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INHABITATIONS:
A FEMINIST FORMATIONS DOSSIER ON
ROBYN WIEGMAN'S OBJECT LESSONS

Tarrying with the “Private Parts”

Robert F. Reid-Pharr

Two-thirds of the way through *Object Lessons* (2012), Robyn Wiegman's provocative study of the institutional and ideological development of what she names *identity-based* modes of inquiry in US colleges and universities, the author recounts a 2003 trip she took to Leiden to attend the inaugural meeting of the International American Studies Association. There, she was regularly met with the claim that American studies, at least as it is practiced by citizens and long-term residents of the United States, was deeply provincial and too caught up with rehearsals of the humdrum difficulties of American social and cultural life, particularly our always fraught conversations about race, gender, class, and sexuality. American studies in both its old and new substantiations was imagined as not sufficiently “in the world,” far too eager to reiterate the basic assumptions underlying so-called American exceptionalism, even as basic geo-political realities clearly demonstrated that the United States, if not exactly America itself, was rightly understood as but one nation among many.

The most obvious approach to this particularly meaty bone thrown to us by Wiegman is to suggest that there is nothing especially radical or even expansive about the rhetoric that she describes. I am not certain that the meeting in Leiden represented so much an internationalization of American studies as its Europeanization. American studies programs and associations exist in England, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, and elsewhere in Europe. Similarly formalized and reasonably well-funded American studies institutions are quite difficult to find elsewhere, even in the rest of the Americas. Like Wiegman and many others, then, I would make the point that what we think of as the new internationalism in American studies is more often than not established along those routes of power and influence, which are themselves some of the most rigorously guarded and celebrated artifacts of the cold war. Imagine a none-too-liberal US president with an always-already absent Kenyan father and skin not a bit fairer than mine stumbling his way into a quiet Irish

village, the great might of the White House press corps in tow, only to shake hands, kiss babies, and share a pint with his willing, grinning—and never to be seen again—ruddy-cheeked relatives. Or to reiterate what we know already, our president, and the many people of color whom I take him to represent, can be seen to have conquered his provincialism precisely to the extent to which he genuflects not so much toward the universal or the global, as toward the European and the white.

One of the things that is most exciting about Wiegman's work in *Object Lessons* is the attention that she pays to not only the institutional histories of women's and gender studies, whiteness studies, queer theory, and American studies, but also the ways in which these fields, these processes of institutionalization, have often gone far beyond the original intentions of the individuals who helped to found them. Wiegman precisely names the methods by which insurgent modes of inquiry have at once restructured traditional disciplines and been deeply marked by them in return. Indeed, the academic and intellectual practices that *Object Lessons* examines are at their best when they unsettle calcified notions about where the proper distinctions between various types of inquiry lie. I say all of this as a way to provide myself some sort of stage upon which I might announce one of the few quibbles I have with Wiegman's work in *Object Lessons*. While I found her rehearsals of the theoretical and programmatic histories of the several fields she examines to be always interesting and, at times, brilliant, I was not convinced by her use of the term *identity knowledges*. I think that it gives far too much away to suggest that sexuality studies, gay and lesbian studies, Asian studies, Latin American studies, African American and Africana studies or postcolonial studies somehow concern themselves with identity, while those fields to which we most (un)consciously pay allegiance—English, French, German, Spanish, Italian, and Dutch, to name the most obvious—do not. On the contrary, I suspect that one of the things announced by attaching the ugly label *studies* to identity knowledges forty years after they were first introduced into American universities is to reiterate the notion that not only are they still “emerging,” but also that they can never be recognized as having arrived, never be understood to be fully engaged with “the universal” until they forthrightly substitute European and American provincialisms for their own cultural and ideological specificities. This is perhaps just another way of noting the fact that, in truth, much of the everyday struggle that each of us encounters around canonization and curricula breaks down rather precisely along lines of race, gender, class, and sexuality. While to introduce a course on African authors into the curriculum is imagined in many locations as additive, new, special, and liberal, to teach a course dealing with only an expected assortment of Victorian literature is but the continuation of our most cherished cultural legacies.

My suspicion, then, is that practitioners of the identity-based fields that Wiegman celebrates have been far too timid in their critiques of what passes as the main currents of American intellectual life. It is one thing to be provincial; it

is quite another thing to refuse to acknowledge provincialism, while establishing a shocking array of apparatuses that work against full recognition of the reality that American humanistic studies are made stale and irrelevant precisely to the extent that they encourage clumsy and simplistic re-articulations of presumably universalist values—values that with only the gentlest of prodding might be revealed to be nothing more than the most humdrum Euro-American conceits. Indeed, the strength of so-called identity-based intellectual practices in American colleges and universities turns on the fact that while many of our colleagues retreat in the face of increasingly vicious attacks on the humanities, claiming that the reasons for their existence is the training of students in so-called critical thinking or perhaps imparting to them the timeless values of the Enlightenment, many people operating in the fields that Wiegman discusses have been long accustomed to articulating the ways by which culture operates in complex social, political, historical, and economic systems. That is to say, we forward an activist understanding of the ways that culture and society work. Moreover, although many are loathe to admit it, we have demographics on our side.

In my nearly twenty years in this profession, I have never taught at an institution that had degree-granting programs in African American studies, women's studies, or American studies. This is the case even though I have taught in the very black, very female, and decidedly American cities of Baltimore and New York. My irritation about this matter stems not only from the obvious unfairness on display, but also from the ways in which these "omissions" cheapen our endeavors as scholars, making us rightly vulnerable to the charge that our efforts represent a dangerous aloofness, an obscene inability to engage with the social worlds that support the institutions in which we work. I would push Wiegman, then, to remind her that her instincts are correct. Her examination of the basic discursive and ideological structures on which identity knowledges have been established comes at a time when many of our colleagues contribute to the various crises besetting US colleges and universities by retreating behind fearful and vision-less obstinacy, instead of seriously asking themselves how the work they do might speak directly to the quick-moving changes in the basic economic, discursive, and cultural structures of contemporary societies. What I would suggest to Wiegman, then, is that she leave off with some of the rhetorical timidity that marks *Object Lessons*. She writes:

Object Lessons is not, then, a critique. It is not even a critique of critique.

It is not an intervention. I am not trying to make us conscious of critical habits so that we can change them.

It is not an argument against other arguments, nor a dismissal of what others have said or done.

It is not a new theory. It offers no new objects or analytics of study.

It is an inhabitation of the world-making stakes of identity knowledges and the field imaginary that sutures us to them—a performance, in other

words, of the risk and reward, the amnesia and optimism, and the fear and pleasure sustained by living with and within them. (35)

I have to admit that I do not really believe Wiegman here. Indeed, after reading *Object Lessons*, I felt less like imagining the risk, reward, amnesia, optimism, fear, and pleasure of working within African American studies, queer studies, and American studies, and more like throwing my fist up and leading anyone who might follow in a chorus of “Fired Up. Won’t take no more.” Part of what troubles me about the type of rhetorical gesture that Wiegman makes here is that I suspect it has as much to do with the considerable frustration that one encounters when struggling to enact institutional change as with the development of some solidly established belief that performance represents an advance over critique, intervention, and theory. Perhaps, then, what I am attempting to do is simply to explain why I cannot rid myself of a certain hurt I experience when reading *Object Lessons*, a sense that one of the none-too-friendly ghosts that haunts these pages is our awareness of the fact that so much of the work we do is carried out in environments that encourage pettiness, complacency, and cannibalism. One wonders, then, if the many heated field-changing arguments that Wiegman describes were worth the considerable damage done to individuals and communities when the arguments were made. Still, I am encouraged by this text precisely to the extent that it emboldens me to imagine that the time is ripe for those of us who have made our careers in these arenas of inquiry to tack toward the center, to strenuously challenge the conceptual hold that so-called traditionalists have on both the vocabularies and institutions that support our profession.

Moreover, I would remind Wiegman and her many fans that she is not alone in her efforts to examine the architecture of the discursive and ideological structures we have established inside American academia. Indeed, *Object Lessons* ought to be read as but the knife’s edge of a wider impulse to assess the current status of our decades-long intellectual and institutional struggles. Sara Ahmed’s excellent study *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (2012) makes plain the ways that the rhetoric of diversity is often put to the service of the revivification, however clumsily, of the apparatuses of capitalist domination. Roderick Ferguson’s *The Reorder of Things: The University and Its Pedagogies of Minority Difference* (2012) explains how what he calls *interdisciplines* not only challenged the dominant structures of academia and the state, but also helped to establish them. Like Wiegman, both Ahmed and Ferguson are fretful about the ways that the struggles around identity knowledges have both challenged and supported dominant social structures.

What I leave you with, then, is the belief that the almost simultaneous appearance of *Object Lessons*, *On Being Included*, and *The Reorder of Things* is itself indicative of the fact that the fields and procedures that these works’ authors discussed have reached a point at which their vocabularies and

procedures are obviously inadequate for the work they have been designed to do. Indeed, this may be their greatest strength. This state of frustration, this sense of having hit institutional and conceptual walls should be understood not solely as a sign of debility, but also as an indication of the obvious need for practitioners of American studies, ethnic studies, and gender studies to redouble their efforts. If American academia is in crisis, then this allows students of identity knowledges and interdisciplines an opportunity to fundamentally affect, however imperfectly, the basic intellectual structures of this country. The very fact that Wiegman, Ahmed, and Ferguson see so clearly that our insurgent efforts have been so easily co-opted suggests that moving forward, we might knowingly utilize our intimacy with the machine, our closeness to its “private parts” in order to achieve fundamental progressive change.

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