

ᕿᓐᓇ, *Storied Matter, and the Corinthian Order: a provocation*

by jake moore

Bringing together two of my most beloved pieces of the vast collection at University of Saskatchewan as an assemblage is a provocation, or speculative gesture, as all assemblages are. Much theorized, assemblage is ‘*a philosophical approach for studying the ontological diversity of agency, which means redistributing the capacity to act from an individual to a socio-material network of people, things, and narratives*’.

Bringing together Felix Ookangut Kopak’s whalebone carving, *Sedna With Two Seals*, purchased in 1975, with the marble Corinthian Column bequested to the University in 1991, may seem merely an aesthetically driven method of display. It is if one recognizes the depth of knowledge inherent in the word’s Greek origins in aesthítikos, aisthesis, aisthánomaia – all which describe the role of sensory perception in relation to coming to know the world: I perceive, I sense, I learn. This calling forward of Greek etymology is invited by the presence of the Corinthian Column and its historical account. That we must move between the ancients and the now of its current reorientation as support for Kopak’s *Sedna*, asserts the narrative role of all objects and the polyphonic voices they carry with them, for all matter is storied. With this understanding we can enact the intentions of assemblage, to redistribute the capacity to act, from the individual to the network, here understood as audience, as those of us that engage with these objects in space and receive their individual narratives now intertwined.

All matter is storied... *Storied Matter is one of the conceptual tools of material ecocriticism ... it describes the idea that from its deepest lithic and aquatic recesses to the atmospheric expanses, and from subatomic to cosmic realms, matter is capable of bringing forth a display of eloquence, which can be explained as the ‘ontological performance of the world in its ongoing articulation’* (Barad, 2007: 149).

This definition is quoted from Serpil Oppermann’s entry for the *Posthuman Glossary*¹, that articulates fully how necessary the move beyond the Western anthropocentric ‘Cartesian dreamworld’ is for liberation from the colonial mindset it scaffolds. In full reception of the matter at hand, stories

emerge in parallel that thicken the potential of future engagement.

Felix Ookangut Kopak’s *Sedna With Two Seals*, depicts a female figure central to origin stories across the circumpolar region. As Kopak lived in Naujaat, Sedna would be understood as the Mother of the Sea, and ruler of Adlivun, who transformed from a human woman into deity after her father threw her out of his kayak and cut off her fingers when she clung to the side. The fingers were cut joint by joint, with the parts becoming seals, walrus, and whales as they fell into the sea. Sedna transformed, growing a fishtail and her hair becoming unruly and net-like, capable of holding back the creatures of the sea that the humans above were reliant on for everything. In Kopak’s depiction, Sedna and the seals are wrought of whalebone, making the material integral to the narrative. Their images are made from the structural elements of a whale. Her rematerialization as sea creature from human is complete in this rendering.

My retelling of Sedna’s origin story is highly reductive, and fully inadequate, as stories told by those that do not live them always are. My learned account should be understood as partial. In part because there are so many stories attached to the becoming of Sedna, I cannot determine which one is true, but also because all stories are true.

The Corinthian order is the last of the classical orders of ancient architecture in Greece. It is described as the most ornate and its columns are marked by a large abacus (the top of the capital) and rows of acanthus leaves. Vitruvius recounts that the order was founded by the Greek sculptor and architect, Callimachus. He was inspired by a votive basket left on the grave of a young girl. The woven vessel was filled with mementos of her life and had been covered with a large square tile to protect it from the wind and rain. On the grave, an acanthus plant had sprung up and interwoven through the staves of the basket, its well-defined leaves redefining the form of the basket, and now supporting the tile that protected the objects within.

In each of these origin stories we hear of the loss of a feminine figure in human form and

its generative outcomes. There are too easy assumptions towards patriarchal abuses of power and the feminization of nature. Also, the Greco-Roman column has long been a silent symbolic stand-in for Western assertions of morality and power. Positions of dominance rarely need to speak for they are articulated and echoed in the very architectures that contain a population. What transpires in the move from object to symbol, is often the loss, or reappropriation, of story, context, and intention.

In this provocation I seek a more complex reception, one that moves beyond the prioritization of the human and towards the interrelation and co-constitution of our world. I suggest this is through stories told in parallel, not opposition. This is not meant to homogenize lived experience, but to ask more of the matter we surround ourselves with. It is also not meant to overwrite the valent materiality of these two objects assembled; the bone, a structural organ and living tissue that makes up the water-based structure of many earthbound species and the marble, rock born of metamorphosis forced by heat, pressure, and time. Their material agency belies the content of the works wrought from them.

While a collection of any kind telegraphs the identity of its holder, it also points to the worldmaking capacity of practices of inquiry, what we ask questions of and how, become the world we live within. Many objects within Western collections are fully alive (or were prior to their incarceration), but collections only become alive with inquiry that reorients the narratives assumed to lie within.

1. Braidotti, Rosi, and Maria Hlavajova, eds. 2018. *Posthuman Glossary*. London: Bloomsbury Academic. Pp. 411-414.