

Seminar on *Material Identity*
Ken Koltun-Fromm (Religion) Leader

Much of the labor of cultural studies has focused on how material products inform and enable expressions of human flourishing. This is so because persons express themselves in and through the things they consume, produce, value, and use. Yet the exposure of this kind of “material identity” is in no way limited by disciplinary boundaries and methods. Indeed, scholars situated in fields that appear distant from humanistic inquiry have productively dismantled these disciplinary borders, and their research has remapped and extended the cultural landscape. Cultural studies is not a discipline within the “humanities”, so much as a mode of inquiry that engages human performances. I am one of those scholars who has profited from the work in cultural studies. By exploring the material dimensions of Jewish identity, I have sought to broaden the critical scope of cultural studies within the field of religious performance. This seminar hopes to attract others who have had long-standing exposures to cultural discourses, as well as those (like myself) who recognize the exciting developments in material culture for their own disciplines and research.

The seminar will explore the myriad ways that persons do things with things, and so perform a kind of material expression of personal identity. But it will also integrate philosophical, visual, and literary works in order to bridge—or better, to critically examine—the often “high” and “low” tensions in cultural theory. Much of my present work, for example, draws Jewish religious philosophy into the orbit of material culture in order to show how cultural discourses inform conceptions of the religious self. I am presently concerned with issues of Jewish visuality, and the ways in which Jews see themselves and Judaism in America. The general and unwieldy term “material” is meant to invite a wide range of interests and research projects that include visual, cultural, psychological, social, anthropological, historical, biological, and other interdisciplinary adventures that uncover the various modes of human flourishing. How do we express meaning through objects? Do we invest personality, emotion, and histories in things? Do visual displays constitute objects as well as subjects? What is the role of memory and nostalgia in the production and consumption of materials? Do we engender objects? These and other questions suggest that objects do things for us, as much as we do things with objects.

While I harbor a rather expansive notion of material studies, I have still been informed by specific works, and I envision opening the seminar with a focused reading of key texts that are expansive in their range and disciplinary scope. Readings in urban religion (Robert Orsi), display and memory (Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett), Jewish immigrant culture (Riv-Ellen Prell, Andrew Heinze, and Jenna Weissman Joselit), music and performance (Mark Slobin and Ari Kelman), literary studies (Bill Brown), and material Christianity (Colleen McDannell and Leigh Schmidt) could all help to establish a methodological base from which to explore other topics more closely aligned with participant interests. Although the texts listed focus on American culture in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the seminar could (and hopefully will) expand beyond that context. These and other texts would simply anchor a more robust and broad exploration in the performances of material identity. Religious studies is interdisciplinary by nature, temperament, and design, and so too this faculty seminar. The expertise and interests of seminar participants will generate the readings and discussions that travel beyond this “core” set of methodological texts.

In the end, I hope the very terms, methods, objects, and boundaries of material identity will be refashioned, realigned, and perhaps even jettisoned altogether for a more sensitive, multi-dimensional approach to the physicality and embodiment of human lives. I envision, as well, new pedagogical and educational opportunities arising from the seminar: co-teaching future courses, building constellations of innovative courses in visual and material culture, perhaps even imagining new models for a liberal arts education. When Marx argued that there were worlds to win, he had more than these educational ones in mind. I have less ambitious goals than those Marx surely entertained. And yet we can still recognize that his monstrous vision of the speaking table is not his alone, nor the only model for how we do things with things. There is still work to do.