

Obi, Assemblage, Enchantment**Elizabeth Maddock Dillon**

In one of the earliest texts of sociology, *Treatise on Sociology, Theoretical and Practical* (1854), the white supremacist Henry Hughes defines women, blacks, and insane persons as “subsovereign” individuals.¹ It would be hard for any reader of this journal not to recognize such a claim as a form of racist and discriminatory thought; surely we know that women, blacks, and insane persons are people too. But in the subprime present of late, late capitalism, we are learning something else as well: sovereignty is just not so sovereign anymore, even for those persons previously known as autonomous liberal subjects. Even for those persons previously known as literary critics. The star-making machinery of the English departments of the 1980s has become clogged with and co-opted by the assistant deanery and assessment effluvia of the neo-liberal, managerially-minded university.² The tide of the linguistic turn has long since ebbed, leaving English scholars beached on the shores of shrinking humanities divisions, searching for ways to increase traffic on their wordpress blogs and remain engaged in an educational endeavor with resonant communal dimensions beyond the accumulation of student loan debt.

At such a moment as this, “subsovereign” antebellum women, blacks, and insane persons may have something to teach us. As a number of well-circulated and highly-debated essays on literary criticism today indicate, the figure of the heroic (sovereign) critic who excels at the revelatory, curtain-removing critical act seems to be under siege.³ The “paranoid reading” (Eve Sedgwick’s term) or “symptomatic reading” (Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best’s term) of the

heroic critic is one that aims to expose hidden truths—to show the workings of power behind the cloak of culture. But exposure itself seems to have lost its cachet: the ruses of power no longer seem to require veiling. If to expose is by no means to vanquish, then critique is increasingly shorn of political force and the heroic critic has lost his or her superpowers. Instead of revelation and exposure, then, a number of new terms have risen to the fore: affect theory, reparatory reading, surface reading. And in the case of this forum, “enchantment.” In what follows, I aim to relate new reading practices to historically informed literary analysis by way of considering the relation between “enchantment” and sub-sovereignty. Specifically, I am interested in what I have come to call “sub-agency” or the sub-agential subject who inhabits a world defined by dispersed, deindividuated subjectivity—a world in which sub-agential subjects cohabit with semi-agential objects, a world in which the assemblage of things and bodies is the locus of meaning, possibility, and poesis.

Obi/Assemblage

In C.L.R. James’s classic account of the Haitian Revolution, *Black Jacobins*, he relates a brief anecdote concerning a slave who is discovered to have stolen some potatoes and hidden them in his shirt. When confronted with the evidence of this theft, the slave replies, “Eh! Master. The devil is wicked. Put stones, and look, you find potatoes.” James writes, regarding this event, that the “majority of the slaves accommodated themselves to [the] unceasing brutality [of slavery] by a profound fatalism and a wooden stupidity before their master...When caught in error they persisted in denial with the same fatalistic stupidity.”⁴ Yet the stupidity at stake in this anecdote seems more than wooden—that is, it seems to partake of a certain creative resistance: the claim that the stones one put in one’s shirt were transformed into potatoes by the devil supposes or asks one to entertain the transformative capacity of inanimate, inert objects. More

radically, the slave's words invoke an alternative regime of being or ontology—one in which there is a plasticity between and among objects, one in which the devil has as much power to order the relations among people and things as does the master.

The ontology evoked in James's anecdote is given full expression in Obeah—the Jamaican religious/ medical practice associated with colonial slave culture and the African diaspora.⁵ Obi is, literally, a practice of assemblage; the Obi priest assembles bits of detritus into the Obi fetish—teeth, nails, hair, glass, dirt—and the Obi fetish, in turn wields medical, spiritual, and even military power. The Obi fetish, notably, combines objects that are typically understood as lacking significant relation to one another, items such as “small pieces of chalk, broken bits of various woods of a certain length, roots of grass, pieces of eel skin, two wings of a bat, two or three pieces of old leather, &c,”⁶ objects that perform and constitute a network of meaning and association that might be characterized in terms of a “counter-culture of modernity” (to use Paul Gilroy's words)—a competing or disruptive ontology with respect to European, plantocratic knowledge regimes.⁷

Historically, the British in Jamaica were struck with ambivalence about the workings of Obeah. On the one hand, they typically derided the credulousness of slaves who sought medical or magical assistance from Obeah men and women—the so-called “professors of Obeah” or practitioners of this craft. On the other hand, the British also outlawed Obeah, following Tacky's Rebellion (1760) in Jamaica, indicating, as such, that they clearly understood it as a threat to their colonial rule. Indeed, hundreds of slaves were put to death on charges of practicing Obeah under British rule in Jamaica.⁸ What Obeah represented, then, was a non-European episteme: indeed, it was not clear to the British what category Obeah should be placed in—that of medicine, that of religion, or that of politics? Derided as a form of knowledge—that is, as a curing or

healing force, Obeah was also vilified as an un-Christian religion, and ultimately outlawed as a potentially mobilizing political force. Obeah, then, was a practice that challenged both the knowledge categories and ontology of European colonial domination.

The derision that Obi occasioned often centered on the incoherence of the dividing line between subjects and objects—a division that is central to European Enlightenment knowledge in which the human subject is sovereign with respect to the instrumentalized objects that he or she wields in pursuit of his or her own ends—objects whose inanimacy assists in the generation and staging of human agency. Accounts of Obeah indicate, by way of contrast, a world in which objects exhibit agency and the agency of human subjects is dispersed and/or dissipated across a network of actors and things. An account of Obi published in 1844 speaks to the porous boundaries between subjects and objects: “The negroes, with but few exceptions, firmly believe the Obeah people can insert different articles, such as pieces of glass bottles, old rags, nails, stones &c., into the flesh of those they dislike, and that the afflicted are obliged to get one of the same craft to relieve them.” The same account describes the experience of a slave woman who has lost a gown and is assisted by an Obeah woman in recuperating it through a process of extracting the missing gown from the woman’s flesh: “the necromancer proceeded apparently to draw out of the sufferer’s arms and legs, pieces of the gown she had lost, various sized pieces of glass, parts of an old shoe, and many other similar articles. This was related with the utmost seriousness of countenance, and no doubt firmly believed in by the reciter.”⁹ The disbelief of the European narrator in this account is clear: the scene is related as an example of the preposterous and puerile metaphysics of Obeah and of the misplaced, uncritical belief of those who subscribe to it. But what if we were to read this without such a judgment attached—without applying the pedagogy of disenchantment, of critical exposure, that the narrator appends? This anecdote,

speaks, on such a reading, to the (perhaps enchanting) plasticity and boundary dissolution between objects and bodies, animate and inanimate entities, that characterizes Obeah. And in this case, the lost gown seems to have a certain agency that intersects with that of its owner. Rather than the slave woman donning the gown, at this moment, the gown dons her—it inhabits her, traversing her flesh, and is returned to her from within, lost and found, owned and disowned at once.

The logic of assemblage that I trace here in representations of Obeah is one that has gained theoretical ground, of late, in the work of theorists from Gilles Deleuze, to Manuel DeLanda, to Bruno Latour. According to Latour’s model of “Actor Network Theory,” for instance, social agency and social meaning are the effect of nodes of assemblage, and these assemblages themselves determine the categories of meaning through which they are apprehended. Significantly, Latour draws no distinct line between subjects and objects: rather, he employs the term “actant” to describe subjects or objects whose agency is produced from within a network of relations linking actants to one another. Assemblages of actants—be these objects or subjects—thus redefine the agency of the (formerly sovereign) subject as embedded within and produced by the network. Further, Latour critiques standard methods of social science, arguing that there are no categories or groupings that exist *a priori* or “out there,” but rather only a series of competing enrollments—a series of competing calls to see one category or assemblage as meaningful and another as invisible: “Everything happens as if social scientists had to claim that there exists ‘out there’ one type that is real,” asserts Latour, “whereas other sets are really inauthentic, obsolete, irrelevant, or artificial.”¹⁰ We might, then, consider Obi in precisely these terms: Obeah places into relation a set of subjects and objects that are seen as unrelated, at least in the reckoning of European observers. Obi *reassembles* the social in order to

render visible and meaningful an alternative set of relations—an ontology—that has been previously regarded as inauthentic, untruthful, barbaric, or meaningless. *Obi* asks us to make sense of unfamiliar—unrealistic, even—relations between and among objects and subjects: between, say, rusty nails, grave dirt, a slave woman, a missing gown, and shoe leather. Unfamiliar, unrealistic, relations between, say, masters, slaves, and sugar cane or between a master, a slave, a shirt, potatoes, rocks, and the devil. Unfamiliar, unrealistic relations between medicine, religion, and revolution.

In the case of the nineteenth-century Anglo-Atlantic world, Latour's model of network theory and the heightened agency attributed to things therein is particularly resonant: we might consider, for instance, that a hogshead of sugar had a greater capacity to move from one side of the Atlantic to the other than did an enslaved person living in Jamaica or Louisiana. And indeed, sub-agential subjects, including enslaved persons, might, in the nineteenth century, do better in transforming themselves into things than in seeking to attain the prestige of officially enfranchised subjects. Henry "Box" Brown, the Virginia slave who mailed himself across the Mason-Dixon line on a twenty-seven hour journey in 1849, was able to achieve freedom and mobility as an object (a box) that was denied to him as a subject (Henry Brown).¹¹ This trope occurs in a number of Atlantic world texts: in Leonora Sansay's novel, *The Secret History; or the Horrors of St. Domingo*, a slave is able to escape from St. Domingue by posing as cargo in a ship; in William Earle's novel, *Obi; or the History of Three-fingered Jack*, the maroon hero of the novel is, as Michelle Burnham has argued, as much plantain tree as human.¹² Becoming plant-like or thing-like can be seen, then, as a means of escaping the inhumanity that is associated with humans.

Eschewing subjectivity for the agency of things may seem like a poor strategy of liberation: we have been schooled to see any transition from subject to object as a kind of downgrade rather than the reverse. The original (rejected) subtitle of Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, for example, hinged upon precisely such an assumption: *The Man That Was a Thing* names a text that narrates Uncle Tom's loss of humanity in the slave trade that turned him into a saleable item of property. Eschewing the prestige of the "human" as an agential figure is disturbing, in political terms, because doing so obviates the possibility of mobilizing justice claims in the name of human rights—a set of claims that have been central to liberalism. However, if we read for enchantment rather than exposure, we may not aim to expose the way in which the ideology of slavery robs Tom and others of humanity but we may aim instead to assemble a new set of relations that does not insist on divisions between agential subjects and inanimate objects. To read for enchantment might involve, as we have seen, reading Obeah representations as accounts of experiences of the world rather than as delusions: such a reading, in turn, reveals sub-agential subjects as inhabiting a world peopled with semi-agential objects; a world in which liberatory possibilities emerge as allied with dramatic ontological refiguration and distributed (not recuperated) agency. To embrace a concept of distributed agency, of assemblage, is also to avoid the very dichotomy separating the human from the inhuman and thus to open the possibility of new forms of movement and making across the subject/object divide.¹³

For sub-agential subjects, the sovereignty of human agency may not seem particularly promising: for literary critics embedded in the assemblage of the contemporary university, heroism might seem less compelling as a mode of knowledge production than engaging with the surprise of enchanted objects and sub-agential subjects. In her critique of the disenchantment

associated with modernity and Enlightenment knowledge, Jane Bennett argues for an *ethics* of enchantment: “To be enchanted is to be struck and shaken by the extraordinary that lives amid the familiar and the everyday.” Bennett suggests that enchantment—to assume “that the world has become neither inert nor devoid of surprise but continues to inspire deep and powerful attachments”—is a form of ethical engagement rather than delusion—a way to consider the relations between and among people and things that make life meaningful.¹⁴ Reading for these relations—as a means of engagement in poesis or acts of reassemblage—would seem, then, to open possibilities for those with foreclosed futures in the realm of liberal humanism.

¹ Henry Hughes, *Treatise on Sociology, Theoretical and Practical* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo & Co., 1854). My attention was drawn to Hughes’ use of the term “subsovereign” by Nancy Bentley’s excellent essay, “The Fourth Dimension: Kinlessness and African American Narrative,” *Critical Inquiry* 35.2 (2009): 270–292, which explores the relation of kinship (and its erasure) to the sovereign subject.

² For a cogent account of the neoliberal university and its management culture, see Chris Lorenz, “If You’re So Smart, Why Are You under Surveillance? Universities, Neoliberalism, and New Public Management,” *Critical Inquiry* 38 (Spring 2012): 599–629.

³ I refer to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s essay “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is about You,” in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Chapel Hill: Duke University Press, 2003): 123–152 and Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus’s “Surface Reading: An Introduction,” *Representations* 108.1 (Fall 2009): 1–21. For a critical response to these essays, see Elizabeth Weed, “The Way We Read Now,” *History of the Present*, 2.1 (Spring 2012): 95–106.

⁴ C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, 2nd ed. (Vintage: New York, 1989) 15.

⁵ For an excellent discussion of Obeah, ontology, and religion that informs my thoughts here, see Toni Wall Jaudon, “Obeah’s Sensations: Rethinking Religion at the Transnational Turn” forthcoming in *American Literature* 84.4 (Dec. 2012). —For recent historical scholarship on Obeah, see *Obeah and Other Powers: The Politics of Caribbean Religion and Healing*, ed. Diana Paton and Maarit Forde (Duke University Press, 2012). For a useful account of literary representations of Obeah, see Srinivas Aravamudan’s introduction to *Obi; or the History of Three-fingered Jack* by William Earle, ed. Aravamudan (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2005) as well as the additional documents collected in that volume.

⁶ H.T. de la Beche, *Notes on the Present Condition of The Negroes in Jamaica* (London: T. Cadell, 1825) 30.

⁷ Paul Gilroy, “The Black Atlantic as a Counterculture of Modernity,” in *Theorizing Diaspora*, eds. Jana Evans Braziel and Anit Mannur (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006): 49–80.

⁸ On the criminalization of Obeah see Diana Paton, “Obeah Acts: Producing and Policing the Boundaries of Religion in the Caribbean,” *Small Axe* 28 (March 2009): 1–18.

⁹ *Antigua and the Antiguans: a full account of the colony and its inhabitants from the time of the Caribs to the present day, interspersed with anecdotes and legends. Also, an impartial view of slavery and the free labour systems; the statistics of the island, and biographical notices of the principal families ..* (London: Saunders and Otley, 1844).

¹⁰ Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) 28.

¹¹ For an extended reading of Henry Box Brown’s performance of escape, see Daphne Brooks, “The Escape Artist: Henry Box Brown, Black Abolitionist Performance, and Moving Panoramas of Slavery,” in *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850–1910* (Chapel Hill: Duke University Press, 2006): 66–130.

¹² Michelle Burnham, “Trans-plantations: Pacific Botany and Atlantic Slavery in William Earle’s *Obi*,” paper delivered at C-19: The Society for Nineteenth-Century Americanists Conference, Berkeley, CA, April 2012.

¹³ There is a burgeoning critical field in the study of objects and in theoretical commitments to reconsidering or eradicating the subject/object and human/inhuman divide. This work ranges from theories of post-humanism (Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* [Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1999]) to “thing theory” (Bill Brown, “Thing Theory,” *Critical Inquiry*, 28.1 [Autumn, 2001]: 1–22), the “new materialism” (*New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, eds. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost [Chapel Hill: Duke University Press, 2010] and Jane Bennet, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* [Chapel Hill: Duke University Press, 2010]) and, more recently, the field of object oriented ontology (key practitioners of which include Graham Harmon, Levi Bryant, Ian Bogost, and Timothy Morton). Bruno Latour’s work is drawn upon by many of these theorists, and in some respects, I use his concept of assemblage here to evoke this broader, developing current of thought.

¹⁴ Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001) 4.