central processing models of AI to perform such seemingly simple tasks as catching a hit baseball (e.g., by computing vectors, speed). Much simpler, peripherally organized perceptual/motor systems can do it more easily (move until the ball seems to stop and stand there). For such “simple” problems, central processing was more a hindrance than a help. Thus, the central tenant of embodied cognition is that much of human thinking takes place without central computation and relies on the resources of our perceptual and motor systems. Extended cognition takes this a step further and argues that resources in the environment, including artifacts and other organisms, are also components of cognitive processes. Malafouris introduces this important idea using Merleau Ponty’s famous blind man’s stick example; for the blind man, the cane literally becomes a component of the perceptual system, with neural hardware changing to accommodate the novel perceptual artifact. To understand a blind man’s cognition, one must incorporate the stick. And to un-
understand Minoan Linear B script, Malafouris’s chosen archaeological example, one must understand that the tablets did not just reflect the scribes’ thinking; they were essential components in the organization of memory itself. Because of the tablets, Minoan cognition was literally different.

Malafouris’s use of enactive sign draws an important distinction between the semiotic nature of linguistic signs and that of material signs. For the latter, meaning arises not via arbitrary assignment and representation, but via the projection of an artifact’s affordances into an expressive domain. “That means that the material sign, in most cases, does not stand for a concept but rather substantiates a concept” (97). Because material signs arise out of the uses and contexts of tools, they are richer and more complicated than linguistic signs and, what is especially important for archaeologists, they had a separate evolutionary history from that of linguistic signs. Malafouris uses the example of Neolithic tokens to illustrate how material things acted as a scaffold for the development of true number concept, demonstrating the key role that material things can play as scaffolds for abstract ideas.

In his most closely argued chapter, Malafouris avers that archaeologists’ recent treatments of agency have been essentially anthropocentric, even those treatments, such as Hodder’s, that have argued for material culture as an essential component of agency. Instead, Malafouris proposes taking a symmetrical stance in which people and objects are equivalent actors. “If the social and cognitive life of things is the phenomenon you seek to understand, then, methodologically speaking, it is more sensible and productive to treat material things as agents (and be wrong) than to deny their agency (and be wrong)” (134). It is not that Malafouris is suggesting that artifacts have volitional lives of their own. Rather, they operate in complex networks of interaction with people, and assigning primary agency to the human nexus is unwarranted.

Malafouris makes a very strong case for MET. Although the theory does not entirely do away with an “epistemic mediator” (Wagman 2002), it does reduce the neural component of the Cartesian mind to an equal partnership with bodies and material culture in the phenomenon we call cognition. The potential benefits to an archaeology of mind should be obvious; archaeology is nothing if not a study of things, and via MET, archaeologists have direct access to cognition, rather than having to rely on long chains of inference. Of course, theories must be judged not just on their coherence and reasonability but on what they help us understand. So how does MET perform when placed against the archeological record?

Malafouris illustrates the potential of his theory using three prehistoric examples: flint knapping, especially the “handaxe enigma,” mark making from the MSA (Middle Stone Age) through the Upper Paleolithic, and wheel-thrown pottery. The second is the best developed, especially in regard to extended cognition and enactive signs. It also builds on an argument he has made elsewhere (Malafouris 2008). In essence, Malafouris sees mark making, such as that done on the ochre pieces from the South African MSA site of Blombos Cave (Henshilwood 2007), as having been one of the scaffolds upon which human metacognition was built. Malafouris sees no reason to conclude that the Blombos engravings had Peircean symbolic meaning; rather, he focuses on the act of engraving itself. Simply engraving a line had several cognitive consequences. One was a freeing up of attentive cognitive resources (working memory) to attend to other things; another was a restructuring of cognitive resources, as in the creation of the one-to-one correspondences essential to number concept (Overmann 2013). But most important of all, engraving was a step on a scaffold for metacognition. Such marking began a process in which action was materialized and available itself for perception, ultimately making it possible “for the visual apparatus to interrogate itself and thus acquire a previously unavailable sense of perceptual awareness. More simply, the image provides a scaffolding device that enables human perception to become aware of itself” (204). What is significant about this conclusion is that it illuminates the process by which metacognition evolved. Rather than simply assigning our own Cartesian and Peircean understandings of mind and symbol to people living 70 millennia ago, Malafouris has employed archaeological evidence to understand how metacognition came to be.

How Things Shape the Mind is an important book. Not since Human Evolution, Language, and Mind: A Psychological and Archaeological Inquiry (Noble and Davidson 1996) has an authored book taken a significant critical view of the epistemology grounding cognitive archaeology. Its challenge will not be easy to meet—our Cartesian view of mind is just so very comfortable—but it may well provide a means for making true progress in the archaeology of mind.

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