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INHABITATIONS:
A FEMINIST FORMATIONS DOSSIER ON
ROBYN WIEGMAN'S OBJECT LESSONS

The Object as Usual¹

Anjali Arondekar

Object lessons. At a moment when it would be difficult to account for the epistemological commotion that “objects” of study (failed or otherwise) have created in critical theory, and at a moment when we seem, as critics (particularly those of us who work within minoritized field-formations), to be constantly battling against the saturated resilience of objects of study we seem to have dislodged, or at least wearily decentered, we are invited here to consider why such institutional attachments to objects persist and what analytical habits they beget and/or endanger. Analytically, narratively, and ideologically, Robyn Wiegman's *Object Lessons* (2012) carefully flags the precarious objects causing such critical tumult, situating them within the porous and emergent “field imaginaries” of identity-based studies: women's studies, queer studies, and American studies, to name a select few. Throughout, one is struck by Wiegman's commitment to revitalizing our relationship to identity-based objects of study as a subject of serious inquiry, even a political paradox, and as a spur for the occasion of her own writing.

In what follows, and in the spirit of object lessons and object relations, I want to turn Wiegman's text into our constituted object here and trouble some of the analytical habits that enable its own questions. *Object Lessons*, for the most part, mobilizes an effective structure of negative dialectics, advocating persuasively for the potentiality of immanent critique as a mode of productive undoing rather than analytical paralysis. The book espouses a rousing ethics of pedagogy, urging us as readers to attend to how objects have come to matter, and to learn from the uneven waves of reaction and anticipation surrounding their emergence. Wiegman's critical aspirations speak directly to the seismic shifts in feminist scholarship over the past few decades, a period of acute “identity crisis,” if you will, where the incursions of minoritized field-formations, such as women's, ethnic, queer, masculinity, and whiteness studies, have both revitalized and deadened intellectual debates around gender, race, class, and sexuality.

Such shifts, I would add here, have further led to a robust engagement with the ethical and political quagmire of the “double bind,” of a critical vernacular that enables the possibility, not a consummation, of a political vision (what Wiegman calls “social justice”), while at the same time placing that impulse under erasure. Such a politics of the double bind is, of course, most spectacularly seen today in the work of affect studies, but, more substantially, I would also suggest in the work of postcolonial and black studies: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her call to an aesthetic education and Frederick Moten in his refusal of black pessimism, to name just two exemplary meditations.² The challenge for all of us, as Wiegman also reminds us, is how to engage objects within relationalities that do not add value through their salvific promise, but rather through their stubbornly nonredemptive and yet reparative scope. I would wager that the current recuperation of queer negativity (Lee Edelman), queer failure (Jack Halberstam), and cruel optimism (Lauren Berlant) are all attempts—with varying degrees of success—to sustain that impulse in the face of, or rather because of, our embattled political horizons.³

Yet, these idioms—and Wiegman’s book is an exemplary case in point—draw our attention to the recursive forms at work within our political endeavors, whether they be cast in analytical habits that constitute objects only to disperse them or to situate them within field imaginaries like American studies, in a sort of feedback loop that even as it turns on itself, still returns to itself. We are all, it seems, keenly aware of the failed seductions of a liberatory hermeneutics, and yet, we return over and over again to the flight of the object as the only sightline worth following. Is there an outside to this plangent object lesson of recursivity and return that is so routinized in any critique of political excess, or are we doomed to lessons of repetition without rupture? Can we imagine instead a counter-lesson that foregoes such a diagnostics of recognition and pushes against the pressing legibility of an object to hold or to destroy?

Let me say more about what I mean. In my own work, I have grappled with such questions of recursivity by thinking about our recuperation of the historical archive, about the hermeneutical demands placed on objects of sexuality, such as those in South Asia that entangle with questions of colonialism and race, and about the multiple double binds and potentialities that emerge from archival engagement. I have written about the press of multiple minoritizations of race, sexuality, and empire that appear to demand archives as objects/guarantors of presence, rights, and representation, rather than as places of analytical “stuckness” that are often ordinary, efflorescent, and even unreliable.

My questions for Wiegman are thus drawn from my preoccupations with the analytical and political itineraries that such recuperative historiographical methods travel and the object lessons they bypass or leave behind. I am struck, for example, in the current work I am doing on capital, sexuality, and collectivity in colonial Portuguese India, by how objects assume their more salutary or salvific forms precisely in the service of collectivities, such as minoritized ones

that tally up what they do not have in relation to other communities. Let me be clear here: I am not repudiating such salvific models, instantiated as they routinely are in the language of rights and representation; rather, I am more interested in asking Wiegman to think through how minoritized collectivities wrestle with the recursive forms that such salvific objects demand, and, in doing so, how they assemble idioms that self-consciously activate the compensatory mechanisms that such objects should or will produce. The challenge here is to engage a critical language that paradoxically adds value to a sedimented recursive object—in my case, minoritized archives that must be resurrected, found, and produced for future gains—precisely by staging interest in its modes of reproduction. In the case of the *devadasi* collectivity about which I am writing, the Gomantak Maratha Samaj, there is a canny *kala* or aesthetics, indeed anticipation, within its archives of object lessons and their place within a longer, routinized, and politico-mythical demand for salvific forms. By privileging fiction and self-consciously bypassing “veracity” genres like memoirs, testimonials, and biographies, the archives of this *samaj* focus on the modalities of archival representation and recognition to record, as it were, the staging of a record (Arondekar 2012). In so doing, we are asked to recapitalize our political commitment to reparation through an embrace of object lessons and double binds in less agonistic terms than their iteration in Wiegman’s text. Elizabeth Povinelli (2011a, 2011b), for example, has also alerted us to precisely such strategies of survival where indigenous collectivities shift the emphasis from the optics of loss under late liberalism to the ongoing nature of social worlds that refuse the shock of structural inequity.

Of equal import here is Wiegman’s account of US academics’ constant and worthwhile efforts to convince ourselves, despite or against our own inbuilt cynicism, that what we do with our critical tools does and should produce a relationship to social justice. The “we,” as Wiegman reminds us, does not have to be ceded to the violations of a corruptive universalism. Such an orientation toward social justice joins identity knowledges to a wider transnational world of praxis and democratization through an embrace of the politics of failure and loss. Wiegman explicitly situates her deliberations within the context of American studies, using the field’s struggles to unmoor itself from histories of empire as a case in point. So far, so good. But what happens if we move Wiegman’s object lessons elsewhere, to postcolonial sites like South Asia where the force of the university as a place of social justice has never been a place of contestation. I do not mean to suggest India, in this instance, as a place of exemplarity, but more as a location that expands the questions that Wiegman raises. Women’s studies departments in India, for example, are one of the largest growing field imaginaries and are directly involved in law-making, policy debates, and even electoral politics. There is very little soul-searching about why Indian academic feminists need to pursue social justice; instead, a more routinized and often moribund embrace of the role of the public intellectual reigns (John 2008). Yet, there are

object lessons to be found there as well—except in this case, they are crafted more through a language of subalternity that challenges critical aspirations of access and representation. For feminist/women’s studies departments in India, the challenges have come not from a troubled institutionalization nor a self-annihilating politics, but instead from local subaltern formations that eschew identity-based knowledges as a solution to structural inequity. The emergence of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar University in India’s capital, New Delhi, is a case in point.⁴ Founded in 2007 and named after the formidable Dalit activist, visionary, and scholar, the university does not wed its Dalit genealogy to a rhetoric of exceptionalism and/or difference that privileges Dalit studies or the general amelioration of Dalit lives. Bypassing the increasingly troubling mobilization of the Dalit subject as the limit case for difference, the university’s outlined project uses Ambedkar’s humanist philosophies to found a new pedagogy of the subject, Dalit or otherwise. Thus even as more Dalit students flock to the multiple Ambedkar university campuses now opening all over India, there are equal numbers of non-Dalit students who are doing so as well, and the same can be said of instructors and administrators. In many ways, a space like Ambedkar University complicates Wiegman’s cautionary object lessons on two counts: it cannot be rendered an object of identity knowledges, and it is thus never willing to become the subject or agent of an object lesson. My point in turning to this example is not to predictably argue that every object lesson has geopolitical roots or to facilely note that Wiegman does not speak to extra-US academic sites of knowledge production; rather, the example of the Indian context delineates between what is residual and tenacious, between what material conditions makes objects appear and what discourses matter more. Such an emphasis on the geopolitics of objects, or the emergence of geo-objects if you will, supplements our understanding of the transnational. In so doing, we move beyond enlivening or enlarging the already big project of American studies or queer studies and so on to thinking more about how objects are not recognizable or even available in quite the same way.

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Notes

1. My title plays rather vulgarly with D. A. Miller's well-rehearsed meditations on "the novel as usual" and the genre's necessary, and thus ordinary, reliance upon narrative and affective structures of surveillance. To read the novel is to cede to such structures. See Miller, "The Novel as Usual: Trollope's *Barchester Towers*" (1988).

2. See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (2012), and Fred Moten's *In the Break* (2003) and "Black Op" (2008).

3. See Lee Edelman's *No Future* (2004), Jack Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* (2010), and Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* (2012).

4. See the university's website at <http://www.aud.ac.in/>. The available vision statement of the university reads: "The Dr. Bharat Ratna Ambedkar University in Delhi was promulgated in 2007 and started functioning in July of 2008. The university's primary focus is on teaching and research activities in the field of Social Sciences and Humanities (in keeping with Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's principles and life's work). The university aims at promoting equity and social justice and has established a number of schools and education centres so that higher education combined with practical knowledge can be disseminated throughout India. The schools and centres offer postgraduate diploma, Masters' and research programmes in social sciences, humanities, mathematical sciences and liberal studies. The School of Human Ecology focuses on the social dimensions of environmental change and sustainable development. It aims at creating competencies and sensitivities relating to the environment and development among future policy makers, leaders of civil society initiatives, advocacy groups and administrators. The School of Liberal Studies concentrates on languages and more classical disciplines in specialised areas, including translation, social history, labour economics and comparative religion, among others."

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