

**Robyn Wiegman. *Object Lessons*. Durham: Duke University**

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What are the consequences for the practices of contemporary academic identity knowledges in the US (race, gender, sexuality and nationality critiques) when these fields come to equate their academic work with political labour? What does it mean to “do justice” with and to the objects of these fields? These are the central questions of Robyn Wiegman’s *Object Lessons*. Wiegman is a Professor of Women’s Studies and Literature at Duke University, and one of the most prominent contemporary US feminist and queer theory scholars. *Object Lessons* brings together six journal articles originally published between 1999 and 2008, re-published and in some cases extensively revised in the current work. Each chapter takes as its object a text or case study within an academic identity knowledge field and uses that example to identify and explore the field’s characteristic animating tensions—often its thorniest foundational paradoxes. The six chapters examine women’s studies, feminism and queer theory, whiteness studies, American studies, and intersectionality.

It is unlikely that scholars in the fields Wiegman examines would read this book beginning to end, due to the very different historical trajectories, objects, and institutional disciplinary formations of race, gender, sexuality and nationality studies in the academy. But the structure of the text is very amenable to an academic reader with an interest in any of these fields, as

the six chapters retain the autonomous qualities derived from their original publication as journal articles and can be read very productively as stand-alone essays. They have also been edited and arranged to draw out important contrasts and continuities in the disciplinary formations of fields of identity knowledges. Chapters one and two, for example, examine disciplines constructed around minoritised subjects (women and minority sexualities). Chapters three and four, by contrast, examine majoritarian disciplines: one which aims to erode its hegemony (American studies as practiced in the US), and one which aims to destroy its own object (the universalism of whiteness in whiteness studies). The chapters are notable for their concise, rich micro-histories and concentrated literature reviews of the identity knowledges they discuss, with bountiful footnotes for those wishing to follow these trajectories. But a critic would need a sophisticated understanding of the structuring tensions of the field to be able to follow each chapter to its height, so this text suits advanced graduate students and academics with metatheoretical knowledges of these fields. *Object Lessons* is readable and strikingly enjoyable for a text of critical theory, with Wiegman's academic voice coming across as assertive and witty with the occasional delicious barb, and an overall subtle and balanced, erudite evaluative position. Although each of the chapters takes a particular textual object or case study, the chapters also include diagnoses of some of the most prominent tensions and paradoxes in identity knowledges disciplines, making this a broadly useful and applicable text of critical theory. A recent cross-disciplinary "Queer Objects" symposium I attended at the Australian National University brought together scholars engaging with *Object Lessons*, which is a testament to the applicability and significance of this text for identity knowledges and humanities scholarship.

The chapters are preceded by an introduction aptly titled "How to Read This Book," which details the historical conditions, intellectual and institutional formations, and methodological traditions which most influence Wiegman's work. The text "dwell[s] on the political investments and aspirations of identity knowledges by attending to the disciplinary practices that comprise and define them" (5). Broadly, Wiegman's intellectual background and the text's methodological protocols derive from materialist cultural studies, as well as the combination of psychoanalytic discourse, deconstruction and ideology critique characteristic of queer theory. Wiegman's position is closer to American feminism than French, closer to Kleinian affect studies than Freudian or Lacanian psychoanalysis, and as she explicitly states, closer to Foucault than Marx or Freud. *Object Lessons* may be contextualised as part of a contemporary debate on the legacies of symptomatic reading and political imperatives of ideology critique, and the text acknowl-

edges and is indebted to the influence of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's 1997 essay "Paranoid and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid You Probably Think This Essay Is About You," which inaugurated the affective turn in queer theory and queer studies. Like Sedgwick, Wiegman is interested in the wishes and desires that propel political criticism.

Chapters one, two and six cover the identity knowledges field with which I am most familiar, and these will form the focus of this review. Chapter one, "Doing Justice With Objects; Or, The 'Progress' of Gender" is a response to Leora Auslander's 1999 paper "Do Women's + Feminist + Men's + Lesbian and Gay + Queer Studies = Gender Studies?" published in a special issue of *differences* named "Women's Studies on the Edge." Wiegman's response tracks the unacknowledged progress narrative omnipresent in the work of Auslander and other feminist critics, the narrative that states that the switch to *gender* as the object of women's studies can productively host all the theories, practices, and political desires its proponents wish, without disappointing or failing in way that *women* did. Wiegman notes, quite rightly, that the dominance of this narrative, especially amongst graduate students in feminism, says more about the power of the "narrative of incapacity" than it does provide a decent account of how diverse feminist work actually was (55). Perhaps the most compelling part of this chapter occurs when Wiegman delineates the contradictions of this dominant narrative, and in particular its four notable characteristics. These are 1) failure: its optimism requires the failure of what it supercedes; 2) dependence: it is therefore dependent on what it supercedes; 3) incorporation: optimism exists in the transference the narrative creates, such that the new object is supposed to be able to fix the problems, expand infinitely, and satisfy what we ask of it; and 4) disavowal: the narrative has to refuse to see similarities between the new object and the problematic old objects it's replacing, especially as those old objects were once the cutting-edge source of that exact optimism. I find this section of the text an extraordinarily insightful and widely applicable diagnosis of the characteristics and consequences of the progress narratives driving identity knowledges. As Wiegman states, this is the dominant narrative by which *gender* is understood to supercede *women* as the object of academic feminism, but also the narrative by which *queer* supercedes gay and lesbian studies, *trans* supercedes *queer*, and *diaspora* supercedes ethnic and queer studies. It is a shame, though, that this theorising is located in the text where it is, as the delineation of the progress narrative seems too valuable and insightful to be restricted to its place in this chapter alone. This is a hangover from its origins as a journal paper, and it would perhaps have been better placed in a more prominent theoretical chapter covering the shared qualities of identity knowledges. Due to the

structure of the book, a scholar of queer theory or critical race theory or ethnic studies could easily miss the theorising in this chapter if they do not already have a significant interest in feminism and women's studies.

Chapter two is a response to Janet Halley's article (published as Ian Halley) "Queer Theory by Men" (2009), in which Halley argues that all feminisms derive from the assertion of women's subordination by men and therefore poorly articulate the complex erotics and relations between and within genders, leading Halley to argue for the value of "taking a break from feminism" for the queer theoretic in particular. Wiegman's insights in her response include delineating the stages in the evolution of an identity knowledge field, with "pre-institutional" referring to political movements largely not articulated through the academy, "inaugural value" naming their first stage in the academy, in which they argue for minoritised subjects being able to become both subject and object of the knowledge made about them, and the threshold crossed into "internal critique" in which the field diverges from within, powering its continuation. Wiegman quite aptly critiques the notion that divergence or internal critique can fix the apparent problems (e.g. binarisms) of the inaugural value—she says this articulation mischaracterises what came before, and retrospectively installs as monoliths movements that never wielded such power. Wiegman critiques Halley for assuming that governance feminism's emphasis on women's subordination is intrinsic to all forms of feminism. In a particularly memorable passage, Wiegman also critiques the queer theoretic which considers the lesbian subject too retrograde:

I want the queer theoretic to do some work on behalf of the analytic mobilities of that seemingly defunct figure, "the lesbian," who has been reduced, unsexed, domesticated, uglified, and abjected by forces too numerous to list, including those of feminism and queer theory . . . Ian [Halley]'s argument . . . sends me into a performative frenzy of my own, leading me to the potentially false hope that I might be able to use divergence to extract some space for the lesbian to claim her own affections for a sex-affirmative, shame-affirmative, irrational, anti-identitarian, anti-male-female, and antiessentialist queer theoretic. (102–103)

Passages like this are some of the most *enabling* in the text (as Heather Love once described the effect of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's work), opening up new and old possibilities for queer theory and queer studies if they can disengage from the disavowal structured into the progress narrative. For those of us in queer theory still dedicated to making critical space for the lesbian subject, this chapter is particularly rewarding. Is it once again a

shame that Wiegman's theorising of the characteristics of inaugural value and internal critique are largely contained to this chapter—these delineations are so precise and insightful and widely applicable to the trajectories of identity knowledges that they deserve to be, as with her account of the progress narrative, up front in a theoretical chapter.

Chapter six, "The Vertigo of Critique: Rethinking Heteronormativity," describes the foundation of queer theory in antinormativity, and thus its inherent contradictions: the field's dependence on heteronormativity as facilitating the creative expanse of queer theory produced in reaction to it. The chapter is framed in relation to Wiegman's difficulty trying to produce a conference paper in 2005 on the good work performed by antinormativity critique, as she had begun to question it. The chapter concludes by arguing that queer theory can't attend to sexuality and sex *and* remain foundationally antiheteronormative. The chapter includes a very good articulation of the origins of the disciplinary imperatives of queer theory, including its reliance on theorists Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick but with its origins in the work of Adrienne Rich and Gayle Rubin. However, it is a difficult chapter to understand. The central case study is a self-reflection on Wiegman's own difficulty constructing an earlier paper, so it lacks the rigour or groundedness of earlier chapters formed as responses to published texts. In addition, there is a confusing definitional slippage at times: Wiegman repeatedly states that "gender is transitive (even in heteronormativity)" without defining *transitive* sufficiently to anchor the discussion. It seems to mean at different times transgender-related, mobile, fashionable, and a grammatical unit requiring or taking an object, each of which has divergent consequences for the discussion. The chapter includes very good short discussions of the pleasures of critique, the relationship between historicisation and essentialism, the theory/experience divide, and a long and insightful examination of sex as the impossible object of queer theory, as well as a call for "more finely argued outrage" over the operations of heteronormativity that particularly delights.

*Object Lessons* occupies an unusual position for a text of critical theory in identity knowledges, in that it forms a highly metatheoretical diagnosis of the political ambitions of identity knowledges fields from within, while explicitly refusing the kinds of critical authority and positivist as well as deconstructive knowledge production that often constitutes work in these fields. It is a very tricky endeavour to examine the affects that propel deconstructive disciplines, but Wiegman performs admirably. This text is extraordinarily insightful, reflective, and engaging, with a generous treatment of the structuring paradoxes of identity knowledges and their optimistic investments in particular objects. This text is also difficult and contentious, as it sets itself

the task of diagnosing the wishes behind the most virulently pursued objects and methods in identity knowledges. The text disrupts the most powerful disciplinary protocols in contemporary feminism and queer theory, and argues convincingly that the most beloved objects of these fields will never be able to fulfil the ambitions and investments attached to them. It is almost impossible to be against intersectionality, interdisciplinarity, or antinormativity in identity knowledges in 2014, and Wiegman manages to diagnose the impossible optimism invested in these most powerful and fashionable of academic objects, questioning their dominance as disciplinary imperatives.

I wonder, though, what the alternatives are to the imperatives Wiegman diagnoses—and therefore, in a way, interrupts. There are consequences to the broadly deconstructive and psychoanalytic logics of this text. Wiegman states in the introduction that queer theory has been one of the identity knowledges fields most amenable to psychoanalytic discourse (and American feminism one of the most hostile to it), but that she is not interested in staking out positions based in any particular school or tradition of psychoanalysis. But her examinations are of political wishes, the disciplinary unconscious, and the fantasies and desires invested in academic objects, and the terminology of psychoanalysis and affect theory has very specific definitions which shed much of their meaning when extracted from those debates Wiegman declines to address. I am not a scholar of psychoanalytic theory, partly because I understand that to apply its more palatable insights necessitates an affirmation, or at least a tolerance, of the field's history of incredibly problematic theorising of gender and sexuality. Wiegman is aware of this, stating:

Queer Studies has perhaps been marked more decisively by an affirmative relation to psychoanalysis than other domains of identity studies, which is of course a development with much queer irony given the long-standing historical antipathy in lesbian and gay communities and in the early formation of LGBT Studies to medical psychiatry's pathologising account of homosexuality and transgender identifications. (21)

Wiegman's use of psychoanalytic terms does well describe the phenomena she identifies, for example, in the way the failure of the perceived universalising term *woman* in second-wave feminism and women's studies is a constitutive failure that facilitates the utopic investment in *gender* in third-wave feminism and gender studies—making gender studies dependent on the failure of *woman* in women's studies in a dependency that is constantly disavowed. I am not sure, however, that a critic can use psychoanalytic terms and relations without bringing with them the problematic baggage of

their Lacanian and Freudian instantiations, including their use in sexist and homophobic histories of psychiatric science. By contrast, queer theorists trained in psychoanalysis such as Lauren Berlant examine the disavowed political wishes of identity knowledges with explicit reference to the psychoanalytic theorists from which they draw their terminology, claiming the complex baggage that comes with them. *Object Lessons* is also broadly deconstructive, in that it performs a metatheoretical self-reflexive examination of the structuring paradoxes and hypocrisies, the constitutive contradictions, of identity knowledges. Wiegman is careful to state that she is not doing this “in order to relish the grand ah-ha, as if learning how to expose someone else’s implication in what they protest is an inoculation against revealing [her] own” (30), but I’m not quite convinced that this book avoids the pitfalls of deconstructive criticism, which include performing self-reflexive and sometimes cynical theorising that can offer nothing but impossibilities to positivist knowledge production. What are the alternatives to the phenomena *Object Lessons* so aptly diagnoses? What can we *do* with this, if every optimistic investment in a different object or method is part of the same problematic progress narrative of utopic futurity that Wiegman is articulating and—though she sometimes denies this—also implicitly criticising? In a characteristic refusal to offer solutions in the way our disciplines normally do, Wiegman states: “*Object Lessons* is not about rescuing us from our habits so that we can do different, if not ‘better,’ work; I’m more inclined to think that our habits are incredibly interesting and need to be rescued from us” (315). If this feels unsatisfying and a little bit slippery, it is. It may be that this is not the book to offer alternatives or possibilities in the form of positive knowledge production, but this would have been welcome from someone with the author’s extraordinary insight. Experiencing the profound enlightenment of an expert diagnosis, the analysand cannot help but wish for a cure. *Object Lessons* is nonetheless an extraordinary work of critical theory within academic identity knowledges, and deserves to be numbered among the best works of contemporary feminist and queer theory.

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