

RESEARCH

The Colonial Home: Managing Objects and Servants in British India

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Colonial domesticity in India was often a fraught exercise. Guidebooks such as Flora Annie Steel and Grace Gardiner's *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook* offered advice on how a household may be run. This essay examines the above work to argue that domesticity was in fact political. It involved the organization of material objects in the English home in the colony, and the organization of native servant bodies. These were two sites of imperial anxiety. Steel and Gardiner present a cosmopolitan Englishness in the choice of material objects, where the English home was to be a space where products from multiple cultural origins may be found. Then, even when representing the docile bodies of the native servants, Steel and Gardiner implied a dangerous agency. Both objects and bodies, given how they determined Englishness, demanded control – which is effectively the advice of Steel and Gardiner.

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John Malcolm, early in the nineteenth century, had issued a set of instructions for the English officers for their official-public interactions with their Indian subordinates:

Our power in India rests on the general opinion of the Natives of our comparative superiority in good faith, wisdom, and strength, to their own rulers. This important impression will be improved by the consideration we shew to their habits, institutions, and religion, by the moderation, temper, and kindness with which we conduct ourselves. (32)

Malcolm was warning the British officers about moderation in their behaviour in India, just as many etiquette books, by Indian and English authors, cautioned the Indians about emotional outbursts or even excessively ornate or effusive expressions in their interactions with the British. Clearly, then, the British were concerned about interracial dynamics in the colony, and hence the perceived necessity for the “management” of manners and behaviour in imperial relations (Nayar 2016). The domestic equivalent of this management appears in the form of works like Flora Annie Steel and Grace Gardiner's best-selling *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook* (1888, it had seven editions by 1909). The work opens with the following statement:

Housekeeping in India, when once the first strangeness has worn off, is a far easier task in many ways than it is in England, though it none the less requires time ... Easy, however, as the actual housekeeping is in India, the personal attention of the mistress is quite as much needed here as at home. The Indian servant, it is true, learns more readily, and is guiltless of the sniffiness with which Mary Jane receives suggestions; but a few days of absence or neglect on the part of the mistress, results in the servants falling into their old habits with the inherited conservatism of dirt. (1–2)

Maud Diver in *The Englishwoman in India* (1909) declares that the Englishwoman knows little about how her sister, and fellow Englishwoman, lives in India, and dismisses the latter as “idle, frivolous, and luxury-loving”, although “deeper knowledge of what life in India really means would soften those criticisms to a surprising extent” (5). It is a life, she says later “hedged about with dangers, difficulties, and hardships rarely dreamed

of in our placid English homes" (21). Misapprehensions and misunderstandings over the role, behaviour and lifestyles of the Memsahibs were rife, as these cited and other texts demonstrated, in nineteenth and early twentieth century British India.

In this context of varied views of the Englishwoman in India, advice books such as the above offered detailed instructions from cooking to dealing with recalcitrant native servants in an attempt to codify practices of the Memsahib running a colonial household. Commentators reading such texts and colonial fiction have argued that the space of the English home and family in colonial India was constructed within, and occasionally in contest with, imperial ideologies (George; Buettner; Joseph). Alison Blunt identifies an "imperial discourse of domesticity" in colonial writings set in India (426; Levine). The management of things, servants and process within the domestic realm is an allegory for the management of the Empire itself. Others have argued that the English home instantiates a "political domesticity" within a colonial "social sphere" – located between the private and the public – in which English official identities were constructed (Nayar 2012).

This essay extends the arguments about political domesticity to propose that colonial households construct an Englishness founded on (i) the organization of objects and on (ii) the organization of native servant bodies. By "organization" I mean to signal the classification and disciplining/management of objects and servants. Evidence for this "organization", in this essay, is tracked through the discourses of housekeeping. Finally, I conclude that there is a link established between the household objects and the servant bodies that generates imperial anxieties over the state of the English home that demands the management of both.

Household Objects

In the course of just two pages of their work, Steel and Gardiner list the various brands of items to be procured to cook, serve and furnish the household are listed: Snowflake American, Norwegian Anchovies, Acerboni and Co. (wine merchants in Calcutta), Maypole Soap, Bolton sheeting, Hall's sanitary paint, and others (12–13, 29–30). Later there are suggestions about Mellin's, Benger's, Allenbury's milk powder and products (167). Medical textbooks as advice manuals for young mothers are also recommended: "two excellent Medical Handbooks – Birch's edition of Goodeves' "Hints on the Management of Children," and Dr. A. W. Chase on "Children" (174). Brand names are sprinkled throughout Steel and Gardiner's work.

This focus on brands and certain specific items is, I suggest, integral to the British construction of their homes in the literal sense, but also their identity. It is impossible to verify whether these recommendations of brands were indeed taken seriously, and English households purchased and used them; but the point is that material goods of certain quality and brand-value were central to the idea of the English home.

If, as Deborah Cohen (2006) argues, material possessions came to define the Victorian home in England, the cosmopolitan sourcing and utilization of brands defined the English home in India, if we infer that the products recommended were indeed procured and used in the colony. Brand advice, in other words, is imperial domesticity as it was imagined but also as it was embodied in commodities.

The organization of commodities and objects – by which I mean the arrangement for safekeeping, maintenance and transport – are as important as the acquisition of the goods. Thus, Steel and Gardiner offer detailed suggestions on how household items need to be transported to the hill station when the family would make the summer journey:

The following is a list showing the way in which the property of a family, consisting of a lady, three or four children, and an English nurse, might be packed and loaded:—

1st camel load: Two large trunks and two smaller ones with clothing.

2nd camel load: One large trunk containing children's clothing, plate chest, three bags, and one bonnet-box.

3rd camel load: Three boxes of books, one box containing folding chairs, light tin box with clothing.

4th camel load: Four cases of stores, four cane chairs, saddle-stand, mackintosh sheets.

5th camel load: One chest of drawers, two iron cots, teatable, pans for washing up.

6th camel load: Second chest of drawers, screen, lamps, 1 lanterns, hanging wardrobes.

7th camel load: Two boxes containing house linen, two casks containing ornaments, 1 ice-pails, angethis, door-mats.

8th camel load: Three casks of crockery, another cask containing ornaments, filter, pardah bamboos, tennis-poles.

9th camel load: Hot-case, milk-safe, baby's tub and stand, sewing-machine, fender and irons, water-cans, pitchers.

10th camel load: Three boxes containing saddlery, kitchen utensils, carpets.

11th camel load: Two boxes containing drawing-room sundries, servants' coats, iron bath, cheval glass, plate basket.

Or the above articles could be loaded on four country carts, each with three or four bullocks for the up hill journey and two or three for the descent. (200–01)

Commodities to be purchased for specific rooms in the home, even a temporary one, are inventoried here. Recreational items, heavy furniture, kitchen fittings are all part of this list. The family moves with its people and things. Steel and Gardiner recommending not only brands but also the spatial and temporal organization of these goods employ a process of "objectification". Material culture theorist Christopher Tilley writes about objectification:

Material forms, as objectifications of social relations and gendered identities, often 'talk' silently about these relationships in ways impossible in speech or formal discourses ... The material object may be a powerful metaphorical medium through which people may reflect on their world in and through their material practice. Through the artefact, layered and often contradictory sets of meanings can be conveyed simultaneously. (62)

Steel and Gardiner, in this reading, objectify Englishness in terms of a cosmopolitan taste and brand-deployment of particular material objects. The English home, if it adopts the advice of Steel and Gardiner, would be a space where multiple products from multiple cultural origins may be found, and this defines Englishness itself. Thus, brands and objects are modes of *mediating* India. That is, for the British, as envisioned by works like Steel and Gardiner's, objects, especially those chosen, purchased, maintained and organized in specific ways and from specific stores/brands, are a means of intervening between the realities of India and their Englishness. The objects define Englishness, in their brand value, which is reinforced and even amplified through detailed processes of maintenance, usage and arrangement.

This suggests that the English home was not merely an index of Englishness, but an Englishness defined by its ability to acquire and deploy goods from diverse global locations as well. Such a line of argument moves us to consider Englishness as acquired not only through objectification but also through the transnational movements of material objects.

Household Servant Bodies

Steel and Gardiner devote an entire chapter (chapter VI) to the duties of servants in India. The chapter begins thus:

In the following chapter the authors have adopted the division of labour which obtains in Bengal and Northern India. In Bombay, Madras, Ceylon, and Burmah the manner of life is so different, that residents in these Presidencies will find it necessary to piece the duties of the various servants together into a new classification. Nevertheless, it is none the less certain that the work has to be performed, whether the worker be called by one name or another; also, that the majority of servants, from Himalaya to Cape Comorin, are absolutely ignorant of the first principles of their various duties. The masaul doing the lamps in Bombay is quite as likely to do them badly as his congener, the Bengali bearer, while the Madras butler's besetting sins are not far removed from those of the Oude khidmutgar. The authors, therefore, believe that, given this slight difference in classification, the following brief outline of household duties will be found useful all over India. To facilitate this alteration, they give a comparative table showing the work assigned to each servant and the approximate wages demanded by good servants of each class at the present time in the various Presidencies. (54)

The above passage also serves as a taxonomy of the peoples of India. The servants are also brought together on a continuum of vice and inefficiency, where the Oude khidmutgar and the Madras butler are more or less the same. Implying here a subcontinental trait of indolence that cuts across castes and geographical

regions, the passage indicts entire populations at one go. Thus, while admitting that inefficiency could be the hallmark of the native servants in any Presidency and any part of the subcontinent, the authors go on to organize forms of labour and their approximate value.

Innumerable anecdotes about careless, faithful, corrupt and indifferent servants are woven into Steel's narratives. There are anecdotes about well-intentioned but foolish servants – such as the one who, according to Steel, used his toes as a toast-rack (2). There are *khidmutgars* who, when serving butter and toast, seek to present it aesthetically. Steel writes:

[khidmutgars] should be generally discouraged from making it [butter] the medium for a display of his powers in plastic art; it is doubtless gratifying to observe such yearning after beauty, even in butter, but it is suggestive of too much handling to be pleasant. (46)

Or a description of the careless servant: “Servants in India are particularly careless in serving up cold viands” (47).

The English home in India often suffered at the hands of the native servants, if Steel and Gardiner are to be believed. They caution against hiring too many servants, especially because there may not be enough work for all of them:

As a rule, the fewer domestics you have the better they will perform their duties. Nothing, in fact, upsets the smooth working of a household like too much leisure or a too minute division of responsibility. (37)

Steel and Gardiner advise the Memsahib to ensure that the servants are kept busy, for instance, by preparing a full-fledged dining table even when there are no guests:

With the number of servants in Indian houses, there is no reason why the table should not be laid, and the dinner routine gone through with the same details when you are alone, as when there are guests in the house. In addition, it is fatal to a cook to let him get slack under any circumstances, while there is really no more reason why your husband should be treated to an ill-considered meal than your guest; perhaps less, since the guest will not complain, and the husband most certainly will. (50)

In order to safeguard the family's space, they suggest, the native servants need to be constantly monitored. In short, domesticity demands a constant vigilance over the servants.

In terms of the interaction between white masters and native servants, it must be noted that the myth of a strict separation of the white family from the native servant class in the household is not borne out by evidence, at least in the case of Calcutta. Swati Chattopadhyay's (2000, 2002) work on houses in colonial Calcutta shows that even though the architecture of the house implied separation and segregation, the reality on the ground was quite different. The concern here is not with the architecture and spatial practices of the house but on the construction of the Indian servant-class in the household.

Native servants, even when utterly faithful, have a negative impact, says Maud Diver. She writes about the servants devoted to the English children in India:

she will be zealous in guarding her children from promiscuous intimacy with the native servants, whose propensity to worship at the shrine of the *Baba-log* is unhappily apt to demoralise the small gods and goddesses they serve. (36)

Elsewhere, Diver would say that native servants “thieve almost as instinctively as the monkey and the squirrel” (67–8); and again:

In fine, if a woman wills to keep house successfully in India, she must possess before all things a large tolerance and a keen sense of justice, rare feminine virtues both, even in these days. She must train her mind to look upon petty falsehoods, thefts, and uncleanness not as heinous offences, but as troublesome propensities, to be quietly and firmly checked. Swift should she be also to recognise the trustworthy man, and to trust him liberally. (70)

If the mistress is firm, Diver says, the home will run successfully:

But he and his kind are nothing if not tractable, and in this matter, as in all others, the mistress who *knows* and *insists* will not fail, in due time, to enter into the reward of her labours. (73, emphasis in original)

Steel and Gardiner underscore agency, one which requires monitoring, in other words, as in this kind of advice: “the cook should be encouraged to act on his own responsibility in minor details, and be praised when he has contrived some fresh pudding or side-dish” (72). I suggest that Steel’s anecdotes and Diver’s character-sketches serve a key purpose – that of demonstrating, variously, native agency, infantilism and stupidity, all of which requires, indeed demands, the work of supervision within the home, exactly as the Empire requires monitoring overall.

This is an exercise in branding because the servants, even when foolish or naïve, could cause enormous damage and hence the need of the Memsahib’s firm hand.

That the servants are agential in their very subservience and inferiority might seem a startling reading of passages such as the above. However, such a history of representing the native as agential even when pretending obeisance does exist. For example, Swapna Banerjee has noted that the representation of the wet-nurse, the *dayee*, as agential, “active wage earners defying, sabotaging and subverting their Western employers” (780). Branding and categorizing servants in this fashion was, then, preliminary to arguing the case for the training of the white woman in running a home. Steel and Gardiner open their treatise with numerous statements about the governance of the domestic scene:

The first duty of a mistress is, of course, to be able to give intelligible orders to her servants ... (2)

the end and object is not merely personal comfort, but the formation of a home—that unit of civilisation where father and children, master and servant, employer and employed, can learn their several duties. When all is said and done also, herein lies the natural outlet for most of the talent peculiar to women. It is the fashion nowadays to undervalue the art of making a home; to deem it simplicity and easiness itself. But this is a mistake, for the proper administration of even a small household needs both brain and heart. (7)

[A]n Indian household can no more be governed peacefully, without dignity and prestige, than an Indian Empire. (9)

Home, then, requires no less management than an empire, because it is a “unit of civilization”. In Fae Dussart’s reading:

Anglo-Indian mistresses privileged the domestic sphere as the place where the relations of power structuring racial and gender identities were learned by employers and servants alike. Mistresses (and, less often, masters) saw themselves as doing a service to imperial society by training their domestic employees in the duties of civilised life. (707)

In some cases, contrasts are drawn between Indian and English servant classes.

First, the Indian servant is infantilized:

Certainly, there is at present very little to which we can appeal in the average Indian servant, but then, until it is implanted by training, there is very little sense of duty in a child; yet in some well-regulated nurseries obedience is a foregone conclusion. The secret lies in making rules, and keeping to them. The Indian servant is a child in everything save age, and should be treated as a child; that is to say, kindly, but with the greatest firmness. (Steel and Gardiner 2–3)

Then their lack of discipline when handling children is highlighted:

There are some who think with us that for tiny babies a really good ayah is excellent; indeed, often more satisfactory than the general run of English and Eurasian nurses, though the mother has all

the responsibility of looking after her and the baby. A good ayah, however, is difficult to get. We learn also that as a rule the class of English servants who go out to India are not the best, require waiting upon, and are not always reliable. Also, though some young girls from the Sanawar and Mayo schools have proved quite satisfactory, the general run of girls brought up in India have a strong *cheechee* accent, and are lazy, careless, and independent. We might mention in passing that the Deaconesses in Lahore have a registry office for servants. Our own experience was, a good ayah, well looked after, for the infant; but for children out of arms, a good, well-principled English nurse was essential. However good native servants may be, they have not the same up-bringing and nice ways, knowledge, and trustworthiness of a well-trained English nurse. Besides, native servants seldom have as much authority over a child. Ladies, however who employ English nurses, accept the responsibility which undoubtedly is attached to bringing them away from their home and friends. (Steel and Gardiner 166–7)

Besides pointing to the moral defects of the native servants – lacking trustworthiness and knowledge – the authors also point to their shortfalls in accent, mannerisms and comportment, all of which ensure that the native servant is portrayed as useful but to be treated as a potential risk, especially in the handling of English infants and children.

The caste and religion of the servant class, they further note, are crucial factors in hiring:

Unless you can get a woman from a regular ayah's family, the Mahomedan ones are apt to be a nuisance; and the reason which leads many ladies to employ them, viz., the dislike to a sweeper or low-caste woman, is in itself foolish. For no one who has lived long in India can fail to see that the sweeper is very often cleaner in his ways, and certainly in his house, than the Mahomedans. Nor does it follow that because a woman belongs to the sweeper caste she should necessarily do all the dirty work of the establishment. But to whatever class she belongs, the ayah's household duties are virtually the same, except that she will not condescend to the broom if she is a Mahomedan. (85)

Categorizing servants, then, is part of the classificatory paradigm of colonial discourse and practice, and central to the “civilizing” project of imperial rule. If in the case of material objects, the Memsahib asserted herself in acquiring the best, the most economical and the most efficient of brands, then in the case of the servants, she trained them in the “duties of civilized life”, as Dussart puts it.

If we were to read these instructions to the Memsahibs as indicative of English acceptance of native (subaltern) agency, then the traditional image of the helpless colonial subject does not make much sense. Indeed, the converse seems to be the case where Steel and Gardiner present the Memsahib as constantly battling native agency in terms of the latter's recalcitrance, intentional incompetence, indolence and outright cunning. If we concede this argument, then it follows that the *organization* of servant-time, servant-space and servant-identity is a marker of Englishness in the household.

This monitoring demanded being alert to what Steel and Gardiner identify as the dalliances of the servant class “Few mistresses have been long in India without having had the trouble of scandals between the ayah and other servants” (87). The English home could not be, obviously, the stage for native romances, as Steel and Gardiner indicate. Monitoring involved paying considerable attention to the ways in which English children were treated by the native servants, and being spoilt in the process:

This more frequent employment of English nurses is no doubt improving the regime of Indian nurseries; but even now it is no unusual thing to see an English child eating his dinner off the floor, with his hands full of toys, while a posse of devoted attendants distract his attention, and the ayah feeds him with spoonfuls of *pish-pash*. Appetite is no doubt variable in Anglo-Indian children, but it is possible that a little more pomp and circumstance, and a wholesome conviction that food is not forthcoming except at meal-times, would induce Sonny or Missy Baba to treat dinner with graver circumspection. Where, save in India, do we find sturdy little tots of four and five still taking their bottles and refusing to go to sleep without a lullaby? (87)

The ensuring of the safety, health and manners of the English child in the colony had to be treated with enormous caution. Hence the Indian wet-nurse, or *dayi*, had to be monitored as well. Steel and Gardiner write:

The horror of native wet nurses universally expressed, even by missionary ladies, in the answers received from their correspondents, have impressed the authors so deeply that they feel bound to call special attention to it. ...The milk from all these it is true—to the shame of humanity be it said—is free from a certain specific contagion; but it is a contagion from which, alas! the West is no more immune than the East. Therefore the objection cannot be on this ground. What remains, therefore, but race prejudice to account for the fatuity of fearing lest the milk of a native woman should contaminate an English child's character, when that of beasts which perish is held to have no such power? The position is frankly untenable. Therefore if the Western woman is unable to fulfill her first duty to her child, let her thank heaven for the gift of any one able to do that duty for her. (176)

As in the case of the various types of native servants already documented in terms of their lacunae and moral shortfalls, the wet nurse is also, in Steel and Gardiner, a risky figure in the English home.

The wet nurse in colonial writings, notes Narin Hassan, is “a figure of suspicion” (355; Also Buettner).

It can be argued that such normative measures regulating the lives, bodies and work of the native servants denies them the status, despite their limited agency (as perceived by the British masters in the domestic scene), of possessing a form-of-life. As Giorgio Agamben defines it, this means a life

in which singular modes, acts, and processes of living are never simply *facts* but always and above all *possibilities* of life, always and above all potential ... The habit of a potential is the habitual use of it and the form-of-life of this use (207, emphasis in original).

He elaborates this later:

form-of-life is a being of potential not only or not so much because it can do or not do, succeed or fail, lose itself or find itself, but above all because it is its potential and coincides with it. For this reason the human being is the only being in whose living happiness is always at stake, whose life is irredeemably and painfully consigned to happiness. But this constitutes form-of-life immediately as political life. (208)

In Agamben's reading, then, potentiality means the happiness that is at stake in living itself. We cannot separate happiness – since the human is not biologically programmed to happiness – from the forms of life lived by the human. (Without potential it is a naked life, which is not subject to any sovereign power.) The political and the powers of the sovereign therefore are structures that determine whether the possibilities of life, its potential, are at work to generate happiness. Agamben's interpretation of life-as-potential, linked to the form-of-life where the potential is enacted implies a social and political order in which the form-of-life may be executed towards happiness. The English household functions in the place of the sovereign, and determines the limits of the potentiality, if any, of the native. By setting in place norms, regulations and regimentation of their bodies, agency, purpose and manners, one could very well argue that the form-of-life of the native servant is being erased. The native servant uses his body and thereby ensures that the English family is secure and prosperous. It is not linked to production but to *use*, Agamben notes (11–12). What allows the English family to stay English is the instrumentalization of the native body, to be used. The control that Steel and Gardiner call for is an instantiation of this denial of potentiality.

The Indian servant in the English household was, then, as much the object of suspicion, monitoring and regulation as the native workers, officers and subordinates in the public domain. The same cultural anxieties over moral turpitude (from indolence to negligence in terms of duties), inefficiency and disorder over the native's behaviour and work culture are expressed over the ayah and the public servant.

Conclusion: Object Relations and Colonial Domesticity

The body of the native servant is aligned, and is even a part of, the objects s/he handles – cutlery, food, utensils, furniture, plants, animals, including the bodies of English men, women and children. Such a move, I suggest, transforms the individual native into a partible person. A 'partible person', as Marilyn Strathern famously defines it (1988) is one who is a part of the object s/he gives. The object is not an entity utterly distinct from the person, but is produced out of the person. Strathern of course goes on to propose that under such circumstances, the gift given by one and received by another has to be seen as *coauthored* by both giver and receiver. The object is produced by the relations within the community. In the case of domestic items, this community is interracial, with the white family and the native servants.

The object handled, material culture theory tells us, is a peculiar form of the “biographical object” (Hoskins 1998). In the case of such an object “the relation that a person establishes with a biographical object gives it an identity that is localized, particular, and individual” (Hoskins 8). Further, “biographical objects share our lives with us, and if they gradually deteriorate and fade with the years, we recognize our own aging in the mirror of these personal possessions” (8). In the case of the material object in the colonial home, its biographical nature has an additional layer: it embodies the biography of the “owner” and the English body, *but also the biography of the native servant*. The “fading” of the object that Hoskins talks about here may be read as the erosion of its value; but indicates not simply the aging of the white owner but of the overuse and misuse by its routine handler, the native body.

There is, then the constant emphasis in advice books on (i) the labouring body of the native in the English home and (ii) the monitoring of the native body **and** the object this body handles. Such an emphasis is indicative of an imperial anxiety over English material possessions in the colonial home. These possessions – English biographical objects, shall we say – are constitutive of English identity, and therefore are a part of the English person/body. Yet, this same English biographical object is bought, cleaned, used by the native body as well, making them native biographical objects too. In the advice book, the native body, therefore, is partible and inseparable from what s/he handles: the English biographical objects. If, as Tilley and Hoskins propose, such objects are embedded in and mediate social relations, the English biographical objects are embedded in *interracial* social relations. It is because of this dual nature of the English biographical object – at once English and native, a part of English personhood and native persons – that the advice book paints the native person as a necessity *and* a threat. Necessity, because s/he serves as an instrument, to be ordered and organized for the English residents of the house and tasked with handling various objects and processes. S/he is a threat because any “misuse” (as defined by the English in their advice books) of the English biographical objects handled by the native undermines the interracial relations, since the objects are not distinct from either the native or the English body but mediates between both. Thus, since the English biographical object is partially connected to the English body, it becomes imperative that it be monitored and regulated. The native cannot be allowed *sole* and unsupervised agential control over the object s/he handles, but must be monitored because these objects are also, at some point, part of the English body.

In other words, an exercise of colonial domesticity demands the use of various material objects of particular economic and symbolic value (hence the emphasis on brands) and native bodies, but a control over both. If the assertion of control in the case of the former is implied in the discourse of brands, in the case of the latter (native bodies) there is a clear inventorying, classifying and regimentation discourse. Finally, the Englishwoman is advised to monitor the native as a partible person because the servant’s use of branded, English biographical objects impinges directly on the English home and identity because these objects mediate between the native body and the white one. Texts such as *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook* were at the forefront of producing such a discourse of management, of bodies, things and the relations between them.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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