

Object-orient Reading: The View from the Custom House

Isabel Hofmeyr

University of the Witwatersrand and New York University

Books Overboard

Most nineteenth century sea-travellers would have been familiar with the phrase “the Chops of the Channel”. The term referred to the jaws, or chops of the English Channel and hence to its entrance, signaled to the north by Land’s End and the Scilly Isles. The stretch of sea was fabled -- the setting of early skirmishes against the Spanish Armada in 1588 and for ocean-weary English sailors, a herald of home.

To ship’s passengers, the Chops signaled yet something else, namely that it was time to sort through their books in preparation for encountering Customs officials in port. As an 1849 passenger’s manual explained, these officers paid particular attention to copyright, especially pirated US editions of English authors. These reprints “can endure no longer than the voyage” (as the manual phrased it) and many such volumes must have been tossed into the Chops, to sink slowly into the nether reaches of Davy Jones’ library.

Yet, disposing of volumes overboard did not end the preparation that book-burdened voyagers had to make. As the manual gratuitously reminded its readers, books are “cumbrous appendages to the traveller”. Like friends, they could improve on greater acquaintance, but could equally cause “inconvenience or disappointment”. And inconvenient, these textual companions certainly proved to be. Passengers had to sort their books by place and date of publication as well as by language. In terms of place, travellers had to distinguish those volumes printed in British possessions from those originally produced in Britain but exported elsewhere. Books produced outside the British empire constituted yet another pile. Bookish passengers also had to keep an eye on the date of

publication, sorting their volumes into those that appeared before and after 1801. This year marked the Act of Union between Great Britain and Ireland, the latter being a long-standing center of reprinting so that the copyright status of books printed there before and after 1801 differed.¹ Each of these various categories attracted a different duty reckoned by imperial hundredweight (112 lbs). Maps and drawings were levied with a tax of one penny each and pictures and paintings, one shilling per square foot.²

The handbook may of course sound simply like so much overwrought Victorian bureaucracy and as such, deserving of being consigned to the Chops. For our purposes however, the handbook is useful since it trained passengers to think like customs officials. Instead of classifying their books by genre or author, travellers had to assess them in terms of weight, date and place of manufacture (no more light reading or weighing of arguments here). In addition to engaging with the micro-qualities of the books, the passengers had to factor in larger issues, attending to the pathway of the book itself and how this intersected with international law. With a stress on materiality and scale, these methods of interpretation start to sound rather modern. Add in the maritime setting of the Chops, and one has a contemporary-looking agenda: materialism, objecthood, mobility, scale, ecology. Somewhat unexpectedly, the Victorian Custom House and its officials offer a useful vantage point from which to consider 21st century themes.

Yet, why would one want to do this? Customs and Excise is an obscure and little-studied institution. The red and green lanes in the airport remind us that they're there and we might have encountered Customs officials as B-grade detectives in novels and films about drug smuggling, but we have little idea of how they work in practice.³ This murkiness applies as well to their position in South African historiography where, despite a venerable tradition of work on the state,

1 My thanks to Meredith McGill for explaining the significance of this date.

2 Henry Sayer, *The Homeward-bound Passenger's Companion, via the Cape; Compiled for the Use of Residents in India, and the British Possessions Adjacent Thereto; with a Tariff of Customs Duties*. ([London]: C. Beckett, 1849. Quotations from pp., 10-11, 36.

3 Gerald Seymour, *The Untouchable* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2014).

Customs and Excise has remained largely untouched, understandably so, since no sane scholar would venture into a terrain that appears so tedious.⁴ However, in this post-humanist object-oriented age, the question of how objects are governed has become of more than passing interest. The South African scholarship has produced an especially deep vein of work on the governance, identification and control of bodies and this work prompts the question of how the control of objects interfaced with, or indeed shaped these broader systems. Given that Customs and its governance of objects long pre-dated systems of bureaucratically classifying people, this question becomes pertinent, more especially so, when one considers that the roots of colonial customs rests with Company rule at the Cape where slave bodies were treated as dutiable commodities.⁵

As the arm of the state that governs mobile objects (or “matter in transit” as one official said), Customs and Excise and their procedures can illuminate contemporary themes of recalibrating the human and non-human. The first part of the paper describes how officials in the Custom House went about their business. The second relates this material to debates on object-oriented ontology.

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Customs and Excise is an instrument of taxation and revenue generation. In England, Customs (taxing of goods travelling over borders) is the older part of the equation dating back to the thirteenth century while Excise (taxing of goods within borders) is a seventeenth-century departure used to raise funds for the Parliamentary forces during the English Civil War. As William Ashworth demonstrates in his superb history, from its inception, Customs was a feudal-

4 There is a small scholarship on the topic from work in the 1920s on the Customs Union and from economic historians working on taxation. Jean Van Der Poel, *Railway and Customs Policies in South Africa, 1885-1910* (London: Longmans, Green, 1933); A. J. Bruwer, *Protection in South Africa*, University of Pennsylvania (Stellenbosch: Pro ecclesia printing works, 1923); M. H. De Kock, *Selected Subjects in the Economic History of South Africa* (Cape Town: Juta, 1924); S. P. Basson, “Regte op invoere as instrument van die ekonomiese politiek: ’n historiese en analitiese beskouing” ([publisher not identified], 1988).

5 De Kock, *Selected Subjects in the Economic History of South Africa*, 82–83.

ridden institution bristling with sinecures and perquisites.⁶ Excise by contrast was rapidly forced to become modern in part because it was so widely hated – excise officers had right of search and entry especially in relation to liquor production, making the excise man a universally reviled figure. Under close public scrutiny, excise officers had to make their procedures visible and defensible. The nature of their work (checking the composition, weight, measure, quality and production processes of goods) promoted scientific standardization while advancing ideas of public health. These procedures standardized and policed the qualities of goods, making visible how, and with what substances commodities had been made. As Ashworth argues, “To tax a good frequently required it to be rendered visible both in terms of its ingredients and in the way it was produced”.⁷ These excise procedures rubbed off on to Customs which by the nineteenth century had become more modernized, a process hastened by the amalgamation of the two departments, a common early twentieth-century event in many parts of the anglophone world.

In discussing how best to make sense of Customs, Ashworth offers some pertinent advice, namely to examine “the everyday labor of those employed by [Customs], and a survey of the physical and social geography in which they operated. ... What was it like to work in the bustle of the hectic, smelly and cosmopolitan space of the London Custom House?”.⁸

Taking a more empire-wide purview, we begin by sketching out how Customs officials went about their business. These daily protocols of the dockside in turn shaped the way they read and interpreted the printed matter that passed through their hands. The focus is mainly on southern Africa with some glimpses of Customs work in British India, Canada, Australia and the US.

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⁶ William Ashworth, *Customs and Excise: Trade, Production and Consumption in England 1640-1845* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

⁷ Ashworth, *Customs and Excise*, p. 147.

⁸ Ashworth, *Customs and Excise*, p. 174.

As Ashworth indicates, in order to tax, one has first to define and much Customs business hinged on deciding what an object actually was so that it could be assigned to a duty category. This ontological work was spread across a number of points that made up the Customs process. This chain was triggered when any vessel crossed into a 12-mile zone from the coast, the point at which the procedure of importation was deemed to begin (export by contrast was complete after 3 miles out to sea). The Master of the incoming vessel had 24 hours to present his manifest (description of cargo on board for that port) to the clerks in the Long Room (the name borne by all administrative sections of Custom departments across the British empire and taken from Christopher Wren's 1671 design for a Custom House on the Thames).⁹ A tidewaiter from Customs was sent out to the ship to keep watch and to search for concealed cargo whether hidden in double hulls or woven into ropes, as smuggled tobacco often was. Meanwhile, on land, the importer framed a bill of entry for his goods, estimating the amount of duty that was paid to clerks in the Long Room. At this point the cargo could be unloaded, a process observed by a landing waiter and then by an examiner who cross-checked documents and scrutinized the cargo, checking its marks and number (the identifying symbols written onto cargo), the number of cases, nature of the goods, their weight, gallonage, quality and so on. If satisfied, the examiner signed a delivery warrant and the goods could proceed. If not, he detained the goods for further inspection.¹⁰

As this description indicates, the procedures of Customs were invariably byzantine and cumbersome, due in part to the feudal history of such departments but also to the logistical difficulties involved in moving goods through a port city which was simultaneously a maritime boundary (although not all Customs posts were port-based).

⁹ Anne Fletcher, *The London Custom House: Souvenir Guidebook* (London: London Custom House, 2000), p. 8.

¹⁰ This account drawn from Western Cape Archives and Records Service, Cape Town, SDK 25, 1930, Customs and Excise. Inspection Report; E. B. McGuire, *The British Tariff System* (London: Methuen, 1939), pp. 131–63.

This context was important and shaped the daily dockside protocols that sought to manage the uncertainty inherent in moving people and goods from sea to land. Port cities are after all deceptive places, funneling good and people from far away places. How did one know that a person was who s/he claimed to be? Like people, objects too could dissemble. Might a walking stick in fact be a lethal weapon?¹¹ Could a shaving brush contain anthrax?¹² Was a coin fashioned into a brooch, real or not (and which was worse)?¹³

This uncertainty was inscribed in the ecology of the port city itself. Port cities aim to pave the ocean and assert sovereignty over the conjuncture of land and sea. While any form of sovereignty is potentially flimsy, hydrocolonial modes are especially so since they are subject to the ocean, both in its physical laws and by the people, objects and animals delivered by vessels docking in the port.

These objects were always under suspicion: they might be diseased, putrefying, contaminated, seditious, obscene, illegal or counterfeit. The hold of a vessel hummed with microbes, weevily maize, rotting cargo, dogs, parrots, reptiles, cattle (both dead and alive). Ships burped bilge water, extruded diseased human bodies, deposited animal carcasses, secreted seditious pamphlets and obscene objects and disgorged undesirable aliens. The ship was indeed an ark of 'nuisances', a term from sanitary inspection much beloved of port authorities.

This uncertainty can also be understood ecologically. Customs Houses, often built on reclaimed land, sought not only to rule, but also to dispel the waves, an ambition apparent in job titles like tide-surveyor, tide department or tide-waiter, terms which undercut their own authority by stressing human dependence on time and tide. Titles of various offices attached to the harbor – Port Captain, Water Police, Beach Magistrate, Receiver of Wrecks (the latter two governing

11 National Archives Repository, Pretoria, SAB, HKE 11, T5/7, 1958, Consolidated List of Prohibited and Restricted Imports and Exports Issued by Customs Departments.

12 National Archives Repository, Pretoria, SAB, DEA 203, A10/11X, 1946, Prohibited and Restricted Imports. Anthrax in Brushware.

13 National Archives Repository, Pretoria, SAB, JUS 1228, 1/171/30, 1932, *Coinage Bill*.

shipwrecks, flotsam and jetsam) – exuded authority, even as they reminded their holders that they were dependent on the ocean and its physical vagaries.

Compounding the complexity of port city logistics were the particular contradictions inherent in Customs procedures. While the bulk of imports passed smoothly through the process, border-line cases occupied much time since Customs officers always sought the highest duty category while importers angled for the lowest. Each disagreements between Customs officials and importers generated a file and the state archives in South Africa abound with such material as committees attempted to adjudicate how objects should be categorized. Was a substance butter or margarine? Could medicinal herbs be classified as tea? Were soup squares the same as stock? Was Gloy (a brand of book-binding glue) identical to glue? Was there any difference between poppy seed in a packet (which could be detained under the opium laws), as opposed to poppy seed for culinary use? Fabric proved particularly tricky as officials debated whether a particular bolt of cloth should be entered as printed tartan or gingham with swatches included.¹⁴

The arbiter of these disputes was the tariff handbook which specified the various categories into which articles were to be assigned for purposes of duty. This process may sound fairly straightforward until one actually sees a tariff handbook, invariably a volume of several hundred pages. In the British imperial world, such handbooks hubristically promised to account for every object in the empire, if not the world but in their very form acknowledged the impossibility of this task – tariff books were generally interleaved, every alternative page was blank to allow officials to write in amendments which were then forwarded to

14 National Archives Repository, Pretoria, SAB, DCU 76, 670/06, 1906, Contravention Customs Union Regulations. JE Bigwood - Standerton. 2 Cases Margarine; DCU 85, 1416/06, 1906, Underentries of Duty: Foo Lee and Company. Tea Described as Herbs: Under Entry; DCU 82, 1091/06, 1906, H Moschke, Pietersburg. "Soup Squares, Re Classification Of; DCU 71, 415/06, 1906, Re Duty Leviable on "Gloy"; DCU 74, 574/06, 1906, Importation of Poppy Seed; DCU 81, 1032/06, 1906, "Gingham" (Flanelette) Tariff Item 175. Imported by Mosenthal Brothers, Limited.

head office for inclusion in the next year's edition.¹⁵ One only has to flip through these volumes to grasp the intricacies of making adjudications about commodities. With dizzying speed, one moves from haberdashery, to haggis to hair, from palisade fencing to pancake flour (always of course with a get-out clause EOHP – except as otherwise herein provided).

In the face of these contending tides of meaning, officials were inevitably driven to the objects themselves, sniffing, tasting and feeling the items in front of them in an attempt to classify them. They minutely checked thread counts in fabric, they opened cartons to verify the weight of items, they tested alcohol to see whether its label matched its content.

The type of labor involved in such procedures is well-captured in the instructions from a Calcutta Customs manual on how to check thread count (in this instance reckoned by area of fabric in relation to weight). The length part of the equation was fairly straightforward and involved measuring the selvage. Gauging width however presented various problems and Customs officials were enjoined to proceed as follows:

A double-fold of the cloth should be laid on the table and the creases stroked out, so that it may lie perfectly flat. The measuring rod should then be placed across the cloth, and the finger and thumb run down the rod on each side of it across the cloth so as to once more flatten the creases. Care should be taken in doing this to see that whilst the creases are smoothed out, stretching is avoided and the warp threads remain perpendicular to the rod. The measurement should then be recorded.

Officials also had to think about the type of material they were dealing with:

In taking these measurements the peculiarities of the cloth under measure should not be lost sight of. Thus cloths, like grey shirtings, that are pressed

15 South African Railways and Harbours, ed., *Official Railway Tariff Book* (Johannesburg: Office of the General Manager of Railways, 1911).

but not folded gain slightly, but by no means uniformly, in breadth in the course of pressing; whilst those that are folded, like mulls, lose in the folding more than they gain in the pressing. ... Loose cloths like mulls, especially if shrunk in the course of manufacture, are naturally liable to bag and stretch more than others, and owing to their flimsiness it is difficult to apply the first method of measurement satisfactorily; such cloths also are liable to drag in the weaving towards the end of a long piece, and the folds will sometimes not coincide with the weft. Due allowances should be made for these characteristics.¹⁶

These procedures required that Customs official apprentice themselves to the objects they worked with, learning the minute peculiarities of the commodities under their jurisdiction. In effect, they functioned as a type of assayer, learning to define and determine composition by touch, feel and handling.¹⁷ In larger Customs stations, examiners and surveyors could specialize in particular areas and in big US establishments, officials were recruited from particular industries to capitalize on their dedicated expertise in certain classes of goods. In smaller establishments, jack-of-all-trades officers developed skills of identification and classification across an astonishing array of commodities.

Such examiners spent their days amongst a gallimaufry of objects, from the predictable (sugar, rice, coal) to the obscure (galloons, gimps and petershams -- twisted, worsted or reinforced cord used in upholstery and millinery). Examiners had to be 'object literate' and to know the 'character' of each item, moving from the gigantic (furnaces, bridge parts, motor cars) to the miniscule (needles, fish hooks, press studs).

These economies of attention produced an intimacy between official and object. In response to a query about the status of poppy seed for use by bakers, a Collector of Customs sent the following almost loving account of a fancy bread: "The seed is not only used for garnishing bread and cakes but a bread cake, a sample of which I send under separate cover, made by the importers of the seed,

¹⁶ *Merchandise Marks Manual* (Calcutta: Government Printer, 1910), pp. 35-6.

¹⁷ I am indebted to Geeta Patel for this insight.

which has, in addition to garnishing, a small quantity – about a teaspoonful – a sweetening mixture added, in the center of the article of food”.¹⁸

The examiners’ intimate knowledge of commodities encompassed a quasi-biographical appreciation of the object’s trajectory from its origin to its destination. With regard to cloth, examiners were aware of the market for which it was headed and how it might change once there. In southern Africa, any surveyor would have known that German and Italian prints and sateens once imported, changed their guise and entered the market as loin clothes for the “native trade”.¹⁹ Item 47 of the South African tariff was entitled “Shawling” defined as “wraps for covering the back and shoulders”, more specifically “cotton scarves, handkerchiefs and mats exceeding in size 1,600 square inches, that is 40 inches square or its equivalent whether imported singly or joined together by a fringe or weft”.²⁰ Most officers however were aware that once in the market, such “shawling” transmogrified into “kidungas, cadungas, Zanzibar shawls, ... Congo Mats and are sometimes invoiced as Printed Calicos, Gordon Tartans, Animal Pattern Calicoes”.²¹ In one instance an examiner rejected a consignment of flannelette under item 47 since the fabric was generally used for cheap underskirts and hence could not be classified as shawling.²² A conflict about whether a white honey-comb bed covering was a quilt or a blanket was settled by an official who decreed the item a quilt since it was used as such “by every European family” in Johannesburg.²³

Examiners and surveyors had to pay painstaking attention to how objects were inscribed, a skill necessitated by trade mark and copyright legislation as well as the Merchandise Marks Act, an imperial provision of 1887 specifying that all

18 National Archives Repository, Pretoria, SAB, DCU 74, 574/06, 1906, Importation of Poppy Seed.

19 National Archives Repository, Pretoria, SAB, DCU 82, 1072/06, 1906, German Prints.

20 National Archives Repository, Pretoria, SAB, DCU 82, 1074/06, 1906, Selampores.

21 National Archives Repository, Pretoria, SAB, DCU 82, 1074/06, 1906, Selampores.

22 National Archives Repository, Pretoria, SAB, DCU 81, 1022/06, 1906, Printed and Calicos.

23 National Archives Repository, Pretoria, SAB, DCU 79, 987/07, 1907, Interpretations of the Tariff.

commodities passing through Customs bear a mark of origin indicating where they had been made (Made in England, Made in Australia and so on).²⁴ This legislation not only specified that objects had to be marked but also *where* the inscription had to appear: on the stem of pipe, the face of clock, every two yards on selvedge of fabric, on the address section of postcard, on the rind of the bacon, the flange of the printing block and so on. The question of how this information was to be imprinted on the object produced yet further regulations and the handbooks on the topic are veritable thesauruses of inscription replete with instructions on how objects had variously to be “impressed, embossed, die-stamped, cast, engraved, etched, printed, applied, stamped, incised, stenciled, painted, branded, molded, punched, cast”, along with an appropriate range of adverbs: indelibly, visibly, conspicuously, durably.²⁵

A further dimension pertained to the language and script in which the mark of origin was to be inscribed. Any script could be used as long as Roman lettering was also present. Any language could be present but in the British empire, English generally had to appear as well. Yet, in following this injunction, importers had to be careful since language itself could legally be construed as a mark of origin. Or, as one hand book explained, “if any names, trade-marks, or descriptions in the English language or any English words at all appear on the goods, wrappings or containers, they are considered as purporting to be of British origin”. Goods produced outside Britain but with English markings had to carry clear signs of what was called “counter-indication” showing that despite the English words on the product, the commodity had not been manufactured in Britain. Exporters from the US were advised that “the words ‘Made in the U.S.A’ in letters as large and as conspicuous as any other English wording, should be printed on every article, label, or wrapper bearing any words in the English language.” In some cases, the mania for inscription went to extraordinary lengths. In the case of writing paper, “if so much as a watermark containing English

24 Howard Payn, *The Merchandise Marks Act, 1887, with Special Reference to the Important Sections and the Customs Regulations and Orders Made Thereunder, Etc.* (London: Stevens & Sons, 1888).

25 All quotations from Roberta P. Wakefield, *Foreign Marks-of-Origin Regulations* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1947).

lettering appears in sheets of paper, a counter-indication of origin must also be watermarked into each sheet, wherever the water-mark occurs”.²⁶ In other instances Roman lettering, like the “K” and “S” stamped onto Japanese copper ingots did not require counter-indication: “such letters are not exclusively English, being common to all nations who use the Latin alphabet”.²⁷

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At this point, dedicated followers of object-oriented ontology (OOO) will probably be raising their voices in disagreement. OOO is adamant that it is not about relations between objects, their mobility or the networks in which they are embedded. Graham Harman is unequivocal: “the network into which any object is thrust can only scratch the surface of its actuality”. An object is “forever withdrawn from the swirl of exterior factors into which it is embedded”.²⁸ OOO is rather like a radical secular atheism -- there can be no pattern, context or network with which to make comforting sense of an entity: all such schemas constitute a mere onto-theology.

Speculative realists like Steven Shaviro have softened this stance by outlining the legitimacy of both a radical OOO approach and a network-oriented understanding. The former “addresses our sense of the thingness of things: their solidity, their uniqueness, and their thereness. ... every object is something, in and of itself, and ... an object is not reducible to its parts, or to its relations with other things, or to the sum of the ways in which other entities apprehend it.” The latter by contrast is “an equally valid intuition: our sense that we are not alone in the world, that things matter to us and to one another, that life is filled with encounters and adventures.”²⁹

26 Wakefield, *Foreign*, p. 83.

27 Anandram Mewaram Jagtiani, *A Practical Companion to the Indian Merchandise Marks Act IV of 1889* (Karachi: Mercantile Press, 1901), pp. 66-67.

28 Harman, *Tool-being*, 247 and 259.

29 Steven Shaviro, *The Universe of Things: On Speculative Realism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 32.

Where do the objects of Customs and Excise fall on this continuum? Most objects that passed through Customs came under the jurisdiction of the tariff handbook and so entered a grid of comparative relations. In 90 per cent of cases, these items passed smoothly through the Customs process. These were the objects and entities that moved along a network and a set of relations and would hence be of little interest to OOO.

Yet, not all objects made it through Customs and some got stuck there. In addition to those goods in dispute between importer and customs official, there were also goods that had been abandoned, never claimed or detained on grounds of being seditious, obscene, pirated or suspicious in some way. These latter items were routinely destroyed, dumped at sea or sold on rummage sales (or in some cases stuck in a liminal zone, like the dog illegally imported from Delagoa bay that ended up on a tug in Durban harbor but was never allowed to land). On one level, these procedures to annul objects were bureaucratic necessities, enabling officials to account for items placed in their custody. Yet these acts of destruction were accompanied by fanfare and protocol in excess of mere bureaucratic requirement. In mid-nineteenth century colonial Natal, the procedure for disposing of unclaimed guns was elaborate: at least two officers had to accompany the guns to sea and dump them into the ocean precisely three miles from the coast. On their return, a certificate of destruction had to be signed in the presence of two additional officers.³⁰

These were objects that had to be removed from their networks and relations. We might dub them failed objects, a category of considerable interest to OOO since it takes us away from the tyranny of context. Harman again: “In an age when all the intellectual momentum belongs to context, continuity, relation, materiality, and practice, we must reject the priority of each of these terms, focusing instead on ... opacity”.³¹ These troublesome objects are of considerable

30 National Archives Repository. Pietermaritzburg. CSO 1530, 1897. Thiselton. Regarding the Landing of a Valuable Dog on Tug Awaiting Landing; CSO 944, 1884. Collector of Customs Asking that the Controller of Arms may be allowed to use his Discretion with Regard to the Destruction of Certain Old Guns and Pistols.
31 Graham Harman, *Immaterialism: Objects and Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity, 2016), 19.

interest since they retain “a hidden reserve of being, one that is never exhausted by and never fully expressed in its contacts with other objects”.³²

“Hidden reserve” and “opacity” – these were precisely what struck Customs officials about the suspect objects they apprehended. Often examiners imagined these objects to have hidden and dangerous microbial properties. Banned films were described as being unfit for human consumption as though they had some bacterial infection; condoms inscribed with undesirable slogans or images were deemed “harmful to health”;³³ indecent items were considered “injurious to the public well-being”, while undesirable publications apprehended in the post were likened to foreign bodies.³⁴ In Australia, suspect magazines were regarded as physical contaminants, immune even to the bleaching agent used in the manufacture of their pages. As one official noted, this disinfectant that should have been able to “militate against disease”, but in the face of the obscene content of the magazine was somehow rendered useless.³⁵

These comments will sound familiar to anyone conversant with imperial logics: the paranoid imaginings of colonial border officials attempting to keep ‘foreign bodies’ at bay through immigration restriction and quarantine measures. For Harman, such paranoia would be unremarkable since in his view, all networks are paranoid, “an infinite system of conspiratorial relations. Individual things have lost their privacy completely, as though their phones were tapped, and their essences bugged by the system as a whole”.³⁶

In this formulation, the object of OOO appears rather haunted and, as feminist commentators have noted, the field is not without its own ghosts. As Katherine Behar observes, OOO has nothing to say about those who have been objectified. She captures this tendency well in her account of Ian Bogost’s “Latour Litanizer”,

32 Shaviro, *Universe*, 30.

33 National Archives Repository, Pretoria, SAB, DEA 199, A10/5X, 1939. Prohibited and Restricted Imports. Indecent and Objectionable Articles.

34 National Archives Repository, Pretoria, DEA 199, A10/6X, 1922, Prohibited and Restricted Imports. Objectionable Literature.

35 Heath, *Purifying Empire*, 115.

36 Harman, *Tool-being*, 261.

a program that generated Flickr images randomly selected from Wikipedia. In one instance, the Litanizer selected a picture of a woman in a bunny girl outfit. Bogost immediately recoded the program so that it would no longer tag “sexy”, “woman” or “girl” and would stick to “object”, “thing” and “stuff”. Yet, this decision raised as many problems as it sought to solve. As Behar notes, for an object-oriented philosophy to exclude an image of an objectified woman was a strange choice. “In setting out to correct the ... problem about who counts as a subject ... OOO produces the ... problem concerning what counts as an object”. In the case of the bunny girl, “‘being objectified’ prevents ‘being’ in the ontological category of ‘object’”.³⁷

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But what then of reading? This question will of course strike OOOers as strange. An object in their schema can’t be “read” since it is “withdrawn” from relations, keeping its own counsel and hidden reserves. How then might one talk about the ‘reading’ that Customs official undertook from an OOO or speculative realist position?

Most obviously, officials were object-oriented. They spent their days amongst streams of objects, arguing about minute differences. Take, for example the category of “Cards” whose subsections included “Boy Scout enrolment; Carmolac colour; Christmas, birthday, pictorial and New Year and other cards; Pattern, for attaching patterns; Shade, composed of cut samples of sewing cotton; Show; Visiting; Wedding”.³⁸ This list suggests the attention which officials had to lavish on commodities. They attuned their bodies, senses and intellects to these objects, becoming adjunct apparatuses to the stream of commodities with which they dealt. They were rather like objects among objects.

Their modes of reading were object-oriented, a tendency perhaps clearest in how officials dealt with printed publications. When assaying printed objects, one

³⁷ Katherine Behar, “An Introduction to OOF,” in Katherine Behar (ed.), *Object-oriented Feminism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 21.

³⁸ Official Railway Tariff Book, 432.

might anticipate that examiners paid most attention to the words in the publication under scrutiny. Yet in many instances, writing was not necessarily prioritized since it constituted only one dimension of the object as a whole. Instead the printed object was apprehended in its entirety or adjudged by a range of material features. French novels were hence often categorized as undesirable simply for being French or on the basis of their illustrations. Book covers provided another avenue for assaying a publication, with the offending jacket being enough to have the object banned or burned. In other instances, officials followed a sampling method in which random passages from suspect texts were selected, rather like an excise man testing a consignment of alcohol. As already indicated, officials apprehended objects in material ways, often imputing microbial properties to inorganic substances.

The reading that officials did was hence organized around, and governed by the object. Officials were like adjunct apparatuses, becoming object-like in the dockside mangle of objects. So, perhaps rather than speak about object-oriented reading, we might think of reading-oriented objects.

The reading protocols that these South African officials formulated and refined would be adopted and extended by subsequent censorship regimes.³⁹ Growing anti-Communism from the 1920s onwards gave the Customs department further occasion to extend its scope. However, as the Cold War started to gain ground and become an international “security issue”, and as more films started to circulate (something for which Customs lacked viewing facilities), censorship was taken over by the Department of the Interior (with their specially built “censorship theatre”) and then by a fully-fledged censorship apparatus under the apartheid regime.⁴⁰

39 Western Cape Provincial Archives and Records Services, Cape Town, T 815, 1505. 1904-1905. Complaint by Mr Speelman Regarding the Detention of Certain Books by the Customs; T 912, 2145. 1905. Detention of Book “Vechten en Vluchten van Beyers en Kemp”; AG 1367, 296, 1904, Detention of Book “The Mobile Boer”; AG 1441, 4790, 1904, Book Entitled “De Dochter van den Handsuffer [Handsopper]”: Detention of.

40 National Archives Repository, Pretoria, DEA 209, A10/26X. Prohibited and Restricted Imports. Censorship of Films. Precedent. TES 696, 1963, Censors: Appointment and Remuneration of Members. 3) Board of Censors: Staff For.

At the height of this latter regime, Nadine Gordimer observed that the South African censorship system treated literature “as a commodity to be boiled down to its components and measured like a bar of soap at the Bureau of Standards”.⁴¹ Gordimer’s analogy was mainly intended to belittle the censorship board and she does so by comparing them to the body in charge of quality control and standards which had its origins in Customs and Excise. While Gordimer was probably unaware of this genealogy, her comments nonetheless usefully summarize the origins of censorship, a process having its roots in the practices of Customs officials in port cities.

We might usefully describe the ways in which Customs officials (and indeed censors) read as apprehensive. Not only did they apprehend the object by seeing it physically and mentally, at times they literally apprehended a commodity, seizing and detaining it on grounds of being pirated, seditious or obscene. These objects elicited suspicion, producing fear or apprehensiveness for what they might contain.

We might think of this apprehensive reading as arising from Customs examiners as reading-oriented objects rather than object-oriented readers. As objects in a mangle of objects, these examiners “read” the entities they encountered but these always seemed elusive, to possess some hidden reserve which made the examiners apprehensive.

Some Conclusions

I was initially driven to read some of the OOO material through working in the Customs and Excise archive itself, composed of files full of objects. In some cases, as we have seen, these were actual objects (swatches of fabric, a packet of poppy seed, product labels), but mostly I encountered endless lists of things in schedules, inventories, catalogues, compendiums and tariff manuals. Alongside these were debates on how to interpret these schedules and disputes on what an

⁴¹ University of the Witwatersrand, Historical Papers, Nadine Gordimer Collection, A 3367, F 3, Censorship in South Africa, Letter to the Secretary of the Interior, 23 January 1973.

object actually was. As we've already seen, these were questions like: Are medicinal herbs the same as tea? Is a substance butter or margarine? Is a soup square the same as stock? Could a sheep's ear tag be classified as an agricultural implement?

This gallimaufry of entities drove me to start reading debates in object-oriented ontology (OOO) and speculative realism. The Customs and Excise archive and the OOO scholarship soon started to resemble each other. Take for instance the following sentence from Harman's *Tool-being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* which could as well be a description of a scene at the Custom House. "We never manage to rise above the massive clamor of entities, but can only burrow around within it. ... the sanctuary of the human ... has been jettisoned in favor of a dense and viscous universe stuffed absolutely full with entities".⁴² Customs houses were located in noisy ports, clanging with machines, trains and shouting stevedores. Customs officials burrowed around in cargo, checking and examining items, literally spending their days in a dense world stuffed with entities. As we've seen, Customs examiners had to pay minute attention to these commodities, checking their weight, composition, and quality. As assayers of these goods, they were apprenticed to the cargo they encountered, becoming an apparatus attached to the commodity, an objects among objects.⁴³

The inventories beloved of OOO (with their "jarring staccato of real being" In Ian Bogost's words) likewise constitute the currency of the Customs archive.⁴⁴ Indeed the files with their profusion of objects rather resemble an OOO laboratory while Graham Harman, the OOOist-in-chief sounds rather like a Customs officer debating the status of an object.

Far then, from being an obscure entity, Customs and Excise provides an unexpectedly rich site from which to consider a range of contemporary themes

42 Graham Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (Peru, IL: Open Court Publishing, 2002), 295.

43 I am indebted to Geeta Patel for this point.

44 Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, or What It's Like to Be a Thing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 40.

while offering a laboratory from which to engage with debates on the human and non-human. These archives are hence far less tedious than most southern African scholars have thus far assumed them to be.