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“FULL ON TOY STORY”: EXPLORING THE  
BELIEF IN OBJECT SENTIENCE  
IN WESTERN CULTURE

by

Amelia Mathews-Pett

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

American Studies  
(Folklore)

Approved:

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UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY  
Logan, Utah

2018

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## ABSTRACT

“Full On Toy Story”: Exploring the Belief in  
Object Sentience in Western Culture

by

Amelia Mathews-Pett, Master of Science

Utah State University, 2018

Major Professor: Dr. Lynne S. McNeill  
Department: English

In Western society, there are a surprising number of people who believe that objects have feelings. These objects are not the kind of special, magical objects found in folk and fairy tales. Instead, they are often the mundane objects of everyday life. Through an examination of personal accounts offered by those who experience the belief, as well as a discussion of research by folklorists such as Patrick Mullen, David J. Hufford, and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, this thesis argues not only for the recognition of these people as a folk group, but offers a term for their experience: “the belief in object sentience.” Establishing both the group and the terminology creates the possibility for folklorists to consider this experience as folk belief, to recognize how the belief has been negatively framed through romanticization and pathologization, and to consider the possibility of an alternative, positive framework.

(83 pages)

## PUBLIC ABSTRACT

“Full On Toy Story”: Exploring the Belief in  
Object Sentience in Western Culture

Amelia Mathews-Pett

This thesis considers, from a folklorist’s perspective, the people in Western society who believe that everyday objects have feelings. It establishes these people as a cohesive group for study, referred to as “people to experience the belief in object sentience,” then analyzes their personal accounts of the experience to find both commonalities and differences. From this analysis and discussion of folkloristic perspectives on belief, the main argument is established: people in this group have generally been marginalized and could benefit from a more careful consideration of their beliefs.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Without the three faculty members on my thesis committee, I would not be graduating with a master's degree in Folklore. From my first phone conversation with Dr. Christine Cooper-Rompato, I knew I would love being a part of the department, and I am grateful to her for encouraging me to submit an application for admission to the graduate program with less than two months before the start of orientation. She made me feel like I could do well at USU, and has since offered invaluable feedback on many things I have written.

Dr. Jeannie Thomas has also been a welcoming presence in the Department, and the first course I took from her during my second semester at USU is one of the main reasons why I changed my degree emphasis to Folklore. Her support of an essay topic combining folklore with the study of comic books made me realize that I could find a home for all my interests in one fascinating field of study, and her encouragement to submit a proposal to the American Folklore Society annual meeting led me to both my first professional presentation and the realization that I could contribute to the field.

During my second semester I also took a course from Dr. Lynne McNeill. It was she who identified this topic as something that could be studied through the lens of folklore, and who has offered unflaggingly enthusiastic encouragement ever since. It would be difficult for me to summarize how much of an inspiration she has been to me in the last year, but I can say without hesitation that I can't imagine having a better adviser for this project.

Alongside the faculty at USU, there have been numerous staff members who have made this experience go smoothly. In the English Department, Lori, Carol, Annie, Sara, Tristan, and Brianna have all helped me to sort out what sometimes feels like a mountain of

little issues. I am grateful to all of them for doing so with both patience and kindness. In addition to amazing staff support, the English Department and College of Humanities and Social Sciences have both provided a significant amount of financial support, which has been critical as I've worked to complete my degree.

Outside of all the wonderful people at USU, I would like to thank my professors at the University of Utah. There were many people in the Department of Film and Media Arts there whose encouragement led me to pursue a master's degree, and I will always be grateful to them for getting me here. In particular, I would like to thank Dale Elrod, Kevin Hanson, Chris Lippard, Samuel Dunn, and Sarah Sinwell.

Of course, this thesis would not be complete if I had not found so many people who were willing to talk to me about their experiences and my ideas for the project. I am infinitely grateful to those who sat down for formal interviews, but also for those who related anecdotes in passing or simply helped me to think through different angles.

Finally, I need to thank my family and friends. They have been enormously patient and supportive throughout this process, and I am certain I have tested the limits of their ability to be either. A resounding thank you to all of them, whose impacts on my life are too numerous to list.

Amelia Mathews-Pett

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## INTRODUCTION

This has been with me forever- the sense that people, as well as inanimate objects, have feelings. This could be a stuffed animal, to a piece of food, to a hammer. It is anything and everything.

—itsjustin, “Inanimate objects have feelings”

“Fancy all that fuss for a toy!”

The Boy sat up in bed and stretched out his hands.

"Give me my Bunny!" he said. "You mustn't say that. He isn't a toy. He's REAL!"

—Margery Williams, *The Velveteen Rabbit or How Toys Become Real*

Objects. Things. Stuff. Three words describing a class of entity that has been regarded as lesser than humans in Western discourse for centuries. Objects are at best passive nothings, at worst the things people endeavor not to become. Objects are less than human because they are the mere recipients of action, and “objectification,” meaning to be made into an object, is now one of the dirtier words in the English language. But what if objects, too, have the power to act? The twenty-first century has been an era of decolonizing many things that were once lesser in the Western eye, and the conversation has begun in some academic fields about de-objectifying objects themselves. As objects increasingly gain ground as agents in the world of material experience, folklorists can contribute to this conversation by investigating people who regard objects as having not only as much agency as human beings, but as much capability for sentience.

There are many well-documented cultures that grant objects such importance and capability in everyday life. Animism is a general term used to refer to the belief structures of such cultures, and is often defined as the perception of plants, objects, and other non-human entities as having a soul or consciousness. Graham Harvey explains animists as

“people who recognise that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is always lived in relationship with others,” and animism as “being concerned with learning how to be a good person in respectful relationships with other persons” (2006:xi). While Harvey’s definition adds nuance to the general outsider perception of the terms, both explanations are often regarded in the Judeo-Christian West as an erroneous form of thinking, and animism is by and large disregarded as a viable belief structure in that context. However, despite this, there are many non-animistic people within the Western cultural structure who find themselves believing that objects are conscious entities capable of both entering into relationships and experiencing the world similarly to humans.

In the West today, there are people with no ideological affiliation with animism who believe that the objects in their lives have emotions and needs that are similar or identical to those of humans. This is often considered a typical stage of childhood development, during which children become concerned for the well-being of their toys and play with them as if they are living. However, not all children grow out of this stage. Some become otherwise typical adults who happen to still feel concern for the well-being of the objects in their lives and build the same kind of relationships with them that they build with other humans. These people talk to their cars, feel anxiety when choosing one product over another at the store, and worry about the feelings of objects they must discard. Their concerns are part of an unofficial belief structure that is often reflected in Western popular culture, and despite perhaps sounding strange, they merit more careful consideration than they have been given in the past.

If these people are not self-proclaimed animists, what do we call them? We could describe this phenomenon as part of the larger Western tendency to anthropomorphize or personify objects, but neither word encompasses the weight of the actual experience completely. Both words are variations on the idea that humans impose their own characteristics on things that are other-than-human with the knowledge that the thing in question does not actually possess the imposed qualities.<sup>1</sup> While this is sometimes the case when people talk about having the experiences described above, they do not always refer to it as something the human mind imposes on the outside world. Rather, their experiences are often felt as a perception of qualities that objects in the world innately possess. Although “animism” comes closest to describing this situation, the fact that it describes a spiritual worldview may make it untenable for some audiences. What I propose instead of animism, anthropomorphism, or personification is instead to use the more generalized phrase “belief in object sentience,” and to refer to the group of people discussed in this thesis as “people who experience the belief in object sentience.”

As part of establishing this phrasing, I would like to address some specific word choices. I chose the word sentience over consciousness because it implies not only an abstract awareness, but also an ability to feel, and the accounts contained in this work are particularly concerned with the feelings of objects. More complicated is the issue of “belief.” Patrick Mullen comments that “belief” is problematic, quoting Marilyn Motz in stating that it “calls into question its own validity: we usually describe our own beliefs as ‘knowledge’” (2001:120). This sentiment may account for Harvey’s word choice when defining animists as people who “recognise” rather than “believe in” the personhood of nonhuman entities. This is well worth noting, and I agree with Mullen’s point. However,

because my informants generally used the words “believe,” “think,” and “feel” more than “know,” and because belief is a recognized field of folklore scholarship, that is the word that will predominate in my own writing, despite my personally having no intention whatsoever to discount the validity of the experiences expressed. I will, however, generally refer to what my informants describe as “experiencing the belief in object sentience” because although there are some cultural frameworks that implicitly encourage the belief, many of the people who experience it see it as something that simply happens in their lives, regardless of their personal overarching belief structure.

In addition to word choice, some clarification should be made about the types of objects in question. While animism, personification, and anthropomorphism can all refer to animals, plants, and the natural world, what people generally refer to when describing their experiences with object sentience are what we would commonly refer to as inanimate objects: things that cannot move of their own volition which are not regarded as alive or made up of living things. Additionally, though the mention of sentient inanimate objects might bring to mind Baba Yaga’s mortar and pestle, the wicked queen’s magic mirror or any number of enchanted weapons from folk and fairy tales, the objects discussed in this thesis are generally not so remarkable. These objects are often commonly found at home, and can include such things as toys, clothes, tools, and even food. Some are in frequent use or of great value (sentimental or otherwise), others would generally be regarded as disposable or replaceable. Although these objects vary, the narratives describing the perception of their sentience share many common factors and themes that unite them as a single subject for discussion.

## **Object Sentience as Folkloric Phenomenon**

This thesis will examine the belief in object sentience through the lens of folklore. Although my writing focuses briefly on explanations of the belief offered by those who experience it, the goal is not to explain or find reasons that the belief exists. Instead, I gather accounts offered by people about their interactions with sentient objects and look for common experiences, shared values, and the other characteristics necessary to designate them as a true folk group, even though they often experience their beliefs in solitude. I do this with the goal of facilitating a framework wherein the people involved can establish their beliefs as being acceptable within the larger cultural framework.

Establishing the validity of the belief in object sentience is an important task because those who experience it have not been given much academic consideration outside the field of psychology, which generally regards the belief as symptomatic of mental abnormality. While I will discuss the psychological perspective in subsequent chapters, at the moment I will focus on the analytical alternative posed by the folklorist's perspective. Instead of contributing to these stigmatic perceptions, folklorists can endeavor to study folk culture, belief, and behavior without value judgments, and I propose to do the same with the belief in object sentience.

In 2001, Patrick Mullen published "Belief and the American Folk" in *The Journal of American Folklore*. His article clearly defines the two ways in which hegemonic cultures (and, at times, folklorists) tend to perceive and dismiss folk belief structures and behaviors that do not mesh with their own by romanticizing or pathologizing them through both overt and subtle commentary. Through romanticization, beliefs and behaviors are glorified and set apart from the norm, while pathologization problematizes

beliefs and behaviors by designating them as part of a cognitive lack or sickness. Both actions deny other perceptions, structures, and cultures the weight of normalcy and the ability to simply be. They put beliefs on the defensive and marginalize those who hold them. As will be discussed in the second and third chapters, the experience of the belief in object sentience is frequently romanticized when it occurs in childhood and pathologized when it occurs in adulthood. Rarely is it allowed space to simply exist as an accepted belief.

Similarly, the people who experience the belief are not easily distinguished as an accepted folk group because, while they have a major belief in common, it is rarely publicly shared. The personal accounts I use in later chapters rarely reference the belief in object sentience as something experienced with others. Instead, it is regarded as something private and personal, occasionally because it is a source of embarrassment. However, the behaviors of those who experience the belief can easily be designated as a form of solo folklore. As Jay Mechling has made clear, it is possible to consider a single person to be a folk group, especially when their actions or beliefs are reflected in a larger folk culture (2006), and it is possible to determine the kinds of “folk relationships” that people can have with inanimate objects (1989:320). There are a significant number of similarities in the accounts I will describe in this work, which imply a cohesion in the behaviors of people who experience the belief in object sentience and connect them into a group made up of those who engage in solo folklore. Additionally, as I will describe in chapter four, their behavior does point to a connection with a broader, unofficial cultural tendency to both treat objects as animate and build relationships with them.

Although stating that people enter into relationships with objects may sound strange, it is a distinguishable aspect of day-to-day Western life. Even if people do not see themselves as in relationships with things like their personal possessions, they still exhibit a strong emotional attachment to them. In “Objects of Memory: Material Culture as Life Review,” Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett outlines several primary categories of possessions that are reflective of important ways in which people construct their lives, identities, and memories. While any of her categories could be involved in a belief in object sentience, “material companions” are the most relevant to this study. These are everyday objects of little obvious value which accompany people throughout their lives; they “are not ‘saved’; they are allowed to grow old and, however humble, they accumulate meaning and value by sheer dint of their constancy in a life” (1989:330). These are the objects with which people form relationships much in the same way they form relationships with other human beings, and they are often the kind of objects described by those who experience the belief in object sentience.

The issue of relationship is key to developing an understanding of how to consider the belief in object sentience, and the study of folklore provides multiple perspectives on the relationships between humans and the objects in their lives. Regardless of the context, it becomes clear that human relationships with the objects in their environments are both critical and inescapable. The belief in object sentience provides yet another perspective in this ongoing conversation.

## Structure and Methodology

This work is based on personal interviews conducted with ten people between the ages of twenty and forty as well as accounts written by others on public internet forums. I collected information in these two ways for two reasons. The first is that personal interviews afforded me the opportunity to ask specific questions about personal experience, and the second is that the internet communities discussing object sentience online offered more data than I could possibly have gathered on my own in the span of time I had available for this project. While there is some crossover thematically in the narratives I will present in the coming chapters, I have generally divided the information I gathered between chapters two and three.

Chapter two, “Childhood,” focuses on information from interviews I personally conducted, wherein informants discuss memories of experiencing the belief in object sentience during childhood. This chapter presents a concise description of some primary characteristics of these experiences, but also focuses on the psychological perspectives surrounding the topic, its general romanticization, and cultural explanations for its origin. In chapter three, “Adulthood,” I similarly present a description of primary experience characteristics, this time gathered predominantly from accounts posted online.<sup>2</sup> This chapter focuses on the pathologization of the belief, as well as its implications for adult material behavior. In both chapters, when I have multiple quotations that speak to the same theme or idea, they are grouped in block quote formatting for clearer distinction. I attribute quotations to interviews I personally conducted within both the text and Bibliography, while I cite quotations drawn from individual comments on online forums



within the text and in endnotes. The original posts on which forum comments were made are cited in the Bibliography.

In chapter four, I combine some of the thematic issues present in both Childhood and Adulthood in a discussion of how the belief in object sentience appears in the Western world at large. This chapter focuses on the communities available to those who experience the belief, as well as the possibility for the belief to create opportunity for expanded relationships with the more-than-human world. This latter idea is expanded upon in the concluding chapter, which considers the value of multiple interpretive systems for framing the experience of the belief and summarized my findings on the group as a whole.

### **A Personal Note**

Having outlined the framework for this study, I would like to comment on my motivation for pursuing the subject. In “Belief and the American Folk,” Patrick Mullen not only clearly outlines how folk beliefs have been framed in the past and how folklorists often have the potential to work differently with belief and behavior, he also indicates that many folklorists fall into the same traps of pathologizing and romanticizing their subjects. In order to remedy this situation, he encourages folklorists to “make explicit the influence that [our own belief structure] has on our representations of groups” (2001:139). To that end, I would like to clearly state in this introduction that I have experienced the belief in object sentience in my own life, and came to study the topic because I hoped to find others who had experienced the same thing as well as previous scholarly research on the topic.

As a child, I believed that one of my dolls was plotting my death. I believed that unchosen items in the grocery store felt sad and unloved, and that my possessions felt rejected when I threw them out or gave them away. I talk to my car, apologize to items I drop, and believe my shoes are happier when I polish them. My research has connected me to dozens of others who feel the same way, and has led me to believe that our beliefs are neither trivial, nor inherently problematic. Instead, they have the potential to create a more positive experience of the world we live in. While there have been times in my life where the belief made day-to-day activities difficult (discarding objects was a nightmare during my teenage years), there have also been times where it enabled me to feel more connected to my environment. I have both pathologized and romanticized the experience at different stages of my life. Stating this, I am aware of my own subjective bias when approaching the topic, but still feel capable of presenting a fair and intriguing picture of the others with whom I share the experience.

## CHILDHOOD

It is a common experience in American life to witness a child making requests on behalf of their toys. They might ask for a Band-aid, food, or something else that they have deemed necessary, but for which an object could not possibly have use. Rarely have I seen an adult, when confronted with such a request, inform the child that the toy doesn't need whatever has been asked for. Instead, adults usually acquiesce. Why? Because we generally regard childhood behaviors and beliefs as transient, playful, and charming, not aberrant and needing correction. Since the early seventeenth century, when the upper classes in Europe began to regard children as adorable little curiosities rather than small versions of adults (Shavit 1999), they have been set apart as special, and their world has been romanticized as one of charming, imaginative play.<sup>3</sup> Children play, they imagine, and though we now consider their world with significantly more nuance, it is still frequently perceived as less based in reality than the world of adults.

This chapter examines the belief in object sentience that several adults experienced when they were children. It includes comparative discussion of commonalities and differences in their experiences, from the types of objects they considered sentient to the emotional impact of the experience. I offer various possible explanations for the origin of the belief by considering the concepts of childhood animism and personification of objects as outlined by psychology, as well as how objects are presented in children's popular media. I also allow space for the possibility that the belief may not be explainable. While some of the content in this chapter is based on outsider perceptions of the belief in object sentience, the ultimate foundation for the

discussion comes from the voices of the people I interviewed, as they explain the experience of the belief in their own words.

### **Why This Is Not a Psychological Study**

In 1929, Jean Piaget published *A Child's Conception of the World*, one of his initial major writings on the study of childhood development. His work is greatly valued for its contribution to the field of psychology's shift toward treating children as psychologically different from adults. To this end, he proposed several stages in mental growth divided by age and outlined typical behavior patterns for children moving through each stage. Although his work has been criticized for its generalizations and multiple studies have since attempted to replicate his findings unsuccessfully, psychologists still cite the importance of Piaget's work. For the purposes of considering object sentience, Piaget's most relevant contribution is the "preoperational stage" in development, in which he observed that children experience animist thinking.

Piaget is often cited in scholarly works that investigate animist beliefs in Western children, and I could use his work to frame my informants' childhood experiences as a normal phase of child development. Instead, I would like to separate my discussion of object sentience from Piaget's designation of childhood animism and other psychological perspectives. I do this for several reasons. The first is that studies since have largely called his theory into question, often finding one of two things. Firstly, some have identified no measurable animist beliefs in children, a result exemplified by an early study conducted by Margaret Mead that was designed to test the universality of Piaget's theories (Kuznets 1994:43). Secondly, they have found incidence of the beliefs (Dolgin

and Behrend 1984), but have linked them more to misunderstanding how movement is generated than an actual, held belief (Sharp et al. 1985). The people I spoke with have expressed that they perceive sentience in objects not because the objects move, but because of some inherent sense of the object's state of being.

The second reason I would generally like to distance this study from the psychological perspective has to do with rhetoric. In terms of Piaget's terminology, the designation of a preoperational "stage" dismisses the possibility for this experience to be a legitimate belief by watering it down into a phase that all children go through. Additionally, Piaget's discussion of animism, a word he uses generally to mean "the tendency to regard objects as living and endowed with will" (1929:170), rests on it being a mistaken perception, which points to two prejudices often held in the West—that both Western experience and the adult mind are more advanced than anything else. By designating animism as an incorrect belief system, Piaget disenfranchises both a child's lived experience of belief and the animist belief systems of non-hegemonic Western cultures.

Finally, I would like to refer back to the distinction I made in the introduction between personification and sentient objects. Personification is the act of giving human attributes to something that isn't human, and psychologists sometimes use this word when discussing children who exhibit a belief in object sentience. Partington and Grant designate personification as behavior in which "the child attributes human characteristics to objects or animals. The child talks to or plays with the object or animal as though it was a real person" (1984:228). While some of my informants do perceive their experience as an act of personification and others describe their experiences with

language that clearly embodies the definition of personification, the word takes on a particular slant in the psychological context that has the potential to oversimplify what is taking place.

In particular, I find Partington and Grant's definition problematic because of the use of animals and the word "real." Although this writing is somewhat outdated, it points to the fact that we often think of animals and usually think of objects as being less "real" than human beings. In the same article, there is lengthy discussion of how "fantasies" like personification function for children as a stepping stone into the "real" world. This wording, although part of an argument that personification is not necessarily pathological behavior, may de-legitimize the realness of the belief itself to some who experience it (1984:234). Subsequent chapters of this thesis offer a contrasting perspective to this interpretation of personification from rhetoricians and theorists who see objects as having equal agency to that of human beings.

While I do think that psychology has much to offer in terms of how we can look at beliefs like object sentience, and I will refer to it on occasion, as I move forward in this chapter I will not generally rely on psychological explanations. Instead, I will endeavor in the presentation of my informants' words to express the experience of object sentience not as a psychological phenomenon, but as a phenomenon of belief. As such, I attempt to consider it rather than scrutinize it, and though I offer possible explanations for its origin, that is in no way an attempt to explain the phenomenon away.

## What People Experienced

As mentioned in the introduction, for this study I interviewed ten friends and acquaintances who expressed to me that they had experienced a belief in object sentience as children. Although these people have since grown up to be adults with extremely variable belief systems, only two of whom actively subscribe to animist beliefs, there are striking similarities in what they remember from their childhoods. The most frequently cited sentient objects in their lives were man-made items such as toys, but many also referenced natural objects. They each expressed that not all objects were sentient to them, described strong feelings associated with their objects, and offered perspectives for why they experienced the belief.

When Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett interviewed adults about their most significant possessions, they indicated a wide range of objects. Children do not have such a range of items that belong to them. Parents will tell a child to get into *the* car, or sit at *the* table, but these things don't belong to a child the way that *your* bear or *your* toy does. It is then perhaps no surprise that the objects my informants designated as sentient were most frequently their own, distinctive possessions. Stuffed animals were the predominant candidate for sentience in the interviews I conducted.<sup>4</sup> These animals came in a variety of shapes and sizes, were sometimes part of a larger group of toys, or stood alone as individuals:

Well, I had this stuffed zebra from my dad and grandpa. I loved that thing practically to death. I remember talking to it, the way kids do, in an inclusive way. Like, he would be sad if I didn't take him with me to the bath, park, toilet, etc.<sup>5</sup>

I remember stuff like wanting to be sure special stuffed animals knew that I didn't mean to knock them off the bed or making sure no one felt left out when I was playing with them.<sup>6</sup>

All throughout my childhood I remember thinking that objects had some sort of emotional response. This mostly took form in stuffed animals . . . I did feel that other objects had some sort of sentience to them, although it didn't quite concern me as much . . . by the time I was seven, it had really developed into me connecting with a specific stuffed animal.<sup>7</sup>

These quotations reveal the primary importance of stuffed animals in children's lives. In *Toys as Culture*, Brian Sutton-Smith refers to them as part of a larger category of "soft toys." He discusses soft toys primarily as objects which encourage isolation in children, but also as common transitional objects, which help children to physically part from their parents as they get older by acting as a substitute for the nearness of parents experienced during infancy (1986:43-49). Interestingly, Sutton-Smith also points out that stuffed animals frequently remain as companions into adulthood. "He is still alive and well, though living on the top shelf in my cupboard," states one of his informants about a soft toy kept since childhood (1986:48). In *The Stuff of Family Life*, sociologist Michelle Janning posits that adults tend to hold on to transitional objects like soft toys because they offer a sense of comfort through major life changes (2017:23-40). Certainly, this explains some of their significance, but my informants' descriptions go well beyond experiences of stuffed animals as sources of consolation.

The first two quotations included above point to a particularly poignant aspect of the experience of object sentience that many of my interviewees expressed: a concern for the emotional well-being of their stuffed animals. They expressed this concern by citing emotions like loneliness, sadness, exclusion, and generally negative states that they wanted to prevent their stuffed animals from experiencing. Although I think it would be easy to draw the conclusion that human beings tend to connect to objects with faces that hold expressions like our own, my informants' concern was not always limited to the



feelings of objects with faces. Several people found sentience in less easily

anthropomorphized objects, including (but not limited to) food, rocks, trees, and fabric:

My mom would have to tell me that some of my dolls or stuffed animals “liked their alone time” so that they wouldn’t feel bad when they couldn’t fit on the bed with me. Or if I couldn’t finish all my food, that the food was going to a party in the trash can because I felt bad that I couldn’t finish!<sup>8</sup>

But I also would sometimes worry about clothes. Not wanting to throw them out because what would happen to them without me? . . . Rocks totally had feelings. I couldn't leave them up in the mountains. They'd be in all sorts of trouble if they weren't able to live in my garden or bedroom. But if they were heavy I'd hide them in my dad's pack so he'd carry them down.<sup>9</sup>

I think I had some cool colored erasers that had feelings who were my little desk pets in elementary school.<sup>10</sup>

I remember talking to stuffed animals and treating them like friends and things like that, and also for a long time when I was young I talked to trees, which was weird?<sup>11</sup>

The final statement above indicates an interesting characteristic of the descriptions offered by my informants. Regardless of what each interviewee designated as the specific focus for their belief in object sentience as a child, many spoke of the things that were most important to them with a general tone of both love and humor, a tone which is indicative of both the importance of the relationships people have with the significant objects in their lives and of the way we think of childhood and play in the west. We tend to laugh about the things we believed as children that adult society perceives as strange, perhaps as a defense mechanism to downplay their abnormality. Despite this amusement, there is still a deep undercurrent of feeling in the way people discuss their childhoods and childhood belongings. Many of the people I spoke with discussed their sentient objects as what Kirshenblatt-Gimblett would refer to as material companions. Some made a comparison to the objects being like pets, others like friends, but their focus was often only on their belongings, rather than all objects.

One of the most consistent patterns that emerged from these interviews was the clear distinction between what was alive and what wasn't. As a group, the people I interviewed generally did not possess the belief that all objects are sentient. In a conversation after our interview, Gemma added that she had experienced this when she was growing up with her sisters. Each of the girls in her family possessed their own blanket, but while hers was sentient, her sisters' were not. Karley mentioned a similar perception while juxtaposing her own stuffed bear to another girl's dolls: "She had this really creepy baby doll thing that she physically paid my friend and I money to babysit . . . and I remember even then thinking, 'What? It's not real!' but that's the funny thing: in my mind I could think that was strange, but I thought my teddy bear was maybe real,"<sup>12</sup> and Josh described the moment he selected his own stuffed dinosaur from a pile of identical others: "He was in a pile of Littlefoots,<sup>13</sup> there were maybe two hundred Littlefoots, and it was at J.C. Penney. And there was a process of, 'Which one?' . . . and he was the one. Like the other ones were sepia-toned compared to him."<sup>14</sup> This recurring model of distinction can be connected to the research Irving Hallowell conducted with the Ojibwe in Canada, which Graham Harvey describes at length in *Animism: Respecting the Living World*. As stated by Harvey, Hallowell asked an Ojibwe man if all the stones around them were alive. The man informed him, "No! But some are" (2006:33). Hallowell noted in his later observations that the rocks that were designated as alive were often those that had demonstrated magic properties or had formed a connection to a member of the tribe. Translating this idea out of the animist mindset, it could be linked to Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's concept of material companionship—that the objects we spend the most time with are the ones that become special, but it doesn't account for Josh's

Littlefoot selection method. Gemma similarly selected her most significant material companion (a Ty Beanie Baby that she named Bunny) from a crowd of other stuffed animals. However, Gemma indicated that she made her decision because Bunny seemed sad.

This emotional component is often present underneath the generally light tone people use to describe their childhood experiences with object sentience, and it is visible throughout the quotations above. The concern my informants felt for their animals leads to natural questions about whether those feelings also reflected their inner states as children. I asked my informants if they could pinpoint any origins for their beliefs and received a variety of responses.

### **Explanations**

When it comes to studying the experience of object sentience, although there are some patterns in children's material behavior and belief, it is difficult to classify a single system by which they are learned. Simon J. Bronner states in his chapter of *Children's Folklore* that he finds "that informal, or folk, learning through word of mouth, demonstration or imitation, and customary example are still the predominant means by which children acquire knowledge of technique and form" (1999:253), but he also discusses the private nature of children's material practices. In most of the interviews I conducted, I was told stories of beliefs that were charming in adult hindsight, but private and personal to their childhood selves. The explanations my informants offered for the origin of their belief in object sentience were highly varied, but none of them cited learning from another child. What explanations were offered could generally be

categorized as internal, psychological origins or external, popular culture-related origins. That said, some cited only inexplicable belief. All explanations are, of course, reasonable, but none offer a cohesive explanation that suits everyone who experienced the belief in object sentience.

### *Internal Origins*

Several of my informants expressed that they considered their belief in object sentience to be connected to emotional, mental, and cognitive aspects of their lives. Gemma considered it to be part of her experience of autism, and Alex stated that she had always linked it to obsessive compulsive disorder. I discuss these possible explanations at greater length in the next chapter. From a purely emotional stance, Russ posed the idea that it may have been a sense of isolation from other children that led to his tendency to talk to objects:

For a lot of my youth I was kind of left to my own devices. I was one of those kids that was raised by public television, you know, lots of TV. Way too much TV. And so, I talked to myself and I would talk to other things too. Because of companionship I think . . . I'd talk to my toys. And so I think it came from that isolation maybe for me.<sup>15</sup>

Russ' description reflects how the belief in object sentience was very often a solitary experience for those I interviewed and indicates a question often asked on the online message boards I refer to in chapter three: are people who experience this belief just lonely? Variations on this question were asked somewhat often by people attempting to help others pinpoint where the belief came from. Loneliness may be or have been a factor in some experiences, but it doesn't function well as a universal explanation.

In addition to comments about loneliness, people considering the origins of the belief in object sentience often bring up the idea that it results from an inherent emotional sensitivity. Cory described herself during our interview as “a really sensitive kid”<sup>16</sup> who had a hard time separating herself from her concern about the well-being of others. She also detailed how even as an adult she reacts strongly to emotions expressed by other people. Liz depicted herself similarly as “a very emotional person”<sup>17</sup> who sometimes projects her inner state onto her environment. While the ways that these two women describe themselves sound similar, I find an interesting distinction between their choice of words. “Projection” implies that Liz was sending her own perceptions outward onto the world, while “sensitivity” implies that the world was affecting Cory.

The nuance in my informants’ descriptions of their experiences indicates just how multifaceted and difficult to pin down this belief can be. No single explanation serves every person, though they may reflect key aspects of individual experience and worldview. It is ascribed above to temporary emotional states like loneliness, personality traits like sensitivity, and cognitive differences like autism. These are all potentially internal causes for the phenomenon, so what of the external explanations?

### *External Origins*

In addition to psychological explanations, several of my informants referenced popular works of children’s fiction. *Toy Story* (1995) is one of the most frequently mentioned films when it comes to the phenomenon of children believing that the objects in their lives have feelings. Alex commented early in her interview that while she did think her stuffed animals had feelings, she wouldn’t describe her experience as “full on

*Toy Story*,” and Gemma references a specific aspect of the film’s influence on her own behavior:

I then developed a buddy system for my stuffed animals so every time I’d get a new stuffed animal they’d have to have a friend. This was also about the same time that *Toy Story* came out, and in *Toy Story* they’re moving and they all have a moving buddy, so I think I kind of took that same idea because we moved a lot.<sup>18</sup>

In this animated film, the heroes are toys that belong to a boy named Andy. They are alive in their own right (not brought to life by magic or any external force as many objects are in fiction), and they hide their aliveness from Andy as they engage in adventures. This theme had appeared previously in *The Brave Little Toaster* (1987), an animated film based on a novel in which living appliances hide their consciousness from their human owners. Although it is, of course, difficult to gauge the psychological impact of either film, I have yet to meet an American adult between the ages of twenty-five and forty who has heard of neither.

Stories like those in the aforementioned films are not a new invention; they have been a recurrent theme in literature for centuries. Karley cited books with similar narratives to *Toy Story* specifically as a potential cause of her own belief: “I think part of that was books that I read. Because a lot of them had themes like when you’re away they then are alive. I always would try to see if I could catch them but never did. And I think that I loved that, and I love that I believed that because it made it really magical.”<sup>19</sup> Lois Rostow Kuznets has conducted significant scholarship on such narratives in fiction, which she compiled in *When Toys Come Alive: Narratives of Animation, Metamorphosis and Development*. As she distinctively puts it, “Literature, after all, is embedded in culture and engaged in a continual, multivalent interaction with it” (1994:21). Tales of living toys can be traced back to the 1700s (Alber 2016), and Kuznets’ writing includes

analysis of notable works like Lynne Reid Banks' *The Indian in the Cupboard* (1980), A. A. Milne's *Winnie-the-Pooh* (1926), Margery Williams' *The Velveteen Rabbit* (1922), and the works of Hans Christian Andersen. Although the majority of these works are narratives of animate toys specifically, Andersen's stories carry animism into other man-made objects and common household items.

Sentient, non-toy objects can be found in nursery rhymes, children's songs, fairy tales, and folktales. The famous final line of "Hey Diddle Diddle" features amorous, mobile tableware, and illustrated versions frequently give the moon human facial features. This is a tendency of many illustrators of children's tales and reflects the stories' inclination to not only animate objects but to personify nature. In her poem-turned-song "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star," Jane Taylor describes the sun as "he" and the star as never shutting its eye. Similarly, "I'm a Little Teapot" is sung from the perspective of an animate, personified tea kettle. In fairy tales, as previously mentioned, children are confronted with enchanted vehicles, talking home décor, and runaway baked goods. In other words, the child's world of story is saturated by sentient objects.

The sheer volume of sentient objects in the Western child's fictional universe is a force to be reckoned with. I think a researcher would be hard-pressed to find a child who hasn't been exposed to any such example. This prevalence would lead many to believe that these stories are the cause of childhood belief in animism, but it is ultimately too difficult to prove which came first. Although it's beyond the scope of my own argument, it's worth considering whether these stories existed because the belief existed, or vice versa. However, neither outcome changes the fact that children experience the belief today.

### *Unexplainable Origins*

In the books discussed by Kuznets, there is sometimes a special circumstance that causes the object to become alive or “real.” The titular velveteen rabbit is transformed into a living rabbit by a fairy because a child has loved him enough. Kuznets analyzes the significance of realness, stating that it “reflects the struggle of both children and adults to feel ‘real’-- to become a conscious, powerful subject rather than an object dependent on others” (1994:61). Liz used the same term in our interview to differentiate between living and nonliving objects by saying, “I think that I know that things aren’t *alive* and *real*,”<sup>20</sup> and Karley used the same word when discussing the difference between her bear and another child’s dolls. There is a subtle distinction between her statement and Williams’ book, in that realness describe in the former the sense of an object being alive *or* having sentience, while in the latter, the two are separate as the rabbit possesses sentience before he becomes “real.”

Considering this led me to break down the protagonist objects in fiction as generally falling into one of two primary categories: objects that possess sentience and are granted aliveness (represented as transformation or the ability to move) through an outside force and objects that were sentient and/or alive without outside intervention. This was not, however, reflected in the responses of my informants. When I asked them if there was any reason why their objects came to be sentient, they generally had no answer. Outside of their adult interpretations of the origins of their beliefs, they felt as children that their objects were sentient just because they were, not because of some explanation that could be easily linked to fiction.



There were two people I spoke with who did not subscribe to the psychological or fiction-derived explanations for their belief in object sentience. For both Josh and Lauren, it was simply what they experienced. Lauren explained, “I think for me I’ve just had that knowing since I was a little kid. And I think maybe so many kids have that, where you talk to things and you’re like, ‘This is just alive, why wouldn’t it be?’”<sup>21</sup> Both people hold spiritual beliefs as adults that contain animist characteristics, and their own childhood experiences with object sentience are reflective of that. Because of their beliefs, they spoke of the experience with a slightly different tone that was less laced with defensive humor. They spoke of their objects with the same love and care as my other informants, but they had no need to establish that the beliefs were in any way silly because they weren’t embarrassed about believing in object sentience.

### **Growing Up**

The experience and origins of childhood belief in object sentience are varied, but one thing is certain: as children progress toward adolescence, the culture at large expects them to grow out of these ideas. The childhood world is filled with stories that encourage the belief in object sentience, but once they reach school children have to either talk themselves out of the feeling or tuck it away. Kuznets remarks that “most intellectuals in this society put a high value on the imagination [of children], animistic or otherwise, and nostalgically mourn its disappearance in adult life” (1994:45) as if it were a mystery that these impulses fade. However, this particular childhood belief is tackled head-on in grade school classrooms, where students are expected to learn the difference between living and nonliving things. This can be made clear by a quick Google search for “living and

nonliving lesson plans,” which as of December 2017 returned 362,000 results and provides a list of related searches which indicates that these results are geared toward grade school teachers.

The Western expectation that children eventually conform to the norms of adult behavior may quash the beliefs totally, but it may also lead to their stigmatization. That children are aware of this stigma was clear in several of my interviews, when informants like Karley stated that they discarded the belief in object sentience under the pressures of conforming to normative adolescent behavior:

I really held onto childhood as long as I could before it was like, “Okay, I’m going into junior high, I can’t bring my stuffed animal anymore.” It was sad to me to think that I couldn’t do that anymore . . . I remember the summer of 6th grade kind of just realizing like I felt like I couldn’t, but also I felt like junior high is such an awkward age anyway to fit in and make friends.<sup>22</sup>

This statement indicates that Karley was aware of the fact that she would need to give up her stuffed animals to fit in. Russ also reflected childhood knowledge of what was an acceptable belief in his own statement that he “was pretty conscious of the fact that other people probably thought it was—you know it’s not something that adults did, necessarily. And so, the older I got, the more private that stuff tended to be.”<sup>23</sup> Societal conventions exert considerable force on social development, and the stigmatization of beliefs that should eventually be discarded as people grow up may explain why these beliefs are often kept private by children and why they are kept private by adults if they persist.

With the exception of the two informants who self-identified as holding animist beliefs (who will be discussed further in the next chapter), the people I spoke to expressed that they held these beliefs as children, but now consider them to be something that was going on inside of themselves rather than an expression of an internal force

inherent in the object. This means that at some point, these people transitioned away from the belief, or it shifted and took on a new form. In chapter three, I discuss how this childhood belief takes on a new shape in adulthood.

## ADULTHOOD

In 2002, Ikea released a television commercial directed by Spike Jonze. In this advertisement, the audience sees a little red lamp sitting on a side table by a couch. We are made to watch as the female owner of that lamp briskly turns it off, unplugs it, and loads it into a cardboard box. We do not see her face, but instead are given the lamp's point of view, watching its place next to the couch recede from sight as the owner carries it away. The next thing we see is the lamp placed unceremoniously on the curb by the owner while it starts to rain. She runs back inside, and as it gets dark, we see from the little red lamp's point of view as a new lamp is turned on in its place. As the new lamp is turned off again, the apartment darkens and the camera lingers on the sight of the dejected little lamp, sitting on the curb in the rain. Suddenly, a man in a trench coat steps into the frame. "Many of you feel bad for this lamp," he says in a Swedish accent, "That is because you crazy! It has no feelings! And the new one is much better." He departs, the Ikea logo appears, and we never see that little red lamp again.

But *are* we crazy? There are enough advertisements and films that draw on similar sympathies to indicate that at the very least, Western culture recognizes the idea that inanimate objects have feelings. The fact that Ikea can assume that its audience is feeling sorry for the little red lamp indicates that this is a widespread phenomenon. This was reiterated in 2009, when the first episode of NBC's sitcom *Community* included a rousing speech wherein one of the main characters states, "I can pick up this pencil, tell you its name is Steve, and go like this—" at which point he snaps the pencil in half and the other people in the room make sounds of distress "—and part of you dies just a little bit on the inside. Because people can connect with anything" (Harmon 2009). For many

people, Steve the pencil and the little red lamp do stir feelings, and although some would describe these feelings simply as craziness or a passing moment of sympathy, for people who experience the belief in object sentience they are much more meaningful.

There may be as many adults as children who experience the belief that the objects around them possess sentience, but while the belief is often romanticized and encouraged in children, it is most frequently pathologized when it appears in adult experience. Though pathologization is the official stance of Western culture at large, there are communities who find the belief to have positive correlations. In this chapter, I examine the adult experience of the belief in object sentience through personal accounts gathered from interviews and public online forums. I use this information to again consider possible explanations for the belief, but primarily to examine how it connects to adult material behavior. Ultimately, I consider the positive and negative frameworks accessible to people who believe in object sentience and discuss their potential impacts.

### **What People Experience**

It is likely because of the shame people feel at experiencing an unacceptable belief that they rarely discuss object sentience openly with others. When they do, it is often to describe it within the framework of symptoms and diagnoses. In my research, there were particular connections between the belief in object sentience and anxiety, autism, and obsessive compulsive disorder (as previously mentioned with regard to Gemma and Alex's ideas about the origin of their beliefs). While people have fought for and developed greater societal acceptance when it comes to these disorders, pervasive stigmas can still lead to negative perception of their symptoms. This can sometimes lead

those who live with the disorders to feel isolated in their experience and turn to alternative communities for support. Because of the opportunities for connection the internet provides, it is no surprise that it is home to various forums where people discuss their experience with object sentience. These forums do represent the abovementioned disorders, but also appear on websites with no psychological foundation.

A copy of Spike Jonze's Ikea commercial is hosted by The Hall of Advertising on *YouTube*. The comments on the video run the gamut of object sentience experience. There are people expressing genuine sympathy for the lamp, making jokes, commenting on the problems inherent in consumerism, looking for connection with those who also feel sorry for the lamp, and some who take the side of the man in the video. These are all common themes that appeared generally in the accounts I gathered. People expressed concern for the well-being of objects, joked about their experiences, expressed anxiety about their possessions, sought others who felt the same way, and worried what others would think of them. Some described the experience as highly distressing, while others found the experience somewhat positive. There are patterns in the kinds of objects they reference and the way they both describe and explain their experiences, but each account is unique.

Cars, clothing, and furniture are all primary possessions people use on a daily basis. They are often taken for granted, but they are clearly definable as material companions. In this regard, the accounts posted in online forums reflect many of the patterns I found in the personal interviews I conducted. Many contributors mentioned their childhood experiences with toys (again, often noting sentience in stuffed animals in particular), which are as previously mentioned often the primary possessions of

childhood. Those who wrote about their adulthood experience with object sentience reference the objects that are more primary in adult life, including cars, clothing, and furniture:

I think it kinda started with not wanting to hurt its feelings, when I talked about how much I miss my old car while I was near [my new car]. I'd mention something about the Element that was better or that I missed, or how that wouldn't happen in the Element . . . Immediately, I'd need to say something nice about [the new car] so I didn't hurt its feelings.<sup>24</sup>

If I hang washing out I can't leave one thing on a line cos it will feel like it's not good enough to be with the other items of washing.<sup>25</sup>

My most obvious example would be from not too long ago. I ran into a chair. I realized it was a chair. I got angry at the chair for getting in my way and then later that day i went back to apologize to the chair for running into it and blaming it because i felt guilty about being angry at this chair.<sup>26</sup>

These accounts mirror Cory's sense of concern for her clothing quoted in chapter two, as well as an all-too-common sense of guilt regarding the actions people take with objects.

Like many of my informants who discussed their experience with object sentience as children, adults commenting on message boards express a significant amount of concern for the well-being of the companion objects in their lives. This ranges from the physical, like not wanting to mow the lawn for fear of hurting the grass by cutting it,<sup>27</sup> to the emotional, like not wanting to objects to feel rejected when they aren't chosen at the grocery store. Although expressions of this concern often dominate the message boards, it is not the only dominant theme. Humor is commonly added to accounts with the effect of either downplaying the seriousness of their experience or emphasizing the abnormality of believing objects have feelings. One *Reddit* user stated, "Oh yeah I used to do this a lot especially when I was a kid. I used to feel bad using spoons and forks at the table because I wondered how they felt being used all the time. Then I came to the conclusion that

maybe they liked doing my job. Yeah I was the weird kid.”<sup>28</sup> Others on the same comment thread ended their own accounts with “lmao,” “:’),” or “haha,”<sup>29</sup> indicating that they were offering their own accounts lightheartedly.

The people who described their own experiences both online and in person often reverted to this tone of humor when they referred to their experience of object sentience or the way they would interact with objects, but the experience is not universally pleasant. This dichotomy is present in an account posted by greenish on *MetaFilter*:

I have a problem - my brain is completely sure that all objects have feelings. The funny side of this is me giving an apologetic smile to the sandwich I put back down when I see another I'd prefer. Stupid, right? The not-so-funny (to me) side is when i happen to read a story in the paper about a town which has an xmas tree which everyone is saying is “shabby and a poor excuse for a tree”. I cried when I read that article, because I felt so sorry for the tree, and hoped it hadn't heard anyone say it was shabby.<sup>30</sup>

While greenish's account does contain clear concerns about the emotional well-being of objects, it also indicates that it is not always possible for people who believe in object sentience to feel light-hearted about their perceptions. For some, the experience is disruptive and a cause of significant anxiety.

In the interviews I conducted with Karley and Lauren, both brought up the idea that we are living in an age of serious accumulation in Western society. The prevalence of consumer goods and purchase-able objects has the potential to foster confusion and worry about the number of things in our lives as well as the huge mass of waste we produce. However, the aspect of this anxiety that is expressed by informants in their own accounts is that they feel surrounded by things, have a hard time not buying them, and feel incapable of letting them go for fear of in some way hurting them. Additionally,



there is some fear of outside perception that adds to the potential negativity of the experience.

The idea that people who experience the belief in object sentience are concerned about being perceived as abnormal is illustrated by the presence of a comment thread related to object sentience on *Is It Normal?*, a website with a header that reads “Are You Normal? Ask Your Question today.” This sense of concern may accompany the decision not to speak about their experience openly and reiterates a theme found in the experiences described in *Childhood*: there is often a sense of shame related to the belief. On *HealthBoards*, NewYorker212 began the conversation about the belief in object sentience with the statement, “I haven’t brought this up anywhere else because I’m not sure how others might react to it.”<sup>31</sup> This is a reasonable concern, as commenters reacting to Spike Jonze’s commercial on *YouTube* don’t exactly mince words when commenting on others’ beliefs; “only liberal wimps and socialist eunuchs would feel bad for this lamp. survival of the fittest” writes fluffynoses.<sup>32</sup> But for every person doling out shame, there is at least one more offering support, and support is generally even more prevalent than negative response. Wordwoman writes in response to greenish, “Does this interfere with daily life? Is there a reason you don’t want to embrace this part of yourself, non-standard as it may be? I suspect the environment would be in better shape if more people shared your problem,”<sup>33</sup> after which greenish replied, “I already feel a shred more sane because I know it’s not just my strange little problem, and it doesn’t even feel like so much of a problem anymore.”<sup>34</sup>

greenish’s statement reflects that one of the most poignant aspects of the communication taking place between those who experience object sentience online is the

excitement people seemed to feel when they encountered others who had been living with the same belief. “Wow, thanks everyone,” they write in the preface to the previous quote, “I cried reading these answers cause it’s all so familiar.” RatGirl echoed the sentiment on *HeathBoards*, “Oh my god...and I always thought it was just me.”<sup>35</sup> This was not limited to the online environment, as the people I personally interviewed frequently expressed similar sentiments. On several of the message boards I visited a sense of community emerged for some of those present from the relief of discovering a shared diagnosis. While often, especially in the case of autism, those who shared a diagnosis discussed the positive aspects of the way their disorder shapes their world, others on the message boards discussed the unwanted symptoms of their neuroatypicality.

### **(De-)Pathologizing Belief**

It is perhaps the potential for this experience to cause distress that leads to it being pathologized. As mentioned in the second chapter, two of my informants linked their own experiences with object sentience to living with obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) and autism. This link is echoed online, where posts about object sentience appear on support forums for not only autism and OCD, but also anxiety. The two anonymous quotes featured above were taken from a comment thread on *Adults With Autism.Org.Uk*, where Steve had written about his experience of having sympathy for objects. Similar comment threads can be found on *Social Anxiety Support* and the OCD section of *HealthBoards*. Some of the people who write on these boards echo greenish’s experience of upset, indicating that believing in object sentience can prevent them from leading normal lives. “What scares me the most is that the extent I feel for these objects

oftentimes fly in the face of all sound logic and reason, and there have been cases where this renders me completely unable to function like a normal adult,” writes Anita.<sup>36</sup> Many of the writers who expressed similar feelings found themselves incapable of discarding objects and made reference to their concerns about hoarding as a result.

In recent years, several studies have been conducted by psychologists on the connection between hoarding and object sentience (although these studies generally favor the term anthropomorphism) which have resulted in a strong correlation between the two. One such study states that “on a purely conceptual level, it seems intuitive that if inanimate objects have been imbued with human qualities, then one would be reticent to discard them” (Timpano and Shaw 2013:388). This statement simultaneously acknowledges the perceptions of those who experience object sentience and qualifies it as something that must be regarded conceptually to be understood by a rational mind. While hoarding does represent a potentially debilitating manifestation of the belief, considering it as a mistaken perception can only add to the negative connotations surrounding the experience. This evinces the kind of condescension Patrick Mullen points out in his discussion of how beliefs are pathologized in “Belief and the American Folk.”

However, despite that many of the people on these boards have been diagnosed with autism, OCD, and anxiety, there are also a significant number who clearly state that they are neurotypical. These people also express their experiences on websites that are not related to psychology like *MetaFilter*, *Reddit*, and *Yahoo Answers*. While neurotypical people were often accepting of the idea that perceiving object sentience could be linked to the disorders, some indicated that they felt it was a natural part of existence. The fact that there are so many people in the world who do not necessarily see

the perception of object sentience as problematic (and who do not experience it as debilitating) gives strength to the idea that there may be value in assessing the belief outside of the realm of psychological interpretation when it does not negatively impact a person's overall well-being.

What can we say about the belief in object sentience when it is not framed as a problem? In 1998, David Hufford wrote that when it comes to health, as folklorists, we “should never assume that experts are right when ordinary people disagree with them” (303). While he continues to advise researchers to approach both the expert medical opinion and the folk approach with the same level of skepticism, his account argues strongly for seeing Western medical practices as another system of belief, rather than the default, correct view. Hufford argues that any party in a health situation should take care to understand the point of view of the other parties. He states, “According to the conventional stereotype, unconventional practices are utilized by the poorly acculturated, either new immigrants or those isolated by poverty and poor education, or by those who are emotionally unbalanced. In either case, the behavior is viewed as marginal and deviant” (304). This statement not only provides a link to the common psychological perception of people who believe in object sentience but also to the way their beliefs are pathologized.

Psychological approaches to diagnosing this belief can offer useful frameworks for its interpretation for some, but frameworks that pathologize the behaviors and thoughts associated with object sentience aren't a one-size-fits-all solution. Instead, some people choose to turn to frameworks outside of the official cultural norms, including animism, new folk religious practices, and suggestions for material behavior.

*Sentient Objects and Religious Belief*

As mentioned in the introduction, animism is a belief system that is foundational to religions across the globe, but it is not endemic to the majority of official, contemporary Western belief systems. However, in unofficial Western beliefs animism is fairly prevalent. It can be found in various spiritual practices (often labeled as “new age”) focusing on intentionality as well as in religions generally perceived as being outside of mainstream society, such as neo-shamanism, neo-paganism, and others.

Both Lauren and Josh expressed in their interviews that they adhere to some of these spiritual beliefs, though both were hesitant to give a name to their belief systems. That said, they expressed that having a connection to other-than-human entities in the world, including animals, plants, and so-called inanimate objects was integral to their spirituality. For them, animistic thought and action led to greater connection with the world around them and was an entirely positive experience. Not only that, but their perceptions of object sentience differed from many of the accounts I have collected in that they didn’t emphasize concern over objects’ well-being; instead, their objects could take care of themselves. Lauren described her connections with the objects in her life as being in a constant state of relationship, wherein objects have the same agency as she does. She even described how objects in her life are capable of indicating to her when their relationship is ready to end, saying, “At some point they just feel like they’re ready to be done. I don’t have a use for them anymore and they don’t belong to me.” This approach to living with possessions is very different from that of most people living in Western cultures.

*Sentient Objects and Material Culture*

It is possible that anxiety over commercialism and accumulation leads to anxieties about the objects in our lives. It is true that in the West we are living in an era where it is easier than ever to purchase goods, and they are mass-manufactured with a greater intention for producing quantity than quality. This becomes problematic not only because it creates an enormous amount of waste, but because human beings are infinitely sensitive to environment. Daniel Miller proposes in *Stuff* (2015) that people are in a constant state of relationship with the objects in our lives which engenders a reciprocal cycle in which we both make objects and are made by them. This indicates that not only are people greatly affected by their environment, but they are in a position to be in relationship with the objects that form it, consciously (as an enactment of the kind of spiritual beliefs discussed above) or unconsciously. It is possible that integrating interaction into these relationships may start to soothe some of the anxieties they create.

The relationships humans develop with the possessions in their lives do have the potential to create anxieties (as in the case of hoarding), but they can also enact a positive effect. As mentioned previously, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett studied the many positive associations her subjects had with their belongings, specifying a specific category of material companions, or objects that accompany people throughout their lifetimes. Of course, not all of the objects in our lives stay with us for decades, but Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's use of the word "companion" is indicative again of the way all objects have the potential to be in active relationships with people. It is perhaps because

of this, in combination with a concern for waste and excess, that people become worried about discarding their objects.

This concern was expressed repeatedly not only by people who posted about their belief in object sentience on message boards, but those I interviewed as well. As is indicated by the connection psychologists have made between belief in object sentience and hoarding, people who experienced it frequently felt especially concerned about the objects they planned to part with:

It makes it so difficult to get rid of old household items that are no longer useful. I almost feel as though they are crying when I give them to the Goodwill and will miss my house.<sup>38</sup>

Empathy for inanimate objects combined with my always feeling like someone might need x makes it very difficult to get rid of anything. If someone needs or loves something, I'll gladly give it to them, but it's like I have to know it will go to a good home.<sup>39</sup>

The language they use not only reflects the persistent theme of emotional concern but comes back repeatedly to the idea that people want their objects to continue to have a life beyond the time they have them as possessions. This is evident in Lauren's statement regarding objects having the ability to choose to end their time with her, but was also echoed in my interview with Karley, who described how finding a good home for her own objects is infinitely preferable to throwing them away.

Thinking of objects in this way and being concerned for their well-being or the repercussions of discarding them carelessly is not an entirely new phenomenon and appears in centuries-old scrolls from Japan. In *Seven Demon Stories from Medieval Japan*, Noriko Reider translates and discusses the *Tsukumogami Ki*, or "The Record of Tool Specters." In this story from the Muromachi period (1336–1573), household objects (specifically containers, tools, and instruments) that reach the age of one hundred gain

their own unique souls, and after being carelessly discarded by their owners transform into demons that wreak havoc on the human world. Although they become demons and are ensouled in the process, much like the velveteen rabbit they are described as having an innate sense of consciousness before that happens. Eventually, they are redeemed through the teachings of Shingon esoteric Buddhism and achieve Buddhahood. Reider describes the importance of the story as indicative of the attempts of esoteric Buddhists to convert exoteric Buddhists, but it additionally reveals a sensibility in Japanese culture toward perceiving objects as having an innate life force. This may have a connection to the Shinto belief system, which is animist in its foundation.

The *Tsukumogami ki* indicates that across cultural and temporal boundaries, people are concerned with the common objects in their lives and what happens to them when they must be discarded (for whatever reason). While in Japan this spawned rituals for the proper parting with objects and tools,<sup>40</sup> in the West it seems to go hand in hand with an ever-increasing sense of anxiety that accompanies our continued accumulation of possessions. Although a specific study of the connection between ritual practices and parting with objects is beyond the scope of this thesis, a connection between the two ideas is already taking place outside of the academic world.

### **Uniting Belief and Material Behavior**

In the work of Marie Kondo, we may find a unification of the belief in object sentience and a functional form of adult material behavior that has the potential to alleviate anxiety about possessions. In 2014, the English translation of *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up*, Kondo's first book, was released in the United States to almost



instant success. The book is a guide to decluttering both home and life, through a very specific set of guidelines for interaction with belongings. The aspect of her writing which caused a particular stir was a specific decluttering process. In this process, the person attempting to declutter would put all of their possessions into piles, then take each one into their hands and ask if it “spark[s] joy” (41); when the object does not, it is discarded with a verbal statement of thanks for what it has offered to the person’s life. People have been dually fascinated by the idea of both pausing to sense the emotions we associate with objects and taking the time to thank them as though they are living, and though we can only speculate about the origin of the practice, the impact of Kondo’s writing can be seen both in popular culture and personal accounts.

Kondo is a native-born Japanese woman, and her decluttering practices are in some ways reminiscent of both Shinto Buddhism and the aforementioned account of Tsukumogami. Her method focuses on being careful to not offend objects and endeavoring to make them as comfortable as possible, exemplified in *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up*’s detailed instructions regarding how (or how not) to fold clothing. She frequently writes about objects as if they are sentient, as in the case below of socks and stockings:

They take a brutal beating in their daily work, trapped between your foot and your shoe, enduring pressure and friction to protect your precious feet. The time they spend in your drawer is their only chance to rest. But if they are folded over, balled up, or tied, they are always in a state of tension . . . Any socks and stockings unfortunate enough to get pushed to the back of the drawer are often forgotten for so long that their elastic stretches beyond recovery. When the owner finally discovers them and puts them on, it will be too late and they will be relegated to the garbage. What treatment could be worse than this? (81)

This kind of description of the experience of inanimate objects seems to have struck a chord with many Westerners despite the fact that animism of any kind is not the default

point of understanding for Western culture. Perhaps this is because it is not outwardly a statement of religious worldview, but more of an outlook. It has, at any rate, become well-known enough that it can be glibly referenced on animated television programs and other popular culture products. In a recent episode of FOX's *Bob's Burgers*, a main character paraphrases Kondo's work, asking another character to sort through his belongings by picking each item up and ask himself, "Does this love me?" (Bouchard 2017). I think it's relevant to consider the fact that the program altered Kondo's "Does this spark joy?" (which is ultimately a question for the person holding the object) to be more oriented toward the object's intentions. This was done to comedic effect; the character asked to complete the task is depicted as a hoarder, who quickly responds "Yes, it loves me!" to every object in question. While this scene indicates that it is silly to be concerned with how an object feels about a person, it also reinforces how soothing the process can be.

There are those who would disregard Kondo's work as just another trend, but it has sparked a very real movement amongst her followers. On a single post on Marie Kondo's Instagram account (@mariekondo) captioned "How has your life changed since applying the #KonMari Method? Share your story via pics or comments!" her followers, sometimes referred to as "Konverts," posted over seventy individual responses detailing how the method has changed their lives. The hashtag #konmarilife has over 2,000 additional posts on the same platform as of January 2018. Many of the people responding to the prompt remark on how they are now living free from anxiety, which is a remarkable effect for a simple trend to have. In fact, it indicates that her method may have quite a bit to offer to both those who experience the belief in object sentience as a

symptom of anxiety and those who experience it without having an interpretive framework to place it in.

### **Seeking Positive Frameworks**

While the KonMari Method, psychology, and spirituality all offer frameworks for the belief in object sentience, they are not equally functional for all. In the accounts offered in this chapter, there is often a dichotomy of experience: people who experience a belief in object sentience generally fall into the categories of those who see it as a problem, and those who do not. Although there are some people for whom the experience is genuinely debilitating, there are others who found it to be a problem based more on outsider perception. As Anita states, “It was only when I started attending school and the teacher mentioned it to my parents, that I became quite guarded about showing this side of me, and only then I realised it may not be as normal as I thought.”<sup>41</sup> Without this formal judgment from the culture at large, it might be possible to find a positive side of the belief. As Pat puts it,

Why does there have to be a “diagnosis”? We are all wonderfully and humanly unique. May be this just shows the tenderness of your beautiful heart, extending to all things—animate or inanimate. I always make my grand daughters furry animals comfortable in her cot, and i don’t consider myself “mad” or in need of a psychological assessment. I bet lots of mums and grans do the same thing without being Autistic ,having OCD or anything else On a deeper level everything is made of the same stuff—consciousness—so maybe we on some level already know this . . . If everyone in the world was as empathic as you and all the rest of the people here – imagine how beautiful our world would be?<sup>42</sup>

This comment shows that there are people who do not completely identify with the experience of the belief in object sentience who are nevertheless prepared to interpret it and those who experience it as an asset to Western society. This mindset could easily pair

with the popularity of Marie Kondo's approach to housekeeping, which in itself implies that there is an audience out there who long to shift from a pathologizing view of interacting with objects to perceiving it as part of a functional adult material behavior. Both demonstrate that entering into an intentional relationship with the objects in our lives does not necessarily need to result in isolation and may instead lead to possibilities for those who believe in object sentience to engage meaningfully with those around them.

## FROM ISOLATION TO COMMUNITY AND RELATIONSHIP

In the last two chapters, I provided excerpts of personal accounts detailing the experience of believing in object sentience in both childhood and adulthood. Despite occurring across a range of ages, these accounts share many common features, including similarities in both the kinds of objects referenced and the descriptions of the emotions associated with the experience. What differed in these accounts were primarily the explanations offered for the origin of the belief and the interpretations of its effect on day-to-day life. This chapter will further consider important aspects of the accounts, but will put them in relationship to the larger Western cultural context by examining the connection between people who experience object sentience and those who do not. This chapter considers the importance of community for those who believe in object sentience, how an officially non-animistic culture engages in animist practice, and how people relate to the objects in their lives. In addition, discussion of these three ideas necessitates consideration of the effects of pathologizing and romanticizing belief.

### **From Shame to Finding Community**

An unfortunately prominent aspect of the accounts examined for this study is the expression that belief in object sentience was something people kept private and often experienced as a source of shame. This was particularly prevalent in the accounts offered by adults who still experienced the belief after childhood.<sup>43</sup> This shame seems to have derived from the fact that these adults perceived their experiences to be in one way or another abnormal. Although anthropomorphizing toys is considered a normal stage of childhood, there is a point between childhood and adulthood where, like many things, the

belief in object sentience suddenly becomes unacceptable and frowned upon, much in the same way that transitional objects like security blankets are no longer an acceptable companion beyond a certain age.

There are behaviors and beliefs that society expects to disappear as people transition to adolescence and adulthood, and adults lose some amount of respect if they continue to engage in them. If a person continues to believe in Santa Claus much later than grade school, they are likely to be mocked by their peers, and people who hold conversations with their belongings suffer a similar fate. The way society frames the belief in object sentience leads to adults being denied the perception of normalcy. However, children are similarly disenfranchised for holding the belief. The pathologization of adulthood beliefs functions in much the same way as the romanticization of childhood beliefs. By designating them as special, we set them apart from the norm and deny them the same weight as typical adult beliefs. Because their belief structures are not taken as seriously as those of neurotypical adults, both adults and children who believe in object sentience are expected to eventually discard their beliefs, an expectation which can lead to considerable distress.

If people cannot rid themselves of a belief that society considers abnormal, they may hide that belief from society, an act that denies them the possibility of discussing it openly with others. Many of the online accounts expressing a belief in object sentience describe a feeling of isolation, at times in combination with sadness or depression. The people I personally interviewed were less prone to delve into negative emotions, but, as referenced in the introduction, most of those people did still describe themselves as alone in their beliefs. Apart from interviewees like Josh and Lauren, who share their

understanding of object sentience with others whose belief systems are animist in their foundation, the people I spoke with expressed this belief as solely their own, something they experienced around other people, but not with other people. It is perhaps because of this isolation that people were so happy to find out that others have had the same experience.

The majority of my interview with Liz was spent smiling and laughing. We traded object sentience stories, and her enthusiasm for the material was apparent. This situation was echoed in the online forums, where people expressed excitement over how happy they were to discover that they weren't alone and swapped anecdotes of their own experiences. As contributors to the online communities, people related through the reflection of their own lives in others' words and formed clear connections to one another. The following exchange had by three users on *HealthBoards* is exemplary of the kinds of connections that take place:

Froggiegirl: My stuffed frogs have feelings, for each other and for me and other humans. They do not like humans who glare at them and are unkind to them.<sup>44</sup>

NoonBlueApples: It is strange that someone mentioned stuffed frogs, because my most important stuffed animal is my stuffed frog. If my house caught fire I would run through the flames to rescue George.<sup>45</sup>

Froggiegirl: I am the one who mentioned my stuffed frogs. I too would run into a burning building for my frog.<sup>46</sup>

NewYorker212: I feel so much better knowing I'm not the only one because I'd never heard anyone mention it before. It's funny that two of you mentioned having stuffed frogs, I have a stuffed frog too.<sup>47</sup>

While having similar experiences with such a specific type of object is more unique, people often related to the categories of objects users mentioned, including the common groups indicated in Childhood of food, cars, and clothing. Users also responded

with enthusiasm when others posted about behaviors in which they too had engaged. While many users participated in this reciprocal exchange and community-building by simply offering their own experiences, others offered advice. Across the message boards and personal interviews, there was a common theme of coping mechanisms. Several of my informants discussed how their parents developed techniques to mediate their concern for the well-being of objects, such as Liz's mother describing a party in the trash for unfinished food. While discussion of parents appears on message boards as well, adults who described their adulthood experiences often offer their own techniques to others when coping with object sentience. Although commenters on the board dedicated to the discussion of obsessive compulsive disorder primarily discussed medication as an option, others suggested mental redirection techniques and ways to engage others in the situation:

The solution for me is this: remembering that there are real beings out there with real feelings that actually are suffering, and I should use that mental energy to worry about/help them instead.<sup>48</sup>

I understand where you're coming from and I think a solution is to break the object down into its component parts - it may help reset your brain into recognising it as an object. For example - this is a washbag made of cotton. The cotton is made up of threads woven together. Each thread is made of plant fibre.<sup>49</sup>

[Referring to the dilemma of choosing one item over another at a store] It also helps to stick the forsaken sandwich (or stuffed animal, or book, or whatever) in prime, pick-me!! pick me!! position to increase selection odds by whomever comes next.<sup>50</sup>

The way I deal with feeling bad for objects is to rewrite their stories in my head . . . In your example with the tree, for instance, you could try seeing it as a brave tree that is shabby because it's been through a lot, and is proud to be the Christmas tree for the town even though it is shabby . . . Rewriting the story works for me because when you come right down to it, there *is* no truth of the matter . . . And I find that my brain just wants to imagine *something*, but I have great leeway to change the story to myself. It leads to a rich and fun inner life; I like it.<sup>51</sup>

[E]ven today I CANT throw things out, i have to leave the room and get my boyfriend to throw things out FOR me, i cant even watch.<sup>52</sup>



[I]f I am straining noodles and one falls out of the strainer and goes down the drain I feel bad for it . . . Sometimes I try to "accidentally" toss another noodle out of the strainer so it would be in the same situation as the first noodle. But then it gets worse. There's a point where you have to run the garbage disposal. I just can't do it. I usually walk away and whisper to my husband (once I'm out of hearing range of the noodles) to run the garbage disposal.<sup>53</sup>

While these methods of coping are often delivered with a note of humor, they indicate that the belief in object sentience is sometimes a problem that people seek to solve, or otherwise need to cope with in some way. Because of this, these pieces of advice come from the cultural environment that accepts that this belief should be changed in order for the people within the community to find acceptance in the culture at large. While change may be desirable for some, for those whose lives are not negatively impacted by the belief, the communities may have the effect of fostering internal acceptance of the belief which could eventually affect the outside world.

Regardless of whether they are offering solely personal accounts or are offering advice to others, the key to the function of the online forums is that they are building a sense of community where none was available before. The unique ability online forums have to create this experience has been well-documented in studies which

provide clear evidence that online forums afford users a way of being genuinely "together, together," as opposed to what Turkle (2012) calls "alone together." This can reap significant benefits for users' well-being, especially those with a stigmatizing issue who may prefer to limit face-to-face interaction. (Pendry and Salvatore 2015)

Through shared experience, these communities serve the needs of those who participate within them, but they have yet to reach a point where the belief in object sentience does not always need to be pathologized, and people don't feel the need to cope. For this to be

possible, a larger community must be identified in which it can be established as an acceptable belief.

### **Object Sentience in the World at Large**

Standing outside the groups of children and adults who do believe in object sentience are people who would never label themselves as believers. If these people were asked, “Does this table have feelings?” they would answer with a quick, decisive “No.” However, many people who would never describe their possessions as capable of sentiment are part of a larger culture where language and behavior often betray an underlying animist sensibility. Seemingly reasonable, typical adults will name their cars, personify toasters, and design technology to interact with its users.

As discussed in the second and third chapters, people tend to experience as sentient the objects in their lives to which they are most connected. Children tend to be connected to their toys, while adults often refer to the objects with which they come into the most frequent contact, including clothes and cars. This rule seems to hold true for those who do not generally experience the belief in object sentience as well. During my research, I have had a frequent experience when I explain my topic to people I encounter. While some get excited because they believe in object sentience, others will express the kind of polite, unspecific interest that implies that the topic is not of personal concern to them. That is, however, until I bring up that people sometimes treat their cars as if they are alive. Suddenly, people who had previously not identified personally with animist beliefs will light up and offer the names of their cars or mention how they apologize to them when they drive over a pothole. My own mother, a psychologist who would

definitely see the adult belief in object sentience as symptomatic of a disorder, would pat our car on the dashboard and say, “What a good car!” when it had carried us through a difficult patch of road when I was young.

Our Western tendency to anthropomorphize our primary possessions, combined with our tendency to respond verbally to the objects we interact with daily, reveals some animist quirks in Western behavior. Lois Rostow Kuznets references Margaret Mead to this effect, stating that she “maintains that, in supposedly nonanimistic Western cultures, animistic thinking is, nevertheless, embedded in language,” particularly with reference to how adults explain the way things work to children (1994:44). An example of this could be an adult saying that the car is tired when a child asks why it has broken down. Kuznets and Mead direct us to consider that Western adults not only talk to objects from time to time, but also speak about them in an animistic manner.

Nonanimistic adults may engage in animistic speaking in many aspects of their day-to-day existence, but tend to deny animism as a functional part of their belief systems. This tendency reflects that in the current Western world, humans are generally seen as the center of interaction. We act on objects, they do not act upon us. Michel Foucault has pointed out to the world at large that this idea of humankind as the ultimate subject is a relatively new phenomenon, just a few centuries old and directly related to the construction of language (1973), a fact which rhetoric scholars have taken into account as they wrestle with the concept of ascribing the world beyond humans with more power. They declare that “Things are also vibrant actors, enacting effects that exceed (and are sometimes in direct conflict with) human agency and intentionality” (Barnett and Boyle, 2016:1). These scholars argue for a new way of perceiving objects in

the Western world, an “Object-Oriented Ontology,” in which they are taken as seriously as humans. As this way of thinking is increasingly considered in academia, it may lead to a broader cultural acceptance of objects’ agency (an idea which has yet to gain footing with the general public), and Western people may learn to further embrace their animistic tendencies and come into greater relationship with the objects in their lives.

### **Relationship**

As previously discussed, Daniel Miller’s work in *Stuff* offers the perspective that human beings are in a constant state of reciprocal interaction with our environments. Candlin and Guins emphasize this point, writing that “our day-to-day, spiritual, sexual, social, cultural and political lives are conducted in relation to objects and thoroughly mediated by them in whatever forms they take” (2009:2). Not only does this mean that relationships with objects are unavoidable, but it indicates that those relationships merit a certain amount of daily engagement. While the people who experience the belief in object sentience may interact regularly with the objects in their lives, their actions exist as a microcosm of a bigger cultural behavior. Through a consideration of recent technological innovations and a cultural penchant for describing the ideal lifespan of objects, we can further explore how animist belief is revealed in both the words and actions of mainstream Western culture. This not only betrays a desire to interact with the objects in our world but may also indicate an inherent understanding of their potential to exist as independent entities as they are considered by those subscribing to the aforementioned Object-Oriented Ontology.

This is perhaps especially relevant as we develop a society that is increasingly involved with computerized technology. Kuznets makes a connection between animistic thinking and coping with a technological world. She states, “The popularity of Milne’s fantasies and Watterson’s comics<sup>54</sup> among adults as well as children seems to underline the encouragement of animism in children and adults’ adherence to animistic thought in the face of the complexities of modern technology” (1994:45). Consider the growth of “smart” technologies in the Western world. Home interface devices like Amazon’s Alexa and Google Home allow their users to control any smart device (such as thermostats, audio systems, and home security) through vocal interaction. Siri, the control system in Apple products, works in much the same way. These and similar systems are designed to be voice-activated, to offer users the ability to interact with technology through speech. The fact that these devices all have a kind of name is not irrelevant. Their artificial intelligence is designed so that they interact like people. Every year, humans develop more and more advanced artificial intelligence, all pushing toward a point where our interaction with objects can be seamless, easy, and anxiety-free.

David Rose labels these pieces of technological advancement “enchanted objects,” stating, “The idea of enchanted objects has deep roots in our childhood, in our adulation of superheroes and fascination with fantasy and science fiction, and in the fables, myths, and fairy tales that go back centuries. As a result, it seems as if we have always longed for a world of enchantment” (2014:9). I argue that what we long for, in fact, is a world of relationship. Rose makes a case in *Enchanted Objects* for a way in which people could achieve interaction with the everyday objects in our lives through an infusion of technology. He argues that doing so will please us because we will be able to

connect and interact with them as never before. However, what I and those who believe in object sentience might ask is, why are we not interacting with objects already? Some people are, and may have already found their way into the enchanted realm.

There are, of course, plenty of objects available to us for this kind of interaction. This stuff (as Miller would refer to it) consists primarily of smaller household objects and items, the objects which offer the most numerous of the potential relationships in our lives. Much like the people we come into relationship with, these objects enter our lives, spend time with us, and eventually depart--if we don't depart first. As discussed in *Adulthood*, people are often concerned about what will happen to their objects once they no longer possess them. The language of animist belief is particularly apparent in the way that people (both those who do and do not actively hold a belief in object sentience) discuss this stage in their relationships with objects.

At the time of this writing *Keep America Beautiful*, a nonprofit organization that works to encourage the public to take actions to improve their communities, has initiated a campaign to encourage recycling. This campaign features advertisements in which common objects are photographed and given voice in a caption that states how they want to be recycled. "I want to be a hairbrush," declares a shampoo bottle. "I used to be a steel can. Now I blaze trails all day," comments a bicycle wheel. Whether this was crafted by a person who does or does not believe in object sentience, I can't say. But like the Ikea commercial discussed in chapter three, this campaign relies on the cultural understanding that it is fine to imbue inanimate objects with the ability to think, feel, and speak. The ad also, however, relies on a general human desire for objects to have a fulfilling existence.

Concern for objects achieving their maximum potential or fulfilling their purpose is linked to the idea of the object biography (Kopytoff 1986), which enables people to talk about the lifespan of their objects. This lifespan may generally consist of the moment the item came into the person's life, the ways in which it has interacted with that person, and when the item ceased to belong to the person. This lifespan also has some cultural expectations. Much in the way we have unofficial criteria for what makes a good human life (involvement in community, satisfying work, a happy family, etc.), we have unofficial criteria for what makes an ideal object lifespan from its inception to the point where it is discarded. It is the point of being discarded that is often of particular concern to those who believe in object sentience. If every object exists or is created with some kind of purpose but does not fulfil that purpose, the general consensus is that the object's potential has been wasted. This was described by many commenters on the message boards:

Everything was made to have a purpose and it can keep serving it until the item is destroyed beyond recognition and is no longer able to perform its original task. Be either a bottle, a piece of gift wrap paper (which I never tear when I open a present), a box or a bag, I keep reusing them until they unvaoidably break. Throwing away something which isn't broken feels like an insult to the thing's purpose and to the potential uses they have left.<sup>55</sup>

I apologize to broken pens when I throw them away. I have to get every bean out of the can, so they can all have an equal chance to be eaten and fulfil their beanly duties.<sup>56</sup>

This dialogue is in no way limited to those who believe in object sentience. As briefly mentioned in the third chapter, even adults like Karley, who expressed some tendency toward animist beliefs as a child, but who denied any such thought processes as an adult, rarely discard possessions without thinking of what will become of them. Western culture

is preoccupied with finding good homes for our used objects, or making sure they have been well-used or well-loved.

This strange language we use in Western culture about how an object should live out its life reflects the way we feel about living beings. We want humans to have safe places to live and to avoid wasting their potential; we speak of objects in the same way. If objects require homes and we are concerned for the successful completion of their lifespans, animism exists well beyond the scope of the belief in object sentience in Western culture.

### **Accepting Object Sentience**

A few years ago, I attended a public memorial service for a young man named David who had passed away unexpectedly. At the service, one of David's best friends offered an anecdote. He described how he had once been passing through a hallway in their shared apartment when he heard David in the bathroom speaking to a toothbrush. He watched through the door as David thanked the old toothbrush for its service, kissed it, and dropped it into the garbage can. He then proceeded to unwrap a new toothbrush and welcome it to the bathroom. This anecdote was offered as an indication of David's sweet, quirky personality, and was met with smiles and laughs. It demonstrates how people outside of the experience of object sentience seem to consider it charming when those around them express care for objects and find it easy to romanticize from an etic perspective. It would not have been nearly as effective as an anecdote if Western culture thought this was standard behavior. But as we have seen, this behavior may not be



relegated to the pathologized or romanticized other and may be part of the larger cultural experience of relating to the world.

People exist in relationship with the objects in their lives. Accepting and understanding this fact may lead not only to a new perception of the belief in object sentience, but greater possibilities for interaction with our environment. While there are specific characteristics that define the experiences of people who adamantly believe in object sentience, their experience is indicative of a larger cultural trend which can facilitate this interaction. What if, instead of creating an environment wherein people must find methods for coping with their beliefs, we could create an environment where their beliefs are accepted? A world which embraces the KonMari Method and fills its advertisements with living objects seems prepared to accept the belief in object sentience, and doing so may have positive consequences.

## MOVING FORWARD

People who experience the belief in object sentience are generally not part of an official animist belief system and because of their experience they stand apart from traditional Western thought. Due to the lack of official belief structure and the fact that their beliefs are reflected in the culture at large but denied widespread acceptance, they are caught in a kind of liminal belief state. They have been isolated in their experience, romanticized, pathologized, and generally marginalized by Western culture. However, this is not the only option for considering their beliefs. By examining the Western culture of disbelief, we can ask why the official culture denies the validity of the experience, and by considering the more positive frameworks for the belief put forth by some of the people who experience it, we can consider the repercussions of doing something different.

### **Disbelief in Western Culture**

Cultures in power over others have a long history of skepticism when it comes to the belief systems of the cultures they dominate. Discounting the viability of alternative belief systems is part of what enabled religious wars, imperialist invasion, and European settlement in the United States. While these actions were often driven by the ideological backing of religious dogmatism or cultural imperialism, scientific rationalism has had a similarly powerful impact on the cultural landscape of the West. We can call the result of this movement a cultural tradition of disbelief, wherein strict materialists discount ways of understanding the world which rely on supernatural explanation (Hufford 1982b). This has led to a pervasive skepticism in Western culture, and it has affected the Western

perception of the belief in object sentience. Traditions of disbelief rely on the fact that it is easier for people to discount experiences outside of their own perceptual worldview than accept them as believable.

In “Traditions of Disbelief,” David J. Hufford discusses the ways in which skeptics explain paranormal phenomena. He writes that disbelievers generally argue that supernatural experience arises from hallucination, illusion, or misinterpretation (1982). While Hufford makes clear that he does not see these explanations as always detrimental, he states that they are “frequently overextended” beyond their usefulness (49). These explanations for supernatural experience connect well to Patrick Mullen’s discussion of romanticization and pathologization in “Belief and the American Folk.” Misinterpretation is the kind of thing that a child might do when confronted with a new, unrecognized stimulus, and childhood explanations for natural phenomena are frequently romanticized. Hallucination and illusion fall more into the category of pathologization, which determines that the perception is erroneous and could have harmful effects, and thus warrants correction.

This emphasis on pathologization of non-scientific belief is similarly addressed in *Fringeology*, where Steve Volk wrestles with many of the issues that arise when paranormal belief and skepticism intersect. He states that “strict materialists usually hold that all paranormal belief is harmful” (2011:249) and discusses a psychological study that labeled people who have had paranormal experiences as “Fantasy Prone Personalities” before drawing a correlation between their experience and schizophrenia (150). While he presents the idea that the scientific community generally sees any form of magical thinking as problematic, he notes specifically that “both the fantasy prone and the

magical thinkers often sail through life with no mental problems and exercise an increased faculty for creativity. So, I'd love to see some studies on what might be called *sane belief*" (151). This last comment is of particular importance as it highlights the potential for both harm and benefit when it comes to belief, as well as the possibility for a different framework for perceiving non-traditional belief structures. Partington and Grant, referenced in *Childhood's* discussion of the word "personification," conclude their writing on imaginary playmates by stating,

As individuals, and as a culture, we seem to possess the capacity for making beliefs and illusions to frame our lives, which can either nurture our growth, or destroy our future. Each of us, in our own way, is trying to deal with the paradox and promise of the human condition. (1984:237)

While their wording highlights the tendency of psychologists to fall back on equating belief with illusion, it does to some extent speak to the issues that surround the belief in object sentience. The belief does have the potential to cause emotional distress, which may need to be addressed through a pathologizing framework, but it also has a great deal of positive potential.

By considering what Volk outlines as the general perspective of the skeptical community when it comes to paranormal or supernatural belief, we may do what David J. Hufford proposes and take the scientific or psychological approaches to the belief in object sentience as Western traditional disbeliefs. As such, they are simply two ways of understanding the world, and not the final word on how people should frame the experiences and beliefs they have in their lives. The question becomes then, what will be the result of the frameworks we choose?

## Frameworks

The above quote from Partington and Grant is prefaced in their writing by a statement about children who have imaginary playmates:

[T]hose children and youth who choose to ‘be with’ their imaginary friends, to the exclusion of their siblings and peers, are perhaps no more deluded than those adults who invest inordinate time and effort in prayer, in polishing their new car, or in counting their money. (236)

This points to an important distinction in the way different beliefs are framed by the official culture of the West; scientific rationalism tends to frame all belief as a form of delusion, but culturally we have significant hierarchies in our approach to belief. Believing in the Easter Bunny is seen as sillier than believing in rituals for good luck, but both are seen as sillier than religious belief. Despite the fact that all are equally unprovable by the scientific method, some beliefs are socially acceptable, while others are not. Object sentience falls into the unacceptable category, right next to adult belief in the tooth fairy.

In previous chapters I have discussed the available interpretive frameworks of psychology, spirituality, and the KonMari method for those who experience the belief in object sentience. The three aforementioned frameworks offer relatively niche communities of people with whom to relate, but each of those communities may still lead to stigmatization. Psychological disorders, non-hegemonic spiritual beliefs, and trendy self-help practices all come with their own potential for negative perceptions. Outside the safe space provided by others in those communities, a person who believes in object sentience runs the risk of being treated like an adult who believes in Santa Claus. However, some of the people who describe their experiences online are fighting for wider acceptance of their beliefs by citing their positive qualities. This starts in the smaller

communities where the conversations about object sentience initially take place, where those advocating for the belief speak to why they want to hold it with language that indicates its potentially positive effects on the world at large.

In Adulthood, I quoted Pat, who argued strongly against the idea that the experience requires diagnosis. She heartily encourages the people who experience the belief to accept it as a positive aspect of their personalities, commenting, “If everyone in the world was as empathic as you and all the rest of the people here – imagine how beautiful our world would be?” Katie chimed in with a similar message on the same comment thread:

It makes me a better person. It makes me treat the environment better and appreciate things, so that I treat my things well and don’t just throw them out and unnecessarily pollute the environment like so many consumerists do . . . I think many autistic traits are here because we can make the world a better place. Let’s see them in a positive light and use them to do good in the world.<sup>57</sup>

This sentiment was echoed by several people on *AskMetaFilter*, including Wordwoman, quoted in chapter three as saying “I suspect the environment would be in better shape if more people shared your problem,” and Ashley801, who states, “I think it would be a better world if everyone were the same way. (Probably a much less efficient world, but still).”<sup>58</sup> It is far from irrelevant that people bring up the environment when discussing the belief in object sentience. Human beings exist as part of an environment that is laden with objects and requires constant interaction and relationship. Animism is a religious cosmology that hinges on a respectful treatment of the environment as well as mindful relationships with non-human entities; it requires those who practice it to let go of the idea of human supremacy in the world. By considering how our everyday objects relate

to the other things we consider to be inanimate in the West, the belief in object sentience may have the potential to do the same thing.

Timothy Morton coined the term “hyperobjects” to refer to environmental systems in which humans are enmeshed or with which they are sometimes forced to come into contact. Hyperobjects include things like black holes and climate change, and by the fact of their existence force humans to realize the folly of anthropocentrism. Discussing the philosophical turn towards an object-oriented ontology,<sup>59</sup> Morton reminds us that what “ecological thought must do, then, is unground the human by forcing it back onto the ground, which is to say, standing on a gigantic object called Earth inside a gigantic entity called biosphere” (2013:18). If a culture sees the planet as an object in the negative sense of the world (as a thing incapable of action), they are far more likely to treat it with disrespect because, as we have come to accept culturally, objects are not sentient and humans can do as they wish with them. People who experience the belief in object sentience treat the objects in their lives differently. They treat them with the consideration with which they treat other humans. This often means that they take care of their objects, are concerned about objects fulfilling their purposes, and feel remorse when objects become damaged. What state would the global environment be in if all humans treated it with the same consideration?

Craig Chalquist describes the current state of environmental consideration by writing, “It’s a strange and perilous worldview. Everything in the world but human beings, we are told, stands frozen, mute, unintelligent, insensitive, oblivious, dispirited, deanimated, and soulless.” He goes on to ask, “Might it be time to junk this lethal worldview and explore an outlook that lets us love, listen to, and appreciate the things

around us?” (2013). The belief in object sentience offers the West an opportunity to do just that. Those who experience it treat the objects in their lives with dignity, respect, and great care because in their system of thought humans are not the only entities that deserve consideration. If, as a culture, the West moved more toward this way of thinking, it could create an opportunity for humans to embrace their state of relationship with the world, rather than attempting to dominate it. Given the Western tendency to grant objects sentience in popular culture and advertising, this might not even require a total restructuring of worldview.

For the commenters above, the experience of the belief in object sentience is part of what it means to be a sensitive, empathic human being, and could have positive repercussions as a result. Sensitive is a word with many connotations; people describe being sensitive as children (see *Childhood*), but it’s always in the past tense. It seems as if in Western society, children are expected to grow out of sensitivity much in the same way they are expected to grow out of the belief in object sentience. If the comments by Pat, Katie, Wordwoman, and Ashley801 hold true, forcing people to grow out of both could lead to less-sensitive, less-empathic adults who may be more likely to disregard the importance of their relationship with the environment. These people are not only arguing for a change in the perception of sensitivity, they are fighting for a broader positive framework for the belief in object sentience.

### **Conclusion: Finding Patterns and Offering Recognition**

There are enough people in the West who believe that objects are sentient to warrant a careful consideration of what they believe, why they believe it, and how they



exist in relationship to official cultural norms. All three of these things can be broken down into groupings of patterns.

### *What They Believe*

The group of people studied in this thesis experience the belief that the objects in their lives are sentient. These people may have held the belief in childhood, adulthood, or throughout their lives, and it is more pervasive for some than others. The objects in question can be naturally occurring or man-made, but they are most likely to be personal possession or objects commonly encountered in the course of daily life. Their main distinguishing characteristic is that they would be considered inanimate by the world at large. Though they are generally not perceived as directly communicating with the people in question, these objects are felt to be capable of the same range of emotion and perception as human beings. For some, this is a belief that detrimentally impacts their ability to function in the world, for others (including many described in this chapter), it is a positive experience that leads to greater connection with the world.

### *Why They Believe It*

Though the “what” of the belief is fairly consistent, the explanations for the belief’s origin vary greatly. In childhood, it can be ascribed to both internal and external sources. From the internal perspective some theorize that the belief is simply part of childhood development or comes from sensitivity or loneliness, while the external explanation usually involves the influence of popular children’s fiction. In adulthood, the belief is sometimes packaged in similar interpretations, but also comes with a new set of

explanations. It can be identified as a symptom of a mental or cognitive disorder, linked to spiritual belief systems, explained as part of a larger cultural tendency to personify or anthropomorphize objects, and sometimes it is described by those who hold it as a belief that just inexplicably exists in their lives. The explanation each person chooses for their own experience may impact whether or not they perceive it as a positive or negative presence in their lives, and can affect whether they choose to accept and integrate it into the way they live.

### *Fitting In*

Those who experience the belief in object sentience without a preexisting animist belief structure walk amongst the officially non-animistic culture of Western Society as outsiders, often lacking a connection to discuss the belief with others. Some have been able to find groups like those engaged in the KonMari Method, where their beliefs can be integrated into material practice. Others have found online communities where they can relate to others by both offering ways to cope with negative aspects of the belief and sharing positive experiences. By seeking out online communities and arguing for positive perceptions of the belief, those who are glad to experience it have created an atmosphere of acceptance that has the potential to spread.

Folklorists can contribute to this acceptance by taking several steps to legitimize their experience. The first step is to recognize that the people who believe in object sentience are part of a larger group of people who share their experience and can thus be seen as experiencing belief as a folk group. The second step is to recognize their experience as a belief on the same level of study as any other recognized belief, to be

neither romanticized or pathologized unless a specific situation warrants the latter. By taking these steps we can start to create a broader supportive framework for those who experience the belief in object sentience.

## NOTES

1. Merriam-Webster, s.v. “anthropomorphism,” accessed February 7, 2018, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/anthropomorphism> and Merriam-Webster s.v. “personification,” accessed February 7, 2018, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/personification>.

2. There are two general notes I’d like to make about these accounts. First, direct quotations may include British spellings, which indicate that the user in question is from the United Kingdom. Secondly, in addition to the other online sources I conducted some interviews through a messaging platform. In both cases, I chose to include any errors present in the accounts as they appeared in the interview text or the message boards in order to retain their original texture.

3. Brian Sutton-Smith and Diana Kelly-Byrne recognize the predominance of “positively toned views of play,” in the West but also point out that it is not a universal perception in “The Idealization of Play” (1984:306).

4. This was also the case for Brian Sutton-Smith, who gathered “play biographies” from students over the course of several years before compiling *Toys as Culture* (1986:208). His informants, like mine, were adults reflecting back on their childhoods, so it is perhaps interesting to note such a similarity when there is a thirty year gap between our collection efforts.

5. Cory. Personal interview, Facebook Messenger, 21 September 2017.

6. Alex. Personal interview, Facebook Messenger, 13 October 2017.

7. Gemma. Personal interview, 27 September 2017.

8. Liz. Personal interview, 29 October 2017.

9. Cory, 2017.

10. Alex, 2017.

11. Russ. Personal interview, 20 September 2017.

12. Karley. Personal interview, 8 April 2017.

13. Josh describes here a stuffed animal version of the character Littlefoot from *The Land Before Time* (1988).

14. Josh. Personal interview, 24 September 2017.

15. Russ, 2017.

16. Cory, 2017.

17. Liz, 2017.

18. Gemma, 2017.

19. Karley, 2017.

20. Liz, 2017.

21. Lauren. Personal interview, 15 April 2017.

22. Karley, 2017.

23. Russ, 2017.

24. Alex, 2017.

25. Anonymous, October 10, 2017 (10:31 p.m.), comment on Steve, “Autism: Feeling Sympathy for Inanimate Objects” on *Adults With Autism.Org.Uk* (blog), June 29, 2015, <http://adultswithautism.org.uk/autism-feeling-sympathy-for-objects/>.

26. Anonymous, September 22, 2017 (10:27 p.m.), comment on Steve, “Autism: Feeling Sympathy for Inanimate Objects” on *Adults With Autism.Org.Uk* (blog), June 29, 2015, <http://adultswithautism.org.uk/autism-feeling-sympathy-for-objects/>.

27. Hangtenvetter, March 22, 2004, (7:40 p.m.), comment on NewYorker212, “Do Inanimate Objects Have Feelings to You?” on *HealthBoards / OCD* (message board), March 21, 2004 (9:06 p.m.), <https://www.healthboards.com/boards/obsessive-compulsive-disorder-ocd/158993-do-inanimate-objects-have-feelings-you.html>.

28. UpsideDownTofu, April 28, 2016 (4:11 p.m.), comment on lifeis-strange, “Thinking Inanimate Objects Have Feelings,” *Reddit / INFP* (message board), April 27, 2016 (7:23 p.m.), [https://www.reddit.com/r/infp/comments/4gq4qo/thinking\\_inanimate\\_objects\\_have\\_feelings/](https://www.reddit.com/r/infp/comments/4gq4qo/thinking_inanimate_objects_have_feelings/).

29. Lmao” is a commonly used online acronym for “Laughing my ass off,” while the final series of punctuation creates an emoticon of a face that is crying while smiling--similar to the laughing while crying emoji common in text message.

30. greenish, November 22, 2010 (2:08 p.m.), “Why Do I Think Things Have Feelings?,” *Ask MetaFilter* (message board), <https://ask.metafilter.com/171232/Why-do-i-think-Things-have-feelings>.

31. NewYorker212, March 21 2004 (9:06 p.m.), “Do Inanimate Objects Have Feelings to You?” *HealthBoards / OCD* (message board), <https://www.healthboards.com/boards/obsessive-compulsive-disorder-ocd/158993-do-inanimate-objects-have-feelings-you.html>.

32. fluffynoses, 2016, comment on The Hall of Advertising, “IKEA - Lamp (2002,USA),” on *Youtube*. January 28, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jU-cori12KU>.

33. Wordwoman, November 22, 2010 (2:19 p.m.), comment on greenish, “Why Do I Think Things Have Feelings?,” *Ask MetaFilter* (message board), November 22, 2010 (2:08 p.m.) <https://ask.metafilter.com/171232/Why-do-i-think-Things-have-feelings>.

34. greenish, 2010.

35. RatGirl, March 24, 2004 (12:00 a.m.), comment on NewYorker212, “Do Inanimate Objects Have Feelings to You?” on *HealthBoards / OCD* (message board), March 21, 2004 (9:06 p.m.), <https://www.healthboards.com/boards/obsessive-compulsive-disorder-ocd/158993-do-inanimate-objects-have-feelings-you.html>.

36. Anita, November 12, 2017 (3:56 a.m.), comment on Steve, “Autism: Feeling Sympathy for Inanimate Objects” on *Adults With Autism.Org.Uk* (blog), June 29, 2015, <http://adultswithautism.org.uk/autism-feeling-sympathy-for-objects/>.

37. Lauren, 2017.

38. Lea, September 21, 2017 (5:23 a.m.), comment on Steve, “Autism: Feeling Sympathy for Inanimate Objects” on *Adults With Autism.Org.Uk* (blog), June 29, 2015, <http://adultswithautism.org.uk/autism-feeling-sympathy-for-objects/>.

39. Anonymous, September 21, 2017 (7:01 p.m.), comment on Steve, “Autism: Feeling Sympathy for Inanimate Objects” on *Adults With Autism.Org.Uk* (blog), June 29, 2015, <http://adultswithautism.org.uk/autism-feeling-sympathy-for-objects/>.

40. Reider cites a variant of the *Tsukumogami ki* in which common people are encouraged “to perform (or have a [Shingon] priest perform) memorial services for their discarded goods” (220).

41. Anita, 2017.

42. Pat, December 4, 2017 (2:53 p.m.) comment on Steve, “Autism: Feeling Sympathy for Inanimate Objects” on *Adults With Autism.Org.Uk* (blog), June 29, 2015, <http://adultswithautism.org.uk/autism-feeling-sympathy-for-objects/>.

43. See NewYorker212’s statement referenced on page 33.

44. Froggiegirl, March 23, 2004 (2:39 a.m.) comment on NewYorker212, “Do Inanimate Objects Have Feelings to You?” on *HealthBoards / OCD* (message board), March 21, 2004 (9:06 p.m.), <https://www.healthboards.com/boards/obsessive-compulsive-disorder-ocd/158993-do-inanimate-objects-have-feelings-you.html>.

45. NoonBlueApples, March 23, 2004 (10:04 p.m.) comment on NewYorker212, “Do Inanimate Objects Have Feelings to You?” on *HealthBoards / OCD* (message board), March 21, 2004 (9:06 p.m.), <https://www.healthboards.com/boards/obsessive-compulsive-disorder-ocd/158993-do-inanimate-objects-have-feelings-you.html>.

46. Froggiegirl, March 24, 2004 (2:11 a.m.) comment on NewYorker212, “Do Inanimate Objects Have Feelings to You?” on *HealthBoards / OCD* (message board), March 21, 2004 (9:06 p.m.), <https://www.healthboards.com/boards/obsessive-compulsive-disorder-ocd/158993-do-inanimate-objects-have-feelings-you.html>.

47. NewYorker212, March 26, 2004 (8:15 a.m.) comment on NewYorker212, “Do Inanimate Objects Have Feelings to You?” on *HealthBoards / OCD* (message board), March 21, 2004 (9:06 p.m.), <https://www.healthboards.com/boards/obsessive-compulsive-disorder-ocd/158993-do-inanimate-objects-have-feelings-you.html>.

48. Ashley801, November 22, 2010 (2:17 p.m.), comment on greenish, “Why Do I Think Things Have Feelings?,” *Ask MetaFilter* (message board), November 22, 2010 (2:08 p.m.) <https://ask.metafilter.com/171232/Why-do-i-think-Things-have-feelings>.

49. cryptozoology, November 22, 2010 (2:43 p.m.), comment on greenish, “Why Do I Think Things Have Feelings?,” *Ask MetaFilter* (message board), November 22, 2010 (2:08 p.m.) <https://ask.metafilter.com/171232/Why-do-i-think-Things-have-feelings>.

50. changeling, November 22, 2010 (2:46 p.m.), comment on greenish, “Why Do I Think Things Have Feelings?,” *Ask MetaFilter* (message board), November 22, 2010 (2:08 p.m.) <https://ask.metafilter.com/171232/Why-do-i-think-Things-have-feelings>.

51. forza, November 22, 2010 (2:54 p.m.), comment on greenish, “Why Do I Think Things Have Feelings?,” *Ask MetaFilter* (message board), November 22, 2010 (2:08 p.m.) <https://ask.metafilter.com/171232/Why-do-i-think-Things-have-feelings>.

52. Tree Hugger, April 14, 2004 (11:46 p.m.), comment on NewYorker212, “Do Inanimate Objects Have Feelings to You?” on *HealthBoards / OCD* (message board), March 21, 2004 (9:06 p.m.), <https://www.healthboards.com/boards/obsessive-compulsive-disorder-ocd/158993-do-inanimate-objects-have-feelings-you.html>.

53. Robyn, March 16, 2016 (12:41 a.m.), comment on Anonymous, “Why do I feel sorry for inanimate objects? Is it normal?” on *Yahoo! Answers* (message board), <https://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20090705010129AAL4kQL>.

54. Here, Kuznets references *Winnie the Pooh* (Milne) and *Calvin and Hobbes* (Watterson), two fictional series in which stuffed toys are depicted as both sentient and mobile.

55. Tybay, August 29, 2014 (6:28 p.m.), comment on itsjustin, “Inanimate objects have feelings,” *Social Anxiety Support* (message board), August 28, 2014 (6:45 a.m.) <http://www.socialanxiety.com/forum/f33/inanimate-objects-have-feelings-1160026/>.

56. vickyverky, November 22, 2010 (3:21 p.m.), comment on greenish, “Why Do I Think Things Have Feelings?,” *Ask MetaFilter* (message board), November 22, 2010 (2:08 p.m.) <https://ask.metafilter.com/171232/Why-do-i-think-Things-have-feelings>.

57. Katie, September 21, 2017 (7:28 p.m.) comment on Steve, “Autism: Feeling Sympathy for Inanimate Objects” on *Adults With Autism.Org.Uk* (blog), June 29, 2015, <http://adultswithautism.org.uk/autism-feeling-sympathy-for-objects/>.

58. Ashley801, November 22, 2010 (2:18 p.m.), comment on greenish, “Why Do I Think Things Have Feelings?,” *Ask MetaFilter* (message board), November 22, 2010 (2:08 p.m.) <https://ask.metafilter.com/171232/Why-do-i-think-Things-have-feelings>.

59. A philosophical system of thought which pushes for the dismantling of the anthropocentric view of the world and argues for the importance of objects as agents in reality.

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