

GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies

Volume 21, Numbers 2-3, June 2015

Queer Inhumanisms

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Objecthood, Avatars, and the Limits of the Human

literary texts outside humanist-centered, historicist frames of reference in order to (hopefully) unleash any literary text's potential for becoming-otherwise. Part of my interest in speculative realism and object-oriented ontology is precisely because I see the (acid trip) modes of thought opened in these intellectual realms as possible allies in rewiring the sensorium of reading with an eye toward increasing the pleasures and enjoyment of not just reading but of a heightened contact with the world itself, in all of its extrahuman (yet still co-implicate) vibrations. This is to ultimately affirm a pluralism of being and worlds—a move both queer and political, human and beyond the human at once.

OBJECTHOOD, AVATARS, AND THE LIMITS OF THE HUMAN

Uri McMillan

New materialists' calls to upend the hierarchical orderings of humans, nonhuman objects, and things has, unfortunately, not held as true for a truly radical "reorder of things" in the balkanized academy; this is especially true of the bounded disciplinary cells that continue to separate much of posthumanist thought from theories of racial embodiment.⁵² In this vein, I concur with Zakiyyah Iman Jackson in her critique of the failure to interrogate critical race studies in much of new materialist thought and the resultant and ongoing violence of such an occlusion, particularly when theorizing blackness has long required considering existential questions of life and death, the limits of humanity, and a stultifying thingness. After all, as Alexander G. Weheliye notes in his discussion of Jamaican writer and cultural theorist Sylvia Wynter, "Within the context of her work, it is the human—or different genres of the human—that materializes as the object of knowledge in the conceptual mirror of black studies." Thus, in Wynter's work (as well as that of Hortense Spillers), the dismantling of Man as the universal human—a distinction that gains traction through its very barring of those designated as nonhumans or not-quite-humans (particularly black subjects and especially black women)—surfaces as *sine qua non* to the praxis of black studies.⁵³ The deaths of Eric Garner and Michael Brown at the hands of (at the time of this writing, unindicted) police officers—on July 17, 2014, and August 9, 2014, respectively—belie all

too clearly the effects of these cleavages to those denied the spoils of full personhood. Meanwhile films and novels grouped under the rubric of Afrofuturism consider questions of blackness, space, and time (and repeatedly, science)—while also rebuking the primacy of Western civilizations, they offer striking possibilities for pushing new materialisms into questions (both earth-based and interplanetary) of diaspora, nation, and futurity.⁵⁴ Meanwhile, building on all this work, Hershini Bhana Young elegantly pushes posthumanism into the realm of the sonic and visual art, via the nineteenth-century performer Thomas Wiggins (a.k.a. “Blind Tom”) and the “fungible cyborgs” of the artist John Jennings. She argues that the sonic enables “a staging of the black subject as both within and outside of modernity, as excluded from traditional liberal discourses of the human and therefore having a special relationship with the category of post-human.”⁵⁵ In this way, she suggests, the black subject—made, historically, to be both object and person—is prosthetic and human, flesh and machine. In short, theories of “object life” are at their most fecund, productive, and expansive when considered *with*, rather than *instead of*, black cultural studies.⁵⁶

Objecthood, like queer theory itself, slips across several disciplinary genealogies. Objecthood is emerging as a concept in queer theory through its intertwining with material culture. Scott Herring, in a recent essay on hoarding, and Drew Sawyer, in an essay on Crisco, provocatively fuse queer studies and thing theory. The former’s attention to sexual nonconformity and the latter’s focus on material objects combine to produce a *queer objecthood*, attuned to matter gone deviant.⁵⁷ Thus queer objecthood here encompasses the queer object relations inherent in excessive accumulation as well as the perverse uses of Crisco’s viscosity for frying *and* fucking. In a much different register, the writings of Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, and Hortense Spillers, while distinct, coalesce in their suggestion that the most brutal effects of chattel slavery and colonization were their joint efforts to deny black diasporic subjects full access to “being.”⁵⁸ While none of the three foreground the term *objecthood*, the terms that they *do* use, most explicitly Césaire’s *thingification*, index the forceful disciplining of these subjects into a different type of humanity, a lesser-than-human. It is this legacy of black abjection and the abhorrent queering of subjectivity that both Darieck Scott and Christina Sharpe take up.⁵⁹ While Scott recuperates Fanon, both make use of queer theories of shame and pleasure’s intertwining to discuss the “monstrous intimacies” of slavery and the pleasures-in-abjection that very well may be the wellsprings of what it means to be postslavery subjects.⁶⁰

In my own work, I seek to bridge the chasm between a dehumanizing objecthood, on the one hand, and an embodied self-possession, on the other, by

reimagining objecthood as a performance-based strategy that challenges notions of what constitutes black subjectivity. *Performing objecthood*, I argue, is a process that enables black women to transform themselves into art objects. Performing objecthood is a world making, one that envisions the capacity for agency in, paradoxically, becoming and performing as an object.⁶¹ The performers I discuss in my forthcoming book *Embodied Avatars* activate objecthood in several ways across time: in collaboration with prosthetic technologies and freak show theatrical conventions in the nineteenth century, conceptual art-based performance works and art world activism in the twentieth, and black camp and video art in the twenty-first.⁶² Performing objecthood, whether in the Great Exhibition of 1851 in London or in the streets of 1970s New York City, is not the negation of art (à la Michael Fried) but a potent leitmotif of black performance art.⁶³

If these black women performers seem ancillary to our discussions here, I caution that they are not; they are indeed participants, albeit overlooked, in the dense relationalities and ecologies that these new materialisms seek to point us toward. I want, in other words, to push past the too-easy assertion that a vital materialism will act as a safety net for those at the very bottom of personhood.⁶⁴ I ask us to consider these performers as actors who work with the proverbial muck of these queered object relations; they create sets of performances with high political stakes, whether to escape from the grasp of chattel slavery in 1849 or to subversively critique the racism of white feminists in 1980. And they persist in doing so via the provocative use of avatars. *Avatar*, a term from Hindu mythology, is derived from the Sanskrit word *avatara*; its translation denotes the descent of a deity to earth in order to be reincarnated in a human form. Entering the English language at the end of the eighteenth century, it eventually acquired a much more banal, technological meaning. The word *avatar* was first used in 1985 to describe virtual persona, specifically a graphic representation of a person—a humanlike figure, usually—controlled by a person via a computer.⁶⁵ Taken together, these two seemingly divergent meanings gesture toward how avatars both duplicate and *displace* the human.

I redeploy both connotations of avatar—spiritual reincarnation and second selves—in the use of black performance art; I use it as an analytic that, at once, captures the shared manipulation of alterity by these cultural subjects, the transubstantiation of these performances across different representational forms and their abilities to shift across time.

Avatars suggest a slippage between the “other” and us, a reaching beyond the limits of where our bodies supposedly end. In this formulation, the “subject” is not a bounded entity but a permeable one. Ann Weinstone terms this an *avatar*

body, or a “zone of relationality” in which “the categories of self and other are rendered undecidable.”⁶⁶ I describe the manipulation of avatars by black women as a repeated tactic of multiplying the self, circumventing limits on how and where to *do* one’s body. And their porousness, across the subject-object line as well as time itself, is useful for our discussion of queer inhumanism. They are utile in thinking through what it means to be (and to partially reject) “human,” and they pivot in directions (be they disciplinary or ontological or temporal) not yet possible to map, let alone perceive. Exceeding delineations between the past and the present, slipping between the real and the virtual, and violating zones between objecthood and subjecthood, avatars suggest the paradoxical powers inherent in willfully alienating oneself from the limits of the human.

TRANSING THE QUEER (IN)HUMAN

Susan Stryker

My very first article, “My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix,” published here in *GLQ* twenty years ago, addressed questions of transgender embodiment and affect through the figuration of (in)human monstrosity. I have stayed close ever since to the themes and approaches laid out in that initial work, and have noted with interest how current queer critical attention to the non-human world of objects, and to the weird potential becomings of vital materialities and matterings, resonate with the concerns I addressed back then.

At the time, my goal was to find some way to make the subaltern speak. Transsexuals such as myself were then still subordinated to a hegemonic interlocking of cissexist feminist censure and homosexual superiority, psycho-medical pathologization, legal proscription, mass media stereotyping, and public ridicule. The only option other than reactively saying “no we’re not” to every negative assertion about us was to change the conversation, to inaugurate a new language game. My strategy for attempting that was to align my speaking position with everything by which “they” abjected us. It was to forgo the human, a set of criteria by which I could only fail as an embodied subject. It was to allow myself to be moved by the centrifugal force pushing me away from the anthropocentric, to turn that expulsive

- cal Inquiry* 28, no. 2 (2002): 369–418; R. L. Rutsky, “Mutation, History, and Fantasy in the Posthuman,” *Subject Matters: A Journal of Communications and the Self* (2007): 99–112.
42. See www.alternet.org/world/evidence-emerges-israeli-shoot-cripple-policy-occupied-west-bank?page=0%2C0 (accessed August 15, 2014).
 43. See www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/09/gaza-crime-crimes-201492664043551756.html (accessed October 1, 2014).
 44. See www.facebook.com/karl.schembri/posts/10152139900211595 www.facebook.com/permalink.php?id=137704959660345&story_fbid=606670669430436 (accessed August 10, 2014).
 45. See www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2014/07/29/nadia-abu-el-haj/nothing-unintentional/ (accessed September 15, 2014).
 46. See www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2014/07/29/nadia-abu-el-haj/nothing-unintentional/ (accessed September 15, 2014).
 47. Michel Foucault, “Friendship as a Way of Life,” in *Foucault Live (Interviews, 1961–1984)*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (New York: Semiotext(e), 1996), 309–10.
 48. David Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Toward a Gay Hagiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 79; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Weather in Proust*, ed. Jonathan Goldberg (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).
 49. Michel Foucault, “The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom,” in *Foucault Live*, 433, 434, and 435. For Foucault, as for the ancient Greek writers he was studying, an *ethos* named modes of being and behavior—of *living*—as opposed to naming some sort of prescriptive morality.
 50. Adam Phillips, “On a More Impersonal Note,” in Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips, *Intimacies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 98.
 51. Jeffrey J. Cohen and Todd R. Ramlow, “Pink Vectors of Deleuze: Queer Theory and Inhumanism,” *rhizomes* 11–12 (Fall 2005–Spring 2006), www.rhizomes.net/issue11/cohenramlow.html.
 52. I am riffing here off of Roderick Ferguson’s trenchant work. Ferguson’s recent remarks on posthumanism, as a potential keyword to dispose of, comes to mind: which posthumanism are we talking about? And does posthumanism become a vanguard production that is a way not to talk explicitly about race? Roderick Ferguson, remarks presented at the annual American Studies Association convention, “Kill This Keyword” session, Los Angeles, California, November 8, 2014. See also Ferguson, *The Reorder of Things: The University and Its Pedagogies of Minority Difference* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).
 53. Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 21.
 54. This woefully incomplete list includes John Akomfrah, *The Last Angel of History* (Icarus Films, 1996); Nalo Hopkinson, *Brown Girl in the Ring* (New York: Warner Books, 1998); Sun Ra, *Space Is the Place* (1974); Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972; rpt.

- New York: Scribner, 1996); George Schuyler, *Black No More* (1931; repr. New York: Dover, 2011).
55. Hershini Bhana Young, "Twenty-First-Century Post-humans: The Rise of the See-J," in *Black Performance Theory*, ed. Thomas F. DeFrantz and Anita Gonzalez (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 56, 47.
 56. Mel Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 5.
 57. Scott Herring, "Material Deviance: Theorizing Queer Objecthood," *Postmodern Culture* 21, no. 2 (2011); Drew Sawyer, "Crisco, or How to Do Queer Theory with Things," www.columbia.edu/~sf2220/TT2007/web-content/Pages/drew2.html (accessed July 4, 2014).
 58. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe." The white gaze's reduction of the black man into a negative sign in the field of vision renders him, in Fanon's words, *an object among objects*. See Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952; repr. New York: Grove, 2008), 89.
 59. Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (1955; repr. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 42.
 60. Christina Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Darieck Scott, *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination* (New York: New York University Press, 2010).
 61. This echoes Jinhana Haritaworn's claim that following objects may well lead us to altogether different objects and worlds.
 62. Uri McMillan, *Embodied Avatars* (New York: New York University Press, forthcoming).
 63. See Michael Fried's infamous essay "Art and Objecthood," *Artforum* 5, no. 10 (1967): 12–23.
 64. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 13.
 65. In 1985 the video game *Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar* was released, in which the player's quest was to become an "Avatar." The same year, Chip Morningstar, a designer of Lucasfilm's *Habitat*, a role-playing game released a year later, first coined the current use of avatar to describe a virtual representation of a player.
 66. Ann Weinstone, *Avatar Bodies: A Tantra for Posthumanism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 41.
 67. Susan Stryker, "My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage," in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, eds. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge, 2006), 244–56.
 68. Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 28.
 69. Nikki Sullivan and Samantha Murray, *Somatechnics: Queering the Technologisation of Bodies* (Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2009).