

The Nonhuman Object in Ama Ata Aidoo's "Nowhere Cool" (1990): A Black Feminist Critique of Object-oriented Ontology

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Abstract

"Nowhere Cool" (1990), a short story by Ama Ata Aidoo, is divided into two sections. In the first, a child sits in a classroom in what is presumably Ghana, feeling alienated by the "familiar things that were begin chased away by the demands of the culture of our conquerors" in the literature discussed by the teacher. In the second, a Ghanaian woman travels in a plane across the USA. She notices a plastic address tag on the baby of the woman next to her, and starts thinking of plastic as material, of oil and of how slavery makes humans into cargo. This short story therefore consists of philosophical rumination on the nature of humans' relationship to material and literary objects. I read "Nowhere Cool" as part of a black feminist epistemological tradition aimed at exposing the situatedness of supposedly neutral western thought, and at emphasising the embodiment and social embeddedness of all knowledge. I argue that the story's specific focus on the nonhuman and on extractive economies allows for it to be read as a corrective to the same universalising gestures in posthumanist considerations of the nonhuman. I bring the story into dialogue with Graham Harman's object-oriented ontology (OOO) to contend that while OOO is aimed at criticising anthropocentrism, a specific human perspective (that of the western white male) is "overrepresented" (Wynter) in it. This has consequences for OOO and posthumanism more generally, since it means that the new relationship to the nonhuman Harman proposes is divorced from the reality of many humans' relationship with the nonhuman. Posthuman ontologies need to build on the insights of black feminism in order to not replicate the skewed nature and resultant inaccuracies of hegemonic western theories of the past.

Keywords: Ama Ata Aidoo, black feminism, epistemology, feminist standpoint theory, Graham Harman, nonhuman, Object-oriented ontology

Introduction

“Nowhere Cool”, a short story by the renowned Ghanaian author Ama Ata Aidoo, was originally published in 1974 in the journal *Asemka*. The restructured version I discuss here was published in the journal *Callaloo* in 1990 and was also included in the short-story collection *The Girl who Can* (1997). The story consists of two parts. The largest part takes place on an airplane flying from New York to the West Coast of the United States of America. The story’s Ghanaian protagonist, Sissy, is in the USA for a fellowship. On the flight she thinks about compromises she had to make in order to take up the fellowship, including leaving her husband and two young children behind. Prompted by a plastic address-label pinned to the baby of the white woman sitting next to her, she starts to think about the label as object, plastic as a material, as well its link to oil. This leads to thoughts on the extractive economy based on oil and cotton. Her thoughts turn to slavery and how slavery turns humans into inhuman cargo.

Whereas most of “Nowhere Cool” is written in the third person and refers to Sissie as “she”, the first two paragraphs are written in the first person. This section depicts a schoolgirl sitting in an English Literature classroom feeling like she could “never understand or cope with” (Aidoo 2002:136) aspects of the class. The schoolgirl, who is presumably also Sissie, is here called Sarah—an anglicised name perhaps chosen by the teacher, Miss Jones. Sissie is unable to take on the persona of “Sarah” expected of her in the literature class and read the prescribed text from a Eurocentric perspective. While the classroom (presumably situated in humid Ghana) is warm enough to heat “great grandmother’s bath water, [the students] read about carriages getting stuck in the snow” (Aidoo 2002:136). This makes “Sarah” feel sleepy, “So I would just sit like a stone, my eyes wide open but staring at nothing, while my thoughts wandered around *familiar things that were begin chased away by the demands of the culture of our conquerors ...*” (Aidoo 2002:136, my emphasis).

It is clear in this sentence that the narrator views Eurocentric literature and culture as something which impedes on “familiar things”. It is also clear that literature is not portrayed as a neutral object that every person will have the same type of relationship with. This section is explicitly about the perspective of readers when it comes to both literature as object and the objects represented in literature (“carriages getting stuck in snow”). It can therefore be read as an *ars poetica*, and having what structuralist Yuri Lotman (1977:216) describes as an encoding function—while it is seemingly unrelated to the rest of the story, the first two paragraphs provide the reader with information which she can use to decode the rest of the narrative. Literature does not feature as object in the story of Sissie’s airplane trip, but the opening of the story indicates to

the reader that it should be read as a literary text which does *not* take a Eurocentric perspective as given, and rather formulates a specific perspective on objects (in this case the plastic luggage tag on a baby). Together, the two sections of the story therefore represent a specific West African woman's perspective on literature, and on the literary representation of non-human objects.

In this article, I situate "Nowhere cool" in a tradition of black feminist critique of hegemonic knowledge production. I therefore follow in the footsteps of thinkers such as Barbara Boswell (2020:1-2) and Desiree Lewis (2007:30) in reading black women's creative writing as a form of theory production which is usually not recognised as such. In particular, I read "Nowhere cool" as representing a critique of Eurocentric literary theory. This entails an exploration of how an object represented in a literary text will have different meanings depending on *who* the writer, focaliser and reader is. An object such as a carriage or a plastic tag will have a different significance depending on the socially situated and embodied position of each of these role players.

After contextualising "Nowhere cool" as part of this black feminist tradition, I ask whether the ways in which humans and nonhumans are represented in "Nowhere Cool" has anything to add to contemporary posthumanist thinking. It can, after all, be considered as relativising anthropocentrism in the attention paid to nonhuman objects. The posthumanist centring of nonhuman objects has been prominent in philosopher Graham Harman's "object-oriented ontology" (hereafter OOO). OOO is part of a range of contemporary theories (sometimes called "speculative realism" and related to new materialism and posthumanism more broadly) moving away from what is considered postmodernism's privileging of epistemology, to focus on ontology. The value of OOO and these other theories lie in their attempts to develop an ontology that grants agency to the nonhuman, and that challenges the human's illusory control over the rest of reality.

In the fourth section of this article, I contend that reading "Nowhere cool" in conjunction with Harman's OOO highlights the continuities between Harman's "new theory of everything" (as the title of his Pelican introduction to OOO for a broad audience—*Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything* [2018]—has it) and hegemonic Western philosophy. OOO attempts to move away from what philosopher Sylvia Wynter (2003:263) calls "Man2" (the conception of man that developed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that views European man as the most rational human and justified in subjugating the peoples of Africa, Latin America and Asia) in that it questions the centrality of the human as such. On the other hand, I will argue, when the human-object *does* figure in Harman's thought, it is still a case of the Western bourgeois Man "which overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself" (Wynter 2003:260).

I therefore argue that “Nowhere cool” highlights the continued relevance of black feminism’s destabilising of this overrepresentation within posthumanism’s centralising of the nonhuman, by emphasising that the human view of the nonhuman is always mediated by the human’s positionality, and that some humans have a more intimate relationship with nonhuman objects due to their history of being dehumanised and treated as extractive resources. According to Frantz Fanon (2008:83) this dehumanisation leads to the black individual experiencing him- or herself as being “an object in the midst of other objects.”

Harman (2018:154) conceives of OOO as reworking the philosophical tradition of phenomenology by distinguishing between real and sensual objects (the latter referring to objects as humans perceive them, the first to the form of the object that exists separately from human perception and is withdrawn from and completely inaccessible to the human). While OOO represents a significant challenge to anthropocentrism, I contend that “Nowhere cool” indicates that OOO needs to be supplemented by Sara Ahmed’s “queer phenomenology”—an acknowledgement that human perception of sensual objects (and their concomitant sensual qualities, to be discussed later) is inevitably influenced by the human’s embodiment and social embeddedness (Ahmed 2006:3).

Black feminism’s critique of hegemonic forms of knowledge production

As indicated above, “Nowhere Cool” deals with a female black gaze, and specifically with how nonhuman objects figure in this gaze. I therefore read the story as part of a black feminist epistemological tradition concerned with how black women know, and with how the specific knowledge of black women poses a challenge to hegemonic epistemologies that view the knowledge production of white men as neutral and universal. Black feminism is not a monolithic or united theoretical or activist field. It is varied and dispersed. In this article I am primarily concerned with an epistemological thread running through theory written by black feminists the globe over, a concern with the ways in which knowledge developed by white men is elevated to the normative and considered “neutral”, whereas knowledge produced by other people and specifically by black women is considered marked by their identity. As a counter measure, these black feminists celebrate knowledge production by black women. In this regard, some of these black feminist epistemologies are aligned with feminist standpoint theory, a theory concerned with “relations between the production of knowledge and practices of power”, and specifically with how hegemonic philosophies, epistemologies and methodologies of science obscure their “normative features behind a veil of claimed neutrality” (Harding 2004:1-2). This veil allows for what Donna Haraway (1988:581) calls the “god trick,” the claim that is made by certain (primarily

white and male) producers of knowledge to be unmarked and to have “the power to see and not be seen, to represent while escaping representation.”

Sylvia Wynter (2003:257) excavates European and American histories of ideas to explain how the white male European came to pull off Haraway’s “god trick” in order to “overrepresent[...] itself as if it were the human itself”. She explains how through three major paradigmatic shifts the valuation of the white “race” and devaluation of the black “race” was maintained and perpetuated. During the middle ages, Roman Catholic theocentrism was used to identify black people as “sinful by nature” (Wynter 2003:263). During the Renaissance and Reformation what Wynter (2003:263-264) calls a “de-supernaturalizing” took place in which god as referent was replaced by the physical sciences as referent and rationality used to differentiate between the white man as rational and indigenous and black people as irrational. Wynter (2003:264) refers to this conception of the human in terms of rationality as “the invention of Man1”. While early colonialism was justified in Christian terms (the non-Christians of the world were to be converted or eradicated), later colonialism was justified in terms of rationality: the supposedly irrational peoples of the world were to be shepherded by the rational (Wynter 2003:266). The “invention of Man2” occurred in the nineteenth century with the rise of the Darwinian biological sciences which conceived of black people as less-evolved than their white counterparts (Wynter 2003:264). It is under Man2 that race was invented as a biological category, with an emphasis on the embodied differences of humans (Wynter 2003:273). During the twentieth century the worldview of Man2 was adapted to accommodate the genetic turn and a form of evolutionary economics: the first being used to claim that black people are genetically inferior (Wynter 2003:316-318) and the latter that the poor of the world’s position is the result of inferior adaptation to the free market (Wynter 2003:320-321).

Throughout these intellectual shifts, it is always the black person who is placed at the “nadir of [the West’s] Chain of Being [...], on a rung of the ladder lower than that of all humans” (Wynter 2003:301). Within this hierarchy, black women are even lower than black men, as they “cannot use a questionable appeal to manhood to neutralize the stigma of being Black”, as Patricia Hill Collins (2004:110) puts it. Black women are othered, labelled irrational and treated as the objects rather than the subjects of knowledge both because they are black and because they are women. Black women are thus especially well-positioned to critique and identify the limitations of the “[i]deas derived from the European Age of Reason [which] remain central to dominant notions of the ‘human’ even today” (Lewis & Baderoon 2021:2), because it affects them so personally.

In their introduction to the essay collection *Surfacing: On Being Black and Feminist in South Africa* (2021) Desiree Lewis and Gabeba Baderoon (2021:3) emphasise, however, that the knowledge produced by black women is “generative and not only reactive. It does not only counter racist and patriarchal world views; it envisions new ways of being human and is therefore relevant to all.” Descriptions of what a non-reactive black feminist epistemology looks like are as diverse as black womanhood itself. Patricia Hill Collins (2004:114) emphasises the impact of “sisterhood, motherhood, and creative expression”, i.e. social and cultural relationality on “the Black female ideological frame of reference”. In her PhD-thesis, Bibi Bakare-Yusuf (2000:50-51) emphasises the embodiment of knowledge. Building on the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, she argues that “[k]nowledge is first of all *of the body*, or rather the body in relational context” (Bakare-Yusuf, 2000:255). Rather than a universal black feminist epistemology, these feminists therefore contend that epistemology is always specific, situated and embodied.

In Ama Ata Aidoo’s essay “To Be an African Woman Writer—an Overview and a Detail” (1986), she formulates a critique of literary historiography, a critique arising from her specific situatedness as a black African woman writer. In this paper, which was first presented at the Second African Writer’s Conference in Stockholm, Aidoo scathingly points out that men writing histories of African literature tend to only mention one African woman writer, white South African writer Nadine Gordimer (Aidoo 2013:516). This is the case in histories written by male critics who are not African and by those male critics who are themselves African: both tend to (at least at the time in which Aidoo presented this paper) ignore the contributions of black women to African literature (Aidoo 2013:515). While the essay functions as an ideological critique of male literary critics’ biases, I contend that Aidoo’s argument is also epistemological: An African literary history which does not mention such seminal writers as Mariama Bâ, Bessie Head, Lauretta Ngcobo, Flora Nwapa, Efua Sutherland and Miriam Tlali, is not a reliable source of knowledge, according to Aidoo. The knowledge produced by those critics which Aidoo discusses is partial, due to the way in which these critics are situated both in their own male bodies and in disciplines with a masculinist bias.

While the one is a fictional short story and the other is literary criticism, “Nowhere Cool” (especially in its first two paragraphs, as discussed in my introduction) and “To Be an African Woman Writer” are related in their concern with the necessary and corrective perspective that a black African woman can bring to the ways in which literature is read and studied. In its status as a nonfiction essay explicitly concerned with the ways in which black women are excluded from the knowledge produced by men, “To Be an African Woman Writer” acts as a bridge connecting “Nowhere Cool”’s fictional exploration of this topic to the black feminist epistemological tradition.

In the next section of this paper, I argue that the contingency central to black feminist thought runs counter to the “overrepresentation of Man” and “god trick” which still underlie OOO as a specific instantiation of posthumanism. First, I will set out the work of some thinkers who are formulating a black feminist response to posthumanism and specifically to the reimagining of the relationship between the human and the nonhuman in the context of the Anthropocene.

‘Anthropocene’ is a term coined by Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer (2000:17) that refers to earth’s current geological epoch, an epoch in which the activities of humans are considered the dominant geological force on earth. Axelle Karera (2019:33) points to the work of Claire Colebrook to contend that mainstream discussion of the Anthropocene largely represents a return to an uncontested valuation of the natural sciences, “a reactionary insistence on the real and the non-negotiable” (Colebrook, quoted in Karera 2019:33). As I will argue in the next section of this article, this emphasis on the “real” and rejection of postmodernism’s and identity politics’ complication of epistemology is true of OOO.

Colebrook’s claim does, however, run counter to the decentralisation of the (rational) human in posthumanism more broadly defined. Karera (2019:40) explains that Rosi Braidotti and other posthumanist thinkers do, however, consider the dawning of the Anthropocene as valuable in thinking posthumanism, as it “reminds us that the earth, or the planetary dimension of our environment, is our common ground—the milieu for us all, humans and non-humans.” This quote indicates the ubiquity of an attitude informed by Spivak’s concept of “planetary” within posthumanism. Spivak (2003:72-73) coined this term to invoke a view of the earth as alterity with which the human is in an ethical and co-constitutive relationship. While Colebrook rejects the claims of much Anthropocene thinking to realism and universality, it is also her conclusion that “[t]he redemptive nature of the Anthropocene event [...] is the opportunity to finally dispose of the solipsistic Cartesian individual for a future eco-oriented humanity acutely aware of its ‘geo’ co-constitution with other forms of earthly entities.” (Karera 2019:38).

Karera (2019:37) is critical about Colebrook and Braidotti’s “universalizing gestures”—the ways in which they conceive of humanity as a “we” who are equally responsible for the dawn of the Anthropocene, and who will equally suffer as a result of its consequences. In the work of these posthumanist theorists and other Anthropocene thinkers, “relations of power are [therefore] elided, and differences flattened out” (Mupotsa & Liu 2019:131). This elision in the name of the “real and non-negotiable” runs counter to a reality in which “the perceived notion of scarcity” (the idea that the earth’s resources are threatened by planetary disaster), “actually justifies,

reinforces, and escalates forms of division between bodies that are considered worthy and populations deemed disposable” (Mupotsa & Liu 2019:131). Humans are not equally culpable in terms of climate change, and the world’s dispossessed are more vulnerable to suffering as a result of ecological disaster. While (some) posthumanist thinkers emphasise the real, and Harman, for example, contends that the Anthropocene requires a newfound focus on “reality” rather than on identity and alterity, reality in the age of the Anthropocene continues to be different for different people based on their social situatedness.

Karera’s argument also links to the concept of disposable populations, in that she comments that much of the discourse on Anthropocene ethics and co-constituted entities is reliant on the idea that the grievability of life constitutes “the category of the human and ensures its survival” (Karera 2019:37). This principle is problematic in the social context in which what Karera (2019:44) calls “blackened” life and death are “unregisterable and therefore un-grievable”. To focus on the relationality between all humans and all planetary entities is to attempt to elide responsibility for injustice and to yield to a “desire to abandon race” (Leong, quoted in Karera 2019:44) and, I would add, the desire to conceive of “a” human perspective on and in the Anthropocene is also a desire to elide an acknowledging that humans have different relationships to the nonhuman, as a result of a history and present of some humans being deemed inhuman. Karera (2019:52) concludes by pleading for an approach to the contemporary that re-centres “the racial outcasts whose illegible plights continue nonetheless to determine the boundaries of ethics even when their constitutive operations are unrecognizable.”

Although it was published in 2018, the year before Karera’s article, Kathryn Yusoff’s *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* can be considered just such an approach, an answer to Karera’s (2019:51) question, “[h]ow would dealing with a [...] perverse kind of historical repetition—dealing with the afterlives of slavery and colonialism—help us unmask the violence and the terror that arrive armed with the language of critique, care and empathy?” Like Karera, Yusoff argues that the black colonised and enslaved are classed with the inhuman, that which modernism, colonialism and industrialisation extract and utilise in the name of so-called ‘progress’ and capitalist growth. Yusoff (2018:loc. 103) formulates this classification as follows: “Blackness [is] a historically constituted and intentionally enacted deformation in the formation of a subjectivity, a deformation that presses an inhuman categorization and the inhuman earth into intimacy.” While this forced intimacy “was constructed specifically as a node of extraction of properties and personhood,” it was also “repurposed for survival and formed into a praxis for remaking other selves that were built in the harshest conditions.” (Yusoff 2018:loc. 106). Yusoff (2018:loc. 107) explains that this “proximity of black and brown bodies to harm in this intimacy with the

inhuman” is what she is calling “black Anthropocenes”. The ‘billion black Anthropocenes’ of her title, the catastrophic environmental and human destruction that black and brown people have been subjected to since the start of extractive colonialism and its continuation in contemporary capitalism, historicises and relativises the mainstream conception of the Anthropocene as something “new”.

Among other things, Yusoff’s (2018:loc. 122) argument is thus a critique of the supposed neutrality of Geology, in that it reveals that Western Geologists only named the Anthropocene when its violence started affecting them. Their coinage of this term therefore does not take place in a vacuum, but is a result of their own positionality (and their ignorance of other positionalities). Anthropocene studies is thus emblematic of Man2’s epistemological “view from nowhere” which Yusoff rightly names as “selective perspectivism.” This selective perspectivism is similar to that identified by Karera in posthumanism and Anthropocene thinking more generally. While “Nowhere Cool” was written 26 years before the term “Anthropocene” was coined, in its centralising of Sarah and Sissie’s specifically black and specifically female perspectives on nonhuman objects, in 2022 it reads as a critique of Anthropocene thinkers’ attempts to conceive of a universal human perspective on the nonhuman. In the next section I will show that this prescient critique it is applicable to OOO—that although Harman is critical, like Karera, of the focus on relationality of much Anthropocene thought, his work is also guilty of eliding human difference and pulling a ‘god trick’.

The overrepresentation of Man in OOO

Simply put, OOO is a rethinking of reality in terms of objects (with humans being one type of object). Graham Harman contends that human objects only have partial access to other objects. Humans do not gain knowledge through accessing the withdrawn essence of an object. Rather, knowledge is created when a new object is formed through the relationship between the perceiver as object and the qualities that he or she perceives in another object. To support this argument, Harman (2018:80) devises a schema which he calls “the quadruple object”. As mentioned earlier, this hinges on a distinction between real objects (objects as they exist in their own right, withdrawn from all other objects) and sensual objects (objects as they are perceived and experienced by other objects, including humans). In “Nowhere Cool”, the plastic tag that Sissie sees on the baby next to her is a real object, but Sissie does not have access to it as a real object. The tag as she experiences it is a sensual object. Sensual objects denote not the objects-in-themselves but their correlates as experienced by humans (Harman 2018:78). Harman’s quadrant is completed by the categories of real qualities and sensual qualities. Real qualities are

those withdrawn properties that a real object has that another real object does not have direct access to, while sensual qualities are those qualities that arise between real objects. Sissie's perceiving that the label is a typed card, inside a plastic casing (Aidoo 2002:147), is her experiencing its sensual qualities rather than its real qualities. Sensual qualities are constantly changing, influenced by, amongst other things, the state of the perceiving real object (Harman 2018:156)—Harman refers specifically to the physical position of the perceiving object with respect to the other object.

Apart from challenging anthropocentrism, OOO therefore shares, with most other instances of speculative realism, a critique of the wide-spread post-Kantian acceptance of human finitude, the correlationist idea that humans only ever have access to the “correlation between thinking and being” (Meillassoux 2008:5), rather than to reality itself. Speculative realism is premised on the idea that attempts at producing knowledge should not resign themselves to dealing with correlates, but should rather admit that reality outside of human understanding does exist, and try to factor this into their worldview. As the name ‘object-oriented *ontology*’ implies, Harman too, is concerned with that which exists, rather than with epistemology. OOO, however, does have epistemological implications and in a sense tries to find a midway between correlationism and realist ontology, in that Harman (2018:7) argues that humans can only approach reality indirectly.

In his attempt to untangle the relationship between correlationism and realism, Harman turns to the concept of metaphor to explain how philosophy works. Metaphor happens, in OOO terms, when a mysterious and inaccessible real object (“the sea”, to use the same Homeric example that Harman employs) is brought into a relationship with sensual qualities (“wine-dark”, i.e. wine-qualities). The sensual wine-qualities are familiar to the human, but “the sea becomes a mysterious sea, capable of holding wine-qualities in its orbit” (Harman 2018:180-181). At stake here is not the sensual object that the human-object has access to, but rather the withdrawn real object (sea). Because a real object is “withheld from any access or relation whatsoever” (Harman 2018:181), it cannot participate in the metaphor. Because “the RO (sea) is permanently unavailable, it is replaced by RO (beholder). I myself, as the reader of the poem, must perform the metaphor by standing in for the absent sea” (Harman 2018:181). A metaphor does not extract the essence of the reality of something, but rather “builds a new theatrical sea-reality upward, on top of the sensual qualities of wine”. In “Nowhere Cool”, the “carriages getting stuck in the snow” (Aidoo 2002:136), which Sarah reads about in her literature classroom, becomes a metaphor for alien European objects intruding on the lifeworld of a Ghanaian schoolchild. This metaphor can only come into existence in the relationship between Sarah specifically, and the sensual objects

she associates with the carriage (cold foreign colonial cultural influences). This metaphor is not premised on the inaccessible essence of the carriage as object, but is rather built upward on top of the sensual qualities of the carriage and performed by the real object Sarah. According to Harman, philosophy functions in the same manner, coming into existence between the philosopher as real object dealing with sensual qualities and in this way creating a new real object, rather than getting closer to the essence of real objects or real qualities, which remain elusive.

My main criticism of OOO lies in the emptiness of Harman's human observer as real object, the implied universality of the qualities (whether real or sensual) of human real objects when it comes to philosophy. Drawing from the black feminist tradition set out in the previous section, I argue that the philosopher as real object is influenced by her embodied situatedness, in political or other social structures and in specific relations to other objects, and that this influences the metaphors created in her interaction with sensual qualities. The object-metaphor of snow-stuck carriages as colonial imposition could not have come into existence between its sensual qualities and just any human. Sarah's situatedness plays a large part in its performance as theatrical object. In denying relationality and the situatedness of the human object, OOO, then, "has no philosophical tools to account for differences and asymmetries, and it makes no attempt to link differences to human objects and their differential power to affect human and non-human objects." (Lemke 2017:147)

From Harman's (2018, 137-139) perspective, my criticism can be dismissed as an instantiation of what he calls Truth or Power Politics. In the first instance, it could be claimed that I am trying to insist that some human subjects, due to their differential situatedness, have access to the essence of real objects (truth) and others do not. In the second, it could be claimed that I am implying that truth is relative but that we should grant more power to the perspectives of those currently disempowered. I will return to this possible criticism and investigate its validity in the conclusion of this article, but for now it is necessary to emphasise that my claim is epistemological, not primarily political or ethical. I contend that in ignoring the influence of the human object's qualities (real and sensual), Harman limits the accurateness and applicability of his "new theory of everything", similarly to how the knowledge created by the male historiographers discussed by Aidoo in "To Be an African Woman Writer" is limited in its accuracy. In the next section I will illustrate these limitations of Harman's theory by referring to the metaphors in "Nowhere Cool", a short story that is, as already indicated, object-oriented in the sense that it is interested in exploring humans' relationship to non-human objects, and which

also builds on black feminist epistemology by emphasising the importance of recognising the situatedness of all humans.

Nonhuman objects and the poetics of “Nowhere Cool”

As discussed above, analysing the first two paragraphs of “Nowhere Cool” to analyse it from an OOO-perspective leads to the conclusion that the “carriages getting stuck in the snow” (Aidoo 2002:136) are real objects in an object-text and thus have withdrawn qualities that can never be fully accessed by the reader as human object, and no interpretation can therefore exhaust the text (see Harman 2012). Sarah as real object, however, latches on to the sensual qualities of this image (the coldness of snow, the foreignness of both carriage and snow) to performatively create a new real object in which the carriages in the snow do not represent whatever the writer of the text intended, but rather functions as a metaphor for cultural colonialism. Reading the passage in this way illustrates the importance of the situatedness of the human real object in this process. The performance of this new real object is influenced by Sarah’s physical position in the classroom and the contradiction between the snow and the heat she is immersed in, but also by her identity as a young black Ghanaian woman.

Typical of Aidoo’s oeuvre (Ogunyemi 1985:78), “Nowhere Cool” does not just consist of prose, but also includes snippets of dialogue and poetry. Also typical of her writing is that these are used to “emphasize climatic points in the narration where the emotion is so intense that prose can no longer serve as a suitable vehicle” (Ogunyemi 1985:79). In “Nowhere Cool” a poem is inserted after Sissie sees that the baby of the white woman sitting next to her on the airplane has pinned to him a plastic label with his name, age and address and thinks “Cargo is cargo, live or dead ...” (Aidoo 2002:147). On one level this thought refers to the airplane’s cargo, but it is also evocative of how seamlessly the colonial trade in minerals morphed into a trade in human beings. This is made explicit in the poem on the following page:

Of course, of course.

The children might get mashed up.

But their labels will be safe from all but fire.

Secure within their plastics which
no hail, no snow, neither war nor pestilence
no water, no blood
can touch.

So what dinosaur ever talked of King Cotton?

All hail Emperor Oil! Step slightly

Nana Black Gold.

We sing the praises of Incorruptible Plastic

the miracle child of a wondrous century. (Aidoo 2002, 148).

In the declaration that plastic (and oil, one of plastic's constitutive elements) is the modern form of the old-fashioned ("dinosaurs" talk of it) "King Cotton", Sissie's perspective on plastic is related to the history of the slave trade. Ghana, the country of origin of both Aidoo and Sissie, was historically part of the so-called "gold coast", a name given to the region by its colonisers due to its rich mineral resources. The trade in gold quickly expanded to include the trade in slaves. Yusoff (2018:loc. 289) refers to the seeming ease of this slippage from gold as cargo to (black) humans as cargo by mentioning that the Gold Coast as a whole was referred to as "the Mine." One of the biggest slave forts in the country also has the name Elmina, Portuguese for "mine". Many of the people enslaved on the gold coast ended up toiling on cotton plantations in the USA. In this poem there is therefore an explicit link between certain inhuman objects (cotton, gold and oil) and the history of slavery—and neo-colonialism as a continuation of earlier ideologies. Aidoo's creation of this metaphor, the way in which sensual qualities of the plastic tag evoke a history of black people's intimacy with the inhuman, is influenced by her situatedness as a Ghanaian woman, and one travelling to the USA.

I am not arguing that only a Ghanaian woman could have created this metaphor, but I am arguing that the embodiment and cultural attributes of Aidoo and her character of Sissie do contribute to their relationships with the inhuman and how that is represented in the short story. Like much of Aidoo's other work, including what is probably her most well-known, the novel *Our Sister Killjoy: Or Reflections from a Black-eyed Squint* (1977), "Nowhere Cool" deals with a Ghanaian woman travelling to what we would today call the global North. Cheryl Sterling (2010:131) therefore reads *Our Sister Killjoy* as an "inversion of the colonial travel narrative". Whereas Sissie, the protagonist of *Our Sister Killjoy*, travels to Germany, Sissie, the protagonist of "Nowhere Cool" is travelling to and within the United States. That both are named Sissie could suggest that they should be read as the same character. "Sissie" or "sister" are, however, also common forms of address throughout Africa, so it could just point to the fact that both characters are African women. It does, I suspect, imply some connection between the narratives, a suspicion that is supported by the similarities in their shared inversion of colonialism.

The direction of the Sissie of “Nowhere Cool”’s travels (from Ghana to the United States), means that the short story not only represents an inversion of the colonial travel narrative, but also echoes the trans-Atlantic Slave trade, reinforcing my interpretation of the way the inhuman is represented in the story and especially in the poem. As I argued earlier, this interpretation is underpinned by “Nowhere Cool”’s first two paragraphs, and the focus in these paragraphs on focus—on the attention paid (or not paid) by a human object to nonhuman objects.

In an argument based on the classic phenomenology which Harman sees as anthropocentric and attempts to transform, Sara Ahmed (2006:3) says that, “in perceiving the object as an object, I perceive that object in a certain way, as being some kind of thing. [...] So it is not just that consciousness is directed towards objects, but also that I take different directions towards objects.” She uses this insight to develop what she calls a queer phenomenology, one that does not just take objects as given, but argues that the objects that a human is attuned to are also influenced by factors such as the human’s embodiment and social shaping. This insight is clearly illustrated in a classroom setting, were a teacher is trying, sometimes successfully, sometimes not, to focus students’ attention on specific objects of knowledge. It is clear that “Sarah” cannot and does not pay attention to the snow-stuck carriage and the text in which it appears in the way that the teacher wishes.

It is true that neither my nor any other interpretation will ever exhaust “Nowhere Cool”—I agree with Harman (2012:200) that literature and the objects represented in it are real objects with essences that remain ungraspable and withdrawn. The way that I as a reader interact with the story, however, is influenced by aspects of my identity and would differ from the ways in which other humans interact with the object. I am the white descendent of colonial settlers and my understanding of Ama Ata Aidoo’s writing and her as well as her character’s lived experience is inevitably partial. The reason that I nonetheless decided to engage with her work is in keeping with the gist of this article’s argument: that an acknowledgement of how the contemporary world is shaped by a still-continuing history of violence should be integral to *all* attempts to engage with and to understand reality. My argument runs counter to OOO in that it is anthropocentric and it is relational, but I cannot conceive of an approach to literature that isn’t. The best I can conceive of is a constant reminder by and to philosophers and theorists that our perspectives are human and limited, and, in contrast with Harman’s argument, I think that this can be achieved by paying attention to and acknowledging the specificity and contingency of our situatedness as human objects.

Conclusion

In the two sections of “Nowhere cool”, the relationships between human and nonhuman objects are explored in different, but complementary, ways. The relevant human objects are a black Ghanaian girl and woman, respectively. I argue that the short story can be considered a philosophical text, one concerned specifically with formulating a black feminist perspective on nonhuman objects. It therefore intervenes in discourse on feminist standpoint theory and black feminist epistemologies, in that like these theoretical streams it emphasises the specificity, the social and embodied embeddedness, of human perspective. This runs counter to dominant western epistemologies, which generally presuppose the existence of a neutral, objective human perspective. As Sylvia Wynter and others have argued, this neutral perspective is not unmarked, but is in fact the perspective of specifically western white man, which is universalised.

In this article I argue that while this universalising move, this ‘god trick’, is characteristic of western humanism, it is also present in some instantiations of posthumanism. Karera, Yusoff, Mupotsa and Liu point to the ‘universalising gestures’ present in posthumanist Anthropocene thinking; the tendency to think that the threat of environmental destruction makes all humans aware of our dependence on and co-constitution of ecosystems. As these thinkers working in the black feminist tradition aver, this tendency elides the fact that different people bear different amounts of responsibility for environmental destruction, and groups that are already marginalised disproportionately suffer as a result of it.

In this article I focus on the way in which Graham Harman’s object-oriented ontology, as specific example of posthuman speculative realism, is characterised by such a universalising of the western white male perspective. OOO is premised on the idea that human objects only have partial access to other objects. Knowledge is gained not through accessing the withdrawn essence of an object, but when a new object is created through the relationship between the perceiver as real object and the sensual qualities of another real object. Harman uses metaphor formation as a model for knowledge creation. As the reader of a poem would isolate certain qualities of the image being described to interpret it, so the philosopher would also focus on the sensual qualities of an object. The reader’s interpretation of the metaphor constitutes a new object, and so does the philosopher’s understanding of the object.

Taking the insights of OOO into account, it could be argued that the schoolgirl as reader is creating a new object in her isolation of the sensual qualities of a snow-stuck carriage, and that this new object represents thoughts on alienating colonial literature and the appropriateness of

prescribing it in African schools. My interpretation of this new object involves me using my experience of reading literature and knowledge of literary theory to ascribe it an encoding function which enables me to interpret the rest of the short story. Metaphors occur in the rest of the story and keeping the first section of the story in mind allows me to read them *as* metaphors, and focused on how new objects occur between human real objects and the sensual qualities of nonhuman real objects.

When Sissie views the plastic tag on the baby next to her in the airplane, for example, meanings proliferate as she thinks about plastic as material, oil, cotton, extractive economies, slavery and oil. The meaning objects created when I as reader read both sections of the story together, are a understanding of metaphor creation in which, in contrast with Harman's argument, the sensual qualities of the perceiving human real object play as important a role as the sensual qualities of the other real object. The characters' interpretations of the objects they encounter are namely influenced by their embodied situatedness as a black Ghanaian girl and woman, respectively. If it was not for this situatedness, their relationship with the specific objects could have been much different. Sissy's thoughts, especially, evoke a history of a shared violent intimacy with the inhuman, in that she thinks of the humans enslaved in Ghana and taken as cargo to work in the United States. Reading "Nowhere Cool" in 2022 can, then, be read as an indication of the unfeasibility of centring nonhuman objects without taking into account the differential standpoints and ongoing subordination of some humans. This reading serves as an indication of the continued relevance of black feminist epistemologies for posthuman theory, by foregrounding the specificity of each human perspective on and relationship with the nonhuman, and the partiality and bias of any theory claiming that such a perspective and relationship can be neutral.

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