Object-Oriented Ontology and Its Critics

Sean Braune*

Fetish-Oriented Ontology

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Abstract: In her essay, “After de Brosse” (2017), Rosalind C. Morris briefly considers the historical importance of the concept of the fetish on the relatively recent movements of new materialism, but she does not engage with Speculative Realism and Object-Oriented Ontology. This essay addresses this gap and focuses on the influence of the fetish on Speculative Realism and Object-Oriented Ontology by focusing on Graham Harman’s conception of objects and Quentin Meillassoux’s theory of arche-fossils. In short, I am offering a posthumanist theorization of the fetish in order to argue that Object-Oriented Ontology can be considered, at points, to be a fetish-oriented ontology and that this notion of the fetish allows us to think about philosophical considerations of objects in a new light.

Keywords: fetishism, Object-Oriented Ontology, Speculative Materialism, anthropology, ethnography

In 1980, a Coca-Cola™ bottle fell from a passing plane on a small tribe of the San Bushmen in the Kalahari Desert and landed intact. The Bushmen that found the bottle had never seen anything like it and could only conclude that the bottle was a gift from the gods. However, this gift did not function like other gifts because it did not appear to have a ready function like other objects, such as trees and roots. The presence of the bottle in the tribe gradually produced discord and jealousy – each member wanted the bottle for themselves as everyone found a different use for it. Eventually, the bottle was taken out of the village by one brave Bushman named N!Xau who took the bottle to the edge of the known world to discard it. The Bushmen did not regard the Coca-Cola™ bottle as a fetish – i.e. they did not consider the bottle as containing a god, – but they did consider the bottle as a gift from the gods. It is possible though that from the perspective of an outside observer the Coca-Cola™ bottle may well be perceived as a fetish god. An anthropological narrative could develop here. It is important to note that, in any case, the Coca-Cola™ bottle is a fetish – even if it is not a fetish in the traditional sense of the word – because it is an example of one of our own, Westernized and commodified fetishes.

Obviously, this is not a true story or even an academic, anthropological account of the San Bushmen, but rather the plot of Jamie Uys’s *The Gods Must Be Crazy*. The film has been widely criticized for its racist elements,¹ but this example points to the economic and anthropological constructedness of the fetish object.

1 Fetish... origins?

One of the key concepts in the Western history of ideas of objects can be found in *fetishism*. What if the fetish, so linked to Enlightenment Reason, expansionism, and colonialist discourse, is not a progression

¹ Tomaselli, “Rereading the *Gods Must be Crazy* Films,” 171–3.

* **Corresponding author: Sean Braune**, Department of English Language & Literature, Brock University, St. Catharines, Canada, e-mail: sean_braune@hotmail.com

from belief to knowledge or from a Kantian ontotheology to an empirical epistemology but rather signals the emergence of a new historical moment that shatters the icon of knowledge? Behind this icon of knowledge, resides a fetish of belief.

Bruno Latour argues that the understanding of the fetish in the West should be called a “factish,” which is his coinage that collides fetishes and facts.² Latour considers epistemology and ontology as two disciplines that developed, in part, from humanist theorizations of the fetish: “by removing the human agencies from the fabrication of facts *and* from the fabrication of fetishes, two fabulous reservoirs have been invented – *one for epistemology, one for ontology.*”³ The distinction or binary of ontology/epistemology is an invention of modernization and has little to do with the real, which is why, for Latour, the Moderns “invoke fairy-objects on the one hand, and fact-objects on the other.”⁴

Latour’s formula for the factish captures part of the historical lineage proposed in this essay, but I will extend Latour’s theory to contemporary considerations of objects in continental philosophy and argue that the history of the concept of the fetish, when combined with its various definitions in anthropology, economics, and psychoanalysis, offers a perspective of contemporary ontological accounts of subjects, objects, and knowledge. An “ontological account of knowledge” may seem almost oxymoronic, but the concept of the fetish (and the factish) opens once rigid dyads, such as ontology-epistemology or even the language-referent correlation to interrogation – an interrogation that would be appropriate in a framework that is critical of dyads and correlations. It is fitting that a concept developed in the service of understanding the religious beliefs of “the Other” in colonial terms – a term that is well-known to be racist in its basic assumptions – in fact reveals more about the epistemic and ontological biases of the colonialist Westerner than the “colonized” or “savage” other.

My method here, perhaps surprisingly, uses Hegel’s notion of *Aufhebung* against his own racist arguments regarding the fetish. (Re)-thinking the fetish in this way will overturn the racist conceptions of the fetish, open views of the “interiority” of late Enlightenment Reason, and suggest a new view of the philosophical appraisal of things and objects that has become popular in contemporary continental thought. My argument builds on Rosalind Morris’s claims in both “After de Brosses” and “Fetishism (Supposing That It Existed)” – essays collected in *The Returns of Fetishism* (2017) – that any (re) historicization of the fetish requires consideration of the contemporary movements of new materialism (that, for Morris, includes posthumanist ecocriticism of the Anthropocene, Amerindian perspectivalism, Speculative Realism, and Object-Oriented Ontology) because of its “rejection of Kant’s epistemological turn.”⁵ In her essay, “After de Brosses,” Morris focuses on new materialism at the expense of a close engagement with Speculative Realism and Object-Oriented Ontology – an understandable limitation because of the breadth of each field in question – but my essay will take up this gap and focus on the influence of the fetish on Speculative Realism and Object-Oriented Ontology by focusing on Graham Harman’s conception of objects and Quentin Meillassoux’s theory of arche-fossils. In short, I am offering a posthumanist theorization of the fetish in order to argue that Object-Oriented Ontology is, at points, a *fetish-oriented ontology* and that this theory of the fetish allows us to think about objects and things in a new light.

This article will situate this argument according to the groundbreaking work of William Pietz and follow the categories he offers in his essay “The problem of the fetish, I” (1985), where he writes that: “Were one to elaborate a theory of the fetish, one might then adopt the following as fundamental categories: historicization, territorialization, reification, and personalization.”⁶ Even though his essay did not follow this framework, my essay will follow his categories and use them as essay headings to navigate this provisional theorization of fetish-oriented ontology.

² Latour, “A Few Steps Toward an Anthropology of the Iconoclastic Gesture,” 65, emphasis removed.

³ Ibid., 70.

⁴ Latour, *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods*, 12.

⁵ Morris, “‘Fetishism (Supposing That It Existed)’: A Preface to the Translation of Charles de Brosses’s Transgression,” xv.

⁶ Pietz, “The problem of the fetish, I,” 12.

2 Historicization

In the 1960s, anthropologists began to study the linkages between the discipline of anthropology and colonialism. The discipline itself rested on often racist ethnological accounts of classes and races that were ordered in relation to the superiority of a white and western hegemony.⁷ As George Stocking indicates, the colonialist origins of anthropology allowed for a pseudoscientific hierarchizing of civilized culture versus “savage” or “primitive” cultures.⁸ The origins of anthropology assumed a telos that was “Man” and then structured the Other-as-savage in relation to that dominant and evolved limit of *homo sapiens*.⁹ This argument features aspects of what has come to be known as posthumanism. Rosi Braidotti argues in *The Posthuman* (2013) that posthumanist critiques of humanist discourse begin with the links between the Enlightenment and colonialism that can be found in humanism, particularly in the epistemological privileging of the object of “Man,” and then attempt to overturn draconian and racist binaries that have been historically produced by humanism.¹⁰ Building on Braidotti, I begin from such a posthuman critique of fetishism – a critique that locates the fetish in several disciplines and concepts that are created by the apparently “civilized” (and Western) academy.

Despite the complicated and intertwined histories of anthropology, ethnology, and ethnography,¹¹ it is important to consider one of the founding thinkers for anthropological theories of the fetish, Charles de Brosses. Pietz argues that the fetish plays a “minor but significant role” in establishing the “human sciences that arose in the nineteenth century”¹² – a claim that would include early anthropology. De Brosses’s *Du culte des dieux fétiches: ou Parallèle de l’ancienne religion de l’Egypte avec la religion actuelle de Nigritie*, first published in 1760, is foundational for the study of fetishism. His text promotes the “first-encounter theory” of fetish objects, a theme that can be traced to the Dutch merchant Willem Bosman’s travelogue account of the Dutch Gold Coast, *A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea, Divided into the Gold, the Slave, and the Ivory Coasts* (1705). Pietz points out that the “classic statement” of the first-encounter theory belongs to Bosman.¹³ Bosman’s account appears in Letter XIX:

the Number of their Gods was endless and innumerable: For (said he) any of us being resolved to undertake any thing of Importance, we first of all search out a God to prosper our designed Undertaking; and going out of Doors with this Design, take the first Creature that presents itself to our Eyes, whether Dog, Cat, or the most contemptible Animal in the World, for our God; or perhaps instead of that any Inanimate that falls in our way, whether a Stone, a piece of Wood, or any thing else of the same Nature.¹⁴

De Brosses assumed the first-encounter theory of Bosman in his own account of the etymology and definition of the fetish. De Brosses points out that the word *fetish* is deployed by Senegalese merchants from the Portuguese word *fetisso*, which means “fairy, enchanted or divine thing” from “the Latin root *Fatum, Fanum, Fari*.”¹⁵ As de Brosses argues, fetishes “are nothing other than the first material object that each nation or individual has seen fit to have ceremonially consecrated by its Priests.”¹⁶ Hegel also refers to the first-encounter theory in *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History: Introduction: Reason in History*: “The first object they encounter which they imagine has power over them – whether it be an animal, a tree, a stone, or a wooded image – is given the status of a genius.”¹⁷ The importance of Bosman’s first-encounter

7 Liebersohn, “Anthropology Before Anthropology,” 18; Mullings, “Interrogating Racism: Toward an Antiracist Anthropology,” 669.

8 Stocking, Jr., *Victorian Anthropology*, 185–7.

9 Clifford, “Rearticulating Anthropology,” 37.

10 Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 23–5.

11 See chapters two and three of Stocking’s *Victorian Anthropology*.

12 Pietz, “The problem of the fetish, IIIa: Bosman’s Guinea and the enlightenment theory of fetishism,” 107.

13 Pietz, “The problem of the fetish, II: The origin of the fetish,” 43.

14 Bosman, *A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea, Divided into the Gold, the Slave, and the Ivory Coasts*, 367–8.

15 de Brosses, *On the Worship of Fetish Gods*, 48.

16 Ibid., 48.

17 Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, 181.

account, embraced by many scholars after him, is that fetishes have the potential to multiply with rapidity. There is no limit to the proliferation of fetishes and such multiplication is seen as threatening by a “civilization” that has embraced monotheism and disregarded the theological arguments of polytheisms. This understanding of the fetish constructs the Other as savage, irrational, and lost in a perpetual childhood: de Brosses, for example, considers fetishism to be absurd,¹⁸ the result of an underdeveloped religion of uncivilized minds: he considers fetishism to be a religion that can only be found “in stupid minds affected by this passion, and becomes rooted by custom among savage peoples, who spend their life in a perpetual childhood.”¹⁹ The religions of Africa are worshipped, for de Brosses, by “pure savages, plunged in ignorance and barbarism,” while de Brosses’s own “chosen race” was never in such a state of barbarism.²⁰ The practices of fetish worshippers remain in an “unformed state,” so that their “customs,” “ideas,” “reasoning,” and “practices are those of children”:²¹

Since we are not surprised to see children who do not raise their minds above their dolls, believing them to be animated and interacting with them in keeping with this belief, why would we be surprised to see peoples, who constantly spend their lives in a perpetual childhood and who are never older than four years old, reason without any sense and act as they reason?²²

Hegel will later consider “all men in Africa” to be “sorcerers.”²³ A country locked in a “perpetual childhood,” as de Brosses argues, could not be expected to have a history: Hegel goes so far as to claim that Africa “is an unhistorical continent, with no movement or development of its own.”²⁴ Even Auguste Comte links the savage to the child in relation to fetishism.²⁵ My point in glossing over these moments in the historical development of the fetish (and there are many other moments and thinkers that could be mentioned) is not to point fingers from the comfort of our contemporary era and call Bosman, de Brosses, and Hegel “racists.” My point is more archaeological: the concept of the fetish is a colonial and imperial term that has become implicated in the emergence of anthropology and the social sciences. This historicization of the fetish situates it as the misrecognition of an *arche* or origin point for civilization. The first-encounter theory extends not only to an imaginary attribution of fetish gods – as the first nonhuman subjects or objects that the Other encounters when “going out of Doors” – but also to the teleological emergence of a “savage” culture to a “civilized” one.

The fetish is a narrative object more than an ethnographic or ethnological one and the narrative that it proposes is racial and evolutionary in both personal and sociohistorical contexts. Comte, in *The Positive Philosophy* (1853), argues that “Man” began as “a fetich-worshipper and a cannibal.”²⁶ Comte finds the possibility of a state “prior even to fetichism” to be unlikely because it would be “a state in which the human species was altogether material, and incapable of any speculation whatever.”²⁷ Therefore, the fetish becomes situated as the “first” nonhuman object seen by a subject “going out of Doors” and also the “first” state of a culture before its progression to monotheism and supposed “civilization.” However, what does this “first-encounter” theory really mean? It is clearly not *every* “first” object seen – what thereby designates an object as a fetish? What elevates the object from its status as “object” or “thing” and allows it to become a “fetish?” What is the story told about it and who tells that story? Is the fetish strictly a colonial narrative and, even if it is not strictly colonial, then what is its function in the larger history of the so-called “civilized” (Western) societies? Comte considers a “fetich period” to be the origin of “all the fine

¹⁸ de Brosses, *On the Worship of Fetish Gods*, 101.

¹⁹ Ibid., 47.

²⁰ Ibid., 47.

²¹ Ibid., 47.

²² Ibid., 101.

²³ Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, 179.

²⁴ Ibid., 190.

²⁵ Comte, *The Positive Philosophy*, 156–7.

²⁶ Ibid., 155.

²⁷ Ibid., 156.

arts, not excepting poetry” and even goes so far as to argue that much of “the industrial advance of the period is to be attributed to its fetichism.”²⁸ If the fetish designates a kind of “childhood,” then what is its relation to the material, the real, and the transcendental?

3 Territorialization (academic discourse)

Before developing a provisional Object-Oriented Ontological reading of the fetish, I would like to sketch out some of the ways that the fetish is already, prior to any evaluation by Object-Oriented Ontology, a very weird object. The other questions that this section asks are: is the fetish an object or a thing? Is it a subject or an actant? Is it a hybrid or a Latourian quasi-object? Put most simply, *what is it?* Part of the challenge of theorizing the fetish is that it is an object that is conceptually singular – singular in the imaginary – but multiple in the real. Unlike, say, a tree or a table, there is no *one* fetish to designate as a referent for the concept. Arguably, this is also the case with a tree or a table – i.e. any tree or table features its own unique characteristics and properties that distinguish it – but in the case of the original definitions of the fetish found in Bosman and de Brosses, there is no limit to what a fetish can be.

The fetish is any object or thing that becomes deified or “transcendentalized” through the chosen selection that follows from the first-encounter theory. Already in 1911, E. A. Wallis Budge argued against Bosman and de Brosses that their definition of the fetish conflated three distinct categories of worship (animal worship, nature worship, and the worship of inanimate objects), but Budge maintained that the term *feitiço* was used by Portuguese travellers to describe their own Christian charms and amulets as much as those worn by the natives.²⁹ Immediately, the issue becomes complicated by various and competing narratives, cultures, histories, and languages. For the purposes of this section, I would like to focus on the linguistic question of the fetish; i.e. how have the objects or things called “fetishes” been terminologically developed and what do these words offer an understanding of the fetish? It will become evident that the terms for the fetish are as multiple as the fetishes themselves.

The accepted etymology for the fetish does not relate the word to the Latin *fatum*, *fanum*, or *fari* as de Brosses asserts, but to the Portuguese word *feitiço*, meaning “magical practice” or “witchcraft,”³⁰ and the Latin *facticius* or *factitius*, which is related to the verb *facere* or “to make.”³¹ The fetish is therefore a man-made object, directly *manufactured*, which firmly links it to the human as opposed to the nonhuman – that is the fetish is an object made by the human. This etymology that relates *feitiço* to *facticius* and *factitius*, when considered in its specific historical occurrence, links the word and the concept to the emerging discourse of humanism, with all of its attendant Enlightenment and colonial conditions. As Pietz argues, the concept of the fetish emerges as a collision between cultures – a specifically ethnographic problem – that occurred in West Africa during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.³² The word emerges from the late medieval Portuguese word *feitiço* and then is concretized by the sixteenth-century pidgin word *Fetisso*, while being grounded in the notion of *facticius*, which is manufactured by human hands.

However, the idea of the *feitiço* should be distinguished from the medieval Portuguese word *idolo* or idol. As Pietz also points out, one of the most important aspects to consider about the fetish is its “irreducible materiality,” such that the “truth of the fetish resides in its status as a material embodiment.”³³ This differentiates the fetish from the idol because an idol is directly engaged in a realm of representation – the idol is a representation of an immaterial model or entity, the fetish on the other

²⁸ Ibid., 163.

²⁹ Budge, *Osiris and the Egyptian Resurrection*, 196–7.

³⁰ Pietz, “The problem of the fetish, I,” 5.

³¹ Ibid., II, 24.

³² Ibid., I, 5.

³³ Pietz, “The problem of the fetish, I,” 7.

hand is a direct embodiment of a spirit or a deity. Thus, its materiality is assumed as present while the idol represents a deity or spirit that is elsewhere; i.e. not present in the idol itself. A dyad emerges here when discussing the materialization of a god: the god is either directly embodied *in* the fetish or represented *by* the idol through a mimetic relation. In Christian terms, an idol as a concept is, on the one hand, usually designated as being “false” in some way – it is often a representation of a false god, which would link it to a form of immateriality while the fetish, on the other hand, is a directly materialized deity that is worn on the body.

Many terms are introduced by attempting to locate the “origin” of the word and the concept of the fetish, including de Brosse’s own 1757 concept of *fétichisme*. It is worthwhile to consider de Brosse’s own unique theory of language to shed further light on the fetish object. In de Brosse’s later text, *Traité de la formation mécanique des langues*, published in two volumes in 1765, he offers a theory of language that is directly incarnational – a model of language in which words are directly embodied and incarnated by their things. According to de Brosse, words contain their referents in a directly material manner. As Gérard Genette argues in *Mimologics* (1976), de Brosse’s theory of the sign is mimological and *non-Saussurean*. Put differently, there is no arbitrariness of the sign for de Brosse because his model of the sign is motivated and directly linked to its objects. As Genette writes, de Brosse’s “vowels were degrees of fullness or intensity,”³⁴ such that, for de Brosse, both speech and writing were configured as modes of painting in which language paints its objects.³⁵ This theory of the sign engages in what could be called phonemic mimesis, which means that the word is physically linked to the intrinsic nature of the object in such a manner that the word can *be* the object that it really is. Talking becomes a modality of presenting objects in their direct materiality. “The vocal organ takes on, as nearly as it can, the form,” de Brosse writes:

of the very object it wants to depict with the voice: it produces a hollow sound if the object is hollow, or a harsh one if the object is rough; in such a way that the sound resulting from the form and from the natural movement of the vocal organ placed in this position becomes the name of the object.³⁶

This theory is more than a simple version of onomatopoeia because it makes speaking even more “magical” or material than simply representing a word with the sounds of the word (such as the word “hiss” for a snake or “buzz” for a bee); on the contrary, this notion of language is almost like a form of witchcraft – a fanciful semiotics that locates the *feitiço* in the word itself.

Every word becomes a fetish for de Brosse. Words are no longer words in themselves but things. At the origins of language, for de Brosse, there lies a multiplicity of things: words are things that are as material as their objects and reflect, in a one-to-one correspondence with their objects, that object’s essence through the evocations of the human voice. By relating words to the corporeality of speech, de Brosse offers a version of the thing-in-itself as signifier. Could this model be called a *fetish semiotics*? Or a metaphysics of motivated fetish words?

It is important to note the lineage in de Brosse’s thought from *Du culte des dieux fétiches* to *Traité de la formation mécanique des langues* because his consideration of the fetish, which is so linked to a critique of the fallacious incarnations and materializations of the so-called “Gold Coast,” is, to use a more twentieth-century academic parlance, a critique of the West African’s “metaphysics of presence.” When considering the fetish, de Brosse criticizes the West Africans for their “savage” or “infantile” beliefs in the embodiment of their fetishes; however, de Brosse later engages in his own incarnational fallacy when theorizing language – where the West Africans would incarnate certain inanimate objects with deities, de Brosse incarnates words with the phonemic corporeity of their referents. Even though de Brosse publishes his book on language after his book on the fetish gods of the Gold Coast, he had been working

³⁴ Genette, *Mimologics*, 95.

³⁵ Qtd. in Genette, *Mimologics*, 67.

³⁶ Ibid., 67.

on both projects simultaneously throughout the 1750s.³⁷ Perhaps the logic of the fetish had influenced his conceptualization of language. Perhaps the fallacy of incarnating an object with a god is different from the fallacy of incarnating a word with its object, but it is possible to historicize aspects of twentieth-century thought as the gradual popularization of the linguistic turn – a turn that, in part, critiques any degree of incarnation in philosophies of language. De Brosses's 1765 book on language can be considered the “fetish age” of early linguistics and semiotics; however, even though much of the twentieth century marked a movement away from materialism towards a kind of immaterialism as a direct response to Kant's distinction of noumena and phenomena, there has been a backlash against such a “semiological idealism” and a return to materialism. The movements of Speculative Realism and Object-Oriented Ontology embrace certain tenets that are also found in the conceptualization of the fetish.

4 Reification: making the real object

Speculative Realism began at a 2007 workshop held at Goldsmiths College at the University of London and Object-Oriented Ontology officially emerges (as a branch of Speculative Realism) in 2009,³⁸ but the 2002 publication of Graham Harman's *Tool-Being* is the *de facto* beginning of Object-Oriented Ontology. The founders of Speculative Realism are Quentin Meillassoux, Graham Harman, Ray Brassier, and Iain Hamilton Grant.³⁹ They each develop unique approaches to the same problem, which is to think a different direction from Kantian philosophy that acts “as a deliberate counterpoint to the now tiresome ‘Linguistic Turn.’”⁴⁰ Object-Oriented Ontology features thinkers like Harman, Levi Bryant, Ian Bogost, and Timothy Morton. It is beyond the scope of this essay to summarize the various (and sometimes competing) definitions of Object-Oriented Ontology and its parent movement of Speculative Realism; instead, I will focus on Harman's early formulation of “Object-Oriented Philosophy” (and contrast this approach to Bill Brown's thing theory) and Meillassoux's concept of the arche-fossil in order to locate certain fetishistic qualities.

Harman's conception of objects is complex and involves his version of a “fourfold object”; again, for the purposes of brevity, I will focus on what I find to be his most important formulations for my thinking about the fetish: namely, withdrawal and vicarious causation. An uncharitable reading could overgeneralize Harman's theory of objects as a conceptual collision of Heidegger's tool analysis combined with Latour's notion of irreductionism with a dash of Husserlian intentionality added in.⁴¹ To a certain extent, this is not incorrect because it touches on several of Harman's sources, but this characterization misses how Object-Oriented Philosophy addresses relatively high degrees of complexity and multiple orders of magnitude – that may even extend into infinite regresses – in the conceptualization of any object. I support Harman's commitment to a complex and multi-layered notion of an object. I would maintain though that Harman's concept of withdrawal adopts certain aspects of Latour's idea of irreductionism, such as when Latour claims that “[n]othing is, by itself, either reducible or irreducible to anything else.”⁴² As well, the influence of Heidegger's tool analysis on Harman's thought is well-known because, according to Object-Oriented Philosophy, an object's essence withdraws while in use, but becomes evident when it breaks down; or as Harman writes: “Hammers break in different ways from drills, which break in different

³⁷ See Leonard, “Introduction: Fetishism, Figurism, and Myths of Enlightenment,” 9.

³⁸ Harman, Series Editor's Preface to *Onto-Cartography: An Ontology of Machines and Media* by Levi R. Bryant, ix.

³⁹ In Brassier (2007), *Collapse III* collected, under the title “Speculative Realism,” the papers presented and the dialogues that developed from this conference.

⁴⁰ *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, 1.

⁴¹ Heidegger's notion of an object's ontology becoming more evident when it breaks down as faulty equipment is later taken up in Bogost's notion of ontography. See chapter two of Bogost's *Alien Phenomenology: or What It's Like to Be a Thing*.

⁴² Latour, *The Pasteurization of France*, 158.

ways from hearts, kidneys, and lungs.”⁴³ Harman describes these withdrawn objects by means of a fourfold model of sensual versus real qualities and sensual versus real objects where an object’s sensual qualities link up in a similar way with what Husserl defined as the intentional.⁴⁴ Harman writes that: “we can speak instead of a permanent tension between sensual objects and sensual qualities, or between an apple that remains the same apple from one moment to the next, and the wildly fluctuating kaleidoscope of its surface features.”⁴⁵ Harman would likely critique de Brosses’s own tendency to engage in an incarnational fallacy because, as Harman argues in “The Road to Objects”: “no matter how excellent our scientific concept of a tree may be, this concept *is not itself a tree*: the concept of the tree may grow every summer just as a tree does, but it neither sheds leaves nor bears fruit.”⁴⁶ The word and the concept are not objects in the way that their referents are, which would prevent a word from functioning like a fetish to its thing – as it does in de Brosses.

However, Harman does not to my knowledge address Bill Brown’s theory of things. Brown emphasizes, like Harman, that a thing’s essence becomes apparent when it breaks down: “A *thing*, in contrast, can hardly function as a window. We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily.”⁴⁷ A thing or an object – both become apparent when that thing or object breaks down. Brown’s essay “Thing Theory” appeared in *Critical Inquiry* in 2001, a year before Harman’s *Tool-Being* was published; however, Harman’s dissertation (that formed the basis of *Tool-Being*) appeared in 1999. In any case, and in order to distinguish terms, Brown differentiates objects from things, but he links the idea of a thing to a fetish:

You could imagine things [...] as what is excessive in objects, as what exceeds their mere materialization as objects or their mere utilization as objects – their force as a sensuous presence or as a metaphysical presence, the magic by which objects become values, fetishes, idols, and totems. Temporalized as the before and after of the object, thingness amounts to a latency (the not yet formed or the not yet formable) and to an excess (what remains physically or metaphysically irreducible to objects). But this temporality obscures the all-at-onceness, the simultaneity, of the object/thing dialectic.⁴⁸

What is interesting to note between Brown and Harman is that both thinkers split their concepts into smaller components: Harman develops the fourfold that is really a binary distinction of the sensual versus the real, and Brown develops a dialectic of object and thing, which is likewise a distinction of an object as phenomenal and a thing as being arguably noumenal (even though Brown does not use this Kantian distinction and may disagree with this schema). To put Brown’s formula in a Harmanian mode would frame the thing as that which withdraws, as the object’s internal and “volcanic core” as Harman puts it.⁴⁹ The thing would be what is excessive to the object and it would be that which becomes more apparent when the object breaks down.

However, there is another notion of the object in Speculative Realism that I would like to consider: Meillassoux’s theory of the “arche-fossil.”⁵⁰ Meillassoux uses the arche-fossil to bolster his argument for the “ancestral claims” of scientific statements.⁵¹ What this means is that, for Meillassoux, the fact that science speaks for a history that exists apart from the historicity of the human – as a directly non-anthropocentric notion of history – suggests that the ancestry of scientific claims leads to an entirely anterior real, a real that exists apart from the human correlation. Put most simply, an arche-fossil is an

⁴³ Harman, “The Road to Objects,” 174.

⁴⁴ Husserl, *Logical Investigations: Volume 1*, §39 or 290–1.

⁴⁵ Harman, “The Road to Objects,” 173.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 178.

⁴⁷ Brown, “Thing Theory,” 4.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁴⁹ Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics*, 193.

⁵⁰ Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 10–5.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 9–14.

object or thing that points to an existence or temporality that exists entirely apart from the human. I'm going to extend the empirical notion of the arche-fossil beyond its definition (as defined by Meillassoux) and argue that the fetish could be conceived as a *subjectivized arche-fossil*, but only if the fetish is considered as real and not as fabricated.

On the one hand, the fetish would appear to not be an arche-fossil at all – the arche-fossil is any kind of object that points to a temporality or history that exists anterior to the human – and a fetish is, if we follow its etymology, manufactured *by* humans; however, if the fetish is considered, on the other hand, in religious terms, then the fetish would be a subjectivized arche-fossil because it would embody a deity that would be, by definition, apart from the human. I do not fully support this argument, but I find it useful because this unwieldy collision of the fetish and the arche-fossil points to an internal contradiction of the fetish: the fetish appears to be simultaneously “of-the-human” and “not-of-the-human,” simultaneously material and immaterial, embodied and disembodied. A fetish is, from the perspective of the colonialist thinker of the linguistic turn, an object that its wearer claims is embodied by a god, but is, in reality, empty of any content. This would render the fetish as being “manufactured by a human” and truly anthropocentric or anthropogenic. And yet, from the perspective of a fetish-wearer, the fetish would embody a god that exists anterior to the human, but which also lives in the human world – a definition that would also apply to the necessary ancestrality of the Meillassouxian arche-fossil.

Essentially, the fetish complicates Harman's claim that Object-Oriented Philosophy is not a process-relational philosophy.⁵² The fetish though is a strange kind of object because it is imbued with a kind of energy that would link it to a process-relational vitalism more than an object-oriented system; however, Harman's own philosophy leaves open the possibility of an energetic impetus in the notion of vicarious causation. In *Guerilla Metaphysics*, Harman offers a definition of vicarious cause:

causation between real objects can only be vicarious. One such object never touches another, but interacts with its neighbors only by means of notes. These notes differ from the usual conception of qualities insofar as a note somehow already bears the inscription of the withdrawn object to which it belongs. Hence, vicarious causation is always a form of allure, whether this occurs in the experience of human beings or in causal interaction more generally. And if we ask where this vicarious causation occurs, the answer is that it lies on the interior of a further entity, in the molten core of an object.⁵³

Arguably, that which is withdrawn in an object would be simultaneously withdrawn from both a human's interaction with that object and that object's interaction with another object and also any language used to describe it. Another correlation – that of signifier-referent – wedges itself in the attempt to define that which withdraws; to that end, Harman relies on a poetic or even magical terminology to discuss it: I find “notes” and “allure” to be somewhat unclear in that they feature a suggestive more than a descriptive quality. They are words that appear to function in “magical” ways. On the whole, I like the abstract quality of “vicarious cause” because it opens the possibility that Object-Oriented Ontology could have aspects of process-relational philosophy because “vicarious cause” can be many different things, including an *élan vital* or a morphogenetic field (two possibilities that Harman would likely reject).

He further describes vicarious cause in a later essay on the topic, but even in that piece, much of the same allegorical language is used:

Vicarious causation, of which science so far knows nothing, is closer to what is called formal cause. To say that formal cause operates vicariously means that forms do not touch one another directly, but somehow melt, fuse, and decompress in a shared common space from which all are partly absent. My claim is that two entities influence one another only by meeting on the interior of a third, where they exist side-by-side until something happens that allows them to interact. In this sense, the theory of vicarious causation is a theory of the molten inner core of objects – a sort of plate tectonics of ontology.⁵⁴

⁵² Steven Shaviro has already critiqued Harman's argument on this point. See chapter two of Shaviro's *The Universe of Things* (2014).

⁵³ Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics*, 230.

⁵⁴ Harman, “On Vicarious Causation,” 190.

Two forms “somehow melt, fuse, and decompress.” This use of “somehow” is very important because it opens the possibility of a fetish-oriented ontology. The fact that vicarious causation seems to be a process (I use that word intentionally because it seems more like a process than an object or a thing) of which “science so far knows nothing” indicates that there is not even a scientific metaphor that can express it. It is, for this reason, a *magical concept*. It is a *fetish*. Morris argues that de Brosses was overcome with an “etymological delirium”⁵⁵ when he linked “fetish” to *fatum*, *fanum*, or *fari*, and the magical qualities of the concept and even whether it existed – as Marcel Mauss points out in his aside from his 1897 thesis *On Prayer* when he writes: “fetishism (supposing that it existed)”⁵⁶ – can be found in the fantastical etymology of de Brosses.

I would suggest, when considering the various complexities of the concept of the fetish, that its etymology to *fatum* (“divine utterance”) and *fanum* (“consecrated space”) is fantastical, imaginary, and incorrect, but the word nonetheless registers that magical quality to this very day. Twentieth-century anthropology and visual studies⁵⁷ have grappled with the magical object of the fetish in various ways and such magical thinking has influenced texts like W. J. T. Mitchell’s *What Do Pictures Want?* (2005) and Michael Taussig’s *What Color Is the Sacred?* (2009). Even Heidegger’s theory of the thing redirects the agential direction of phenomenology from human-to-object to thing-to-observer. Potential agency can reside inside objects and things and this repressed impulse in twentieth-century continental thought – that can be traced to de Brosses’s fanciful and colonialist concept – can be found once again in the emergence of Object-Oriented Ontology.

As mentioned at the beginning of my paper, Rosalind Morris makes this claim in *The Returns of Fetishism*, but I would go further and say that a fetish-impulse resides at the basis of any conceptualizing and systematizing drive in philosophy. Even though de Brosses was part of an intellectual environment that disregarded the totalizing impulse of academic systems,⁵⁸ his concept contains the search for an *arche* or an origin. That origin becomes “magical” or can be contained in a “fairy object” and this “fairy object” is, perhaps surprisingly, more *realist* when it appears in the toolbox of Western philosophy than when it is present (or not) in the villages of Guinea.

Like Harman and other object-oriented thinkers, Jane Bennett locates “vibrant matter” in the nonhuman objects and things that populate the world, and this vibrant materiality is another term for the kind of energy or vitality that can be found inside a fetish. I define the fetish as the thing inside the thing that makes the thing more than the thing itself – it is an excess, a beyond, and also, at the same time, a kind of intensity or extreme understanding of interiority. The fetish is also a name for an epistemological impulse: the humanist impulse to know the other – other lands, countries, and things. This impulse finds its progress in the fabrication of concepts. As Deleuze and Guattari argue, philosophy is the fabricating of concepts⁵⁹ and the fetish is an example of a concept that is simultaneously overflowing with content and devoid of it. For this reason, and because of the influence of the fetish on countless thinkers as distinct as Kant, Deleuze, Baudrillard, and Derrida, the fetish, as a concept, marks the convergence point of philosophical and academic desires and energies. These “desires and energies” are not necessarily those desires and energies of a deity but the desires and energies of certain Western thinkers.

Because the fetish is fabricated, it also shares a relationship with Heidegger’s theory of technology or *technê*. As Heidegger argues in his 1954 essay on technology, the idea of technology comes from *technê*, which “belongs to bringing-forth, to *poiêsis*.”⁶⁰ Building on my definition above then the fetish can be considered a technology of desires and energies that permits the creation of any object, thing, or idea – it is that which is revealed during the production of an idea, object, or thing and, for this reason, it

⁵⁵ Morris, “Fetishism (Supposing That It Existed),” vii.

⁵⁶ Mauss, *On Prayer*, 31.

⁵⁷ See Mulvey, “Some Thoughts on Theories of Fetishism in the Context of Contemporary Culture.”

⁵⁸ Leonard, “Introduction,” 16.

⁵⁹ Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?* 2.

⁶⁰ Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, 12–13.

accommodates the various manufacturing projects of epistemology and philosophy.⁶¹ The fetish is, in this way, a vitalist technology that fills in that which is currently unknown, while pointing to a notably strange materiality that exceeds the current parameters of science and philosophy; it is not necessarily theological but rather an intersection point and locus for competing discourses that mark out the limits of current knowledge regimes. At the same time, the fetish, as a technology, manifests the desires and energies of anthropic systems of inquiry. I would like to expand on this claim in greater detail in relation to Latour.

One of the founding thinkers of the various turns towards new materialism is Latour and his own thought is influenced by de Brosses's concept of the fetish. Latour's idea of the factish arguably combines what could be called the "modern" correlation of object-oriented and process-relational philosophies because it simultaneously permits the irreductionism or what Pietz would call the "irreducible materiality" of the fetish and also its more obscure and incarnational qualities, which could be called its "vibrant materiality." Another possible "modern correlation" would be that between Speculative Materialism and semiological idealism because the factish permits the real materiality of the fetish and also a social constructivist notion of its existence as an object-of-knowledge, as a *fact*. The factish denotes this strange and ambiguous space of liminality – this space of existence/inexistence, presence/absence, embodiment/disembodiment, and incarnation/disincarnation.

In *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods*, Latour disrupts the tradition of the linguistic turn and its emphasis on theorizing a speaking subject when he calls the fetish a "speaking object."⁶² The *speaking object* would be a central tenet of fetish-oriented ontology. Latour follows in the tradition of Hegelian dialectics and Derridean deconstruction by disrupting the hierarchization of binaries, or he disrupts the notion of the binary entirely – either the less privileged term becomes resituated as privileged or the binary itself is negated in favour of one of Latour's combinatory concepts, such as the quasi-subject or the actor-network. Latour disrupts a similar binary with his inversion of fetish/fact: a fetish would seemingly emerge from external reality as the first nonhuman object or thing encountered by a fetishist, instead the factish becomes resituated by Latour to conceptualize the fetishism of knowledge by the "Moderns," a knowledge that had appeared to exist "outside." The fetish is truly a technology in this instance. Knowledge becomes a pantheon of divinities for "the Whites" – a pantheon that consists of concepts. Latour is correct to point out, in this regard, that fetish divinities affect "Whites as well as Blacks."⁶³ The factish as a concept bears its intrinsic constructedness in terms of its relation to the fetish; in a sense, the factish is a concept that signals the conceptual influence of de Brosses's fetish-concept because it locates the fetish firmly in the tradition of Enlightenment Reason and the "Modern" tendencies of formulating dyads and correlations, while also demonstrating the manner in which knowledge is still related to belief – facts have magical qualities and fetishes have empirical qualities. The Moderns have not, as Latour argues, "left belief behind"⁶⁴ and entered knowledge; on the contrary, "they" are still trapped in the prison-house of belief and the misrecognition that technology is not a mode of revealing or "bringing-forth," or even craftsmanship, but a future-oriented and machinic drive towards greater domination of the "natural" by the "human."

Latour grounds the factish in the thing-in-itself or in real things: the Moderns think they will have "smoother, faster, and more direct access to the real thing, which is the only object worthy of respect and worship."⁶⁵ The thing or the object reappears in the twenty-first century as the reimagined fetish, which is now a factish. I would go further and say that newer materialist, realist, and vitalist movements are concerned with a grounding process-relational question; namely, what is it that rests at the ground of objects and things? What is that ground or energy? The ground of an object arguably contains an obscure and bizarre energetics, an energetics "of which science so far knows nothing";⁶⁶ this energy is vicarious and yet causative, self-organizing and emergent – in other words, a fetish.

⁶¹ The way I am using "technology" builds not only on Heidegger, but also Michel Foucault, whose later work on the "technologies of self" focuses on the ways in which the self is a production of various sign systems, significations, and transformations. See Foucault, *Technologies of the Self*.

⁶² Latour, *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods*, 13.

⁶³ Ibid., 50.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 66.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 83.

5 Personalization: quasi-subjects or speaking objects?

Whenever knowledge and belief both withdraw into their objects, a fetish appears. This fetish functions not only in its traditional proto-anthropological definition from de Brosses but also in terms of the withdrawn kernels of philosophical concepts. For this reason, the fetish is the thing inside the thing that makes the thing more than the thing itself – it is excessive and contingent, intrinsically contiguous to its own knowledge paradigms.

How can one concept be found in so many different fields and be influential for so many different thinkers? Pietz claims that this is part of the fetish's rhetorical force; that is, in its indispensability to thinkers as different as "Comte, Marx, and Freud,"⁶⁷ which renders the fetish an exemplary interdisciplinary object. It is an academic object that exceeds seemingly simple and ready boundaries between disciplines. Generally speaking, there are three dominant and field-specific notions of the fetish: the first is the ethnological, the second is the Marxist and the economic, and the third is the sexual and the psychoanalytical. However, there are other deployments of the fetish beyond these (as in Derrida's *Glas* [1974] for example).⁶⁸

Marx's fetish is famously a transcendent category of the commodity that attaches itself to an object as a kind of patina spread across a surface.⁶⁹ What is interesting about Marx's reappraisal of the fetish is that an economics was evident in the ethnological original definition from de Brosses. Pietz points out that, in colonialist terms, the "alleged false religious values of African fetish worshipers were understood to cause the Africans' false economic valuation of material objects."⁷⁰ In another sense though the Marxist definition of the fetish is the same as that found in de Brosses because commodity fetishism is, in essence, an attribution of a kind of existence to a seemingly lifeless commodity. Michael Taussig makes this point when he writes that "we" (as consumers), "attribute to commodities a reality so substantial that they acquire the appearance of natural beings, so natural in fact that they appear to take on a life-force of their own."⁷¹ Whenever fetishism is included in the evaluation of an object – a fetish god, a commodity, or a sexual metonymy – it alters the relationship of that object to a subject, to other objects, and imbues that object with special significance.

In other words, fetishism alters the ontology of an object or a thing. What is more, fetishism can become a quality or a property of an object or a thing and this qualification of an object as a fetish complicates the readiness of simply saying that a fetish is strictly generated or manufactured by humans through an anthropofacturing procedure.

A commodity becomes a fetish by way of a splitting process whereby a commodity's essence as thing and its usefulness as value become split – its value becomes designated, as it were, by a kind of other-worldly or even magical essence. Harman acknowledges this point in his essay on commodity fetishism from a 2017 issue of *Eidos*, in which he emphasizes that Marx's notion of commodity fetishism is "a theory of *value*, not of *reality*."⁷² Fetishism is a unique assignation of essence because it truly grounds the commodity as a value that is rooted in *feitiço* – the commodity becomes an amulet, however temporary and however temporal, as it is situated as a salve for the quasi-subject. This process rightfully seems magical and rightfully difficult to theorize in a contemporary context. It is more like an invisible energetics – an energetics that is assigned to a deity or, as is more likely, to the materiality of the signifier (the signifier of the narratives of advertising) that imbue empty objects with something that is more-than-

⁶⁶ Harman, "On Vicarious Causation," 190.

⁶⁷ Pietz, "The problem of the fetish, I," 5.

⁶⁸ In *Glas*, Derrida writes that: "The fetish's consistence, resistance, remnance [*restance*], is in proportion to its undecidable bond to contraries. Thus the fetish – in general – begins to exist only insofar as it begins to bind itself to contraries." See Derrida, *Glas*, 227.

⁶⁹ Marx, *Selected Writings*, 436.

⁷⁰ Pietz, "The problem of the fetish, II," 41.

⁷¹ Taussig, *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America*, 30.

⁷² Harman, "Object-Oriented Ontology and Commodity Fetishism," 31.

itself. For this reason, the verb form of fetish is useful to use when discussing consumers, or to use Bosman's phrase for the fetishists: "Let us make *Fetiche*."⁷³

The sources for Marx's economic appropriation of the term "fetish" can be traced to his engagement with aesthetics and art. In 1841 and 1842, Marx wrote short essays that argued against Hegel's theory of aesthetics, but unfortunately these essays were never published and no drafts of them exist.⁷⁴ However, we do know what he was reading when he was writing these essays: as Margaret Rose discusses in *Marx's Lost Aesthetic* (1984), Marx was reading, among several other works, Karl August Böttiger's *Ideen zur Kunst-Mythologie* or *Ideas on Art Mythology* (1826) – a text that Hartmut Böhme notes as being key to Marx's early, aesthetically inflected understanding of fetishism⁷⁵ – and de Brosses's *Über den Dienst der Fetischgötter*, which was the 1785 German translation of *Du culte des dieux fétiches*.⁷⁶ Rose points out that Marx was influenced by Böttiger's argument for the fetish character of religious art, that even included Christian art⁷⁷ as well as Ludwig Feuerbach's critique of Christianity as repeatedly depicting anthropomorphizations of the divine in *Das Wesen des Christentums* or *The Essence of Christianity* (1841).⁷⁸ Therefore, there is an intellectual lineage of Marx's use of the fetish that links the early anthropological notion of the fetish to an aesthetic argument grounded in a reverse critique locating fetishism in Christian art and then finally culminating in an economic critique of early commodity culture.

In the concept of the fetish, the burden of belief is outsourced – this is one of the central tenets of defining a fetish-object in the history of fetishism. Even when Freud writes about the fetish in 1927, the fetish functions as an outsourced belief that the mother has not been castrated and still contains the phallus.⁷⁹ For this reason, the fetish is a convergence point of desires and energies. The fetish sometimes functions in a metaphorical manner and it sometimes functions in a metonymical way, but this simple dyad is also overturned because of the fetish's "irreducible materiality" – it is positioned as the closest that a human can get to a thing-in-itself. The paradox here runs deeper because the fetish-in-itself can be apparently thought *and* known because its essence is *known*: the fetish-god that inhabits it is known; the magical value of the commodity is known by the consumer and is sought after; and the lost phallus is traced through the various sexual fetishes that exist.

This structure runs deeper though because, in the history of the humanities, the fetish has been an incisive concept that has influenced so many thinkers and discourses. The fetish exists, for this reason, inside the allure of philosophical concepts – those *fabricated* concepts that proliferate in twentieth-century continental thought. These concepts appear to choose the thinker in much the same way that Roland Barthes argues that: "The text is a fetish object, and *this fetish desires me*. The text chooses me."⁸⁰ The agency exists with the fetish and the fetish is magical because, in any of its various guises or forms, it chooses the human, or, in contemporary terms, the posthuman. The outsourced belief, the vicarious causation of the fetish, or the energy or vitality that seems to imbue it and manifest it as a technology are designated by the sign of zero, nil, nothing. The fetish – all fetishes – are most likely empty, but what is important about them is that they do not seem to be empty, or, to put the idea in a more paradoxical and appropriate phrasing: the emptiness at the center of the fetish is still *some-thing*.

Is this not only a further Derridean dyad where presence and absence collapses into present-absence? But Derrida's notion of a present-absence is an effective way of conceiving of the fetish in all of its various forms, across thinkers, centuries, and disciplines. Latour is right to argue that, after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, fetishism has reasserted itself and become factishism:

⁷³ Bosman, *A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea*, 148.

⁷⁴ Werckmeister, "Marx on Ideology and Art," 501.

⁷⁵ Böhme, *Fetishism and Culture*, 245.

⁷⁶ Rose, *Marx's Lost Aesthetic*, 62.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 68–9.

⁷⁸ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 46.

⁷⁹ Freud, "Fetishism," 199.

⁸⁰ Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 27.

We knew (I knew!) we had never been modern, but now we are even less so – fragile, frail, threatened – that is, back to normal, back to the anxious and careful stage in which the “others” used to live before being “liberated” from their “absurd beliefs” by our courageous and ambitious modernization. Suddenly, we seem to cling with a new intensity to our idols, to our fetishes, to our “factishes,” to the extraordinarily fragile ways in which our hand can produce objects, and over which we have no command.⁸¹

The factish is important because it points out that the supposed presence of the fetish is unimportant. The “inside of the fetish” can be considered empty, but this emptiness is still a present-absence that is positively charged; in other words, the factish is itself a fetish-object. The factish is an attempt to reveal the “inside” of the fetish, but as the fetish functions for the “Modern” colonialist, what it reveals is only the importance of the fetish’s original manufacture – that the fetish was always a manufactured concept built by human hands. The contradiction of this is that the reconceptualization of objects that has occurred in Speculative Realism and Object-Oriented Ontology fabricates and manufactures objects that are seemingly *apart* from the human and outside of the correlation (at least in Meillassoux’s speculative materialist version), but the concepts that seek to move outside of the correlation are still manufactured by human philosophers – they are truly fetish-objects. What is more, a fetish need not be delimited to a specific scale or order of magnitude, they can be Morton-sized hyperobjects⁸²: Comte writes that a fetish can be a star⁸³ – even though Böttiger initially distinguished between the “extreme” poles of “sabaism” or the idolatry of stars and fetishism⁸⁴ – or even de Brosses points out that each “country has a national fetish.”⁸⁵ One of the hallmarks of Harman’s theory of objects is that his Object-Oriented Philosophy tries to think objects that are “spooky” and “mysterious”⁸⁶; the spookiness of objects is contained in the fact that when philosophers have been talking about objects, substances, things, actants, or other concepts designating some degree of presence, they have really been talking about fetishes – *thought-fetishes* that may or may not correlate or represent real-fetishes.

These thought-fetishes or fetish-concepts appear to be imbued and incarnated with a presence – the presence of the concept that has been forged to solve a specific theoretical or philosophical problem. In a sense, these fabrications really do solve theoretical problems and fit together in larger theoretical conglomerations or thought-assemblages, but they are also, at the same time, fetishes in de Brosses’s sense of the word. However, they are *also* factishes in Latour’s sense of the word.

The goal of this essay has not been to discredit the goals of Speculative Realism and Object-Oriented Ontology. I am sympathetic to their problems and philosophical projects. The purpose of this essay was to point out some ways that the idea of the fetish – beginning with de Brosses – has influenced the intellectual avenues of much of the concept-making impulses that can be found in the humanities and in twentieth-century continental thought. The privileging of etymologies and the search for an origin, and, in the twentieth century, the seeming impossibility of locating an origin, can all be found in de Brosses’s original formulation of the fetish. I called this essay “Fetish-Oriented Ontology” not because I am attempting to say that Object-Oriented Ontology is *really* fetish-oriented; I am trying to say that the massive concept-driven machine of continental thought has already been a fetish-oriented ontology and that the concepts that have proliferated throughout the twentieth century are *thought-fetishes*. This is because their presence or absence has been less important than their manufacture in the human sciences and in their attempt to shed light on a reality that has, even to the present day, seemed far darker than it should have in the wake of a modernity predicated on notions of progress and innovation. Do our fabricated fetish-concepts illuminate the darkness of the cosmos or the world any more clearly? They certainly illuminate the greater limitations of the human and the darkness that lurks in the formulation of any object-of-knowledge.

⁸¹ Latour, *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods*, 97.

⁸² Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 1–3.

⁸³ Comte, *The Positive Philosophy*, 161.

⁸⁴ Böttiger, *Ideen zur Kunst-Mythologie*, 9.

⁸⁵ de Brosses, *On the Worship of Fetish Gods*, 173.

⁸⁶ Harman, “On the Undermining of Objects,” 38.

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