

How Does the Object Impinge on Me?

Queer Performativity, Ontic Un/Certainty, and The Archive Catalogue as Representationalist Vehicle

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Abstract

This text sets out to explore the hypothesis that the archive catalogue acts as a reproductive vehicle for the representationist conviction that the object captures what there *is* (to know, i.e., ontology) and that, if unaddressed, this reproduction will continue the reductive and essentializing effects that are sought undone by restorative efforts, such as, when a project to un/engender the archive invites us "to think histories of gender and sexuality through the local cultures and temporalities to which ethnographic objects rightfully belong". Drawing on a framework of queer performativity this text unfolds a two-fold exercise that, firstly, identifies at work in the archive catalogue, what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick names, "ontogeny" along with the representationalist conviction it couches, namely, that the world amounts to a host of knowable and ordered objects that, in Denise Ferreira da Silva's formulation, follow "calculable laws of separability and determinacy". Thus embedded, the text opens on an analytic encounter with the archive catalogue that, in drawing from Sara Ahmed's precision that diversifying measures distract from the *systemic* nature and root of a problem, suggests that a catalogue technology to elaborate detail and specificity safeguards the ontological model that sustains the archive's functional and existential legitimacy, namely, the 'idea

of the object' (i.e., the object *as* ontology). This analysis, in other words, suggests that the ontogeny that causes reductionism and essentializing is highly capable at reproducing itself despite or, indeed, because of mechanisms that detail specificity, so long as such leave the archive's underlying object ontology unchallenged. Continuing this line of speculation on how to conceptualize the problem of representationalism where it manifests in the museum (and beyond), the latter part of the text brings H el ene Cixous into conversation with Denise Ferreira da Silva and Axelle Karrera to propose that the reliability and fixity that representationalism insists govern the world, amount to efforts to bring order to a world that operates in absence of such. Thus, these efforts couch a fear of the world's inherent unknowability and a resistance to being at its mercy. In highlighting the presence of fear, the task I consequently propose we are faced with when we seek to respond to representationalism and its detrimental effects, where they manifest in the context of the archive, is to compose a practice of not knowing. That is, an ongoing existential-methodological exercise in allowing the object and the world to impinge on us in potentially destabilizing and unfamiliarizing ways.

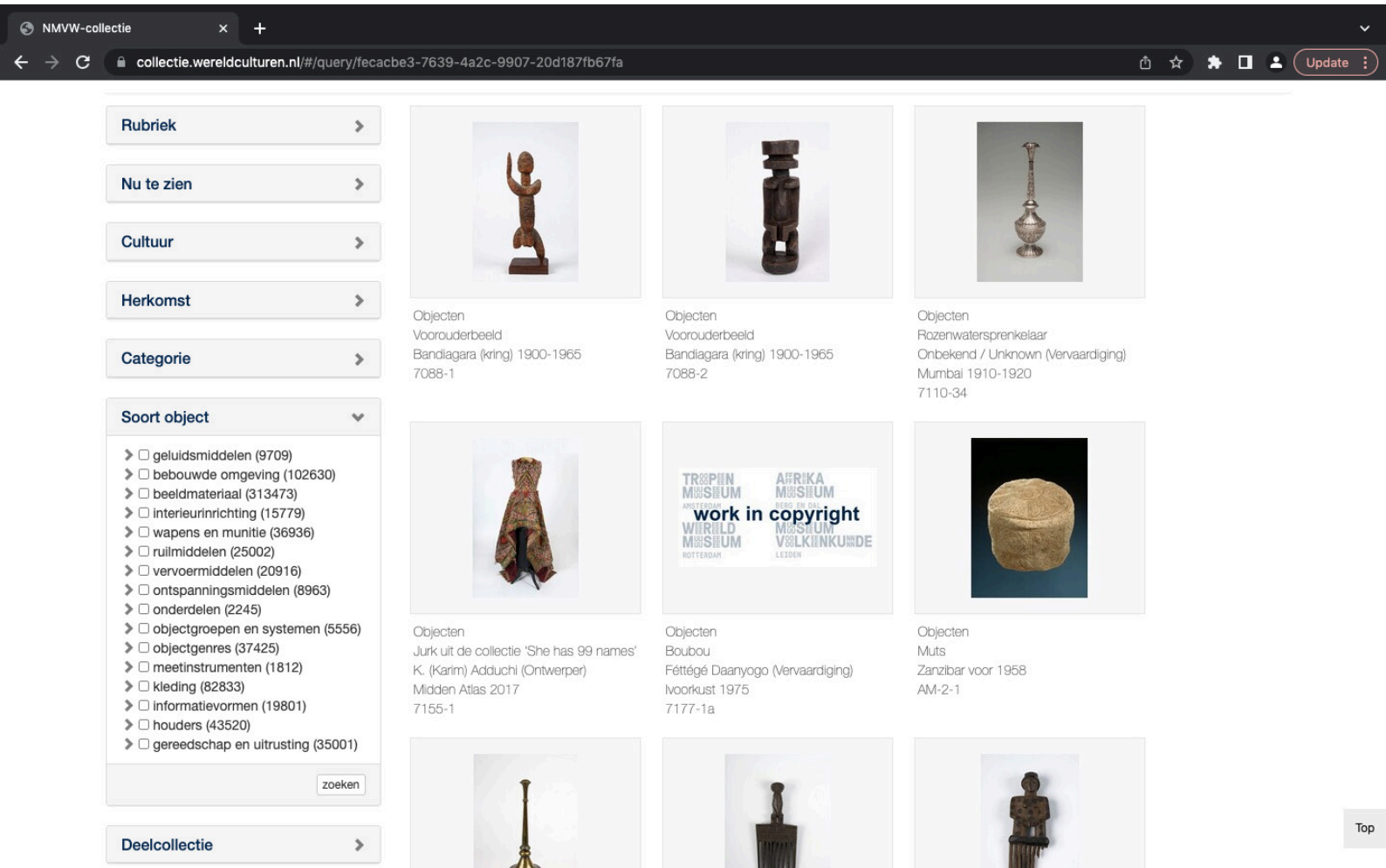


Figure 1 A screenshot of the online catalogue.

I. Queer Performativity: A Museum Archive Encounter

Browsing through the collection catalogues of the *Nationaal Museum Van Wereldculturen and Wereldmuseum* I am struck by how readily those objects that are indexed here become placeholders for gendered assumption. This impulse reflects less the object in question and more a habit of making sense of the world inter alia by way of gendered categorization. Encountering “Object number : WM-50080”, a *mocassin*, I find myself in routine considering if *this is a footcovering for a boy or a girl?* A tendency toward dualist sense-making belongs to European modernity as is also stressed in the prompt that fleshes out the possibilities and

risks entailed in a project that seeks to un/engender the archive when, for example, it asks what it would mean "to think histories of gender and sexuality through the local cultures and temporalities to which ethnographic objects rightfully belong?"¹ This line of inquiry highlights the connection of gender to colonialism. Indeed, across post-, de-colonial and indigenous scholarship, women of color and critical race theories, thinkers and practitioners highlight how a male/female binary emerged with European colonial machineries, and retains its functional centrality to the hold of empire on the present.²

1 <https://www.materialculture.nl/en/research/projects/unengendering-collections-rethinking-gender-ethnographic-museum>.

2 This latter formulation of the continued ruination caused by colonialism and imperialism takes inspiration from Ann Laura Stoler's introductory framing of the works included in *Imperial Debris: On Ruins and Ruination* (Duke University Press, 2013). See also the case Denise Ferreira da Silva makes "for the acknowledgement that the total value produced by slave labor continues to sustain global capital" (as opposed to "the conventional view that places slavery in the prehistory of capital") ("Toward a Black Feminist Poethics: The Quest(ion) of Blackness Toward the End of the World", *The Black Scholar*, 44, no. 2, 82). In the following, I list four disparate examples of how feminist scholars engage with the sex/gender binary in the context of colonialism. First, Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí's illustration of how 'woman' did not exist as a pre-cultural category, but was introduced to deepen colonial systemic inequality, leading to a gender based economic dependence of women on men and the creation of a public sphere exclusively for the latter and "the hallmark", Oyèwùmí writes "and symbol of colonial progress." (*The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*, (University of Minnesota Press, 1997)), 154). Second, María Lugones provides a framework for understanding the intertwined processes by which "race" and "gender" are produced and operate, in her formulation, as "the modern/colonial gender system" ("The Coloniality of Gender," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Gender and Development*, (2016) (Palgrave Macmillan), 13-4). Third, Hortense J. Spillers offers a psychoanalytically informed reckoning with those "overdetermined nominative properties" (i.e., ethnicity and gender) that feature in "the African-American female's misnaming" with her aim being to restore "the *potential* for gender differentiation as it might express itself along a range of stress points, including human biology in its intersection with the project of culture". ("Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," in *The Transgender Studies Reader Remix*, (Routledge, 1987), 93-4. Lastly, Kim TallBear disrupts "Eurocentric" configurations of gender and sexuality by decoupling love and relations from their function to the settler formation of sex and family, offering a queer indigenous human and non-human vision of "caretaking relations" in their place. The purpose of such vision, TallBear elaborates, is to challenge the "temporally progressive settler-colonial American Dreaming that is ever co-constituted with deadly hierarchies of life." ("Caretaking Relations, Not American Dreaming", *Kalfou: A Journal of Comparative and Relational Ethnic Studies*, Vol 6 No. 1, 2019). See also "Making Love and Relations Beyond Settler Sex and Family" in *Making Kin Not Population*, (Prickly Paradigm Press, 2018).

Thus, efforts to un/engender the archive interconnect with a contemporary project to de-colonize institutions and, notably, museums. A prominent example of the latter is found in an initiative taken recently by the Dutch government to return objects from their place in national collections: a process by which collections that took shape during the, so-called, "Golden Age" are gradually acknowledged as contemporary storage for straight-up looted goods.³ I share with a project to un/engender the conviction that gender and sexuality have much to teach us in the context of the ethnographic museum collection and archival processes. Alongside vast and varied reparative projects and, among them, in particular those restorative and elaborative strategies that look beyond a Western sex/gender dyad for alternative vocabulary and experience,⁴ I offer a queer performative response to the call to un/engender the archive. To do so, I follow Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's observation that what we learn from sex and gender is not the answer anticipated by the varied iterations of interest in and concern over how to accurately account for what these terms *are*. Looking at both the scientific and popular assumptions that subtend it, Sedgwick identifies an "ontogenetic" habit in such debate about how to understand sex and gender. Ontogeny, she holds, embodies a representationalist conviction that the world is

3 For a news entry on the Dutch governmental initiative to redress "injustice by returning cultural heritage objects to their country of origin see: <https://www.government.nl/latest/news/2021/01/29/government-redressing-an-injustice-by-returning-cultural-heritage-objects-to-their-country-of-origin>. See also the principles and processes of return as specified by the Nationaal Museum von Wereldculturen: <https://www.tropenmuseum.nl/en/about-tropenmuseum/return-cultural-objects-principles-and-process>. For a different geo-political context, see Sathnam Sanghera's discussion of the growing critical awareness and debate in Britain about the contents of their collections and museums (56) along with Sanghera's broader reflection on how to understand and respond to the fact that a vast part of what is considered modern Britain is in actuality rooted in its imperial activity (*Empireland: How Imperialism Has Shaped Modern Britain*, (Penguin Books, 2021)). Scholarship too continues to engage critically with the project of reparation in response to a growing restorative awareness on part of governmental bodies but also in non-governmental institutions and civic organizing. For an example of one such recent scholarly initiative that critically reflects on "what's to be repaired?" See: <https://whatstoberepaired.wordpress.com>.

4 As exemplified across different areas of scholarship (e.g., footnote 2) and captured in the prompt to un/engender the archive above.

comprised of objects that exist in individual and inherent ontological coherence and are therefore knowable in such terms.⁵

Invoking queer performativity, Sedgwick thus points out how a quest to *know* is highly capable at replicating itself through prisms of sex/uality and gender, and she cautions how, even where introduced as alternative lenses, these terms risk continuing the representationalism that renders them as problems of identifying 'right' and 'wrong' definitions in the first place.⁶ Taking my cue

5 This observation grounds Sedgwick's queer performative intervention in that it derives from her conceptual dislodging of sex from gender. Specifically, Sedgwick challenges the assumption that these terms have any knowable relation to one another (*Epistemology of the Closet*, (University of California Press, 1990), 22, 29). Sedgwick formulates this queer performative shift methodologically on more occasions but for the first time—in the context of her now seminal contribution to queer theory writing in the lethal material-discursive bio- and necropolitical field of the HIV/AIDS epidemic—in the following way: "Repeatedly to ask how certain categorizations work, what enactments they are performing and what relations they are creating, rather than what they essentially *mean*, has been my principal strategy." (ibid., 27). Although Sedgwick's focus is on how a sex/gender binary informs the formation of hetero- and homosexuality, at the heart of the framing of her early queer intervention is the dislodgement of duality as the principal model of Western ontology. By dislodging the sex/gender binary in the context of its expression through a modern hetero/homosexual dyad, Sedgwick challenges Western ontology's reliance on dualism (ibid., 29). It is worth highlighting here how Sedgwick nuances her critique of duality by pointing to its replication in a feminist conceptual distinction of sex from gender and the debates that have followed across, and to parse out, the relations between this biological/construction divide (ibidem.).

6 Importantly, works such as TallBear's that I offer above as one example of how indigenous scholarship gesture beyond a Western sex/gender dyad, entails an alternative ontology to Western dualism. This is to say that, in invoking it as example of a repertoire of strategies to restore and elaborate notions of gender and sexuality, I am not suggesting that TallBear or any of those other scholars that tackle the sex/gender binary merely manage different versions of the same essentializing that stems from Western dualism. Instead, I aim to highlight the *end* toward which such alternative perspectives might be mobilized in a project to un/engender the archive. In that, I echo Sedgwick's cautioning to not replicate an ontogenetic habit of knowing even, or perhaps especially, when pertaining to alternative definitions of sex/uality and gender. Sedgwick's queer performative intervention, in other words, reminds us to consider what desire for knowing or what hopes to reach certainty run underneath a specific inquiry. I am therefore asking that we consider what we want gender and sex/uality (or any other phenomenon) to tell and reveal to us. I highlight this risk not only in the context of a project to un/engender the archive but in light of a broader contemporary field of dispute around gender and sexuality in part as a response to the, so called, 'gender ideology' push-back that is utilized in both European and US right wing extremist politics. Shon Faye cites statistics on transpeople in the UK to illustrate the existential reality that political actors thus take as their playing field. Notably, Faye responds by dispersing the opposition these political attacks impose with a profound Marxist feminist

from Sedgwick, the aim of this piece of writing is to consider how a significant source of the reductive and harmful effects reparative and elaborative strategies aim to counter risks being left intact.⁷ The source in question is the archive catalogue itself. I, in other words, set out to test the hypothesis that the archive catalogue acts as a reproductive vehicle for the conviction that the object represents what there *is* (to know, i.e., ontology).⁸ Although such an endeavor ultimately asks *if/how the archive and catalogue can/should remain*, my aim here is simply to activate and enlarge a space of speculation around the foundational model that structures the museum and its function via related praxes so as to begin to imagine ways to respond to such concerns.

argument for the “transgender issue” as a prism that illuminates socio-economic and political inequality broadly (*The Transgender Issue: An Argument for Justice*, (Penguin Random House UK, 2021)). That said, as part of the response to right-wing aggressions on, so-called, gender ideology is an understandable tendency toward a hardening of frontiers both in research and politics on feminist and queer issues. To my mind, as one example of such can be mentioned how sex and gender and the relation between the two have become terrains of promise in the context of feminist research on biomedicine (e.g., Di Noto, P., Newman, L., Wall, S., & Einstein, G, “The Her Munculus: What is Known About the Representation of the Female Body in the Brain?,” *Cerebral Cortex*, 23, no. 5 (2013), 1005–1013.). Promise, that is, that we might uncover these terms (once and for all?) to settle (again, once and for all?) a dispute over the existential legitimacy of some lives, where such [legitimacy] is played out across questions of whether or not some ways of living conform to gender and sexual norms. Although counter-push backs such as the scientific example above are understandable and hold much strategic value in the context of lethal anti-LGBTQI+ pushbacks, my point to stress is that they take part in creating an ontogenetic impasse in disputes over ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ definitions that risk foreclosing attentiveness to what is at stake in and also what are reproduced as the conditions of knowing through a quest for accuracy and certainty that, in this case, takes shape through sex and gender.

7 I draw on the work of Ferreira da Silva below to elaborate on the violence of this assumption and its reproduction in contemporary discourse.

8 Drawing on Karen Barad and Ferreira da Silva’s formulations, I elaborate representationalism in the following section. Suffice it for now to summarize that representationalism (as Barad formulates it) and (according to Ferreira da Silva) its laws of separability and determination comprise a perception of the world that pervades both scientific practice and vernacular consciousness. A perception, that reality represents an orderliness that, as Barad puts it, stems from the belief that objects exist in the world prior to engagement with them, reflecting each their inherent ontological core (Karen Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 28, no. 3, (2003); Denise Ferreira da Silva, “On Difference Without Separability.” *Catalogue of the 32a São Paulo Art Biennial, ‘Incerteza Viva’*(Living Uncertainty), (2016)).

II. The Catalogue Object and Object (as) Ontology

A proposition to approach the archive catalogue as a representationalist vehicle first took shape when I browsed through the online collection. However, when in the following I invoke 'the idea of the object' I am not referring to a specific archive item, but instead to the presupposition that grounds the scientific-vernacular conviction that the world is accurately understood as a host for pre-existing objects. I am, in other words, referring to the object that is believed to constitute the foundational ontological element of Western dualist metaphysics. In resonance with Sedgwick's identification of the pervasive habit and impact of ontogeny, Karen Barad later observes how this iteration of the object denotes the "idea that beings exist as individuals with inherent attributes, anterior to their representation, [this] is a metaphysical presupposition that underlies the belief in political, linguistic, and epistemological forms of representationalism. [...] That is, there are assumed to be two distinct and independent kind of entities— representations and entities to be represented."⁹

Barad here highlights the division of representations (epistemology) and entities to be represented (ontology) as the split and resulting subject/object duality that ground a belief that lives and subsists in both a Western tradition of knowledge production and popular consciousness.¹⁰ Namely, that objects exist in the world, each in their inherent, ontological coherence and,

9 "Posthumanist Performativity," 804, *my emphasis*.

10 One example of this ontology, which, according to Barad, understands "beings [to] exist as individuals with inherent attributes, anterior to their representation", is Martin Heidegger's framing of the question of being as one of ultimate ground: "Since the beginning of philosophy and with that beginning, the Being of beings [...] has shown itself as the ground [...], has been considered as ground. The ground is that from which beings as such are what they are in their becoming, perishing, and persisting." (Martin Heidegger, *The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking*, as quoted in Kas Saghafi "The World After the End of the World," *The Oxford Literary Review*, 39, no. 2 (2017), 273). Heidegger's formulation of being, as the ultimate ground from where "beings as such" emanate, echoes the representationalist idea that objects express an individual and inherent ontological core that exists prior to or regardless of representation.

consequently, that a substantial cause of their varying appearances is to be found in the subject's ability to perceive of and represent them.¹¹ The question remains how does this belief manifest in the context of the ethnographic museum catalogue?

Each entry in the online museum collection catalogue contains a photo, a brief object description, place of origin and object-number ("inventarisnummer"). Click on either photo or text and it leads you to an elaboration of the object. In the online catalogue of the museum collection, "Object number : WM-50080" is a "Mocassin", a pair, that measure "27 x 10 cm". Their "origin" is "Noord-America" (North America), from second half of the 19th century ("2e helft 19e eeuw") and their cultural specificity ("culture") is indexed further as "Cheyenne".¹² Under "medium" are listed materials, leather, porcupine pen, beads strung in strands and sewn in ("leer, stekelvarkenpen Kralen zijn in strengen geregen en opgenaaid"), that is, a detailing of those utensils and techniques that were utilized to bring about and now make up the more readily tangible components of this mocassin. Specific object entries unfold from within an overarching index that organizes according to this model (i.e., "Objecten"), providing clarity and enabling those who oversee and those who, like I, visit the archive to access and search its contents.

In looking at the basic indexical and visual presentation of "Object number : WM-50080", one sees how the online catalogue lifts its main organizational structure from 'the idea of the object'. By grounding its browsing system in this idea, the catalogue enables a double ontogenetic confirmation of the representationalism that subtends it and, in so doing, shares its *raison d'être* when an

11 Leave it to Ferreira da Silva to unpack how this notion of inherent or ultimate difference operates as justification for discursive and material acts and measures of differentiation (among them racializing and gendering). This is to say that Ferreira da Silva pays sustained attention to the violence representationalism captures and reproduces in its concept of difference that rests on "the three ontological pillars" of "separability, determinacy, and sequentiality" that "sustain modern thought" ("On Difference," 64). I will pertain more to this violence below.

12 <https://collectie.wereldculturen.nl/?query=search=packages=OnViewAM#/query/b841e1cc-0b53-45ed-8b8f-645a5f9d2b18>.

individual entry invites interlocutors to ask: *what is this* — and its structure (as described above) indirectly answers: *it is an object* to confirm: *the object exists*. Next to providing the catalogue with its grounding ontological formula, the object too functions as a tool to organize and disseminate information, inter alia by enabling a wider categorization across items. Illustratively, object “number : WM-50080” is indexed under a broad thematic delineation of clothes and personal decoration (“kleding en persoonlijke versiering”). Simultaneously, the object as organizing unit permits a listing of specific traits such as, also noted prior, origin, medium and size.

Seeing how these details flesh out items beyond their broad categorization, one might well argue that this technique to unfold specificity, such as place of origin, original purpose and so on, distinguishes an archive item from ‘the idea of the object’. This way, elaboration of origin-specific details can be seen as lessons in multiplicity and difference. Yet, as Trinh T. Minh-ha highlights, notions that echo authenticity, even when mobilized to stress non-reducibility and to redress essentializing, entail their own complications.¹³ They risk indirectly reproducing the dichotomies (e.g., us/them: here/there) that confirm a notion of inherent (i.e., authentic) difference (i.e., representationalism) essential to the ideological vehicle that propelled colonial conquest and so partook in carving out those routes that landed disparate objects in Dutch museum archives in the first place.

This caution coupled with an understanding of museum collections, not as remnants of historic conquest but, as part of, what Saidiya Hartman names, slavery’s afterlife or ongoingness,¹⁴ gives reason to pause before assuming that catalogue techniques that elaborate specificity and detail are modeled after and, more to the point, in *effect* offer alternatives to the notion of ultimate difference

13 Across her written and filmic practices, Trinh T. Minh-ha articulates the problematics of difference rendered as ultimate or inherent difference and embodied in notions of ‘otherness’ (e.g., “Not you/Like You: Postcolonial Women and the Interlocking Questions of Identity and Difference,” *Cultural Politics*, 11 (1997), 415-419).

14 E.g., *Loose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*, (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008).

Denise Ferreira da Silva identifies as the grounding pillar of modern thought. That is, the notion of difference that representationalism and its accompanying ontogeny like to imagine reality *as*.¹⁵ Notably, I suggest, the technique that allows for specificity and elaboration operates as an extension of the archive catalogue, which derives its organizational structure (i.e., “objecten”) and, with that, its existential legitimacy from ‘the idea of the object’. Said technique thus begins to echo and, more significantly (whether intentionally so or not), *work* more like those diversity measures that Sara Ahmed identifies in institutions run like business, and the neoliberal university in particular.¹⁶ Although such measures may also express genuine or at least varied intention, Ahmed insists that in actuality they deflect from the systemic root of the problem they seemingly seek to address, which, in the case she places in focus, is institutional racism.

From this perspective, we may consider the catalogue a construction that is built to incorporate, and in so doing remain

15 See footnote 11. Where Barad invokes representationalism to denote the scientific and popular belief that objects exist in inherent and individual ontological coherence prior to engagement with them, Ferreira Da Silva captures this belief in the scientific conviction that “The World [i]s an ordered whole composed of *separate* parts relating through the mediation of *constant* units of measurement and/or limited violent force” (“On Difference,” 57-8, *my emphases*). Ferreira Da Silva traces the origins of this belief through a tradition of Western philosophy, which, according to her, concentrates in a “Kantian program” of knowledge that relies on laws of separability and determinacy, that take shape as we know them through elemental physics and are philosophically parsed out through “the necessity characteristic of mathematics” (“(life) ÷ * (blackness) = ∞ – ∞ or ∞ / ∞: On Matter Beyond the Equation of Value”, *E-flux Journal*, issue #79, (2017)). Ferreira Da Silva specifies: “What Descartes introduced in the 17th century is a separation of mind and body in which the human mind, due to its formal nature, also acquires the power to determine the truth about the human body as well as anything that shares its formal attributes, like solidity, extension, and weight.” She continues: “This separation is precisely what is consolidated in Kant’s modeling of his philosophical system after Newton’s program, particularly the idea that knowledge consists in the identification of the limiting forces, or laws that determine what happens to observed things and events (phenomena).” (“On Difference”, 59-60).

16 Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, “Part II Diversity Work”, (Duke University Press, 2017), note in particular pages 89-114. See also Olúfémi O. Táíwò’s discussion on the reconfiguration of identity politics with the co-optation of equity politics in business and cooperation in *Elite Capture: How the Powerful Took Over Identity Politics (And Everything Else)*, (Haymarket Books, 2022).

untroubled by, difference and multiplicity, so long as its grounding ontology of ultimate difference remains unchallenged. Above reflection on the catalogue thus means to highlight how 'the idea of the object' easily remains intact behind techniques that offer to elaborate those items the archive stores.¹⁷ By intact I mean, it remains as a presupposition that tasks a specific item with providing proof (in the form of details and specificity) that the catalogue has legitimate, both functional and existential, purpose.¹⁸ Thus, despite, or even with the support of elaborating techniques, the catalogue is capable of reproducing its underlying ontogeny: (*If not x version is correct then y version might be, therefore*) *what (x, y, z version) is this object?* Following Ahmed's analytic precision that diversifying measures distract from the *systemic* nature and root of a problem one could well argue that a catalogue technology to elaborate detail protects the 'idea of the object' (i.e., the object *as* ontology). That is, it deflects from consideration of what this object *does* in the context of the museum archive or, more accurately, *whom* it serves. This question guides the remainder of my text, bringing it to close in speculation on how to respond to the representationalism that both grounds and is reproduced through the archive catalogue.

III. Who Needs the Object or What Does the Object Serve?

In delineating the ontogenetic avenues through which an item is to be understood and engaged with, the catalogue delivers an

17 Admittedly, I have focused in this section on the archive's technical set-up for introducing difference and multiplicity and not on restorative and elaborative strategies for unfolding such, as exemplified in the opening section. My aim in highlighting the diverging effects of diversity measures is not to undermine strategies to elaborate on gender and sexuality from non-Western perspectives and positionalities (the same way I do not compare them here 1: 1 with the archive technique to introduce item detail and specificity). Nor am I insinuating that a queer performative mode of address should replace restorative and elaborative strategies, what I hope instead is that it can accompany such while honing in on the ontological formula that grounds the archive and, in so doing, reflect on and perhaps challenge its resilience.

18 The answers an object delivers in response to the question of *what it is*, in other words, provides the catalogue with site to rehearse and reproduce its own existential legitimacy.

impoverished world: a world that is folded down into units believed to be knowable, as Ferreira da Silva clarifies, by calculable laws of separability and determinacy.¹⁹ This world is presented as a given, as what there *is*, inter alia: through the model of encounter the collection catalogue establishes with the main (or majority) interlocutor to whom the museum caters, and relies upon, namely, the subject (this relationship possibly involves the museum's related praxes, such as exhibitions etc.).²⁰ By 'impoverished' I refer less to the technical limitations of the archive catalogue (i.e., how much specificity and detail one object entry can unfold) than to a sense of impoverishment that emanates from how representationalism delineates an encounter with a world that is already foreclosed by or as the 'idea of the object'. This is the limitation Sedgwick points to as ontogeny. Borrowing from Barad's tandem isolation of the split of subject from object and epistemology from ontology, one might say that the impoverishment representationalism and its related ontogenetic mode of address suffers (both where they operate in the museum catalogue and beyond) is captured in the assumption that *I, subject, can know and influence you, object, (through representation), but you, object, cannot touch or influence me, subject, in any way meaningfully (i.e., ontologically) altering*. The question (above) thus remains and amplifies: who needs the world to *be* in this way and why?²¹

Embedded in an alternative perspective on the world as characterized by inseparable difference or difference that is not ultimate, Ferreira da Silva stresses how modern thought relies on a racialized occlusion for its projection of human life as "European Man".²² This "defining logic of obliteration", she elaborates, *by design* limits "the reach of the ethical notion of humanity" as is

19 See footnotes 11 and 15.

20 Ferreira Da Silva highlights how the human subject (Western man) relies on a constitutive other. That is, this model retrieves its status as marker of life from posing against what it imagines and renders as its opposite, namely, non-life, captured, Ferreira da Silva argues, in the "Category of Blackness".

21 "Be" here corresponds to my use of "is" above to denote a perception of the world as static and determined or, as Ferreira da Silva puts it, "ordered".

22 Ferreira Da Silva focuses on how, what I have referred to throughout as, rep-

manifest, inter alia, in the incompetence of universalizing humanist ethics when faced with contemporary scenes of violence that cluster around discourses of the “other”.²³ Ferreira da Silva is, in her own words, looking to expose the origins of the “ethical indifference with which racial violence is met”,²⁴ an aim, which she distinguishes from Sylvia Wynter’s “ideological unveiling (as in exposing how European Man “overrepresents” the human, thus disavowing all other modes of being human)”.²⁵

Reading Ferreira da Silva’s and Wynter’s respective identifications of the violence that originates in and flows from European man together with, what I would add is, this model’s frantic insistence that it operates solely by reason and calculation, it is straightforward to conclude that a representationalist belief in certainty and determination is only motivated by a desire for power and dominance. My aim, however, is to elaborate on the forces that propel such belief, in the hope to hone those tools this text aims to leave as options for the further task of exploring the question that, ultimately, follows from my reading of the archive-catalogue as a representationalist vehicle, namely, *if/how it should/can*

representationalism is cemented as laws of separation and determinacy in, a tradition of modern continental philosophy. See “(life) ÷ * (blackness)” and footnote 15.

23 “On Difference”, 57. In opening, Ferreira da Silva notes examples of such limitation by design and its consequent incompetence as exhibited in “European states’ responses to the “refugee crisis” resulting from the latest wars of Global Capital.” (ibidem.)

24 Ferreira Da Silva does this inter alia by unlocking “blackness’ disruptive force, which, she holds, is sought obliterated when rendered the constitutive other or “nothing” to an exclusivist notion of life (i.e., European Man) ” (see, “(life) ÷ * (blackness)”). According to Da Silva the occlusion of black life is inscribed in the laws of separability and determinacy that define “The Ordered World” as prescribed by Western philosophy, and she enacts an onto-epistemological perspective, which she also refers to as “Plenum”, to gesture to a world beyond these laws. A world, that is, “an infinite composition in which each existant’s singularity is contingent upon its becoming one possible expression of all the other existants, with which it is entangled beyond space and time” (“On Difference”, 58-9).

25 “(life) ÷ * (blackness)”. According to Sylvia Wynter the seemingly generic or universal notion of human in fact means the “present globally hegemonic, monohumanist and secular Western, yet no less *genre*-specific, now (neo)Liberal conception of *Man(2)*” (“The Ceremony Found: Towards the Autopoietic Turn/Overturn. Its Autonomy of Human Agency and Extraterritoriality of (Self-)Cognition,” in *Black Knowledges/Black Struggles*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), 193).

*remain?*²⁶ Ferreira Da Silva remarks on the function of fear where it is mobilized at a covert discursive plane, namely, as affective fuel to cycle around notions of cultural difference that are captured in contemporary figures of “otherness”.²⁷ My closing speculation involves a hypothesis that fear too operates in more existential-psychological terms. That is, as a response to the ontic uncertainty of an un-ordered world (to riff on Ferreira da Silva’s terminology),²⁸ and that, in this form, fear may have something to tell us about the challenges entailed in the task Ferreira da Silva identifies as an “imaging” of the world and our modes of relating to it otherwise.²⁹ To this end, I find a helpful resource in Hélène Cixous.³⁰ Specifically, because of how attuned to fear her deconstruction is of the

26 As far as I see, this is a question that Barad, for example, does not address. While their agential realist alternative provides useful conceptual vocabulary to challenge representationalism (their concept of intra-activity, for example, captures the way in which phenomena come into being *intra-actively* rather than inter-act from pre-defined positions), Barad does not really ask what representationalism serves or, more accurately, what motivates it, what its desire to know in certain or ultimate terms responds to. In my understanding, this question is crucial to the analysis of representationalism’s effects and the task of addressing and challenging it.

27 “Fear and uncertainty,” Ferreira da Silva writes, “to be sure, have been part of the staples of the modern racial grammar. Since the early 20th century, articulations of cultural difference in the modern text added a *social signifier* to delimit the reach of the ethical notion of humanity.” (“On Difference”, 57, *my emphases*)

28 See footnote 27 on Ferreira da Silva’s use of “Plenum” to gesture beyond “The ordered World”.

29 A task, not unlike the one I imagine the archive must consider. Ferreira Da Silva observes that discourses that rely on anxiety and uncertainty cannot be used to undermine the “unbridgeable ethical divide” its “scientific imaging” puts in place through and as (a theory of) “The World as an ordered whole composed of separate parts relating through the mediation of constant units of measurement and/or limiting violent force” (ibid., 57-9). What I am highlighting, however, is not fear as an affective discursive tool, but as part of what motivates a perception of the world that builds on a notion of ultimate difference (i.e., difference as separability). Consequently, if fear is part of what motivates representationalisms, then a necessary piece of the task Ferreira da Silva identifies as an imaging of the world differently entails reckoning with this fear: with what it responds to and what it aims to do.

30 Critics tend to take issue with Cixous’s use of the feminine. I comment on her terminology of Man and Woman in footnotes 34 and 35 and account for my understanding of her use of “feminine textual body” as a deconstructive tool and a gesture toward a world beyond dualism in the main text of present piece and with substantially more detail in my dissertation chapter 4 “A World That Operates as Loss: *The Year of Magical Thinking*” (Ida Hillerup Hansen, “*Being Through Loss: A Queer Performative Reckon-*

shaping force of “opposition” (i.e., dualism) on “culture [that is], the whole conglomeration of symbolic systems [...] everything that seizes us, everything that acts on us”.³¹ This “everything that seizes [...], everything that acts”, Cixous elaborates, is “all ordered around hierarchical oppositions that come back to the man/woman opposition”.³² Thus, in striking resonance with Ferreira Da Silva’s use of vocabulary when she isolates those laws that are believed to govern “The Ordered World”, Cixous highlights how man or a “masculine economy” renders the world as passive (i.e., determined) objects that exist in absolute or opposite distinction (i.e., separation) from him.³³ Although this vocabulary may sound trite and reductionist to contemporarily attuned (queer-feminist) ears, Cixous’s usage of man and woman are not recourse to biological essentialism. They rather illustrate how, by referencing a seemingly irrefutable biological fact or *ground*, dualism gains its ontological primacy.³⁴

A concept of man thus denotes a masculinist approach to the

ing With Grief,” PhD dissertation, (Central European University and Utrecht University, 2023). See also footnote 38).

31 “Castration or Decapitation”, 44. Note that Cixous elaborates how the man/woman dyad amounts to an oppositional schema that is hierarchical in quality and that entails a set of other enactments, including “great/small, superior/inferior [...] activity and passivity” (ibid., 44). Although Cixous focuses her analysis on the man/woman dyad, she points to the racializing thinking that subtends difference or “otherness, in its [imagined] entirety”. Faintly and less conceptually rigorous this formulation might remind us of Ferreira da Silva’s formulation of the notion of difference “The Ordered World” relies on, namely, where “*separability, determinacy, and sequentiality* [comprise] the three ontological pillars that sustain modern thought.” (“On Difference,” 64). Cixous writes: “Women have it in them to organize this regeneration, this vitalization of the other, of otherness in its entirety. They have it in them to affirm the difference, *their* difference, such that nothing can destroy that difference, rather that it might be affirmed, affirmed to the point of strangeness. So much so that when sexual difference, when the preservation or dissolution of sexual difference, is touched on, the whole problem of destroying the strange, destroying all the forms of racism, all the exclusions, all those instances of outlaw and genocide that recur through History, is also touched on. (“Castration,” 50).

32 Ibidem.

33 Ibid., 44.

34 In elaborating the workings of a scheme of “hierarchical oppositions that come back to the man/woman opposition” (ibid., 44) Cixous stresses how “the body is not sexed, does not recognize itself as, say, female or male without having gone through

world, which Cixous elaborates as a model of being that is always at war with it [world].³⁵ To explain, Cixous employs an analogous use of the “castration complex” and a Freudian or psychoanalytic model of mourning. Like a model of mourning, the castration complex serves to push back the world’s “mystery” (i.e., indeterminacy) by way of rendering its lack of order a concrete lack (that is, a lack of penis and the lack or hole mourning’s individualized labor renders repairable).³⁶ In my reading, Cixous’s use of mystery thus denotes the way in which the world operates in absence of order; the way it takes as much as it gives in absolute indifference to or concern for individual attachments; the way in which the world operates *as loss*.³⁷ The castration complex and a psychoanalytic model of mourning thus express efforts to re-configure loss from an abstract and uncontrollable existential condition into a concrete and individual matter of overcoming.³⁸

These efforts reek of contradiction in that man’s need to distinguish him/self from the world reveals the very un-ordered world he wants to disappear. These complexes thus couch a deep

the castration complex.” (Ibid., 46).

35 It thus follows that Cixous’s use (and mine that I lift from her) of man does not refer to some inherent male trait but rather, as I stress in the main text, a masculinist approach that grasps for reason, rationality and efficiency as its main tools to be in and cope with the world.

36 The “castration complex” seeks to resolve a condition of “not knowing” or, in Cixous’s words, a “mystery that leads man to keep overcoming, dominating, subduing, putting his manhood to the test, against the mystery he has to keep forcing back” (48-8). Along this line of thinking, Cixous alternates “mystery” for a “feminine textual body” that she describes as “always *endless, without ending*: there’s no closure, it doesn’t stop” (ibid., 53, *my emphasis*). This is, a world that does not, as Man desires, operate according to duality.

37 I make this connection in my dissertation chapter 4, basing it on a combined reading of the formulation Joan Didion in her account of grief related to the loss of a loved one offers of “*world without end*” and Cixous’s use of feminine text or textuality as “an outpouring [...] as a vomiting, as “throwing up,” “disgorging” (ibid., 54). Pointing out Cixous’s reference to the fleshiness of text, I read her use of the “feminine textual body” and Didion’s notion of “*world without end*” in resonance with Vicki Kirby’s on-to-epistemological approach to the world that leans in turn on Derrida’s notion of the world’s textual play (Derrida in *Telling Flesh*, 90).

38 See my dissertation chapter 4 and in particular section “4.2 “*World without end*”: Deconstructing opposition”.

fear that rumbles within man's ordering of the world into "passive" objects that he, from his self-declared, opposing position of "activeness", can understand and control.³⁹ The fear is that, try as he might, the world is not in this way he desires or needs it to be in order to feel safe.⁴⁰ His efforts at overcoming thus capture the irony of this model of being (European man) in that, in order to simply exist, it must resign itself to an endless war or fight to uphold, what Ferreira da Silva calls, "The Ordered World".⁴¹ This irony not only reveals that what man renders object is not passive and controllable (i.e., is not discernible through laws of separability and determinacy). It reveals too how the split (active/passive: subject/object) he imagines distinguishes and safeguards him from the world is subsumed by its [world's] activity and uncontrollability (i.e., its absence of laws of order).⁴² Cixous, in other words, highlights how representationalism expresses a fear of

39 This representationalist distinction that Barad too highlights between subject and object is what allows man to abstract himself from the world. Note the resonance between Cixous, Ferreira da Silva and Barad in how they isolate a representationalist habit of rendering the world into objects whose agency or activity depends on the subject's ability to activate/understand/represent. Cixous details how dualism (Man/Woman: subject/object) is a "law of death" and, in so doing, she strikes resonance, again, with Ferreira da Silva's formulation of the laws of "The Ordered World" that delineate the criteria for what is (i.e., ontology, being).

40 I am riffing again on Sedgwick's invitation to approach the world from the perspective of queer performativity, as a *doing* rather than a *being*.

41 "Man", Cixous writes, "cannot live without resigning himself to loss. He has to mourn. It's his way of withstanding castration. He goes through castration, that is, and by sublimation incorporates the lost object. Mourning, resigning oneself to loss, means not losing." (ibid., 54) Cixous highlights here how a certain form of mourning (i.e., man's) amounts to a resignation to loss whose aim is to *avoid* "losing." We might call this form of mourning individual in that, as Cixous stresses, it urges man in singular "to mourn" (i.e., "he has to") by way of incorporating "the lost object." According to Cixous, incorporation of the lost object amounts to a strategy of avoidance, in that, by rendering loss concrete (i.e., "the lost object") and individual (i.e., "incorporation"), it dodges another form of losing (i.e., "mourning [...] means *not* losing") (Ibidem., *my emphasis*).

42 Of course, given the socio-political, economic and other structures of advantage and privilege that surround him, there is an easy case to be made that Man(1) (to borrow Wynter's vocabulary) enjoys a span of positions that are, generally speaking, safer than most. My aim here, however, is to highlight, first, the illusiveness of the representationalist distinction that affords him a sense of safety and, secondly, how this illusiveness extends and so operates much beyond him through the common-sense

a world that lacks order and a consequent desire for a sense of existential safety.⁴³

IV. A Fear of *Not Knowing*

In proposing that man's way of being in a world that (in my formulation above) operates as loss is by trying to bring order to it, Cixous also delineates an alternative, open-ended mode of being that embodies the world's in-exhaustive field of ontic possibility.⁴⁴ This is a mode that, instead of seeking to combat, gives into the world's unordered unfolding, its ontic un/certainty.⁴⁵ There are, it is important to note, numerous risks entailed in engaging this field of ontic possibility. Among such, Axelle Karrera argues, is the, in her opinion, fact that relational ontology is unequipped at reckoning with the systemic and material dispossession of some lives according to hierarchies of class, gender and, she highlights, race.⁴⁶ Notwithstanding such risks, I want to highlight another challenge. A challenge, that not only entails identifying a desire

stature of representationalism.

43 In isolating this insight, it is important to distinguish the precariousness that Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou as well as Achille Mbembé in each their ways highlight, which results from systematic and necropolitical efforts at undermining some existence *from* the existential condition that is captured in da Silva's use of the term Plenum and I try to formulate, and respond to below, as a world that operates *as* loss. See Judith Butler, and Athena Athanasiou, "The Logic of Dispossession and the Matter of the Human," In *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political*, (2013), John Wiley & Sons; Joseph-Achille Mbembé, "Necropolitics," *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003), 11–40.

44 See footnote 37 for conceptual resonance.

45 My use of un/certainty here is inspired by Barad's concept of "in/determinacy" ("What is the Measure of Nothingness: Infinity, Virtuality, Justice: 100 Thoughts: Documenta Series 099," *Kassel, Germany: Hatje Cantz* (2012), 7). In above highlighted dissertation chapter (see footnote 30), I derive a notion of un/certainty from my reading of the existential-methodological lessons Didion stretches out in her embodied oscillation between control and loosening up of such tendency/desire as she maneuvers *world without end*. Un/certainty captures the ambiguity of onto-epistemology as a perspective and the challenges, I engage below, of maneuvering it. It captures how, in ontic openness or in/determinacy, there is both possibility and risk of losing what one (thinks one) knows and therefore trusts.

46 Karrera delivers this important point when she argues that "the new regimes of Anthropocenean consciousness" are ill equipped or altogether unable to account for the

for power at work, its effects and their origins, but requires that one wrestles with the existential-methodological issue of *how* to open up to the ungraspable and lean into the overwhelming (because) open-ended field of ontic un/certainty dualism desires to disappear.⁴⁷ This challenge has both cognitive and experiential components and is only further complicated by the commonsensical 'nature' of representationalism.⁴⁸

In identifying and responding to representationalism at work in the context of the archive catalogue and in the encounter the museum at large curates between its interlocutor and its items (subject/object), we are, in other words, tasked with acknowledging the role fear plays in motivating a perception of the world that is manifest in 'the idea of the object'. To acknowledge this is not the same as feeling sorry for or needing to cater further to the war-like,

different forms of suffering racially antagonistic structures and systems of power produce ("Blackness and the Pitfalls of Anthropocene Ethics" *Critical Philosophy of Race*, (2019), 7, no. 1, 32-34). The point to note here is the potentially flattening effects of leading with frameworks of entanglement and the risk of ignoring how systems of oppression continue to differentiate being across race, class, gender etc., regardless of how relational prisms undo classical hierarchies of difference. I agree that one should cautiously maneuver relational ontology. The insight I try to formulate here, however, aims to relate productively to the existential-methodological challenges that accompany an onto-epistemological perspective and more specifically to offer some closing reflections on the usefulness of a queer performative approach for a project to un/engender the archive.

47 My reflection above on the analysis of power that may derive from reading Ferreira da Silva and Wynter's lucid engagements with the violence that follows the model of human that is captured in European Man does not mean to insinuate that da Silva does not engage with the question of how to lean into ontic openness or the field of possibility she refers to as the Plenum. On the contrary, her artistic-scholarly practice tackles this challenge as illustrated in her collaboration with art maker/artist Valentina Desideri on the *Poethical Readings and Sensing Salon*. What I try to highlight here, however, is the role fear plays as a motif and a mechanism that may remove us from, what I believe to be, a crucial process of un-learning or loosening our, as da Silva puts it, "grip of certainty" ("On Difference", 59).

48 By representationalism's common-sense 'nature' I mean the taken for granted manner in which the assumption that the world comprises a host of recognizable and knowable objects operates in both scientific practice and vernacular discourse. The challenge I aim to highlight here is, as above noted, what I also understand Ferreira da Silva gestures towards when she appeals to an "imagining" of "The Ordered World" from the perspective of difference as inseparability. Yet my interest here is to further unpack the question that remains, *how* to go about this and what challenges does it entail?

self-protective masculinist model of being Cixous identifies. What I merely mean to stress is that if we are to respond effectively and creatively to the presence of this model and the power it holds (to reduce and simplify), we do well in factoring in how the impoverishment representationalism somewhere desires or in effect brings about *as* the world grasps for certainty, not only out of a will for power and control, but also out of fear.⁴⁹ Speaking in broader terms about representationalism, to acknowledge fear means to elaborate on the challenge we face beyond a dismantling of disproportionate power to involve the question: how to invite in the fear-inducing perspective of an un-ordered, unknowable and uncontrollable world whose unfolding *as* loss undoes a sense of existential safety that is build on ideations of determinacy and continuity: How to invite in the world's un-familiar/izing and radically estranging, indeed, potentially obliterating, ontic field of possibility.⁵⁰

Returning to the queer performative observation that originally inspired this piece, the proposition that follows from Sedgwick's insight, that a sex/gender dyad has much to teach us about the entrapments of Western dualist thinking, notably formulates its invitation to dislodge from ontogeny as a commitment "*not to know*".⁵¹ Here, fear becomes an important tool in that it reminds one to be attentive to (rather than to try to resist or do away

49 I am referring loosely here to Ferreira da Silva's identification of scientific discourse as a framework that has a grip in certainty ("On Difference", 58) but also to Sedgwick's identification of an ontogenetic habit of asking questions that strive to *know* what something *is*, revealing thus a subtending ontology based in certainty.

50 I noted above how an un-ordered world operates or unfolds not only by bringing about being but also by equally undoing it, thus making any and all existence subject to an inseparability that alters and shifts rather than stays fixed.

51 *Epistemology*, 12. In accounting for the methodological implications of a queer performative approach, Sedgwick elaborates how this "seemed to open a space for moving from the rather fixated question Is a particular piece of knowledge true, and how can we know? to the further questions: What does knowledge *do*—the pursuit of it, the having and exposing of it, the receiving again of knowledge of what one already knows?" ("Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're so Paranoid, You Probably Think this Essay is About You," in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, (Duke University Press, 2003), 124). The challenge or task Sedgwick formulates from a position of embeddedness within it, is to unlearn the cultural habit of wanting to

with) understandable needs to feel safe and stable in the world as well as it asks one to notice what is foreclosed when, out of habit, one reaches for certainty in knowing. Knowing, not necessarily a specific object but rather, knowing where it operates as the conviction that an object *is* knowable and, in so doing, serves to reassure the stability and reliability of one's own being in the world.⁵² Instead of a simple or single step, Sedgwick stresses how a queer performative approach amounts to a continuous *practice* in noticing and loos(en)ing (up on) a certainty that one can know in absolute terms what something *is*, including one's sense of self.⁵³ It thus entails submitting to the effects of the unfamiliar/izing (i.e., an un-ordered and unknowable world), which might indeed require practice. As a point of departure for this exercise Sedgwick offers that we might ask (not what it *is* but) what an object *does* so as to stay open to the radically altering consequences of queer

know that permeates a Western metaphysics of knowing.

52 These sensations of stability and safety in part rely on those laws of separability and determinacy Ferreira da Silva highlight. With my focus on fear, I am trying to engage with their more embodied effects. My use of a queer performative framework, and the existential-methodological practice of letting go of a certain way of *knowing*, first took shape in the context of my PhD research project. Rooted in my personal experience of loss this project found sites for further exploration in grief literature. My dissertation thus opens: "In grief, the phenomenon of being reveals its queerness by displaying its performative capacity to shift and alter" and continues by explicating how the framework I built for "'being through loss' reconfigures our understanding of and engagement with grief as well as it provides us with a poetic sense of the entangled quality of being as phenomenon." ("*Being Through Loss*," 1).

53 Of course, this exercise entails also considering when other routes of address are equally or more useful. My closing speculation here is based on my dissertation and, once more, in particular on chapter 4. Here, I propose that Didion offers an existential-methodological lesson through her embodied oscillation between control and loosening up of such tendency/desire as she maneuvers or as a mode of being in *world without end*. This lesson resonates with Sedgwick's queer performative approach in that it entails an *ongoing* exercise in noticing one's desire to know and in that feel safe and in letting go and loos(en)ing up on a certain way of knowing. It is for this reason that I find Sedgwick's approach to queer performativity so insightful and helpful. Sedgwick places pressure on how a queer performative approach is foremost an exercise in leaning into uncertainty. In my dissertation I reflect on the usefulness of Sedgwick's queer performative approach vis-à-vis the framing gestures of Barad's queer posthumanist performative framework in the context of the fields of feminist new materialism and posthumanisms and their legitimacy ("*Being Through Loss*," section 1.3 "There is something queer about grief: Methodology").

performativity: how does 'an object' "impinge" on 'me'?⁵⁴ *How does 'an object' impinge on 'me'? How does ~~an object~~ the world impinge on me?* Could the archive collection encourage such un-familiarizing and de-impooverishing encounters?

54 Interested and invested in the "ontological tenuousness" of phenomena, Sedgwick sets out on a queer performative mode of address and engagement, which she elaborates in the context of her later theorizing on affect and through her concept of "texture" specifically (*Touching Feeling*, 3). She writes: "To perceive texture is never only to ask or know What is it like? nor even just How does *it* impinge on *me*? Textural perception always explores two other questions as well: How did it get that way? and What could I do with it?" (Ibid., 13). Sedgwick goes on to stress through "texture" how a performative line of inquiry does not end (not here, not anywhere) but continues to unfold and unravel the possibility of a finite answer when it asks further how being came to present a given way and what one might do with it (i.e., "How did it get that way? and What could I do with it?"). "Impingement" shifts perspective from a safeguarded or stable (subject) position of engagement to a mode of being that alters *through* the world.

All contributors called into the Un/Engendering research project were asked to think outside their respective specializations. Without their courage, openness, humility, and without the peer reviewers' generous attention, such an interdisciplinary project could have never taken place.

Images

Figure 1: Screenshot of the online catalogue, screenshot by the author, 08-02-2017.

We publish these articles as the museums consolidate into one nominal entity, het Wereldmuseum: since the articles were written between 2020 and 2023, they do not yet reflect the March 2023 name change.