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Dehumanism and Disposability

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JULIETTA SINGH

Dehumanism and Disposability

I have a particular interest in objects, in what they tell us about the world and our attachments to it, and in the ways that we are subjectively crafted in relation to “things.” As a result, I am continuously struck by the narrative movement of *Middlesex* as it details the process of the protagonist becoming enamored with a character he names the “Obscure Object” (or simply “the Object” for short). The Object is a freckled, red-headed rich girl whose attraction is irresistible, and through whom Cal begins to interpret his own body. It is not, however, the straight unfolding of a queer romance that interests me here, but rather how this love relation between the protagonist and his Object becomes possible through a third body: the body of the Object’s under-narrated maid, Beulah.

As the romance unfolds in the Object’s bourgeois home, Cal tells us that “the Object required constant refreshment. I still wasn’t comfortable in the house. I couldn’t get used to being waited on. I kept jumping up to serve myself. Beulah was black, too, which didn’t make it any easier” (Eugenides 335). This love object *requires* servitude, and Cal cannot “get used to being waited on,” a difficulty compounded by our protagonist’s addendum that “Beulah was black, too,” an embodied fact that “didn’t make it easier” (335). I’m interested in this ambiguous “it” that is not being “made easier” for Cal. Much of the novel is concerned with tracing Cal’s passage into his “true” self, a narrative logic that Alaimo, Breu, and Hsu in particular in this special cluster vitally trouble for its abiding commitment to binary logics of both sex and gender. Yet here in love’s unfolding, we are delivered into Cal’s discomfort with other adjacent forms of socially constructed and enforced difference. Beulah becomes a key tool in elucidating Cal’s own adjustment into a sexual love relation with the Object. The novel asks us—perhaps despite itself, perhaps unconsciously—to query what kinds of objectifications, of *rendering* object, are at stake in the staging of intimate relations.

Unlike other outspoken racialized characters woven into the novel’s love relations (see Kojima in this special cluster), Beulah is a thoroughly silent/silenced figure who serves the couple “without elaboration,” a gesture that Cal interprets as “giving Grosse Pointe the silent treatment” (342). We might read this interpretation as the novel’s liberal attempt to offer agency to the servant: she doesn’t speak per se, but, well, she’s still saying “fuck you” through her silence. Of course, what Beulah is also “giving” to Grosse Pointe is the material stuff of love’s unfolding, the snacks and servitude that make this queer romance bloom. In fact, what the novel calls Beulah’s “silent treatment” is the condition of servitude itself, a hushed legacy of slavery that instantiates the silenced Black female body as a necessary requirement for the circulation and fruition of White bourgeois life—and love—in America.

David Eng elucidates how, in what he calls “colonial object relations,” reparation between subjects requires that violence and hate are held in reserve for personal and political consolidations that preserve the Western liberal human and cannot be extricated from colonial histories (11). Through Eng, we begin to see a constitutive alterity within the reparative process, an enforced racialized outside, an unwanted excess necessary to the work of reparation itself. I wonder: can we slide this notion of reparation into relationality? Does becoming relational with another turn out to require the psychic and political consolidation that keeps in reserve a necessary and yet perversely discardable third object-body? Is the silent Beulah necessary for Cal’s particular relation to his coveted Object, even while it causes him some discomfort? What *Middlesex* calls the Object is both “other” (as an object of Cal’s authorial self) and has its own others (the silent servant-object). While the Object is objectified, she also unabashedly objectifies. Cal also has multiple objects at play in this romantic scene: the object he loves, and the object that discomforts him. There is a relay at work here. We might begin to explore from this angle the disposable body-objects and object-bodies that make up the conditions of object relations themselves: The objects we choose. The objects we make. The objects we are. The objects we discard.

All of this objectification is vitally related to what I am calling *dehumanism*: a counter-intuitive deconstructive practice of recuperation, of recovering those forms of life and living outside the proper realm of Man. Dehumanism is an ethico-politics where we might discover other ways of generative living, of human and more-than-human cohabitation, of collaborative emergence that doesn’t match up with those parameters of civility and proper human living we have inherited as “natural.” If the foundations of Man—which we can also call the Subject—are erected on the violent foundations of colonial and neocolonial mastery that continue to render some beings more human than others, we must look elsewhere and urgently to other kinds of living, even and especially those forms of life that have been rendered discardable.

Dehumanism calls for a form of radical dwelling in and with dehumanization as a deconstructive act of learning to live otherwise. Along with thinkers like Sylvia Wynter and Alexander Weheliye, I am keen to explore those forms of collective world-making that have been excluded from the domain of Man and that might enable us to become promisingly disoriented from our habits of interpreting and acting in the world.¹ What forms of generative, sustainable, and collective living—and crucially also dying—might we learn outside of our customary forms of practicing humanity?

Upon discovering quite by accident in an emergency room that he is not the girl he was socialized to be, Cal declares: “now all the mute objects of my life seem to tell my story, to stretch back in time, if I look closely enough” (Eugenides 397). Rhyming with Sandilands’s attention to the “mute” mulberry trees that contribute so much to the histories, ecologies, and sexualities at play across the novel, and with Seymour’s attention to what architectures tell us

¹ See Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, after Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument,” and Alexander Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*.

in the novel (see Sandilands and Seymour in this special cluster), Beulah is another “mute” object of Cal’s narrative who promises to tell that story in altogether different ways. If we look closely enough, if we listen with and live through wider attunements.

What I am trying to ask is this: what mute objects of our own lives might we look back upon to tell our stories differently? What objects might reconstitute us, and might lead us to live in embrace of dehumanism? How might we become objects differently, to live in the abandon and embrace of proliferating objectifications? Following Alaimo (*Exposed*), how might our exposure enable us to learn a radically alternative ethics of object disposability? What body-objects might we salvage that we are accustomed to disposing of, and what might we dispose of that we have taken as essential?

Beulah’s silence is the sound of a history of violent enforcement, and her representation in *Middlesex* as a mute Black maternal figure and domestic laborer asks us not to fill in her silences, but to consider the multiple ways through which her objectification and enforced silence crafts other more empowered subjectivities, gives rise to particular love relations, signals a relay of objectifications where some matter narratively and socially while some do not. This absent voice asks us where and through what means some get to be fully human, while others are made and sustained as objects for their comfort and play.

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