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Objecthood

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Boston University

Chapter 1 Objecthood

Mary C. Beaudry

The Enlightenment has been aptly described as the time of the thing, a period during which "philosophers, artists, scientists, and cultural commentators of all sorts paid new attention to the changing material details of everyday life" (Rosenberg 2018). The historical uses and meanings of things shifted as the cultural and intellectual frameworks that gave them meaning also changed. "The very activity of classification—an enterprise so characteristic of Enlightenment arts and sciences . . . could barely be pursued unless seen as entirely entwined with the production, distribution and movements of the mass of commodities and artifacts that freshly populated eighteenth-century worlds" (Craciun and Schaffer 2017: 2). It was the age of the classification and collection: collections of curated objects (Craciun and Schaffer 2017) and collections of facts and information in the form of encyclopedias and other compendia (Stalnaker 2010). New concepts of objects and objectivity led to the widespread objectification of objects—and of people—through the dialectical processes of externalization and reinternalization (Lucas 2010: 128–129; Miller 1997[1987]: 4–82). Externalization involves "creating something which is 'other' or 'object'—this allows the self to define itself . . . subject is defined in relation to object—something that stands against" (Hodder 2010: 30–31). Reinternalization (sublation) involves re-appropriation of the external into the self: "Man not only effects a change of form in the materials of nature; he also realizes his own purpose in those materials" (Marx 1976: 284).

New ways of defining and expressing self and personhood through objectification in the Age of Enlightenment were prompted by far-reaching events and processes that characterized the

emergence of the early modern world. Among these are globalization and the rise of capitalism, which led to unprecedented forms of connectivity and interactions across borders and oceans (Gerritsen and Riello 2016a: 3). European rulers and merchants who reaped vast profits from global trade in luxuries invested in exploratory ventures in search of the elusive passage to the east through the American continent; none were successful, but exploration led to exploitative and extractive colonial and imperial projects in various parts of the world. It also led, in parts of the Americas and elsewhere, to the establishment of large plantation estates and haciendas requiring the labor of enslaved indigenous peoples and Africans—a process in which trafficked humans were treated as objects (King 1994: 117–126). Here I explore the ways in which globalization and international connections, the transatlantic slave trade, and the rise of notion of individual human rights affected ways in which people redefined themselves and objects during the Age of Enlightenment.

The First Global Age

Material historians since the 1970s have focused on material culture and material life and following the “global turn” in historical studies of the 1980s, on the global trajectories of things, and the impact of global trade in luxury goods upon the lives of Europeans at home and in colonial contexts (Gerritsen and Riello 2016a: 2–3; see also Blondé et al. 2009; Blondé and de Laet 2017; Gerritsen and Riello 2015a, 2016b; Lemire 2018). In the seventeenth century, Amsterdam became “Europe’s principal entrepôt not only for commodities and luxury goods from throughout Europe, but also for products from Asia” (Corrigan 2015: 124). Amsterdam merchants purchased goods in bulk from the vast warehouses of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and sold them at luxury shops (van der Veen 2015); the VOC also held public auctions.

Yet another way in which people could acquire exotic goods was via the second-hand trade, which historians now see as having been highly important in the early modern retail infrastructure as well as in terms of the links between individual identity and second-hand consumption (Stobart and Van Damme 2010: 4). Tracey Randle (2010) studied how patterns of second-hand purchasing can make construction of new identities possible for groups of varying economic means. Free Burghers of the VOC's Cape Colony, former employees of the VOC who were granted large parcels of land, sought to purchase goods to furnish their households and bodies in ways that "would be a reflection of their perceived and newly constructed social status and land-owning identity" (Randle 2010: 221). The appropriate goods were key to Burghers' ability to assert their aspirational identity and status: "the act of purchasing goods at an auction can be seen as a form of public identity construction" (Randle 2010: 223) because attendance at public auctions allowed purchasers to establish connections with elites and to emulate them. Randle (2010: 237) concludes that the sale and resale

of second-hand goods was important to those low down on the economic scale, but also for those at the highest echelons of colonial society. At the Cape, 'modernity' might not have been defined so much by the use of 'new' consumables, but rather by access to the wealth needed to purchase the most luxurious of second-hand goods.

Purchase of second-hand luxury goods that once graced the homes of the rich thus allowed those who lacked wealth to emulate those who could afford to purchase such goods when new, as well as to demonstrate in material form that they, too, possessed the taste and distinction exhibited by their wealthy counterparts (Bourdieu 1984).

Wealthy Dutch householders furnished their homes with Indian and Chinese textiles, Chinese porcelain, and exotic curiosities such as shells, horns, agates, minerals and pearls displayed in elaborate cabinets of curiosities (Corrigan 2016: 124). The “culture of luxury” that emerged in Amsterdam (and elsewhere in Europe as well as in colonial contexts) in the seventeenth century was strongly affected by the availability of Asian objects. Display of wealth that had once been chiefly if not solely signaled through possession of gold, silver, and gems shifted “toward objects whose value lay not so much in the cost of the materials as in the quality of their craftsmanship or more abstract concepts of significance” (Corrigan et al. 2015: 14). New tastes and a new form of consumerism fostered by the “sensual and visual allure of Asian imports” (Corrigan et al. 2016: 14, 16) gave rise to new ways of presenting the self and new expressions of personhood through objects; in this sense, objectification can be seen as part of the larger process of becoming (Miller 1987: 81; Myers 2001). Dutch portraits and still-life paintings after 1600 included rare and exotic objects such as silks, porcelain, shells from the Indian and Pacific Oceans, spices and peppers, and tea (Roelofs 2015). Asian objects in portraits allowed the person or persons portrayed to present themselves as persons of taste and sensibility through ownership and appreciation of fine objects of distant origin; those who could not afford portraiture or the most exotic imports, much less collect such things, could attempt to emulate the wealthy by acquiring second-hand goods from the households of people who were wealthy enough to purchase and display the newest items from abroad and to commission paintings and portraits.

Some scholars have linked changing concepts of personhood to the rise of new work habits and work-discipline (Thompson 1967) that extended to self-discipline through mannerly behavior, dining etiquette (Braudel 1979), and the possession of matching dinnerware (Leone

1988). Shackel, for instance, in his study of the emergence of personal discipline in eighteenth-century Annapolis, Maryland (1993) focused on time discipline through examination of objects related to the segmentation and measurement of time and space (clocks and scientific instruments) and on “formal and segmenting dining items” (1993: 100), noting that such items were associated with new behaviors that “led to practices such as having separate dishes for the salad, the main course, and the dessert. These specialized dining items began to separate both the dinner into parts and the diners from one another” (1993: 101). His analysis emphasizes the ways that objects act upon people and the role things play in fashioning personhood and the individual. This is surely a valid interpretation, but it gives short shrift to human/thing relationships and the entanglement of people and things in the performance of identity (Hodder 2012; Hodder and Lucas 2017).

Dinner parties and even less formal meals are characterized by a performative intermingling of objects, texts, and dinner guests/performers; at times the place where people dine is decorated in such a way as to render it a theatrical space (Goldstein 2013: 77). Art historian Claudia Goldstein explores the significance of the early modern dinner party among the well-to-do, aspiring, and elite of sixteenth-century Antwerp through correspondence, paintings, inventories, literature written for the dining room (*tafelspelen*, or table plays) and even the motifs on stoneware jugs. She surmises that imagery on both pots and paintings involving peasants participating in festive events constituted important tropes through which hosts and diners positioned themselves within contemporary society.

The temporal moment of the dinner party activated the space of the dining room and the images in it, and challenged distinctions between classes, between performer and

audience, and between art and social life. The event both changed and charged, if only for that moment, everything in the physical space of the dining room, creating a theatrical, liminal, and ultimately safe place for the urban elite to explore socio-economic difference and the experience of the other. (Goldstein 2013: 77)

Performance, “the whole event, including audience and performers“ is nebulous, “because the boundaries separating it on the one side from the theatre and on the other from everyday life are arbitrary” (Schechner 1977:44, quoted in Goldstein 2013: 78); at dinner parties the guests are on foreign territory even if it is familiar to them, hence they can be thought of as the audience “both participating in the ritual of the dinner gathering and observing all things about the host and his family and home. . . . the host, family, and even the house and its decoration become the performers, with staff in supporting roles. Yet the guests are called upon to perform as well, entertaining the host and other guests in order to prove their value as persons invited into his home” (Goldstein 2013: 78).

E. C. Spary examines “issues of appetite, authenticity, and control and the transformations of both foods and eaters during that encounter” (Spary 2012: 246); she argues that eighteenth-century French diners enacted and performed Enlightenment principles with the explicit aim of appearing to be enlightened individuals (Spary 2012: 246).

The relationship between eating and identity was fraught with ambiguity. On the one hand, the act of eating was artificial, a mannered act in which inner nature was to be concealed, just as the task of cooks in nouvelle cuisine was to disguise the identity of individual ingredients. On the other, eating habits were commonly also taken to display authentic

inner nature, either by manifesting deviant appetites or through the adverse health effects of a bad diet.

Authenticity, or being perceived as authentic, then, is a critical aspect of Enlightenment and contemporary personhood (Anton 2001); it may be “inner nature” but must be demonstrated outwardly, through appropriate behaviors and appropriate objects.

Not all dinner parties were harmonious events, however, and not all centered around conceptions of authenticity but rather on subverting the authentic. Dawn Hadley discusses the “social dangers of various dining scenarios” (2005: 106–108), noting that the material culture of elite dining could at times frustrate or humiliate guests. Diners might be expected to participate in table plays, as mentioned above, or be confronted with the challenge of attempting to drink from a puzzle jug (a jug with perforations that make it impossible to drink from without spilling unless one solves the “puzzle”), or of comprehending the import of table décor such as sotelties (foods made to look like something else) bearing coded political or social messages, or decorations whose messages seemed to invert the social order or aimed to convey to diners advice about how to behave in ways appropriate to their social position vis à vis the host (Hadley 2005: 108–116).

Through objects people enacted and re-enacted their social roles at the levels of domesticity and private life, while being drawn into both global and national networks and imaginaries. Incorporation of unfamiliar and exotic foodstuffs from Asia and the Americas into the cuisine served at the tables of elites as well as of ordinary peoples served the purposes of eighteenth-century European governments, whose leaders applied Enlightenment principles to national economies. This had much to do with the correlation of particular foodstuffs, for example, the

potato, with population and political economy. Rebecca Earle examines the case of the energetic efforts of European governments to promote the cultivation and consumption of the potatoes, a New World tuber, among all ranks of their citizens: “the health of individual members of the population became linked to overall health and stability of the state and its economy” (Earle 2018: 156). In this way a humble foodstuff was objectified as an instrument of state. Earle (2018: 157) concludes that

If we wish to understand eighteenth-century ideas about governance and statecraft, we need to pay attention not only to debates about urban planning, military reform, vaccinations, or the gathering of statistics. We also need to consider how the meaning of everyday activities such as eating were re-conceptualized within this new framework of governance.

Integrating the slower history of the potato’s conquest of European dietaries with its frenetic promotion in the late eighteenth century illuminates the central role that ordinary eating practices came to play in Enlightened models of statecraft.

Objecthood and the Atlantic Slave Trade

The most quintessential expression of objectification in an emergent capitalist world was the transformation of human beings into objects that were quantified and traded on the same terms as the commodities so sought after by mercantile elites. During the Atlantic slave trade (sixteenth through nineteenth centuries), over 35,000 voyages transported at least twelve and a half million Africans to the Americas; a trade such as this was possible only through the objectification of the bodies of captive Africans as sub-human or non-human—as cargo, in other words (Voyages

2018; Lindsay 2008). The European objectification of Africans not only allowed them to treat Africans as commodities but also to deliberately overlook the rich ethnic and religious diversity of African cultures by classifying all of them as merely African, “ultimately affecting the original systematization of white-world and black-world relationships” (Edmondson 1976: 5). Europe’s white-world expansion and search for global power resulted in a pervasive system of slavery embedded in the processes of international relations and racialization, “some consequences of which are still secreted in the contemporary world” (Edmondson 1976: 5).

In the eighteenth century, Calvinist minister François Valentijn stated that enslavement was “the world’s oldest trade,” while noting that Dutch slaving in the Indian Ocean before and during the seventeenth century was not well documented (Keijzer 1856: 46; King 1994; Vink 2003). This was not the case for the nations (Portugal, Netherlands, England, Spain, France) most deeply involved in the Atlantic slave trade when, in response to the demand for coerced labor for colonial undertakings in the Americas, the business ramped up from a periodic activity to a full-bore commercial enterprise. Slaving was a business, and businesses required records, many of which have recently been tracked down and systematically assembled into a searchable database by historians David Eltis and colleagues, providing a comprehensive listing of ports of call, ports of delivery, numbers of persons who made up the cargoes, and other information for the period of 1514–1866 (Voyages 2018; see also Eltis and Richardson 2015; Rosenthal 2018). Enlightenment principles of scientific nationalism were applied in keeping records of the slave trade as well as by eighteenth-century scientists who collected new natural and medical knowledge through contact with Africans; scientific treatises produced by naturalists were often cited to justify race-based slavery and the continuance of the Atlantic slave trade (Murphy 2016). As Rebecca Earle notes, “the classifications that underpinned early modern systems of

knowledge in the Atlantic world embraced both plants and people and reflected a yearning for order that transcended any division between science and statecraft” (Earle 2016: 431).

The scope and scale of the Atlantic trade affected peoples who remained in Africa (Decorse 2001a; Manning 1994) as well as those who were captured and survived the Middle Passage, leaving a material footprint across the African continent as well as in the Americas. The trade had significant and lasting impact upon the peoples of Africa, where “there were dramatic changes in economic relations, social organization, and cultural practices” (Decorse 2001c: 1). West and Central Africa became deeply involved in the slave trade while at the same time West and Central Africans served as a market for industrial goods such as cloth and firearms; new economic alignments led to shifting political alliances among African polities and between Europeans and African rulers, along with internal disruptions such as civil war and population movements (Stahl 2007: 67; see also Ogundiran 2007; Usman 2007; Kusimba 2007). For the most part, European slave traders operated along the west coast of Africa; coastal and riverine towns were the most directly affected by European contact (DeCorse 2001c: 7), but the European thirst for ever greater numbers of captives fostered wars and civil unrest in the interior. In Kongo, for instance, civil wars were sparked by competing dynastic ambitions of rulers who enriched themselves by selling war captives to European traders; during these wars, “thousands of Christian Kongolese were enslaved and were sold into the Atlantic slave trade” (Heywood and Thornton 2007: 110). The business of the slave trade required an elaborate infrastructure through which African bodies were processed, transported, and marketed for sale after being held temporarily at commercial prison fortresses such as El Mina and Cape Coast Castle on the West African coast (DeCorse 2001b, 2016; St. Clair 2006). The ships that transported captives from Africa to points of sale in the Americas were the most important element of the infrastructure of

the slave trade as it was on ships that black bodies were truly objectified by being treated and loaded, as cargo; scholars have recently turned their attention to the materiality of slave ships and have treated the Middle Passage as a specific experience in the lives of both Africans and sailors (Handler 2009; Rediker 2008; Webster 2005, 2008). Slave ships were modified through the addition of slave decks into which several hundred individuals would be closely packed according to stowage plans that called for “spoonwise” packing head to toe in a fetal position (Webster 2005: 246). Other temporary modifications included “deck ‘slave houses,’ netting, and ‘barricades’ (timber partitions stretching across the quarterdeck, thereby securing the area used by slaves brought up from the hold)” (Webster 2005: 250).

The captain and crews of slave ships promoted a “culture of fear” through surveillance and through discipline and punishment, which included “shackles, bilboes (double shackles), thumbscrews, whips and branding equipment” as well as the *speculum oris*, a device used to force feed captives (Webster 2005: 251). Despite measures taken to prevent captives from committing suicide by starving themselves or flinging themselves into the ocean—insurance would not have covered such deaths—there were instances of jettisoning of live slaves “as a matter of necessity, under ‘perils of the sea’” (Webster 2007: 291) in order to make an insurance claim for each of the drowned slaves.

Those who survived the Middle Passage experienced objectification and harsh forms of social control after being sold in the Americas (see, e.g., Delle 2014; Hall 1971; Lenik 2012). Plantation owners and managers practiced scientific agriculture, and “appealed to data as well as experience, believing that careful record keeping and numerical analysis led to increased output and higher profits” (Rosenthal 2018: 1–2). Thousands of plantation account books have survived; in her book *Accounting for Slavery*, Caitlin Rosenthal analyzes these archives as

business records in order to reconstruct the management practices of American and West Indian slaveholders. She notes that the “portrait that emerges is that of a society where precise management and violence went hand in hand . . . on plantations, the soft power of quantification supplemented the driving force of the whip” (Rosenthal 2018: 2).

Upon arrival in the new world slaves would be sold or exchanged for goods right off the ship; cities along the Atlantic seaboard had slave markets where slaves would be sold at auction; once enslaved labor became the engine for wealth accumulation by the mercantile sector, internal traffic in slaves abounded beyond the major ports and metropolises (see, e.g., Florentino 2008: 275–312). Slave markets existed along overland routes and at interior locales. Sites of slave markets have seldom been preserved or studied in the US (Gan 2015; but see Dyle 2005; Trammell 2012,), whereas the Valongo Wharf in Rio de Janeiro, entry point and market for ca. 900,000 slaves, was the target of archaeological investigation; it has been named to the UNESCO World Heritage List, partially preserved, and interpreted (Banyasz 2013; Londoño 2017). Among the many finds at Valongo were hundreds of amulets and charms intended to protect enslaved bodies from misfortunes of all types, reflections of the despair and the hopes of those who were sold here (Lima et al. 2014) as well as of their rejection of objectification and insistence on their own personhood.

Socioracial classification and the objectification of humans were key features of Europe’s colonial projects in the Americas and elsewhere. A particularly dramatic example of the materialization of racial taxonomy exists in the form of sets of Spanish *casta* paintings, most of which came in sets and were painted in Mexico during the eighteenth century (Earle 2016: 427; Loren 2007). Diana Loren (2007: 34) notes that eighteenth-century *casta* paintings “capture part of the charged discourse on race, gender, and creolization, which was seen as a threat to white

rule. The bodies of colonial subjects were a critical aspect of this discourse.” Each painting depicted a family group consisting of a man, a woman, and their offspring; captions identified them according to socioracial distinctions, “tracing the outcome of liaisons between the diverse offspring of these couples” and cataloguing “the human heterogeneity of Spain’s New World empire” (Earle 2016: 428). The paintings depict families in what was deemed the appropriate settings, furnished with the appropriate objects and show differences in skin color, clothing and personal adornment, and posture. Casta paintings carry a strong contradiction in that they were intended to classify and name caste in a strictly genealogical way, yet they present caste as “simultaneously genealogical and mutable,” in a manner that “clarifies the underlying epistemologies that structured colonial society and helps connect casta paintings more explicitly to the broader debates about human difference that so captivated Enlightenment thinkers” (Earle 2016: 431).

Concluding Remarks

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Enlightenment thought fostered ideologies of difference on many fronts. Europeans expressed and reinforced social difference through the objects they purchased and deployed in daily activities in their homes, at their dinner tables, and upon their persons. Enslavement and the slave trade throughout the Age of Enlightenment was embraced through acceptance of a socioracial classificatory scheme that supported the objectification of black and brown bodies as other than human. Ironically, this occurred during a time when Enlightenment principles promulgated among Europeans and Euroamericans a new sense of individual personhood and individual rights—“human” rights that were far from universal because they were linked to whiteness. “The eighteenth-century campaigners for the rights of man could condemn their opponents as unfeeling traditionalists, interested only in maintaining a social order predicated on inequality rather than equality, universality, and natural rights” (Hunt 2007: 212). Yet the Age of Enlightenment was one in which inequality was materialized through objects—and objectified bodies—in manifold ways.

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