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**Lived Objects: Prosthetics, Agency and the Question of Object Oriented Ontology within an Ecological Disability Studies Framework**

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**LIVED OBJECTS: PROSETHETICS, AGENCY AND THE QUESTION OF OBJECT ORIENTED ONTOLOGY WITHIN AN ECOLOGICAL DISABILITY STUDIES FRAMEWORK**

Hi, so I'm Zach Richter and my presentation is called 'Lived objects, prosthetic agency and the question of object-oriented ontology with an ecological disability studies framework.' I am going to start by saying the main theorists I'm using for this work are Karen Barad, Sara Ahmed and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Barad, whose book *Meeting the Universe Halfway* is really important to the new field of critical object orientation, uses Niels Bohr to consider the entanglement of matter. What is interesting from an ecological disabilities framework is her use of the image of a blind person who is feeling the world with a cane (an idea from Bohr's writing also) to think about objects and the entanglements of the social within the object and tie in the co-entanglement of matter. And it is very important to her to theorize what she calls "a gentle realism" in order to ascribe a greater degree of agency to objects and to question the cut which cast subjects and objects as separate and not inter-related.

Some of us are already familiar with Sara Ahmed's work with queer phenomenology; she posits the table as kind of a centering device for the family as part of the idea of heteronormativity that comes from queer theory. The table is interesting to think about because it is an object that has kind of the social forces of heteronormativity embedded within it; this family table is an object which we regard as physical, but it has this social and political power, and it gets that partially from its spatial effort of directing a parallelism between the power of the patriarchal center and the more passive feminine and child but partially from how it centers the subject. So this is an object we are living through, and that gets me to my presentation, which is the lived object.

In Barad's work, we hear intentionality may be more attributable to a complex network of human and nonhuman agents including historically successful material conditions, and the phenomena are the ontological inseparabilities and entangled interactive agencies that are ontologically primitive relationships and interacting forces which transcend boundaries. Once more consider the example of the blind person who is traversing a space with their cane; Barad's focus is how the texture of the surface the blind person is traversing sticks out to them, and that for her is an example of intra-action between object and subject.

But I would like to take the thesis a little bit further in order to suggest that Barad isn't taking into consideration the moment in which there's kind of an ambiguity for the blind person when it is not clear what is happening to them and they get kind of confused. So when we take into consideration that ambiguity, we are forced to think about how real and how consistent that texture is, and we know the texture is not always present, that there must be an effort of reaching out, of feeling out to feel that texture. And so what I would posit is that the prosthetic device of which is used to feel, which in this case is the cane, is an object that is lived through—it is a lived object. And that object is kind of this place where the entanglement plays out to a greater degree than the texture of this outer world. So I am contradicting Barad here, which leads me to explore Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

Barad refers to Merleau-Ponty a lot. He was Foucault's teacher, and as a Marxist phenomenologist, he helps to reveal the ideological outlines set out to interpret and make indistinct phenomena into a set view of reality. Merleau-Ponty uses the concept of horizons to map out the limited and inter-related nature of a given type of perception. Within the Merleau-Pontian viewpoint, phenomena are horizontally separated into separate sense types that share information. But when specific sense types flood, the formerly solid lines become translucent. So, Barad's thesis asks for that line to no longer be a solid line and so for us to recognize that horizons are inherently porous, that the entanglement means that multiple areas of sensation collude and that horizontality becomes lost to multi-directional entanglement. And what that suggestion is, is that there's muddledness to the world generated partially by the interaction between spatial and tactile forms of sense data from multiple sources. And so we get this other element of the prosthetic, of the objects that we live through.

There is agency in making the effort to feel, in extending, to use one more of Barad's examples, the arm to feel and move in a specific manner. Starting on the left, for instance, or starting on the right, implies personal agency on the part of the cane user; it implies an agency about the world, what would be called a non-linear orientation. So with the lived object we recognize this place which is liminal space in which multiple agencies are intermingling, multiple forces of agency,

multiple intentionalities are kind of colliding. We have to imagine that a limb or an arm or a prosthetic arm or a conjured item of speech is prosthetic in that it enables the subject, this thing between the self and outer world, the ego and the self, is touched and effected by the environment and by the agency of the human body. And you know they feel the objects act as kind of outer extensions of one's agency in that they are limited in that same way that one's agency would be limited.

We get this because there's this stigma that's not only given to the person but to the limb or aspect of your person that seems out of order; that limb is targeted by ablest limitation and stigma. And I like to use an example which fits a current effort that I'm working with, which is dis-fluency.

The stutter is kind of a prosthetic in that it's a part of the person that is stretching out, but the stutter itself is the cut between subject and object as well, in so far as it is interpreted as a sign of weakness morally or psychologically. We see the cut, in terms of the stutter, as separating the stutter from the stutter-er and that's because the stutter as a part of the body, as a thing put out from oneself, has its agency taken up by the world of ablest social meaning in terms of its unfinishedness, in terms of its unevenness. The stutter itself, the moment of dis-fluency in speech, or the knarred limb in the case of physical disability, or the cane for a blind person—these extensions of disability are themselves objects, but in a sense that they are viewed as external from what is normal, and when a subject finds these objects extended onto them, there is a reaction of pushing away.

We also see this in the case of a cage or in the case of a dirty floor. The object has social assumptions projected upon it by the public world of social meaning, and so when we see theorists like Ahmed noting how the table is situated in this heteronormative way against queer people and how it can be used in a misogynist way against gendered people, there's a battle being waged to kind of liberate the lived object and reflect upon that object's role in collective material consciousness.

Likewise, an eco-ability framework would aim to liberate the parts of the animal from being seen as tools, so we see vegans and other animal rights activists repudiating products made with meat because of this knowledge that, in a sense, those objects are made through cutting, and through being cut away from the subject they are imbued with a social meaning of exploited use, and that they are (or were once) part of the independent agency of the animal is disregarded.

Similarly, we see disabled people pushing for things like Mad pride or pushing for wheelchairs to be regarded as objects which are needed and useful but are not bound to the person; and acceptance of a prosthesis is shown as not wanting to hide or cover these disabled parts. So, in these cases, battles for animal rights or disability rights are being waged on/in the constitution and the make-up of the object itself. There is kind of a paradox that an object can be both used as an outer sphere by a collective social concern and also used by an agency in terms of the material navigation of objects. But that paradox can work with this phenomenological theory about the horizon in the sense that the connection between the object to the person and of the object to an environment can be viewed as more inconsistent. This scholarly project exists to critique some efforts in poststructuralist new materialism which would understand objects and effects as

completely separate from movements for identity and movements for equal rights and movements against capitalism. That they would aim to skew these kinds of pieces of reality into an inter-subjective interplay and place them into a symbolic economy in a Lacanian style but at the same time forget the political situatedness of the object in the collective unconscious and that if an object has a meaning projected upon it, such a meaning would not be inseparable from dominant meaning systems that would align it either within neoliberal schemes of identity or in resistance to them and that objects are in fact battlegrounds between a collective agency which would disavow them and a personal agency which acts through them.

And so it is a problem to me when critical object-orientation or a recent poststructuralist material theorizing misses or evades the multiple agencies present in the object. I think that Ahmed does very well with the example of the table which reveals the sense in which the phenomena of the table is over taken by the phenomenon of the family which uses it as a gathering point. And in the conversation about objects, I would hope that more people involved in eco-criticism, people involved in critical animal studies as well as people involved in disability studies and critical disability studies make an effort to retake objects as part of their struggle and make efforts to challenge this trend which Barad occupies toward viewing objects as completely separate from these struggles and trying to use her idea that objects have an acting agency.

That is to say that merely saying the object has a texture and acts on its own is not enough. It is acting on its own as well as being acted through both by a wider social culture and individual agents which materially pushes through it, or touch it, or must use it. So we get this understanding, as I'm ending my presentation, that the object is beset by a multiplicity of forces which are all acting through it and acting in it and acting with it. And so its agency is not alone, but its agency is kind of being pulled back and forth in two to three different directions. I will finally add that we have to consider the extent to which objects can be used for a disability agenda which would argue that everyone is using objects to extend their will, and used within an animal agenda, we would consider the sense in which animal objects still retain an animal agency. Thank you.