

Who Are You and What do You Want?

In “The Cultural Biography of Things” Igor Kopytoff suggests that, “in complex societies [that is, those which use money as a means of exchange] a person’s social identities are not only numerous but often conflicting, and there is no clear hierarchy that makes one identity dominant over the others” (89).¹ An analogous anxiety underpins the identity of things; the crisis of the thing in a complex society is likewise one of “classifications and reclassifications in an uncertain world of categories whose importance shifts with every minor change in context” (90). These classifications and reclassifications, Kopytoff proposes, make it useful to think of things as having “life histories,” rather like people. Moreover, as Kopytoff points out, the seemingly hard and fast distinction between things and people is not, in fact, so clear-cut. Slavery, for example, represents a tenuous superposition of humans and things – a condition which, in the post-bellum United States, is carefully proscribed by a host of legal and social strictures.² Even so, various other transactions – for instance, wage labor or blood donation or the sale of ova – conflate human bodies and commodities in often-controversial ways.

Kopytoff is mainly interested in the biographies of things as commodities and non-commodities. But if we stray from this one aspect of the socialization of objects, it’s possible to see still other ways in which human beings’ identities are intimately tied up with the “lives” of things. Indeed, in the case of certain biomedical things, it’s particularly complicated to sort out precisely where objects end and human subjects begin. In Margaret Lock’s “The Social Life of Organs,” from her book, *Twice Dead*; Marjorie Garber’s “Spare Parts” from *Vested Interests*, and

¹ Igor Kopytoff. “The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as a Process.” In Arjun Appaduri, ed., *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986. pp 64–91.

² More specifically, Kopytoff proposes that, rather than simply being humans-as-property, slaves are humans who are commoditized until the time of sale, then are re-socialized into a new role – always with the potential for re-commoditization.

David Skinner's "Racialized Futures," we can see, at varying levels of abstraction, a play between the making and re-making of individual human selves, and the biographies of things.

In "The Social Life of Organs," Margaret Lock examines what might be termed the "re-socialization" of transplanted organs and their recipients. Her title is a play on the name of a volume in which Kopytoff's essay appears, *The Social Life of Things* – suggesting that organs are a specific kind of thing, not entirely on the order of other commodities or gifts.³ On the one hand, Lock notes, "the language of medicine insists that human body parts are material entities, devoid of identity whether located in donors or recipients" (319). On the other hand, she goes on to say, "[...] in the rhetoric of promoting donation, organs are animated with a life force, and donor families are not discouraged from thinking of their relatives as 'living on' in the bodies of recipients" (319). Certainly this ambiguity is evident in Lock's interviewees – fewer than half of the transplant recipients with whom Lock spoke were unsentimental about having another person's organs in them. Although Lock notes that transplant recipients are strongly discouraged from thinking of their organs as another individual self residing within them, she relates the stories of, among other people, a woman who believed her transplanted kidneys influenced her appetite for sweets (323); a medical doctor who jokingly suggested that if he were to receive the transplanted heart of a murderer, it might somehow change his personality (320) and a man who, knowing that his kidney had formerly belonged to an "Italian," subconsciously bargained with it by developing a taste for garlic (327).

For Lock, this visceral feeling that the generic, fungible, "material entity" of medical lingo is imbued with its own, persuasive, animated spirit is a sort of fetishism, though not of the Marxian variety. That is, while a certain amount of alienation between production (donation) and consumption (transplantation) represents the medical ideal in terms of ameliorating social

³ Lock gives lip service to Kopytoff's notion of the "life history" of things, but is more interested in theories of gifting.

frictions associated with organ donation, Lock points out that, in fact, the sort of mystification that often takes place in organ transplant is nearer to “fetishism in its original sense, the animation of objects with magical or religious power [...] closer to what Mauss suggests happens in gift exchange” (320). We can call again on Kopytoff, who also notes that, in the ever-shifting topography of monetized value exchange, individuals constantly “singularize” – make sacred – commodities, if only for moments at a time (a lucky shirt, for instance, or a childhood blanket, to say nothing of baseball superstitions). This, he posits, is a form of non-economic commodity fetishism – a means not simply of obscuring modes of production, but of testing and revaluing commodities against lived experience. In the realm of organ transplants, however, it would seem that the identification of a murderer’s heart with a murderer’s behavior, or of an Italian person’s kidney with an Italian person’s appetites, veers away from either obscuring a mode of exchange or testing value. Instead it makes transactions of organs more visible – the identity of the organ is not just a product of the life history of the organ, but of the human who previously “owned” it.

Marjorie Garber discusses a similar issue. In “Spare Parts” she posits transsexualism as a limit case that tests the efficacy of the notion of male subjectivity in a society in which subjectivity by default is male. “Does a transsexual change subjects? Or just bodies – or body parts?” she asks (105).” Does subjectivity follow the knife, or guide it?” (109). That is, do sexual organs “make” individuals, or do individuals reside in bodies which, in some cases, require surgical alteration to accurately reflect the gendered subject “inside”? What can we learn about modern American conceptions of gender from the example of transsexuals?

The answer, perhaps unsurprisingly, is complicated. On the one hand, Garber notes that, for both male transvestites and male transsexuals, the phallus is “the index of male identity. Male Subjectivity in this case is objectivity” (98). For a male transvestite, this comes in the form of

erotic reassurance that, even when dressed – and addressed – as a woman, he still “is” a man, by virtue of his phallus; for a transsexual women, too, the phallus is the “*sine qua non* of the ‘male subjectivity’” – to “offer her a penis’, ‘in dead seriousness,’ became the ambivalent task of the [...] ‘sex change doctor’”(99). In contrast, for a pre-op male-to-female transsexual, the “insignia of maleness” is a cause for deep distress. Thus it would seem that, from purely medical/scientific perspective, the phallus is indisputably ascendant.

On the other hand, however, Garber notes that in some cases “the actual gender identification precedes the surgical makeover by many years” (100). Before his operation, for example, one female-to-male transsexual dated some of his female classmates “cross-dressed as a boy,” fabricated an artificial penis with which he could have intercourse, and gave great value to sleeping with a “real” .38 pistol when he was a child – a metaphor which Garber remarks needs no translation (100). Viewed from this perspective, the individual in question was subjectively male long before undertaking surgery to change his physical appearance; his “core gender identity” is a matter distinct from his physical attributes. But can that then be said to be his “real” subjectivity? Is dating one’s classmates in drag itself a “real” identity, or simply a temporary substitute for the one signified by the surgical construction of a flesh-and-blood penis? What about the subjectivity of people who choose to not to undergo full surgery, and instead retain some anatomically male and some anatomically female characteristics? What does “real” mean, anyway, Garber asks, “in the cultural milieu in which all gender roles are constructed” (101)?

Moreover, if things and people share biographies and identities, they also share politics. In Garber’s analysis, the enterprise of sex reassignment surgery is, in effect, an essentialized attempt to balance an ostensibly mismatched gendered subject and gendered body. But this balance isn’t equally distributed – it runs up against greater resistance in the instances of women

who wish to be men than in the opposite scenario. Phalloplasty, Garber notes, lags behind vaginoplasty in terms of rates of satisfactory results – a fact which Garber attributes to the perhaps unspoken, but deeply, socially felt understanding that “making a man” shouldn’t be so easy as surgically assigning a penis. Indeed, men who wish to be women are still medically referred to as “male transsexuals,” implying that their maleness persists in spite of their stated “core identity” (102).

Ultimately, Garber seems to be speaking about a fetishization of body parts not dissimilar to the one experienced by a percentage of organ transplant patients. However, whereas Lock’s transplant patients are impassioned by the spiritual, individualized power of a specific organ from a specific (if not specified) human being, the sex characteristics which Garber’s subjects can opt to adopt can be regarded as part of a political act of self-construction. She notes, for instance, that while female-to-male transsexuals might undergo scarring on their torsos at the hands of doctors who (consciously or not) are repelled by the notion of transsexualism, they nevertheless frequently go bare-chested – an act which Garber describes as one of self-realization: the patient regards “his new body *theoretically*; it is, he is, *male*, however attractive or unattractive the appearance” (103). In a more complicated fashion, Garber relates how the well-known transsexual tennis player and physician, Renée Richards, first describes her new (post-operative) vagina in terms of a seemingly generic template, singularized by her subjective self: “what I saw was essentially what I had seen so many times between the legs of the women with whom I’d been intimate – a normal looking introitus but incredibly distinctive because it was mine” (105). In the contrast to the experience of many organ transplant patients, Richards singularizes his new part against his former experience of generic vaginas; his vagina’s singular life history begins with Renée. (Garber doesn’t entirely accept this description, countering that, whatever “mine” belonged to Renée, “Dick” was still somewhere within the “I”)(105).

Finally, if transplanted organs can speak for another self, and sexual organs can stand as the physical foci of gender subjectivity, then genes, as David Skinner points out, can not only serve as substrates for describing populations, but also stand as solicitous guides “offering evidence of an *individual’s* origins and ancestry” (480). While the topic is too extensive to do it justice here, it’s worth mentioning, especially as the harbinger of a “new age of essentialism,” as Garber puts it, in contrast to the anatomical essentialism explored in “Spare Parts” (Garber: 108). Skinner doesn’t present a picture of genes and identity in one-to-one correspondence, but in the course of examining the new self-understanding of “biologism,” agrees that, in a manner akin to the fetishism displayed by people towards transplanted organs and sexual organs, “the gene may have become a ‘cultural icon, a symbol, almost a magic force’ in the public imagination” (472). In this capacity, with this power, genes can serve as avatars of personal history, especially with respect to notions of race. A person’s genes – abstract molecular concepts to the layperson – can be instantiations of hidden kinship, origins and group membership. Individuals use them, that is, as part of “a strategy for establishing their own social location and personal identification.” Genes speak, and are spoken with. Skinner posits an “active, self-constructing individual” in the center of group affiliations read in genes – an individual trying to negotiate personal identity vis-à-vis a small, particularly potent class of commodity with its own shifting social imperatives. This is not, Skinner takes pains to note, the only way in which people test their identities against variable biomedical entities – genes “do not supersede other idioms as ways of making sense of identity” (481), and people use other attributes (for instance, the “unique biochemical properties of melanin” (469)) to singularize and differentiate themselves.

In short, not only are divisions between people and things sometimes hazy, but the ways in which ontological boundaries blur go beyond trade and commodity. In particular, biomedical

things – often miniscule biomedical details – inform and are informed by the subjective selves of individuals in intimate and complicated ways. Kopytoff asks the question “how do we understand things in relation to people?” and comes up with the answer that things are fluid, things have identities – the social lives of things are analogous to the social lives of people. He could take it one step further and say that, in certain cases, things almost *are* people – or at least, things are so closely related to subjective selves as to be indistinguishable or inseparable from a constructed, if essential version of how an individual understands herself in slippery, flexible society.