

*Objects are readable texts. As you enter the field, you should train yourself to notice material objects—artifacts—that represent the culture of that site. Researchers gather these cultural artifacts for what they reveal about subcultures. And researchers use artifacts to learn about insiders' perspectives on their subcultures.*

## What is material culture?

Researchers—folklorists and anthropologists—use the term **material culture** to refer to meaningful objects of a culture, personal artifacts loaded with meaning and history that people mark as special: tools, musical instruments, foods, toys, jewelry, ceremonial objects, and clothes. Everyone wears jeans. But not all jeans convey the same cultural meanings. Some mean utility, some fashion, some status. Jeans that have been painted, beaded, patched, stone-washed, bleached, ripped, or tie-dyed by their owner (not purchased that way in the store) can be read as objects that mark the wearer's place in popular culture.

## How do I read a cultural artifact?

When reading a cultural artifact, you should investigate the surface details of the object, research its history, and learn about people's rules and rituals for using and making the object. Specifically, you can explore the artifact in terms of the three areas below:

- **PHYSICAL CONTEXT**—Use your fieldworker's gaze to describe the physical attributes of the object. Remember the story I told earlier this semester about the crazy old professor and his rotting fish? "Write what you *see*," he said, as he slapped the rancid fish onto the desk for the third day in a row. Write what you *see*. That's how you should address the physical context of the object you are reading. Don't look through it. See it like you've never seen anything like it before. What is it made of? How is it made? What does it look like? What space does it occupy?
- **SOCIAL CONTEXT**—Consider how the object is situated among the people of the subculture to whom it belongs. How do people interact with the artifact? What emotions or behaviors are associated with it? What rules or rituals? What is the history of the artifact? How did it come into being or evolve over time?
- **CULTURAL MEANING**—Have you ever analyzed a piece of advertising? In the field of media studies, students analyze and interpret advertising and other forms of mass media. Advertising reveals a lot about us as a people, our culture, or our society. This same kind of "reading" can be done on a cultural artifact. (In fact, advertising *is* itself an artifact of popular culture.) So, when examining an object from the subculture you are studying, ask the following questions: What do the artifact and the behaviors associated with it symbolize? How does the artifact reflect the political or social organization of the group? How does the artifact reflect cultural values or norms of the group? Finally, consider how the cultural meaning of the artifact reflects the worldview of the people of the subculture you are studying.

## Beware of the pitfalls in reading cultural artifacts.

Remember our discussion on positioning when reading a fieldsite? Positioning also affects your reading of cultural artifacts. Be aware of your fixed and subjective positions that may be affecting the way you read an object. Also, most importantly, remember that we cannot know the meaning of an object through observation alone because our eyes can deceive us and there are meanings that lie beneath the surface of an object. The best way to learn about the meaning and value of an artifact is to ask questions about the object and listen carefully. You have to interview your informants to truly understand the material culture. Reading the object is just a start.

## Try it for yourself.

The everyday objects people use inside a culture are often so utilitarian and taken for granted that the members of the culture don't recognize them as being important or symbolic of their history. An outsider is more likely to notice them and wonder where the objects come from, what they're used for, who makes them, and why they're made the way they are. All of these facts become clues to the traditions, rituals, values, rules and behavior of a cultural group.

Try your fieldworker's gaze on an everyday object: a musical instrument, a tool, a piece of furniture, an article of clothing, or some other artifact. Choose something you've collected from your site for this exercise. Observe it. Take fieldnotes while you study it. With the help of your notes, try to describe the external details of the object. Sketch it, map it, or photograph it. If you can, read about its history in the library or online, and interview either the owner or the creator. Then make an interpretation: What does it say about the person who uses it? The person who made it? How are you positioned to see the object? What did you already know? Why did you choose the object? Finally, what does the object teach about the culture from which it comes? Brainstorm questions to ask your informants about the artifact. Bring the cultural artifact you selected from your fieldsite to our next class. Be prepared to share its significance with the class.

## Due Dates

Refer to your syllabus for the schedule of due dates.