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WENDY ANNE LEE

In their introduction to *Critique and Postcritique*, Elizabeth Anker and Rita Felski ask whether “postcritique require[s] a different ethos or affect” than critique?¹ Bruno Latour offers one clear option in his 2004 hard-nosed injunction to “return to the realist attitude.”² Expressing his uneasy sense that climate-change deniers have co-opted “the weapons of social critique” to undermine the validity of scientific findings, Latour endorses a turn away from the “debunking impetus” inherited from the Enlightenment and toward a mission “to protect and to care” (*CRS*, 230, 232). Such a shift in ethos would allow academics to face a new set of “threats” in the world: “there is no greater intellectual crime than to address with the equipment of an older period the challenges of the present one” (*CRS*, 231).

What intellectuals find in their new and improved arsenal is what Latour will in a subsequent essay specify as “compositionism,” an alternative to critique that “takes up the task of searching for universality but without believing that this universality is already there, waiting to be unveiled and discovered.”³ Compositionism would appear to meet the postcritical or “constructivist” call to replace “the ethos of someone who . . . *subtract*[s] reality” with that of one who “*adds* reality” (*CRS*, 232). According to Latour’s “Attempt at a ‘Compositionist Manifesto,’” this work would entail 1) introducing gaps between causes and consequences, in part because consequences have overwhelmed their causes and we now inhabit that overflow; 2) extending agency to nonhumans in a return to animist thinking; and 3) composing or projecting these agencies across space and time “slowly

and progressively” in the making of another world—one that is “much more material, much more mundane, much more immanent, much more realistic, much more embodied” (*ACM*, 484).⁴

It is worthwhile to compare Latour’s theoretical reset to another glimpsed in our own field of eighteenth-century studies, Sandra Macpherson’s (anything but) “little formalism,” a critical redirection that would basically detonate Latour’s “wish to compose a common world” (*ACM*, 484).⁵ “My own wish,” Macpherson states, is “for a genuinely formalist critical practice, a little formalism that would turn one away from history without shame or apology” (*ALF*, 385). What Macpherson means by form is partly the inquiry of her essay, but one offering is “a perceptible, perhaps a recurring pattern that makes something the thing it is” or, in reduced form, “merely . . . being the thing one is” (*ALF*, 388, 401). In comparing the outlooks of these two materialist thinkers, we might start by observing their tonal differences. Latour’s “Manifesto” risks a certain chirpiness as it toggles between dogged affirmation (*let’s reboot modernity!*), productive alarm (*oh god, the planet!*), and mood-enhancement (*surely we can dispute, compose our futures, say yes to the sixteenth century?!*). Where Latour’s exclamatory style lifts, lightens, and rallies, Macpherson’s dark austerity brings us back to an unforgiving earth—solid ground wholly indifferent to critique, a cold planet after all.

Their points of countervision are profound. To Latour’s emphasis that we attend to gaps in causation, we have Macpherson’s “philosophy of life committed to the notion that biology is destiny” (*ALF*, 400). To Latour’s embrace of nonhuman agents, we have Macpherson’s objection to critical projects based on agentive solutions, in particular, object-oriented ontology (“OOO”), which for Macpherson is forever granting objects the status of subjects in a predictable celebration of freedom, autonomy, and knowledge-production—an all-too-human posthumanism. “To move beyond the human, it turns out, is to find her everywhere,” writes a disappointed Macpherson (*ALF*, 399).⁶ *No formalism without ontology!* is the slogan to her own “determinist formalism” (*ALF*, 390, 401, emphasis mine), and where for Latour, “critique has not been critical enough” (*CRS*, 232), for Macpherson, “OOO isn’t reactionary enough, isn’t committed enough to the ‘staleness’ of substance” (*ALF*, 397). Instead of agents who subtract or add reality, what emerges is just reality: impervious, durable matter. Finally, to Latour’s urbane optimism, we have Macpherson’s stalwart commitments far beyond the pleasure principle. “About the end of our species,” she concludes, “I say: fine”—a pronouncement inflectable by either shrugging resignation (*okay, fine*) or tooth-gnashing anger (*fine then*) or Cary Grant-like jauntiness (*Swell! Fine!*) (*ALF*, 401). (Macpherson’s delivery at the 2015 American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies conference in Los Angeles suggests the last option.)

For Latour, it is time to move beyond “the old opposition between what is constructed and what is not constructed,” an outgrowth of the great “Bifurcation” issued by Enlightenment philosophers (*ACM*, 477). Since “the cage of nature,” he argues, “was invented to render politics impotent, there is no reason why a politics of *Nature* would ever deliver its promises” (*ACM*, 482, 480). Instead of leaning on some utopian framework, Latour proposes a politics that seeks “immanence *and* truth together . . . *matters of concern*, not only *matters of fact* . . . achieved only by the slow process of composition and compromise, not by the revelation of the world of beyond” (*ACM*, 478). Macpherson commits to an immanence of the stark and uncompromising variety. A formalism committed to history or to politics (or that regards “its commitment to politico-historical formalism as the only tolerable formalism”) is for her not sufficiently formalist, posthuman, “ontic” (*ALF*, 397). Critics working under the banner of new formalism or new materialism do not adequately approach objects, she suggests in a reading of Barthes’s “The World as Object” that quotes his “scandal of [the lemon’s] perfect and useless ellipse,” with a view to “their irreducibility, their impenetrability, and their meaninglessness” (*ALF*, 396).⁷

It is worth including here the full quotation from Barthes’s essay about how Dutch painting showcases the utility of objects, obscuring their “essential form,” or “core,” or “substance.”⁸ “What need have I of the lemon’s principal [*sic*] form? What my quite empirical humanity needs is a lemon ready for use, half-peeled, half-sliced, half-lemon, half-juice, caught at the precious moment it exchanges the scandal of its perfect and useless ellipse for the first of its economic qualities, astringency” (*WO*, 5). Barthes layers the distinction between an object’s “stubborn matter” and “functional virtues” over an existential division between human habitats, or “[t]his universe of fabrication,” and the “riddle” of the physical world (*WO*, 5). In the non-isomorphism between environment and matter, Barthes keeps intact the riddle of “form”—work that is carried on by Macpherson, who sniffs out and eschews residual humanisms. Of Jane Bennett’s response to the work of Timothy Morton, Macpherson writes, “if new formalism redeems form by tying it to the contingency of a human agency that goes under the name ‘history,’ new materialism redeems matter by tying it to the contingency of a human agency that goes under the name of ‘politics’” (*ALF*, 401). For Macpherson, there is no need to redeem form because form does not need to be redeemed—as, say, human beings do: “We are the bad objects,” she clarifies (*ALF*, 402).

Macpherson tantalizingly alludes to “another story: about wanting a determinist feminism to go along with my determinist formalism.” But, she writes, “it is a story for another time” (*ALF*, 401). In spite of her

deferral, we see that a determinist feminism would probably entail what, in a parenthetical aside on Elizabeth Grosz and Luce Irigaray, she calls “morphological thinking,” or what “we used to call ‘essentialism,’ but I would call . . . ‘formalism’ inasmuch as morphology is formal for the body.” A gendered formalism would furthermore meditate on “the material conditions of sexed bodies” (*ALF*, 400). Macpherson’s little, determinist, feminist formalism’s expansion of the range of objects to material conditions resonates in another feminist’s theory, this one looping the critical back to the postcritical. Latour’s full quotation names her: “Can we devise another powerful descriptive tool that deals this time with matters of concern and whose import then will no longer be to debunk but to protect and to care, as Donna Haraway would put it?” (*CRS*, 232).

To Latour’s dream of composing a better world and Macpherson’s wish for a more formal formalism, Donna Haraway, as Heather Love writes in her contribution to *Critique and Postcritique*, “dream[s] of cultivating a feminist version of objectivity.”⁹ This task, Love illuminates, “argues that the constitution of new objects of scientific knowledge is inseparable from the creation of modern forms of gender and gendered inequality.”¹⁰ In a comparative discussion of Haraway’s “Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium” and Latour’s essay ostensibly launching postcritique, Love writes that it is Haraway who “imagines extending attention from the object to its contexts, seeing how *all* of the entities in technoscience—including gender, and other forms of social determination—are ‘constituted *in* the action of knowledge production, not before the action starts.”¹¹ Even if Macpherson’s little formalism looks ultimately to the stalest and barest of inhuman substances, her determinist feminism suggests a similar widening of attention, to forms *and* formations. Whether Macpherson would opt into “the lumpy community of modest witnesses called feminist science studies” is not clear to me, but I’m fairly certain she would agree with the signature line from Haraway’s book: “a searing sense that all is not well with women.”¹²

Macpherson’s concerns are far from remote to eighteenth-century studies. Without necessarily claiming a new materialist lineage (or even writing under the influence of Jane Bennett or Elizabeth Grosz), feminist scholars in our field have shown a strong orientation towards natural science, raising challenging inquiries about the relation of literary to material and biological form. In work by writers including Lynn Festa, Anne-Lise François, Andrea Gadberry, Lenora Hanson, Sarah Tindal Kareem, Heather Keenleyside, Jayne Elizabeth Lewis, Anahid Nersessian, Joanna Picciotto, Helen Thompson, and Courtney Weiss Smith, among others, we see persistent questions about the distinctions between organic and inorganic substance; what connects figuration, concrete form, and abstraction; the methods and claims

of empiricism and experimentation; and the ontological status of poetic language. (One recent example won the MLA First Book Prize: Amanda Jo Goldstein's *Sweet Science* about the impact of Lucretian materialism, "a materialism that granted substance to tropes and tropic activity to nonverbal things," on Romantic writing.¹³) This collective research—in many ways catalyzed by the historian of science Lorraine Daston and much informed by posthumanist readings of the Anthropocene—belongs to a longstanding feminist meditation on the legacy of Enlightenment. Evident is a renewed focus on and even urgency in attending to how, as Ann Thomson writes in *Bodies of Thought* about the early Enlightenment soul, "materialism was a spectre haunting any reflection on human nature in the eighteenth century, and one that was taken seriously."¹⁴

Has *Homo sapiens*' loss of species entitlement opened up new takes on the physical world, perhaps comprising what philosophers Hasana Sharp and Chloë Taylor have described as a "renaturalization"? Such an effort, which Sharp and Taylor depict as indebted to Haraway and feminist science studies at large, would "consis[t] of a creative and ambitious effort to reground feminist ontology."¹⁵ Tita Chico, in her new book about early science's reliance on literary knowledge, flags the centrality of naturalism's modest witness as "a masculine figure of authority, gentility, and privilege, admired for his morality and knowledgeability and, just as notable, distinguished from women and laboring men."¹⁶ Engaging Haraway, Chico observes the "unmarked" or "self-invisible" quality of the Enlightenment scientist and its gender-specific application in which "male modesty referred to the mind; female modesty referred to the body."¹⁷ The commitments of Macpherson and of a significant group of eighteenth-century scholars to interpreting cultural texts and artifacts in insistently and detailed materialist terms could suggest how a feminist project of renaturalization approaches the possibility of perception, experience, and encounter precisely from a footing in the marked and the visible—not so much as a counterclaim to morality or knowledge but as an attempt to loosen the viciously hard knot of "authority, gentility, and privilege" that still defines what we do.

NOTES

1. Elizabeth S. Anker and Rita Felski, introduction to *Critique and Postcritique* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 1.

2. Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (Winter 2004): 225–48, 225, henceforth cited parenthetically in the text as *CRS*.

3. Bruno Latour, "An Attempt at a 'Compositionist Manifesto,'" *New Literary History* 41, no. 3 (Summer 2010): 471–90, 474, henceforth cited parenthetically in the text as *ACM*.

4. Maureen N. McLane takes up Latour's challenge in "Compositionism: Plants, Poetics, Possibilities; or, Two Cheers for Fallacies, Especially Pathetic Ones!" *Representations* 140, no. 1 (2017): 101–20. "I would like to move from the language of critique to that of composition," she writes, "for not only is there no way out of sympathetic (or antipathetic) projection, it may be that this is precisely the required condition for an acknowledgment of common life" (104).

5. Sandra Macpherson, "A Little Formalism," *ELH* 82, no. 2 (2015): 385–405, henceforth cited parenthetically in the text as *ALF*.

6. For an alternative demonstration, see McLane's analysis of ballads in "Compositionism." For example, of "The Three Ravens," McLane writes that "tree and field are not summoned to do the job of human speech, or to sustain the work of human responsiveness; they mediate no consciousness, carry no affect, transmit no lessons. If any nonhuman figures do that in this ballad, it is the ravens. . . . Tree and field are not, it would seem, the subjects or agents of the poem; they are, however, its infrastructure and its support" (107).

7. See Macpherson's critique of an aesthetic injunction to politicize or to evaluate art as "good or bad for something" in "The Political Fallacy," *PMLA* 132, no. 5 (2017): 1214–19, 1219.

8. Roland Barthes, "The World as Object," *Roland Barthes: Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1972), 5–12, 5, henceforth cited parenthetically in the text as *WO*.

9. Heather Love, "The Temptations: Donna Haraway, Feminist Objectivity, and the Problem of Critique," in *Critique and Postcritique*, ed. Elizabeth S. Anker and Rita Felski (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 53.

10. Love, "Temptations," 55.

11. Love, 57.

12. Donna Haraway, *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium.FemaleMan©_Meets_OncoMouse™: Feminism and Technoscience* (New York: Routledge, 1997). The rest of the line reads, "as well as billions of nonwomen, who remain incommensurable in the warped coordinate systems of the New World Order, Inc." (269).

13. Amanda Jo Goldstein, *Sweet Science: Romantic Materialism and the New Logics of Life* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 7.

14. Ann Thomson, *Bodies of Thought: Science, Religion, and the Soul in Early Enlightenment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 2.

15. Hasana Sharp and Chloë Taylor, introduction to *Feminist Philosophies of Life* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017), 5.

16. Tita Chico, *The Experimental Imagination: Literary Knowledge and Science in the British Enlightenment* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018), 37.

17. Chico, *Experimental*, 38.