

Critical Practice as Desire

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Robyn Wiegman. *Object Lessons*. Duke University Press, 2012. 398 pp.

Robyn Wiegman's *Object Lessons* is an extended meditation on the disciplinary frameworks, concepts, and narratives that have shaped the field imaginaries of identity-based studies, focusing primarily on how these have developed within the context of the U.S. academy. *Object Lessons* theorizes the ways in which the concept of social justice shapes these fields, including Women's Studies, Queer Theory, Whiteness Studies, and American Studies, in order to ask what can be learned from their organizing practices, particularly the relationships between these fields and their objects of study. The book's title thus serves as an invitation to the reader to think with Wiegman about the lessons that a discipline's object of inquiry can teach us about both the discipline itself and the affects that motivate its study. According to Wiegman, "*Object Lessons* aims to interrupt faith [. . .] that if we only find the right discourse, object of study, or analytic tool, our critical practice will be adequate to the political commitments that inspire it" (2-3).

In her Introduction, Wiegman frames the book by arguing that while identity-based studies have an acknowledged tie to the political, "the operation of the political within identity-based fields has not been sufficiently engaged" (13). She introduces the concept of the "field imaginary" as a way to identify the ways in which disciplinary frames shape how a field of study is imagined. She asserts that "belief in critical practice as an agency of social change" (10) is one of the key assumptions underlying identity-based scholarship. While *Object Lessons* is about the desires that motivate the disciplinary practices in which scholars engage, her work does not explicitly theorize the concept of desire itself. This is not the project of the book, and indeed Wiegman makes no claims to offering a comprehensive account of all the identity-based disciplines, and argues that such a project is an impossible one (it is). Nonetheless, there are some areas that Wiegman touches on less directly that seem surprising, such as the rise of affect theory, which has been constructed as "*the way forward*," as Clare Hemmings puts it, from the critical practice that comprises Wiegman's focus (550). Wiegman also does not dwell directly on the concepts of "the political" or "social justice" themselves, and the ways in which these terms are mobilized within identity-based disciplines. While these particular areas seem under-addressed in the Introduction, and throughout, what the reader does leave Wiegman's book with is a set of critical readings of particular disciplinary narratives that are instructive for thinking through

the key concepts, scripts, and stories of other identity-based fields.

In her first chapter, “Doing Justice with Objects,” Wiegman identifies a progress narrative shaping the discipline of Women’s Studies: the notion that shifting to a discourse of gender will solve the problems inherent to the concept of “women.” That is, that the concept of “women” attempts to circumscribe the uncircumscribable, and in ways that frequently fail to account for the experiences of women of colour or trans-women, for example. Wendy Brown’s (1997) “The Impossibility of Women’s Studies” is a key essay in the archive of feminist writings outlining the problems with the term “women” and its implications for Women’s Studies as a discipline. Wiegman’s essay on “Feminism, Institutionalism, and the Idiom of Failure,” published in *Women’s Studies on the Edge* (2008) critically rereads Brown’s essay to argue that a narrative of failure shapes discourses around the institutionalization of Women’s Studies. In *Object Lessons*, Wiegman revisits the idiom of failure within Women’s Studies to argue that it comprises part of a larger progress narrative that also includes: dependence, “in the compulsion to overcome what has failed” (52); incorporation, through the transferential power of moving from one signifying practice to another “newer” and “better” one; and, finally, disavowal, through the denial of any similarity between the “old” concept (women) and the “new” one (gender). “Doing Justice with Objects” is a strong chapter, demonstrating the breadth and depth of Wiegman’s analytic capabilities. The chapter is meticulously footnoted, clearly demonstrating the seismic shift from “women” to “gender” within Women’s Studies scholarship and Women’s Studies at an institutional level, while also offering a focused, illustrative reading of this shift through Leora Auslander’s (1997) optimistic essay, “Do Women’s + Feminist + Men’s + Lesbian and Gay + Queer Studies = Gender Studies?” that first appeared alongside Brown’s more cynical assessment.

Like Chapter One, Wiegman’s second chapter, “Telling Time,” offers an illustrative reading of Ian Halley’s provocative essay, “Queer Theory by Men,” in order to think through both the relationship between feminism and queer theory and the impulse towards divergence that shapes the field imaginary of queer theory. Wiegman critiques Halley’s homogenizing and reductive portrait of feminism as only concerned with male/female difference and female subordination across all contexts, offering an alternative feminist archive of sex-positive lesbian writings as a counterexample. Ultimately, Wiegman’s close reading is less effective in this chapter, as it seems at times more concerned with critiquing Halley than with foregrounding the narrative of divergence shaping queer theory. While “Telling Time” does discuss the ways in which queer theory emerged out a different temporal context than feminism—indeed, as Wiegman argues, queer theory’s divergentism “requires the prior arrival ... of sexual identity as an area of inquiry onto the academic scene” (117), an area developed primarily through feminist thought—this chapter’s analytic frame often feels too nar-

rowly focused upon Halley's work.

Chapters Three and Four mark a shift in the text's focus from the minoritarian discourses of Women's Studies and Queer Theory to the majoritarian fields of Whiteness Studies and American Studies, disciplines which are predicated on disavowals of their objects of study; as Wiegman puts it, both Whiteness Studies and American Studies are "aimed at unmasking, critiquing, and even destroying the object of study that names them" (138). The argument in Chapter Three is framed around a central paradox within Whiteness Studies: the paradox of particularity. That is, Wiegman tracks three streams of Whiteness Studies—scholarship on poor whites, white abolitionism, and class-based analyses of whiteness—in order to argue that white universalism underwrites these particularities rather than existing in a binary relation with them (188). While scholarship in the area of whiteness continues to be produced, Whiteness Studies as a discipline did not gain purchase within academia. Studying a "failed" discipline allows Wiegman to contextualize Whiteness Studies within the recent past of 1990s and early 2000s, offering a compelling discussion of broader shifts within popular culture around the construction of the white liberal subject during this period.

In Chapter Four, Wiegman explores the post-Cold War turn of American Studies to a critical stance favouring disidentification with its object of study. As Wiegman puts it, "New Americanism posits itself as *exterior* to the object of study that names it in order to guarantee an analytic position commensurate with the political desire that animates it—a position that is simultaneously outside the object's geopolitical power but inside the disavowed histories, affects, and violences that attend and support such power" (202). Wiegman elaborates on this point by focusing on the discourse of internationalization that pervades New Americanism (in critical work on imperialism and diasporic and transnational studies, for example), and suggests that, despite the desire to disidentify with the nation state, New Americanism's move to internationalization can not be dissociated from the move to neoliberal globalization and governmentality that marks the U.S. university. In light of this imbrication, Wiegman focuses on internationalization "as a critical aspiration" (206), suggesting that "the fantastic wish for an uncontaminated future" (238) is one of the key desires motivating the field imaginary of contemporary American Studies. This is another strong chapter in which Wiegman masterfully traces the key trajectories of, and debates within, American Studies. Her work in this chapter belies the fantasy that "*practitioners are the agents of field revision,*" arguing instead that "changes in the narrative formation and critical priorities of fields of study are generated by the very processes critics hope to decipher and transform" (215).

The fifth chapter, "Critical Kinship," focuses upon intersectionality, which has argu-

ably become *the* leading paradigm within Women's Studies and, more broadly, "*the* primary figure of political completion in U.S. identity knowledge domains" (240). This chapter functions not as a critique or indictment of intersectionality itself, but rather explores both the desire for kinship mobilized through intersectionality and a paradox that helps sustain intersectionality's critical value (242); that is, intersectionality pursues both universality (through its comprehensive aspirations) and particularity (through taking black women's experiences as the paradigmatic intersectional location). Wiegman's meditation on intersectionality revisits the particularities of legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) essay, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex," which brought the term into circulation, rereading the key insights of Crenshaw's work through more recent legal cases. Readers travel with Wiegman through the complex muddle of gender, race, and reproduction in legal and media contexts, in order to arrive not at a resolution of these complexities, but at an understanding of "the contingency of critical practice" (296) and insight into the ways in which the desire for kinship is imbricated in the shifting terrain of U.S. white liberal subjecthood in the 1990s and beyond. In addition to these insights, the chapter concludes with an assessment of intersectionality that builds on Jennifer Nash's (2008) evaluation of the term.

Wiegman's concluding chapter, "The Vertigo of Critique," returns to Queer Studies, and is framed by a narrative that may be familiar to many scholars: a conference paper that seems like it will write itself starts to raise more questions than it answers, once the critic begins thinking through the assumptions underlying their research questions. Wiegman uses this narrative as a way to ask questions of both Queer Studies and critical practice in its broadest sense. With regard to the former, Wiegman argues that while the queer critique of heteronormativity assumes its intransitivity for the purpose of mobilizing the anti-normative aspirations of queer theory, it may be the case that gender and sex are *always transitive* (318). With regard to the latter, Wiegman uses her self-reflexive narrative to argue that "the critical authority derived from critique belongs not to the critic but to the questions she learns to hone" (318). In this sense, our objects of study also constitute *us* as researchers. In this final chapter, Wiegman offers a perceptive analysis of the ways in which fantasy and desire are imbricated in, and sustain, critical practice.

Object Lessons is an excellent contribution to the field of critical scholarship on the ways in which Women's Studies defines and understands its own disciplinary project; Wiegman's project takes the kinds of questions that Women's Studies has been asking of itself and extends these questions to other identity-based fields to ask the broader question of what we expect critical practice to *do*. The text is meticulously footnoted and the scope and depth of Wiegman's analysis is impressive. Recommended for scholars and graduate students working in the areas of Women's, Gender, and Sexu-

ality Studies, particularly, as well as other identity-based disciplines. Wiegman is a brilliant thinker and her text provides a site for considering the stakes of the projects with which we're engaged and how the "stakes" are defined in the first place. While Wiegman offers no easy answers, for scholars who have ever asked questions of themselves, like: "Does my work *do anything?*" and "Does this work *really* matter?" what Wiegman does offer is a thoughtful meditation on the narratives that work to sustain the aspirational hopes of disciplines emerging out of left critique; specifically, the hope that critical practices will deliver the futures of which we dream.

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