

HELEN HOLMES. *THE MATERIALITY OF NOTHING: EXPLORING OUR EVERYDAY RELATIONSHIPS WITH OBJECTS ABSENT AND PRESENT.* NEW YORK: ROUTLEDGE 2024. 163 P. ISBN: 9780367655570.

LAURA BERGIN¹

Helen Holmes' *The materiality of nothing* offers a provocative intervention in material culture studies by foregrounding absence as an active and generative force in everyday life. Drawing on interdisciplinary frameworks from anthropology, sociology, and science and technology studies, Holmes challenges conventional understandings of materiality, arguing that absent objects, whether lost, discarded, forgotten, or unmade, continue to shape social relations, emotions, and practices. Through a series of case studies, the book demonstrates how absence operates within domestic spaces, digital environments, and sustainability initiatives, positioning 'nothingness' as a critical site of inquiry.

Throughout the book, Holmes argues that material absence is an ongoing process with social, political, and affective consequences. This assertion builds on and extends established anthropological work on materiality (Miller 2005, Ingold 2012) by emphasising the relational dynamics between presence and absence. The book deftly illustrates how objects that are no longer physically present continue to exert influence, or 'haunt', in the form of waste, digital possessions, or anticipated but unrealised materialities.

Holmes' analysis is enriched by a range of case studies from her decade-long career highlighting the multifaceted and complex impact of absence. For example, she examines how people experience and interact with discarded objects, revealing how material (dis)use is embedded in broader socio-economic and environmental frameworks. Her discussion of digital possessions, such as lost data or deleted social media accounts, incorporates discourse on virtual materiality (Drazin 2012, Pink et al. 2016), complicating traditional boundaries between tangible and intangible forms of ownership.

One of the book's most compelling contributions is its interrogation of sustainability through the lens of absence. Holmes critically engages with circular economy theories, demonstrating how material disappearance produces and reflects social tensions through recycling, waste management, or the phasing out of single-use plastics. By focusing on what is removed, rather than what remains, Holmes shifts the conversation on sustainability from visible interventions to an analysis of the unseen processes that structure contemporary consumption and disposal practices.

This approach to (in)visibility in sustainability research resonates with anthropological critiques of waste (Douglas 1966, Reno 2015) and contributes to emerging debates on the 'politics of disappearance' in environmental governance (Gabrys 2019). Holmes argues that

¹ Postdoctoral Research Associate, Sustainable Materials Innovation Hub, University of Manchester. Email: laura.bergin@manchester.ac.uk.

the rhetoric of sustainability often obscures the afterlives of materials, raising important methodological and ethical considerations for researchers studying this field.

Methodologically, *The materiality of nothing* pushes the boundaries of ethnographic inquiry by demonstrating how absence can be studied as an empirical phenomenon. Holmes employs an eclectic mix of qualitative methods, including participant observation, interviews, and visual methods (including photography, filming, and drawing), to capture how absence is enacted and experienced. This approach is particularly relevant for anthropologists working on themes of ephemerality, loss, and the intangible dimensions of material culture.

The book also engages with affect theory, showing how absence is structurally produced and deeply felt. Holmes' discussion of how people emotionally navigate missing objects through nostalgia, grief, or frustration, as well as how they are 'haunted' by lost or absent objects, aligns with broader anthropological engagements with affect, loss, and materiality (Navaro-Yashin 2012, Ahmed 2014).

While Holmes' argument is compelling, some readers may find that the book raises more questions than it definitively answers. The concept of material absence is expansive, and at times the analysis feels diffuse, moving between different forms of absence without fully resolving the complexities of their interconnections or relationships. Additionally, while the book successfully challenges traditional materialist frameworks, further engagement with non-Western perspectives on materiality and absence could have deepened the discussion.

Regardless, *The materiality of nothing* provides a vital contribution to contemporary debates in material culture studies, anthropology, and sustainability research. It encourages new avenues for thinking about the *presence* of materiality, as well as the significance of what is missing, erased, or made to disappear.

Holmes' *The materiality of nothing* is a valuable and thought-provoking addition to material culture scholarship. It challenges anthropologists to rethink absence as an active and consequential force, offering theoretical insights and methodological innovations that will be of interest to scholars across multiple disciplines. The book will appeal to researchers working in material anthropology, waste studies, digital anthropology, and environmental humanities, as well as to those interested in the broader implications of sustainability, (dis)use, and disappearance in contemporary society.

Bibliography

- Ahmed, Sara 2014. *The cultural politics of emotion*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Douglas, Mary 1966. *Purity and danger: an analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo*, London: Routledge.
- Drazin, Adam 2012. Ethnographies of materiality, *Journal of Material Culture* 17/1, 101-107.
- Gabrys, Jennifer 2019. *How to do things with sensors*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Ingold, Tim 2012. *Being alive: essays on movement, knowledge and description*, London: Routledge.
- Miller, Daniel 2005. *Materiality*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Navaro-Yashin, Yael 2012. *The make-believe space: affective geography in a postwar polity*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Pink, Sarah, Horst, Heather, Postill, John, Hjorth, Larissa, Lewis, Tania and Jo Tacchi 2016. *Digital ethnography: principles and practice*, London: SAGE.

Reno, Joshua 2015. *Waste away: working and living with a North American landfill*, Oakland, CA: University of California Press.

This work is copyright of the author.

It has been published by JASO under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NonDerivatives ShareAlike License (CC BY NC ND 4.0) that allows others to share the work with an acknowledgement of the work's authorship and initial publication in this journal as long as it is non-commercial and that those using the work must agree to distribute it under the same license as the original. <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

