



PROJECT MUSE®

---

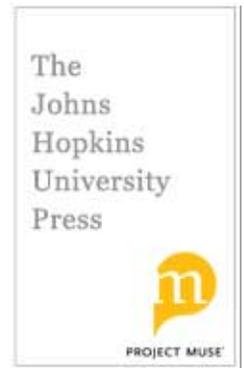
## Magic of Objects

Fred Moten

Callaloo, Volume 26, Number 1, Winter 2003, pp. 109-111 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/cal.2003.0022>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/39842>

---

---

## MAGIC OF OBJECTS

by Fred Moten

Performance Studies is a very young discipline, but its youth hasn't stopped some of its founders from characterizing the discipline as post-disciplinary. For me, this characterization is troubling since the terms "performance" and "performativity"—in the promiscuity of their applications and in the very indefiniteness of their own specific concept of an object of study—often threaten to assert themselves as the ground of every possible area of study. When faced with the conflict between global desire and an objectless locality where disciplinarity and discipline are eclipsed, one is called upon to ask certain questions that converged with the theme of our gathering in Cuba. Is the post-discipline a good model for the changing U.S. academy and, more broadly, for the forging of a new and liberatory understanding of the relation between humanity and the humanities?

Permit me, and please forgive, a long quotation from Randy Martin's brilliant book, *Critical Moves*, wherein Martin begins to address some of these issues:

... insofar as structure and agency retain the discrete separation of object and subject, practice emerges instead as the already amalgamated process of these last two terms. From the perspective of practice, it is no longer possible to insert human activity into a fixed landscape of social structure; both moments are formed in perpetual motion.

Where this insight has its immediate political application is to the series of practices articulated through race, class, gender and sexuality. Each of these words points to a systematic structuration that appropriates different forms of surplus through racism, exploitation, sexism and homophobia. By extending a productionist model to domains not generally associated with an economy oriented toward exchange, I want to take seriously Marx's understanding of capitalism. He treats it as forcibly constituting, by the very organizing boundaries it erects and then transgresses, in pursuit of increasing magnitudes of surplus, the global collectivity, the "combination, due to association," that he understood as the socialization of labor. . . . That race, class, gender, and sexuality, as the very materiality of social identity, are also produced in the process indicates the practical generativity—the ongoing social capacity to render life as history—necessary for any cultural product. Therefore, it is not that a productionist approach assigns race, class, gender, and sexuality the same history, political effects, or practical means. Instead, this approach is intended to imagine the context for critical analysis that would grant these four articulating structures historicity, poli-

tics, and practice in relation to one another, that is, in a manner that is mutually recognizable.

To speak of practices rather than objects of knowledge as what disciplines serve privileges the capacity for production over the already given product-object as a founding epistemological premise. The focus on practices also allows production to be named historically so as to situate it with respect to existing political mobilizations. (Martin 205-6)

I would briefly add a couple of formulations: 1. The epistemological shift that Marx allows—wherein practices are thought as if for the first time, as if in eclipse of objects—can itself be thought as an irruption of or into the sciences of value. I study black performances which are anticipatory manifestations of that irruptive shift. 2. Afro-diasporic performances work the second “as if” above in a specific way. The eclipse of objects by practices is a head, a necessary opening, that vanishes in the improvisatory work of those who are not but nothing other than objects themselves. (Afro-diasporic) performances are resistances of the object and the object is in that it resists, is in that it is always the practice of resistance. And if we understand race, class, gender and sexuality as the materiality of social identity, as the surplus effect and condition of possibility of production, then we can also understand the ongoing, resistive force of such materiality as it plays itself out in and as the work of art. This is to say that these four articulating structures must not only be granted historicity, politics and practice but aesthesis as well. This is also to say that the concept of the object of performance studies is (in) practice precisely at the convergence of the surplus (in all the richness with which Martin formulates it—as, in short, the ongoing possibility or hope of a minoritarian insurgency) and the aesthetic.

Cuba is animated by the improvisatory labor of objects; it is therefore always fraught with the dangerous traces of a terrible past and an uncertain future and is no less necessary for being so troubled. To put it in Martin’s terms, the production of surplus—along with that which it produces and is produced by, “race, class, gender and sexuality as the very materiality of social identity”—has reemerged there with a vengeance. Surplus is the very magic of objects, their fetish character, their mysterious secret. That magic can be terrible, can produce some of the effects that now give visitors to Cuba pause or consternation precisely because those effects are so familiar, especially to those of us who are from the United States, the natural habitat of the hustle and its various causes, complications, choreographies and degradations. But there is also a liberatory force of the surplus, the magic of objects, that we see here in the midst of its very transformation, that requires us to make that undeniable claim on the revolution that it seems we *yanquis* have no right to make. That claim is undeniable for me not only because of the uncanny familiarity of black faces, bodies and gestures that I had never seen before but also because of the centrality of the revolution to my own political formation and reformation. And yet, for many reasons, that centrality is not as central as it should be and so being there becomes or ought to become an occasion for radically rethinking my own political positions and practices.

In the end, the magic of objects, the magic of the surplus, is a rough thing that cannot simply be adjured. This was shown to me in Cuba over and over again; for

instance, when I went to the *Museo de la Revolución*, this magic was continually on display, at once most affectingly and most surprisingly in the diorama where the figures of Che Guevara and Camilo Cienfuegos move through the *Sierra Maestra* in full, purposeful, now arrested stride. They were already and have become again magic objects. Their examples live in rich and complicated ways that are both held in and in excess of Raúl Castro's words when he speaks, for instance, of Camilo's "always trying to improvise a kind of joy." Beyond all possible forgetting, that's what revolution is though such improvisation is an almost always painful struggle constantly in need of renewal and recalibration. That work always remains to be done both in Cuba and in the United States, and the connection between those struggles needs constantly to be thought as they are, in and from both locales, humbly claimed and lovingly—which is to say viciously—critiqued.

Meanwhile, the revolution remains, in all of its force, my object of desire and my model though it is, perhaps, the very re-emergent minoritarian insurgence that the revolution in some sense subsumed that will animate it, grace it with the particular kind of black magic that is indispensable to the necessary cutting and augmentation of that of the dollar. And perhaps this minoritarian insurgence will draw strength from and give strength to its infinitesimally but unbridgeably distant twin in the United States whose ongoing submergence was paradoxically indicated by our gathering in Cuba. The irony is that the magic of objects, the magic of the surplus, drives both this reemergence and this submergence. The question is how more fully to merge that errant magic with our own most human desires. Addressing this question is our improvisational, revolutionary task.

#### WORK CITED

Martin, Randy. *Critical Moves: Dance Studies in Theory and Politics*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1998.



**Avenida de los Presidentes**

**Photo by Marcus D. Jones**