After the "Speculative Turn": Realism, Philosophy, and Feminism

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The Other Woman

Katherine Behar

This is why we can’t have nice things.
— Anonymous

Not-So-Nice Things

Recent new realist theories intend to respect objects by leaving them to their own “weird” ways.¹ However, in seeking to rethink how objects access each other, and how humans have access to the world, these philosophies consistently center on questions of having access to things or, put simply, having them.² Ultimately, there is something perversely exotic about objects

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¹ For a compendium of speculative realist thought, which often takes this approach, see The Speculative Turn, eds. Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman (Melbourne: re.press, 2011). See also Graham Harman’s term “weird realism” in Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy (Alresford: Zero Books, 2012), and Timothy Morton’s “magical” take on realism in Realist Magic: Objects, Ontology, Causality (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2013).

² Consider, for example, how noncorrelationism, Quentin Meillassoux’s founding gesture for speculative realism, claims the possibility of having access to being in-itself, apart from thought. Quentin Meillassoux, After Fini-
framed, through the language of object-orientation, as a form of alterity that is meant to be had even if from afar. This dynamic carries sexual undertones and is entangled in objectification and reification. Any fetishist will attest that weirdness can be sexy, and this holds true, it would appear, even in philosophy. Whether or not one chooses to read terms like allure and withdrawal as flirtatious or frigid, attributing distant availability to objects produces what I call an exoticism of objects. As we will see, this exoticism troubles economies of access and having, which I contend are foundational for new realist philosophies.

In considering these ideas, I will be drawing on emerging discourses in object-oriented feminism.3 Like the object-oriented philosophies that have proliferated in the wake of speculative realism, which collectively insist that the universe is composed of objects and that humans are objects like all others, object-oriented feminism embraces nonanthropocentrism. It also pursues a feminist ethical stake in the histories and implications of objectification, which today’s object-oriented theories may have occasion to renew. In “Treating Objects Like Women,” Timothy Morton states that the term object does “not stand for objectification or reification.”4 His “weird essentialism” recuperates “the supposed biological essentialism of French and 1970s American feminism,” torquing an unfashionable phase of feminist analysis toward the worthy project of object-oriented feminist ecology.

3 Object-oriented feminism (OOF) is a new field of analysis that has been developing out of several years of panels I organized at annual meetings of the Society for Literature, Science, and the Arts, and dialogues around a forthcoming edited volume, Object-Oriented Feminism, ed. Katherine Behar (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016). Among the authors in this volume, Patricia Ticineto Clough and Frenchy Lunning have been actively involved in developing OOF thought since its inception, and editor Eileen A. Joy was an OOF panel respondent in 2012.

But perhaps Morton is too hasty in dismissing objects’ imbrication in objectification and reification. Object-oriented feminism is directly concerned with treating humans like things. Equally, it is engaged in extending intra-human feminist ethics to the object world and in cultivating posthuman solidarities.

In this context, an important aspect of object-oriented feminism’s ethical challenge can be posed as an inversion of the speculative question of how humans have access to things. Instead, object-oriented feminism takes up a thing’s perspective and asks how things are had. This essay will address such questions of access and having by way of a provocative human object, the “other woman,” to arrive at a proposal for object-oriented feminist erotics. An alternative to “aesthetics as first philosophy,” object-oriented feminist erotics undermines the principle of value in aesthetics and in productivist relationships between objects. But first let us assess how having access to things, having things, and having one’s way with things have been playing out in new realist philosophies thus far.

**Having at Things**

One way philosophers have at things is through metaphor. For example, in Graham Harman’s non-relational philosophy, metaphor summons real objects together toward access. Harman theorizes that objects have no access to each other because they are fundamentally “withdrawn.” Each object, he claims, is its own world, hermetically, ontologically, and prophylactically “vacuum-sealed.” Harman proposes a novel concept he calls “al-

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5 This object of analysis, like the title of this essay, references Luce Irigaray’s *Speculum of the Other Woman*; however, beyond a rich point of inspiration, Irigaray’s text is not a primary focus for this short essay. See *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (1974; rpt. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985). On the connection between masculinist speculation as theorized by Irigaray and its significance for feminist philosophy “after the ‘speculative turn,’” see Katerina Kolozova’s Preface to this volume.

lure” to account for the reality of influence and dynamism in the universe, notwithstanding his notion of withdrawal.

Allure is the metaphoric process by which qualities from one object are applied figuratively to another. In the construct of allure, reticent, “withdrawn” objects are coaxed into “connection” in order to fertilize change or “vicarious” incidents of causality, while still remaining wholly apart from each other. To add an analogy of my own, allure is akin to dressing in drag. An alluring object remains of-itself but with the addition of qualities borrowed from another object, which surface without making the first object’s core being any less withdrawn; in fact, these borrowed qualities even allude to something unknowable beneath that very surface.

This arrangement constitutes the foundation of Harman’s aesthetics, which he claims as first philosophy. Surprisingly, considering this prominence, the term allure is loaded with innuendo. Among other things, allure is likely to summon sultry ads for a Chanel perfume, or feminine wiles instructed by a Condé Nast beauty magazine, both of which bear its name. Harman explains that allure involves allusion, so such associations with feminized products of patriarchy are not accidental; its connotation is itself an example of the process he has in mind. In other words, it is a function of allure when allure becomes as suggestive as the enticingly vacant gaze of a languorous model positioned beside a bottle of French perfume.

Even setting aside Harman’s penchant for flamboyant prose, the scent of seduction and conquest permeates his terminology. For Harman, allure “alludes to entities as they are, quite apart from any relations with or effects upon other entities in the world,” but some readers might conclude that allure also alludes

8 Numerous examples exist throughout his oeuvre. To take but one instance, in the main passage from which I draw in this section, Harman invokes the image that a real object surrounded by sensual ones “pierces their colored mists” to connect with another real object nearby. See Harman, “On Vicarious Causation,” 213.
to sexual courtship. Against withdrawal’s surly non-relation, allure offers a bewitching whiff to suggest things could get interesting as withdrawn objects beckon each other. Even Harman’s chosen example for the metaphoric transfer of qualities through allure is romantic: the poet’s pronunciation “my heart is a furnace.”

For his part, Morton associates an object’s withdrawal with its essence, or irreducibility. Thus, an object’s withdrawn essence accounts for allure. Objects are “essentially” alluring, and here we would do well to recall the biological essentialism Morton has evoked in his “weird” version, and its association


10 Different flavors of object-oriented philosophy speculate differently on the finer points of non-relation. For example, Levi Bryant describes a “democracy of objects” composing a “flat ontology” that stresses horizontal adjacency rather than separation; Bruno Latour conceives of objects as networked actors; and Ian Bogost, like many object-oriented feminists, typically explores objects of a cultural, artificial nature, inherently tinged by or even arising from other objects’ meddling. Yet still in the title of a book like *Alien Phenomenology, or What It’s Like to Be a Thing* (riffing on Thomas Nagel’s 1974 essay, “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?”) Bogost maintains the air of alien foreignness and aloof unintelligibility in objects’ presentations to each other. Likewise, consider Morton’s account of objects’ self-differing as an internal “looping” structure. Twisting away from self-identification, Morton’s looping objects (and his rolling prose) are curvaceous and tantalizing— even while hinting at juvenile infatuation, evoked by a “Looney Tunes” overture. In object-oriented feminism, all objects are indeed set in such suggestive motion, wavering seductively between attraction and repulsion. See Levi R. Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2011); Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Graham Harman, *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics* (Melbourne: re.press, 2009); Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, or What It’s Like to Be a Thing* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2012); and Timothy Morton, “All Objects Are Deviant: Feminism and Ecological Intimacy,” in *Object-Oriented Feminism*.


with female bodies. For not only furnace-like hearts but bodies themselves can speak metaphoric volumes.

Frenchy Lunning insightfully connects the shared use of metaphor in Harman’s notion of allure with Julia Kristeva’s concept of the abject to draw the body of an “other” woman, the menstruating and even postmenopausal body of the older woman, into the feminist fold.¹³ For Harman, metaphor constitutes what Lunning calls a “come hither” gesture soliciting the otherness of withdrawn other objects. But if, as in a perfume ad, allure is associated with the pubescent, attractive young girl whose nubile body suggests her availability or have-ability, Lunning perceives its complement in Kristeva’s metaphor for abjection as a “violent repulsing thrusting aside of ‘otherness.’” In this gestural reversal, alluring femininity becomes one of Harman’s severed qualities, shoved off and overcoded into abjection in the figure of the mother, “the defining subject/object position for females, which is necessarily thrust aside.” Lunning captures this inverted fusion of allure and abjection, and its significance for object-oriented feminism, in the following passage:

This leaves the emerging female subject/object in a rather sticky spot, especially under patriarchal conditions. For under the patriarchy, women are reduced to various image objects of their singular and necessary function of reproduction: not just the mother, but also the bodacious babe who is codified and commodified in terms of breeding potential. As such, women are abjected and degraded as objects in all senses of the word, and so is any linkage with the maternal and feminine objects in the culture. The coded trappings of feminine objects — the notes of these objects — and especially those clustered around the extreme manifestations of feminine qualities, are thus regarded as cloying, obnoxious, and disgusting objects.¹⁴

¹³ Frenchy Lunning, “Allure and Abjection: The Possible Potential of Severed Qualities,” in Object-Oriented Feminism.
¹⁴ Ibid.
Of course, it is also the abject older woman, the madame, who provides access to another kind of “other woman”: prostitutes. Not coincidentally, when Harman attempts to arrange the meeting of objects, he posits a third enveloping facilitator object, which in effect assumes the role of the madame, providing a space where two objects can meet on neutral turf to engage. “My claim,” he writes, “is that two entities influence one another only by meeting on the interior of a third, where they exist side-by-side until something happens that allows them to interact.”

Abject or alluring, this enveloping intentional object conjures the conspicuous interior of the madame’s abject environment.

*Things to Have and Things to Hold*

We cannot ignore the uneasy relations binding objects in object-oriented philosophy to objectification and reification. In the red light district’s rosy glow, objectification, labor, gender, and class bathe in the same light. Here, object-oriented feminism links Harman’s invocation of tools to biopolitical histories of use, exploitation, and resistance. In his reading of Heidegger, Harman explains that the world consists of two types of objects: tools, which are “ready-to-hand,” and broken tools, which are “present-at-hand.” By flouting the human intention of use, the latter confront their masters, hinting at the depths of their full, glorious, uncolonizable strangeness. What Harman calls “tool being” is distinguished by exploitation and resistance. In object-oriented feminism, exploitation names the treatment of tools through use, misuse, and abuse, and resistance designates the opposing behavior of broken tools that defy being so treated.

If all objects are either tools or broken tools, let us consider two human objects of interest for feminist philosophy, the “wife” objectified as property, and the sex worker reified as the “other woman” in a most bare form. How are we to understand these women/objects as broken/tools? My purpose is not to reiterate a tired binary between Madonnas and whores. On the contrary,

I want to seriously weigh the contention that all objects, including humans, and hence including women, are at once captured in and resistant to confining systems of labor and possession.

The Marxist feminist movement Wages for Housework exemplifies this predicament. Building on a history of women’s mobilizing for financial independence, the movement rose to international prominence in the 1970s, the same era when many feminists also adopted strategic essentialism. Wages for Housework reasoned that it was unjust (and unsafe) for women to remain financially dependent on their husbands because wifely housework was indispensable reproductive labor without which the capitalist system could not survive.

Silvia Federici recounts how, in an 1876 letter to the editor, a Kentucky housewife made precisely this argument. The response from the editor of The New York Times, reproaching the woman for so much as mentioning money, exposes the continuity between a wife’s work, and an “other woman’s” labor.

If women wish the position of wife to have the honor which they attach to it, they will not talk about the value of their services and about stated incomes, but they will live with their husbands in the spirit of the vow cf. the English marriage service, taking them “for better; for worse; for richer, for poorer; in sickness and in health; to love, honor, and obey.” This it is to be a wife; and not to be this, and not to be willing to share a man’s fortunes and give him the respect and submission due to the master of a household, is to take on a perilous likeness to women in certain other relations, who do demand stated incomes, or at least wages, and whose position is such that there is always at least reasonable doubt as to their right to talk to a man about their care of “his” children.

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16 Silvia Federici presented this material at “Wages for Housework,” a workshop held at The Commons Brooklyn on Saturday, March 21, 2015.

Tools behave nicely. They are demure. They present themselves for service retiringly, to be used without reward. We can have our way with tools because they don’t warrant our second thought. But there is something altogether wrong with the broken tool. It is not a nice thing at all. Broken tools disturb our contentment, stand out brashly, and demand our attention. So what kind of woman claims remuneration for her work? What insolence turns a woman from a useful tool, resigned to her cultural role, into a broken one, requiring recognition? A sex worker is an easy target for being objectified and reified as a would-be human sex toy. But, is only the “other woman” used as a tool? Or, is the wife used as a tool until she “breaks” and demands her fair pay? Or, is her broken demand precisely what threatens to reclassify her as mere tool, as an “other woman” and no longer an esteemed wife? Clearly broken tools can’t account for these other women abounding, breaking things and the economy of being had. The tool analysis doesn’t fit nicely.

**What We Can’t Have**

Let us be clear: the unshakeable problem with viewing the world as tools and broken tools is that this thinking leaves the Hegelian dynamic of servitude intact. The real issue for object-oriented feminism is not the difference between tools and broken tools but the power differential between users and tools, masters and slaves.  

To be a tool is to be in the service of another. And so, Harman protests what he perceives as the servile position of most contemporary philosophy, which he laments “grovels at [science’s] feet. ‘How may I serve thee, master?’” Harman’s refrain is that


19 Andrew Iliadis, “Interview with Graham Harman (2),” *Figure/Ground*, http://figureground.org/interview-with-graham-harman-2/.
philosophy should pursue reality in its own right and must not be the “handmaid” of any other discipline. Promoting aesthetics as first philosophy, he views recalibrating philosophic priorities to account for the significance of his concept of allure as a gallant move, by which he stands ready to rescue aesthetics from scandalous, perhaps whorish, ruin. Here not only handmaids but also dancing girls populate his rousing calls to philosophers. “Until now,” Harman writes, “aesthetics has generally served as the impoverished dancing-girl of philosophy — admired for her charms, but no gentleman would marry her.”

Adding up these accounts, which seem to be overflowing with unacknowledged feminine metaphors (and patriarchal baggage), object-oriented feminists might easily arrive at erotics, not aesthetics, as first philosophy. Harman maintains that his philosophy does not promote a method, but a counter-method. But erotics might well be object-oriented feminism’s method, if only to lay waste to toolish propositions like these.

**Having One’s Way with Things**

Erotics erodes boundaries between self and other, as well as the complementarity that upholds the master–slave dialectic by requiring the integrity of each of these figures delimited as humanist subjects. When object-oriented feminism advocates feminist solidarity across all objects in all manner of erotic coalitions, it is in order to recognize objects’ shared servitude under dominant relations of production. The work things do dissolves seeming separations between human sex workers and non-human sex toys, as well as apparent oppositions between wives and “other women.” As broken/tools, sex workers, sex toys, and wives are all implemented in physical and affective labor in the service of social reproduction.


21 I expand on this concept in “An Introduction to OOF,” developing the notion of erotics in object-oriented feminism through the work of Audre Lorde, Georges Bataille, and others. See Katherine Behar, “An Introduction to OOF,” in Object-Oriented Feminism.
According to Jean Baudrillard’s concept of “seduction,” all three are reduced to masculine value, having lost the viability of feminine uncertainty, which here I would relate to the broken tool’s capacity to surprise when it refuses to be had. For Baudrillard, capitalism represents how relations of production replace relations of seduction (which is not the same as the sexual, which is itself productivist). As Baudrillard warns, “it is women who are now about to lose, precisely under the sign of sexual pleasure,” which is scrupulously productive, “mak[ing] everything speak, everything babble, everything climax.” Baudrillard critiques the women’s movement for advancing a sexual logic in its “promotion of the female as a sex in its own right (equal rights, equal pleasures), of the female as value — at the expense of the female as a principle of uncertainty.”

We could say the same for object-oriented theories that seek to elevate objects as quasi-subjects. Ironically, such theories of things’ agency and would-be weird volition will always be at the expense of erotic uncertainty. In economic positivity, things can be “had” in all senses of the word, so certainty also accompanies the exotic object of desire, which can be positively counted upon to remain always alluringly unattainable.

Evelyn Fox Keller frames the erotic in opposition to similar dominant practices in the sciences that seek mastery of nature and its objects. Describing this productivist mastery over objects, which Federici, Carolyn Merchant, and others connect to the dual exploitation of women and nature throughout the history of capitalism, precisely as an engine of such productivity, Fox Keller identifies “a degree of control that one would not think of having in relation to a subject that one had a more erotic, more interactive, more reciprocal feeling-engagement with.”

Mastery abolishes the possibility of erotic uncertainty

because it involves definitive “control in the Baconian sense of domination, that nature is there to be steered, to be directed.”

Erotics lessens self/other distinctions. This means refusing the hierarchical separations of aesthetics, like the false separations that persist in the adjacent productivities of wives and mistresses, madames and dancing girls, philosophers and handmaids. In each of these couplings, ideological distinctions of not/niceness describe and generate value. Aesthetics functions on the same principle of difference, as do all systems of value. We value things for being nice instead of not—or vice versa—because value is always comparative, hinging on degrees of difference. Because erotics is an enemy of difference it is incompatible with value and all it entails. While master and slave reciprocally produce each other as discrete but productively intertwined identities, the erotic surrender of self-unto-other turns “having” an identity or “taking” a lover into “giving it up.” Erotics reaches its zenith in the giving up of self-sacrifice, a becoming one with the universe that is comparable to the devastating expenditure of potlatch and tantamount to the death of the individual.

In more mundane terms, erotics also means simply this: We must overcome the insidious distancing from which metaphors overreach and within which exoticism lingers. In the total ontological scope of object-orientation, feminist struggle should not be about Hegelian recognition as becoming vis-à-vis the struggle to become a subject instead of an object or a master instead of a slave. (Nor should it be about becoming a slave instead of a master or an object instead of a subject.) These distinctions only perpetuate productivism, reinstating capitalist systems of value generation, labor, and utilitarian possession. What remains for feminists and other women is to erotically disable dialectic complementarities like these.

24 Ibid.