



PROJECT MUSE®

---

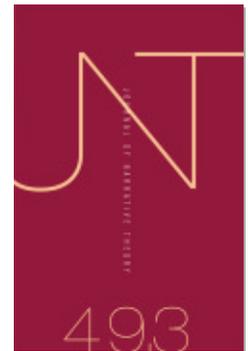
## Introduction: Bodies/Objects/Agents

Holly Dugan, Melissa J. Jones

Journal of Narrative Theory, Volume 49, Number 3, Fall 2019, pp. 289-295  
(Article)

Published by Eastern Michigan University

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jnt.2019.0012>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/746533>

# Introduction: Bodies/Objects/Agents

*Holly Dugan and Melissa J. Jones*

We began brainstorming for this special issue in June 2016, when the threat of Donald Trump's election as president was looming but was not yet a certainty. We recognized the structures of white nationalism, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, and ableism that buoyed his campaign, and we wanted to think critically about them, especially about their intersections with the work we do in the academy.

We were worried: taken aback by the sight of a presidential candidate openly mocking a disabled journalist onstage; sickened and angered by relentless images of police violence against black men and women; ashamed at witnessing white supremacists taunting immigrant individuals and families seeking asylum. We knew that we, too, were vulnerable, as states lined up to roll back reproductive rights, anti-discrimination laws, and workers' protections. Bodies that we loved, inhabited, and communed with were under attack. What value did literature hold in such a moment, we wondered, especially when so many canonical authors and their works felt reiterative of those same structures of oppression? What use was our archival study of oppression when faced with physical and emotional challenges in real time? And what tools were we equipped to offer our students that might help them to survive these times?

Three years later, here we are. The structures of oppression that culminated in the 2016 election were not new. What does feel new, however, is an emboldening of white male power across the globe, a kind of narrative of normalcy around issues and ideas that were once interpreted as radical and extreme. Teaching in the humanities has also gotten much harder. In-

stitutional pressures have stretched departmental budgets, degraded our labor, and intruded in our classrooms. Many of our colleagues are working without the protection of tenure, in non-renewable, temporary appointments. Some have been targeted by hate groups for simply teaching about black lives in classical and premodern eras. And the work in our classrooms has changed, as our students collectively process, analyze, and confront the violent effects of this rise in white power on our campuses and in our communities.

At the same time, new narrative modes of embodiment, history, and materialism have transformed the humanities and its objects of analysis. In this journal issue, we want to explore the activist potential for such critical work, focusing particularly on posthumanist trends as both historical products of late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century neoliberalism (vis-à-vis N. Katherine Hayles's 1999 *How We Became Posthuman*) and as philosophical provocations that challenge bodily boundaries (vis-à-vis crip, queer, feminist, and trans theory). How do these new theories of bodily matter engage with and support the political work of pro-choice and Black Lives Matter movements, for instance? Or the activism of disability justice and transgender rights groups?

Posthumanist theory categorically protests the 'human' embedded in the humanities, explicitly naming the problem of bias built into western philosophical traditions, and it lays bare the terms by which some individuals and groups benefit from the liberal arts while others do not. Rooted in feminist theories about agency and stemming from crip, queer, and trans challenges to embodiment norms, the posthuman demands new narratives about being and becoming.

Object-oriented ontologies (OOO) further blur the boundaries of 'subject/object/agent,' questioning what constitutes matter at all: are discursive objects more or less real than physical ones? Following the logic of Bruno Latour's theory of actor-networks as social fields in which everything both can act and be acted upon, OOO-inflected analyses flatten ontologies of difference, rendering all matter equally agentic. Karen Barad's theory of "mattering," a term that describes not only visceral experiences of embodiment but also the frameworks that ascribe meaning and value to these experiences, further argues that discursive matter impacts physical matter. "Accountability and responsibility," Barad chides, "must be thought in terms of what matters and what is excluded from mattering" (357).

What does this mean for activism? What new stakes are raised for the stories we tell about the future and the past? This issue aims to explore what happens when we engage with the contours of these developing fields, fields aligned in their hope that new narratives about the past can create more livable lives in the present and future. It is an attempt to begin a doubled project of narration, one that can actively counter violent normative and racist narratives about the past while also engaging in new, speculative acts of world-making for the future. Our use of this phrase is inspired and influenced by black feminist theory, especially Frances Beale's and Deborah King's work, and Reginald Wilburn's work on W.E.B. DuBois's "double consciousness" in tandem with Milton's poetics. The essays included here are aligned by their engagement with the three key terms of our issue: bodies, objects, agents. Each provides a different way of answering the questions we posed at the start of this project, "How do we narrate these times?" and "What do we make of the paradoxical gap between the theories we're embracing in the liberal arts of the academy and the practical politics that is needed to address the political crises at every level of civic life in the United States?"

In this spirit, we ask that you also read each essay with a sense of how it might feel and move in diverse classrooms. The important work of talking and thinking about our 'day jobs' as we read essays on literature and theory calls out bodies—our own and our students'—in ways that we hope might additionally complicate critical and practical understandings of what defines objects *and* what constitutes agency in Anglo-European culture and literary studies. Our students and our scholarly communities deserve much more deliberative and strategic opportunities to talk about everyday, local, and global acts of violence, dehumanization, and white supremacy within the standard literary curriculum. We wish to position "bodies/objects/agents" as one possible way to think through the challenges of teaching and writing in the humanities in a decidedly inhumane time.

The essays in this special issue model three separate but related narrative arcs about how bodies, objects, and agents interface with one another in the present and the past. The first set engages with premodernity, complicating how we operate within long-standing histories of oppression, ableism, and literary racism. The authors in this cluster take on alpha-canonical writers, William Shakespeare and John Milton, in order to con-

front our thinking about ‘bodies’ in the past so as to upend constructions of whiteness and ability as markers of human experience.

Michael Lutz’s “Poisoned Sight: Race and the Material Phantasm in *Othello*” engages with visual history and performances of Shakespeare’s *Othello* across the centuries, exploring the long-standing racist history of white perception of black bodies. How is it, Lutz asks at the start of his essay, that white viewers can continually be presented with visual evidence of police brutality against black and vulnerable bodies and not see ‘it’? What structures of seeing condition this kind of willful unknowing? This history of seeing, Lutz argues, is constructed through literary aesthetics. Using Shakespearean performance as an archive of racist structures of unknowing, Lutz demonstrates that Shakespeare’s play and its conditions of performance in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries constructed “material phantasms” of race; the conditions of blackface performance taught white viewers to imagine black bodies in certain ways, a racist imaginary that we’re grappling with to this day. This history of the racist imaginary—of white strategies of perception—is grounded in fictive modes that serve to reveal the operation of such structures in everyday life.

This moment of reexamining the circulation of blackface in Shakespearean performance history offers one window into thinking about how we might work collectively to reconsider ways that Shakespeare’s canonical status is upheld in institutions today, and it offers insight into antiracist pedagogical approaches that help to renegotiate how we teach and read iconic white male authors like Shakespeare or Milton. In “Object-Oriented Disability: The Prosthetic Image in *Paradise Lost*,” Steven Swarbrick offers an innovative take on familiar tropes of what is seen and what is unseen, and how that matters. Challenging the ableist structures that frame theories of aesthetics, especially about literary imagery, Swarbrick argues for a disability aesthetic, using perhaps one of the most canonical works of epic poetry in the English canon: Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. His essay explores visual imagery in *Paradise Lost* not as evidence of Milton’s increasingly embodied experience of visual impairment but rather as a vigorous mobile poetic strategy, an aesthetic technology—or logic of connection—that Swarbrick describes as “blind seeing.” Milton’s images seem to move on their own, connecting this premodern epic poem with postmodern film theory, multimodal sensation, and disability aesthetics that frame “blurred” images not as a lack but as surplus. Swarbrick’s work explores

not only how this leads to wider modes of appreciation but also how it positions us to argue both for an object-oriented ontology and for an object-disoriented ontology.

The second set of essays engages with ‘objects,’ speculating on the alternative meanings that might be generated from a deliberative reconditioning of extreme products of white supremacist culture. Both Lucas Kwong’s “H.P. Lovecraft’s ‘The Call of Cthulhu’ as Radicalizing Assemblage: An Anglo Materialist Nightmare” and Samantha Pinto’s “Objects of Narrative Desire: An Unnatural History of Fossil Collection and Black Women’s Sexuality” directly confront narrative theory in an effort to imagine antiracist ways to read the history of white supremacy. In order to perform this double narration, each author examines what it means to read ‘against the grain’ of a text in order to uncover the racist, sexist, and nationalist structures embedded within it. Kwong takes up the challenge of reading H.P. Lovecraft as anything other than a purveyor of white supremacy, and Pinto explores the difficulties in reading the evidence of slavery in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century cultures of collection, both in histories of science and in Pauline Hopkins’s 1902 novel *Of One Blood*. Bones and letters are revealed by both authors to be agentic objects of history used to construct racist narratives of bodily harm, and yet, as these essays demonstrate, we might also pluck them from such contexts and set them anew, using them as prompts for reparative justice and including more expansive narratives about history and futurity.

Pinto shows us how antiracist, feminist, and ecocritical work in the Anthropocene might be expanded by studying the affective legacy of archival objects rarely placed in conversation with one another: dinosaur bones and black women’s bodies. This radical assemblage allows her to explore the “strange connections” amongst the current crisis of great extinction, narratives of liberal progress, and local histories of racial and sexual objectification while also excavating their roots within eighteenth-century natural history collections. Using Thomas Jefferson as a starting point, Pinto shows how racial science was built into the very structures of eighteenth-century natural and national history. Applying this understanding of the coalescence of white male desire to reading *Of One Blood*, Pinto illuminates Pauline Hopkins’s destructive narrative of progress, one that very much anticipates what narrative theorist Brian Richardson terms “unnatural narratology.” Hopkins’s depiction of black women’s objectification in

the novel is so extreme that it works to revivify the fossils of history, including those of black and brown bodies collected in the museums and graveyards that mark the boundaries of western imperialism.

If cataclysmic narratives might be used to challenge racist assemblages, might cataclysmic assemblages be used to challenge racist narratives? Using the Deleuzian concept of “assemblage,” Kwong takes up perhaps one of the most notoriously racist writers in the canon of science fiction, H.P. Lovecraft. While “The Call of Cthulhu” can be read as imagining a set of events in which white reason is destroyed by a monstrous assemblage from the nonwhite world, Kwong argues that Lovecraft’s cherished ‘Anglo Materialism’ helps produce the cataclysm. Tasked with piecing the text’s history together, the narratee is positioned within Lovecraft’s totalizing worldview, yet may retain enough power to resist its force. In his study, Kwong explores the stakes of such a destructive narrative and tests whether it might be possible to use it against itself. In doing so, Kwong challenges the claim on Lovecraft by the alt-right. Lovecraft and his narrative about a racist monstrous assemblage that demand a global response is worth rereading, Kwong argues, because its vision of a “self-animating, author-defying” literary assemblage compels readers towards political action unthinkable (and indeed abhorrent) to the author.

The final essay in this collection, Christine Hume’s “Death, Sex, and Nylon,” takes on the question of agency in both its style and its content. This experimental piece brings together different strands of the history of nylon—from its seminal place in the birth of plastics and modern living, to its service in gendering twentieth-century consumer culture, and finally to its instigation of white women’s anger during the infamous “Nylon Riots” of the 1940s. Hume’s essay weaves and twists nylon’s story into a plastic history of women’s political agency and activism. The essay employs many modalities of knowing and telling, placing information itself under linguistic scrutiny. Nylon’s destructive history in the twentieth century gets repurposed as a starting point for political action by coalitions of the oppressed, disenfranchised, and decanonized. To participate in demeaning women’s Nylon Riots, as Hume deftly reveals, is to share in the oppression of women and to endorse the subtle ways that capitalism and the military-industrial complex have led to current cultural crises. Hume insists that violence against women is continuous with silencing and stealing women’s narrative voices. Her essay’s creative yet factual counternarrative thus par-

ticipates in the posthumanist project in matter and in manner when it displaces the authority of (mostly white male) perspectives on this history, challenging notions of what constitutes a ‘dangerous’ object, whose political agency matters, and which activist stories are worth telling.

### ***Works Cited***

- Barad, Karen. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Duke UP, 2007.
- Beale, Frances. “Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female.” *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, edited by Beverly Guy-Sheftall, The New Press, 1995, pp. 146–56.
- Hayles, N. Katherine. *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*. U of Chicago P, 1999.
- King, Deborah. “Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of a Black Feminist Ideology,” *Signs*, vol. 14, no. 1, 1988. pp. 42–72.
- Latour, Bruno. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford UP, 2007.
- Wilburn, Reginald. *Preaching the Gospel of Black Revolt: Appropriating Milton in Early African American Literature*. Duquesne UP, 2014.