

Notes on a Relationship: Fetish Object, Femininity, Historian

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Ilya Parkins soutient que l'étude des objets considérés historiquement comme fétiches peut fournir une solution pratique au type d'histoire féministe qui tente de retrouver les voix des femmes. En effet, comme la vérité de l'objet fétiche est toujours partiellement inaccessible, le sujet de l'historienne ne peut accéder à la transparence et à la lisibilité complètes.

For the theoretically informed historian working with the emergence of feminine subjects in the modern west – the culture that developed in response to industrial modernization and was largely structured around consumerism as an economic and symbolic activity – the concept of the commodity fetish contains enormous critical potential. Significantly, it is a double figure: working through what the fetish *is* can offer insights both into the complexities of historical subjects, and the complexities of our own historical methodologies – our ways of conceptualizing the project of writing history. Attention to the quality of the fetish as a *conceptual* entity, for example, contains the potential to shift understandings of agency, that eternally vexing question for theoretically informed historians. It also allows feminist historians to think materiality in productive ways, and to make connections between materiality and agency that will not only inform the history that is produced, but – perhaps more crucially, and perhaps more excitingly – how it is written. This, then, is a reflection on some of the methodological and, ultimately, epistemological considerations that can be pulled out of the very writing of the commodity fetish, and the recognition that these considerations can never be split from their application to historical texts or subjects.

Femininity

What is it, then, in the characterization of the fetish that makes it so rich and enticing in the conceptualization of femininity as an historical category? Perhaps most crucial to the fetish's radical critical potential is its insis-

tent foregrounding of matter – a quality which has historically provoked great anxiety in its theorists. In Marx's original account of the commodity fetish, he stressed the object's magical qualities: "so soon as it steps forth as a commodity," he wrote, "it is changed into something transcendent" (320). And although that so-called transcendent value was the very thing Marx worked to challenge, his own interpretation of the truth of the fetish never came to terms with the absolute materiality of the object. Marx's central idea of the fetish as the mystification or displacement from consciousness of the relations of production, ultimately shies from interpreting the interface of producers (and, of course, of consumers) with the object *as* object. The failure to address the question of this particular set of interactions within the relations of production (and consumption) signals an ultimate inability to stand up to the weight, so to speak, of matter. Given a western history of associations of the feminine with the material, this writes us into a bind from which we can never acknowledge the potency of feminine consuming subjects' discourse with matter. The result is a theory that ultimately reifies the figuration of the commodity as transcendent by ignoring a crucial constitutive layer of its sociality: its status as tangible thing. The notion of false consciousness, then, works in a particularly insidious way inside constructions of femininity; it acts as a fundamental denial of the experienced "truth" of women's perceptions of and interactions with material objects they covet or own.¹ This is a curious, simultaneous acceptance and denial of the pervasiveness and potency of matter, especially in its conceptual associations with femininity.

Most theorists have dispensed with the notion of false consciousness that Marx's account implies. Instead, they have focused on the desiring subject (in discussions of the commodity as well as the sexual fetish). William Pietz's brilliant account of the history of fetish theory notes that the earliest definitions of what was to become "the fetish" – emergent in the sixteenth century in the space of intercultural exchange that was colonized coastal West Africa – relied on a notion of a "first encounter between a new purposive desire and a material object, whereby the thing becomes the divinized emblem of the new project" (8). The idea of "purposive desire" still resonates rather profoundly with nineteenth- and twentieth-century ideas of the fetish, both sexual and commodity. Desire, according to this formulation, is not an empty impulse, but accomplishes something, is generative of something. This is more than simply a banal generalization. Fetish as awakening "purposive desire" places the object in an his-

torically privileged position, according it a degree of "agential power."² If the commodity fetish involves the intimate relationship of a desiring subject to an object, the question of this subject's emergence cannot be considered independently of objects, or matter. In acknowledging the potency of the material in subjects' self-conceptions, in giving credence to its agential potential, the notion of the fetish helps to pose questions about the spaces *between* matter and consciousness, and secondarily, about how those were configured in the culture of modernity.

The desiring/consuming subject who longs for, buys or uses an object is always negotiating the object on two levels. She sees "all" of it and constructs a scheme by which she will use its available and seemingly transparent meaning to particular ends. But the power of the object – the very thing that is productive of her desire for it – emerges from a social semiotics that is ultimately impenetrable.³ As E.L. McCallum writes, "fetishism itself is both representable as publicly available knowledge that certain objects may contain a private and titillating significance, and unrepresentable insofar as the public never knows precisely for whom, and for which items, that significance exists" (3). The fetish object thus never speaks any "truth" except in relation to the desirer or buyer, and then only a partial one. And, crucially, even that seeming truth is ultimately inaccessible to the subject. At any stage of modern consumer capitalism, then, the subject understands that the object's meaning fluctuates, affecting its desirability and hence its meaning.

This partial inaccessibility of the fetish object is crucial to the development of an historical methodology of both femininity and materiality, for two reasons. First, it displaces the pervasive notion of materiality as a transparently readable "fact," an instance of simple "surface." And, given the historical association of femininity and matter, this insight extends to the conception of the feminine itself. Working with fetish relations through an historical lens thus implicitly calls into question the privileging of masculinity as deep and authentic, and the concomitant devaluation of the feminine as depthless and artificial. The focus on the changeability and ultimate inaccessibility of meaning in both matter and femininity allows us to understand the behaviour of historical female consumers, dressers, and desirers, as contingent upon the emergence of different systems of valuation. The meanings of a specifically modern feminine subject, and of specifically modern objects, are brought into clearer focus. The inaccessibility of femininity does not emerge from an essential opacity, but from its situation in the consumer capitalism from which modern objects emerge.

I have been relying here on the symbolic association of matter and femininity to argue for the usefulness of fetishism for understanding both. This does not, however, preclude the movement I discussed earlier, wherein the feminine desiring or consuming subject both knows and does not fully know the object she covets. Crucially, this epistemological position points to something very different from the conflation of the feminine with the object. What the structures of the fetish show is that ultimately the subject's desires for and sensual interactions with the commodities that surround her refuse the interpretation "of female fetishism as boundarylessness [which] all too easily replicates clichés of femininity as unformed and oceanic" (McCallum 77). Even as it plays with them, fetishism shows tropes of the essential unity between subject and objects to be problematic. Not because of an over-reliance on the subject's agency, but because of the power fetishism accords to the supposedly passive object.

Fetishism proposes as a condition of the subject's historical constitution an *impassioned* space rather than a unified one, to borrow from Anne McClintock's formulation (using Pietz) of the fetish as an "impassioned object" (184). A common critique of fetishism – in both psychoanalytic and commodity terms – is that it involves the impossible search for unities and origin in the face of terrifying ambiguity, investing the object with the power to restore that lost unity or to produce an integral self. But this castigation of fetishism as the reinscription of an illusory wholism does not acknowledge the ways in which fetish objects, *as objects*, complicate the dynamic. If we narrate the object itself as a central player, an agential if often silent thing, in any individual/social drama of fetishism, we allow the disunifying potential of fetishism to emerge more clearly. With this sense of the importance of the fetish object, we can take seriously McClintock's wish "to explore fetishism as the historical enactment of ambiguity itself" (184). In its insistence on the concealment of elements of a whole, which throws the existence or possibility of unity into question, the fetish intervenes importantly in the notion of the feminine subject's singular and uni-directional relationship with the object. If the object exists partly in an economy of intangibility that belies its visibility, the subject is placed in an uncomfortable position in relation to it. Thus, rather than pacifying, the commodity fetish produces a kind of social/psychic friction in the subject who encounters it and learns that it holds secrets, that what seemed to be its "truth" is unlocatable. The subject's desire for a dress, for example – to produce or reinforce a particular self-image, or to

“mean” in a specific way – can never be wholly satisfied or permanent, because the signification of the dress is contingent on an ultimately unstable system of signification. Yearnings for unity, or toward the perfection and freezing of an image, are ultimately impossible given the fluctuations in style and value upon which modern consumer capitalism has been predicated. The emergence of the modern feminine subject, then, must be considered as the emergence of a subject whose fragmentation is undivorceable from her interactions with modern objects.

It is here that the sticky relationship between subject and fetish object begins to shade into the similarly anxious psychic/social investments of the subject. Pietz writes that the “intense relation to the individual’s experience of his or her own living self through an impassioned response to the fetish object is always incommensurable with ...the social value codes within which the fetish holds the status of a material signifier” (12-13). In this formulation, the fetish object, far from reinforcing illusory unities, is the guarantor of a reflexive stance for the subject vis-à-vis the social world she inhabits. Further, Pietz writes, “it is in those disavowals and “perspectives of flight” whose possibility is opened by the clash of this incommensurable difference that the fetish might be identified as the site of both the formation and the revelation of ideology and value-consciousness” (13). Any notion of the object as a passive and transparent indicator of meaning is dismissed in the formulation of fetishism as a potentially socially disruptive configuration. What this means for thinking the emergence of feminine subjects is that their mundane interactions – the consumer interactions that structured their days in industrial modernity – were infused with conflicting meaning that called into question paradigms, including women’s conflation with the material. Theories of fetishism therefore add breadth to conceptions of the potentially subversive qualities of modern women as consumers. What is interesting about the particular potential of fetishism is that it does this in the voice of the supposedly voiceless material.

Knowing

This rethinking of the modern feminine subject offered up by the commodity fetish clearly has important epistemological implications. Interactions with objects are instances of sense-making, a fact whose significance tends to remain obscured until we recognize the objects as, in a sense, discursive agents. McCallum writes, “fetishism can illustrate par-

ticularly well the limits of presuming an ideal masculine subject as the only subject who can know and who can desire" (154). Contained in the fetishized commodity object's potential to do work, to exercise agency in the world, is a rewriting of the feminine consumer – so often historically considered the paradigmatic irrational non-subject – as a knowing subject. A recognition of historical subjects as knowing subjects allows not only for the historicization of the notion of epistemology itself, but – more crucially and perhaps more creatively – for an understanding of the subject's mundane interactions as part of a knowledge project. In yet another way, then, the fetish object might broaden the understanding of the constitution of modern femininities.

Tracing the subject's everyday dealings as instances of knowledge-making allows us to ask questions about how her traceable social self is produced in the psychic processes of knowing. An intensely personal desire for an object is inextricable from the subject's knowledge of it, and thus is the rationalist knowledge model "sullied" by the spectre of subjective, volatile, potentially irrational desire/knowledge. The idea of the fetish makes a powerful intervention in the traditional epistemological model, asking us to consider the ways in which modern consumer capitalism produced women who were knowing subjects with desires. Pietz conceives of the fetish as "a primary and carnal rhetoric of identification and disavowal that establishes conscious and unconscious value judgments connecting territorialized social things and embodied social individuals within a series of singular historical fixations" (14). The "carnal" quality of the desire for even the commodity object, something that connects the individual and the social, opens the door to understanding modern subjectivities as configurations of desires, and complicates the notion of desire by connecting it to the collective. The fetish allows for a social history of desire as a knowledge project.

There is at least a third way in which the fetish object might be seen to disrupt traditional western epistemological frameworks. This lies in its privileging of "belief" over "knowledge." Many theorists working with sexual fetishes from within the psychoanalytic model invoke Octave Mannoni's aphorism, "*Je sais bien, mais quand même*" [I know, but nonetheless]. Emily Apter explains, "though he knows that feet, underwear, and velvet constitute nothing but a false or simulated phallus, the Freudian fetishist continues to regard them as real *nonetheless*" (14). The same might be said of the consumer of the commodity fetish in an

explanatory model that dispensed with the notion of false consciousness. Though the desiring consumer understands that the feelings or benefits or self she connects with the desired object are, at least in part, illusory, she continues to desire. The persistence of belief in the face of knowledge, of course, calls into question the status of that knowledge. The *co*-existence of belief and knowledge suggests the complicated and anxiety-producing possibility of the simultaneous existence of multiple registers of "truth." We might see the fetish as enabling a multiplicitous epistemological model, one that recognizes the contingency of knowledge on belief that emerges from unique psychic/social constellations.

What does all of this mean for attempts to get at historical feminine subjects? In a discussion of clothing fetishism and the belief/knowledge relation, Alexandra Warwick and Dani Cavallaro suggest that "the splitting between knowledge and what the subject wants to believe or perform ... enables [the self] to embrace an eminently liminal role and outlook, based on the self-conscious appropriation of a condition of displacement and forever deferred satisfaction" (110). What emerges here is a view of the fetishistically desiring/consuming woman as productively conflicted, as a sort of eternal work-in-progress, engaged in negotiating her relation to *herself* as well as to the social. There has been a temptation to understand late nineteenth-/early twentieth-century women as finished subjects – an odd current given the theoretical emphasis on fragmentation as the hallmark of modernity. The notion of an epistemological split in the subject herself connects the subject to that fragmented modern landscape in a meaningful way, and thus corrects the disjuncture that has produced, at the level of history and theory, an uncomfortable split between subject and social.

For the historian interested in historical examples of the agency of feminine subjects, the belief/knowledge dialectic emerges as spectacularly generative. More than simply indicating the subject's complicated relation to knowledge, it suggests a complicated relation to "reality." The persistence of belief in the face of knowledge might be read as a belief that contains an active *refusal* to believe. Where there is a refusal to believe, surely there is always, too, an imagining of alternative configurations. Warwick and Cavallaro write, "[a]t its most productive, the disclaiming move promulgated by fashion fetishism could lead to a contemplation of the mutual interdependence of things as they are and of alternative scenarios, to be inaugurated not by the fulfillment of utopian dreams projected on to an

indeterminate future, but rather by forms of resistance to common sense and by a denaturalization of the *doxa* in the here-and-now" (110). The fetish object promotes fantasy, and can lead to the willful, conscious manipulation of reality in the present. The suggestion, then, of the agency of consuming, fetishistic women, always suggests their dreams of change, and the intersection of those dreams with social realities. The fetish does the important work of introducing the inevitability of fantasy, of quasi-utopian dream. And it does so in a way that is sensitive to the irreducibility of materiality in the dream-agency equation. Too often, concepts of agency have ignored the charged connections between subject and object, in effect often building the case for agency on a disavowal of the object. In this case, the relational quality of subject and object changes the landscape of agency into one in which the subject productively *uses* her unmistakable connections to objects.

The Writer

It is a potent concept, this fetish, with its potential for redrawing the ways that femininity is thought and even the ways that we consider knowledge. But there is still something more to this potency, and it concerns the one who does the writing. What the fetish accomplishes for femininity and knowledge demands to be extended to the conception of the writing subject – the one who struggles to “get inside” historical people and phenomena.

Most relevant to the feminist historian is the way in which the fetish suggests the visibility, and yet the partial inaccessibility, of an entire stratum of “things.” Feminist history has too often been underwritten by a notion of the transhistorical commensurability of the writing subject and the subject of her telling. The notion of recovering historical women’s “voices” has unwittingly inscribed a concept of the complete transparency and readability of historical subjects. It has rarely demanded the humility and reflexivity of the historian, instead celebrating her gaze uncritically.

What might happen if feminist historians were to consider ourselves fetishists of our historical subjects? How might this productively complicate the ways we choose to write about the past? Drawing the analogy between the fetish object and the subject(s) of our inquiry pushes hard at methodologies by acknowledging that those historical subjects will never be entirely knowable. This will not be a practice, then, through which the

historian can ever fully master her historical subjects. It is about granting their *possibility*, as it is born from the things that the historian's moments of sense-making cannot explain. It sets in place a renewed conception of agency – one that emerges from precisely what the historian *cannot* see or hear. The fetish thus enacts the potential of the concept of agency a second time, this time through the historian's own experience of what or who is agential. Just as the consuming woman encounters troubling moments of double incommensurability in her experience with desired objects, so too does the feminist historian encounter gaps and silences. A fully realized theory of the fetish may help her to come to terms with these, with their intervention in her dream of a transparent past.

Notes

¹ In an endorsement of Michel Leiris' concept of the fetish, Pietz notes that "the fetish is, first of all, something intensely personal, whose truth is experienced as a substantial movement from 'inside' the self (the self as totalized through an impassioned body, a 'body without organs') into the self-limited morphology of a material object situated in space 'outside'" (11-12).

² For an excellent discussion of apparently "inanimate" matter as agential, see physicist Karen Barad, "Meeting the Universe Halfway."

³ This is not a Marxian suggestion of the "transcendent" power of the commodity fetish; rather, it is an acknowledgement of the ultimate unreadability of the thing even in the most direct, immediate relations with it – relations whose historical existence do not allow for the concept of transcendence. A crucial difference between this formulation and that of the transcendent object lies in its positing of a fully empowered subject who understands – is not mystified by – the object's lack of readability, and understands that it occurs within a system of signification.

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