

## Comments on “The Materials of American Studies”

**Paula Rabinowitz**

In the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., among the evidence—slight as it is—of annihilation, is a glass case containing hundreds, perhaps thousands, of potato peelers. I am something of a skeptic about the purposes and methods behind this and other museums dedicated to memorializing the victims of Nazi genocide; but I was in D.C. for a conference, and my mother, who had come down from New York to meet me, wanted to go. She wouldn't, couldn't, go alone; her Parkinson's means she walks tenuously, with a cane. Although she was born in this country with only tangential connections to Hitler's devastation (her mother's oldest brother, the only one of the family to remain in Europe—the rest having emigrated to Palestine—did not survive the destruction of Hungary's Jews), she crumbles emotionally at every face-to-face encounter with the Shoah. Still she wanted to go.

The visit began strangely. We were to go to dinner at an old friend of hers afterward, and I had brought along a bottle of wine in my satchel. Bottles are forbidden in the building and there are no trashcans anywhere nearby. I jumped back on the metro to the hotel with the bottle and left my mother sitting just inside the metal detector to look at the public exhibits. When I got back, she had disappeared behind the huge gunmetal security doors into the darkness of the main exhibit. I followed but somehow in the pitch dark I could not find her. I knew she moved slowly, so I raced through the vast maze of the hall—huge caverns secreting texts and photographs and videos and voices—expecting to

find her ambling slowly through the space. How could she have gotten so far ahead of me?

I could barely concentrate on the faces and sounds and words; I didn't linger to read about the destruction of the Lvov ghetto or to study the Wannsee meeting documents; I ran through the cattle car, ducked into the chapel, circled back through the gallery full of Jewish hair and suitcases and photographs and shoes, a mad monologue streaming through my head, "I've lost my mother in the Holocaust Museum." Then I came upon the potato peelers and stopped dead in my tracks. Transfixed. "Of course," I said to myself, interrupting my idiotic incantation, "what Jewish mother would leave home without her potato peeler?" She'd need it to feed her children; it took up so little space—could be shoved, at the last minute, into a pocket or tied in a bundle.

I studied that pile of potato peelers for a long time, anxious. I still couldn't find my mother and I shouldn't be lingering. This re-enactment effect was getting a bit too real—I needed to find her soon—but I couldn't stop examining those banal objects. The simplest of devices: two curved blades that come together at a point to dig out the eyes and a handle. When I used to visit my grandmother as a young girl, insisting she make latkes for me, I would stand on a stool over her sink peeling potatoes with her battered peeler, amazed that I could poke out the many eyes with the worn tip. Potato peelers: everyday items, I have one; you probably do too stuffed somewhere in back of a drawer, they were traces of a deep humanity. Each had belonged to some woman, been used by her. They held the residue of a lost past.

Potato peelers are so generic, so utilitarian, so replaceable. Yet, there, piled together, they told a story, many stories. Objects meant to be used; they outlasted the hands that once held them. Some were plain tin or cheap steel affairs, others had elaborately carved handles, some even gold-plated. Some looked relatively new, perhaps a young bride just setting up house owned it; others appeared worn, handed down from mother to daughter. They came from poor and working-class and middle-class and wealthy Jewish kitchens across Europe. The last remnants of lives lost. Artifacts. Evidence. Inert, they speak.

Objects

Products

Remnants

Devices

Gadgets

Artifacts

Things

Stuff...detritus and trash become material traces of human labor, desire, need, fear.... Papers from the World Trade Towers floating over Greenwood Cemetery in Brooklyn; the cataloguing of each piece of wreckage hauled to Fresh Kills Landfill from ground zero; a wallet dropped in the mayhem of lower Manhattan returned intact to a young mother. When does a product become an object; an object become a remnant; a remnant become a text? How does stuff mutate into

collectibles, then artifacts? How, to paraphrase Austin, to do things with things, use objects, interpret devices, theorize junk. How to "read" these traces, remaining, left over, by the fluke of their materials—metal, stone, paper—and by the chance spaces where they are kept—archives and collections (legitimate storage bins), less officially, basements and attics and dumpsites.

Carolyn's talk considers the electric belt, a less utilitarian device than the potato peelers that flooded me in D.C.; one considerably less ubiquitous, that depended upon the apparatus of advertising with its reliance on gullibility and shame and endless optimism to find a market. What can one say about the electric belts and their uses when only a handful remain in museum collections and, once in a while, on e-Bay? They probably felt good. They don't appear to be too widely used. Their manufacturers devised tried-and-true marketing appeals to self-improvement, self-help, self-modification that are the hallmarks of American advertising.

The belts' circulation was facilitated by modern media and commerce and transportation systems—mass-media advertising and the postal service. Like the many ads for diet supplements or physical enhancers or exercise machines that are found today on cable TV or in magazines, they spoke to a population that was far-flung, had some leisure time and extra cash. And what did they say? "I sing the body electric," with Walt Whitman. Did they offer power like that harnessed to revivify life by Mary Shelley's Dr. Frankenstein? Did they bring the electric energy of a lightning bolt down to earth like America's founding father Ben Franklin had? Did they promise to unlock the power of the sun sought in Greek mythology by Icarus? In short, the electric belt made concrete, commodified and available a Western literary obsession with science, energy, gadgetry.

Carolyn suggests that one reason for interest in the electric belts, marketed expressly as sexual enhancers, was a widespread fear, calculated within the Victorian spermatic economy, of men's impotence and exhaustion. Was this due to masturbation, untreated venereal disease, masculine insecurity over women's insatiable sexual appetites? Or, was it part of a displaced fear over immigration and internal migrations of darker—perhaps more potent and manly—new populations whose increased birth rates might overwhelm a WASP American heartland? The images of sexual depletion that the belts were designed to cure sound eerily similar to those circulating in late-Victorian British culture about Jews, immigrants, women, homosexuals—vampires, all, at once over-sexed and impotent—sucking the vital forces of the national body, detailed by scholars such as Nina Auerbach and Judith Halberstam. In this, the belt manufacturers' exhortations to reenergize health seem almost foreign, old world, old Europe. Their brand names replete with such alien markers—German Electric, Pulvermacher, etc.—announcing that the American cultural anxieties about racialized bodies crowding the cities—a collapsing of the old order from within—

could be shored up by reinforcements slung around the body, shielding it, sheathing its perimeter, borne by external (Aryan) agents.

As literary devices, then, the belts are throwbacks; yet they appeal to a public through a thoroughly modern invocation of the electric. They offer a techno-optimism in sync with turn-of-the-century American self-mythologies. They say to their users—with Emerson—that self-improvement is always within reach—just a snap, just a zap, away. Self-reliance become self-help: masturbation? Is the penis, then, also an object, an appendage worn like the belt, perhaps detachable, and worthy of detailed inspection—a shard of masculinity? For years, the phallus as sign has predominated poststructural and feminist studies of culture. We have been at pains to differentiate the actual penis from the semiotic phallus, claiming with almost Puritanical zeal that we are not talking about *real* things. Perhaps Carolyn's work on the electric belt will usher in a new perspective in which the body itself, and its parts, assume a corporeality, become objects of study.

Objects, things that stand in relief distinguished from the subjects who perceive them, have had a raw deal of late. In our obsession with fashioning new political subjectivities, discerning subaltern voices, the status of the object has shifted towards the abject, that which is cast away, forgotten, diminished. Carolyn reads the electric belts, these lost and abject objects for their hidden history. Like the potato peelers I encountered, they speak of intimate stories left untold, voiceless. To be sure, the silences surrounding them do not leak of the horrors of genocide—they are rather benign absences. Almost silly. Yet they too can only be partially reconstructed.

We can never know how or even whether these electric belts were used; nor why. What we can know is how they were sold, marketed, invented through the quasi-literary form of ad copy and the proto-aesthetic mode of advertising graphics. Still their very presence, their remains, demands our recognition, and with it a narrative. That is the power—and danger—of objects. They exceed. No, there is no safety in objects, despite the title of a recent film.

I close with an anecdote gleaned from this morning's (March 28, 2003) MSNBC reporting on the Iraq War: An embedded reporter had entered a hospital with Marines searching for the captured American prisoners of war. What they found—objects, stuff, things—demanded interpretation. There, in the almost empty rooms, were cartons of gas masks, brand new, still containing the instructions written in English, “exactly like,” in the words of the Marine commander, “the ones we have at Camp Le Jeune.” These up-to-date devices were clearly part of a well-stocked modern armed force procuring the best equipment available. There was no explanation for their presence, though. In an adjacent room, another set of objects seemed to tell another tale. Here reporters found a single cot, bare, missing a mattress, and a chair on which sat a car battery with some wires hanging from it. This, the reporter noted, was clear evidence of the primitive practice of torture used “throughout this part of the

world." No other evidence of the POWs could be found in this building that had gone without electricity for some days. What to make of these found objects? Were the U.S. forces fighting a well-stocked army or a band of thugs? Perhaps we will never know. Or the stories might emerge as those who had been in the hospital before the Marines and the embedded reporter are found and recall the previous days. The objects themselves rest mute; they are open to emotional and ideological interpretations. Their appeal is visceral. Thus we need to be wary of their power to affect us. And that, too, is the danger of objects.