Dear Leigh
(or: So Boundary as Not to be an Object at All)

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Dear Leigh,

It's been far too long since we talked. I've missed it—not just over the past year and a half, when it has been impossible, but for several years before that. Somehow I let those late night conversations with you and Geof slide, especially during those five decanal years, when the urgent preëmpted. My loss; my forever loss. I can't tell you how much I regret having let them slip away.

You've been on my mind, recently. There are so many things I'd like to talk to you about—questions I want to ask. Especially about *boundary objects*: that fabulous idea of yours that went platinum—that infectious term, that falls so trippingly off so many people's tongues these days, or at least off their keyboards. So I thought I'd try to write down some of the questions here.

Now I'm no sociologist, as you know. How often we laughed about that—about how, after my *Objects* book came out,[1] people said that I didn't have an ounce of social awareness in my body—that (such a layered irony) I was "missing the sociality gene." I'm not even much of an STS-er, though I've tried to be a flying buttress—a supporter from the outside. Peripheral, for sure—whether legitimate or not I'll let others decide. No matter. It never got in the way of our musings. That's one of the things I loved.

I have three questions—or maybe four. None are new. But what I have been wondering, recently, is whether they aren't all related, whether they don't all boil down to the same thing. So let me give them a shot.

The first question may seem minor. Some may even, uncharitably, think of it

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[1]*On the Origin of Objects*, MIT Press, 1996.

as carping. But I don't think it is. It even came up in your original paper with Jim.[2]

You say—as so many people have recited—that boundary objects are:

> "[O]bjects which are both *plastic enough* to adapt to local needs and constraints of the several parties employing them, yet *robust enough* to maintain a common identity across sites."[3]

On the face of it, that seems innocent enough. Certainly inspiring. My question, though, has to do with the *voice* it is uttered in—with the perspective from which it surveys/surveils the situation. At a minimum, the statement is one that sees—characterizes, describes—the two (or more) sites in which boundary objects exist, in which they play a role, in which they are unsettlingly stabilized. Per se, that doesn't seem particularly challenging. Academic work, intellectual work, "registers," as I would put it (more on this in a moment), other peoples' and communities' practices. Perhaps especially sociological work (though how would I know?).

It's the phrase "robust enough" that is tricky. I've just never been able to get it out of my mind. It's like one of those songs that invades you, and won't let go. Robust enough *for whom?* Who gets to say so? And why?

If one were a naïve (or even sophisticated but still vanilla) realist, one might think that the object's robustness would be a *fact about it*—a property it has, relevant to its use in different sites—a fact or property that trumps or transcends or at least territorializes its employ by the parties implicated in the boundary practices.

But you're not naïve—and even if you are a realist, your flavour, if memory serves, is not vanilla. Moreover, Donna is lurking in the audience. And even if she isn't lurking in the audience, she is lurking somewhere. This is no God's eye mind-fuck view of robustness[4]—not from *you*. On the contrary, the stabi-

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[2]Susan Leigh Star and James R. Griesemer, "Institutional Ecology, 'Translations' and Boundary Objects: Amateurs and Professionals in Berkeley's Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, 1907–39," *Social Studies of Science*, Vol. 19 (1989), 387–420.
[3]Op. cit., 393; emphasis added.
[4]Haraway, Donna, "Situated Knowledges," *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (Autumn,

lization of the object *as* an object—the norms and practices and pragmatic projects that identify and coalesce and harden the object and box it on the ears to make sure it behaves like an object—those things, according to you and your type (OK: my type too), are exactly specific to the kinds of "parties" that you refer to in the description.

So I get the boundary-negotiating parties. No problem there. What I'm wondering about is what party *you* are hanging out at. Who else was invited? Oh—and can I come?

One answer—not a deep answer, and not your answer, I'll hazard—is to back up and say that all that is going on, in these boundary object situations, is that the several parties to the negotiations *use the same term, fill out the same form, categorize under the same label, pile things up in the same repository*. But that's kind of vapid—and anyway, it doesn't answer the question. Who gets to say that they *are* the same term, form, label, repository? Homophones aren't thereby boundary objects, after all. There has to be some warrant for the "sameness," for the claim of commonality or contested identity across the boundary.

Another answer is that the robustness arises *from the durability and persistence of the common use*. But that can't be right, of course. Among other things, it's backwards. What you say—and what you surely mean, since it is so sensible—is that the object is robust enough *for this durability and persistence to arise*. It's a *reason* for the durability; not simply a *name* of it.

Here's a funny example. I've always found the technical notion of a *variable* to be a fascinating case of a boundary object. It has played a role in catalysing cooperation and collaboration between computer science and logic—in bringing them together, and also, interestingly, in keeping them apart. My sense is that the notion operates at the right scale, and that it structures work processes and normative practices appropriately. But variables—their values, their bindings, even what they are—are remarkably unsettled, as between the fields. Historically unsettled too. Torvalds and Russell and Quine precisify variables

1988), pp. 575–599.

in intriguingly different ways. The differences lie fallow, allowing the fields to pursue their own concerns, and maintain their identity, yet feel—and genuinely be—collaborative.

But robust? Sure, in a way—I can see how one can say that. But I don't think that my saying so is innocuous. So anyway, that's my first question: what is it to say that a boundary object is "robust"—and who gets to say so, and how?

My second question has to do with *objects*. Not, I might say, with the qualifier. Boundaries are fine; I live there, pretty much, as so many of us do. ("Hey, you're a loner? I'm a loner, too! Let's get together!") *Objects*, though—I've never been sure about them. I guess that's why I had to write that book. I attribute it in part to coming from the North—or at least from outside. If you live in the city, hang out in offices, measure drinks in shots, you are certainly surrounded by objects: mutable mobiles, artifacts of human manufacture, chopped up and categorized and sold. But in the desolation of the tundra—in the crush of white-water, in rocky canyons and flooded plains—I have no idea what or where the objects are.

Now I will say that you mean *less* by the term 'object' than just about anyone I've ever read. And that's a good thing. Here are some of your words: an object is "a set of work arrangements that are at once material and processual;"[5] an object is "something people … act toward and with;"[6] and so on. So I am not accusing you of saying anything specific!

Nevertheless, I have two worries about objects—or maybe not worries, but at least questions. Put it this way: understanding the world in terms of objects is a *very particular* way to understand it—hugely useful but also fraught, consequential, and violent. Or to use my registration language: to register the world in terms of objects is a particular *kind* of registration—not universal, not ubiquitous, and certainly not innocent.

Over the last decade or so I have taught courses on what philosophers call

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[5]Susan Leigh Star, "This is Not a Boundary Object: Reflections on the Origin of a Concept," *Science, Technology, & Human Values* 35(5), 601–17, 2010; p. 604.
[6]Op cit., p. 603.

"nonconceptual content," which for present purposes we can think of as ways to understand the world *not* in terms of objects. Think of the drenched smell of a wet forest in the spring as the snow recedes and the moldy mat of fall leaves begins to breathe. Or of the speed of your second tennis serve, just "that much slower" than the first. Or of the capitalist orientation of shopping malls. Or of what 'it' refers to, in the sentence "it is raining." These aren't great examples, because I've referred to them—and reference objectifies. Over single malt I could do better. But you know, and I know, that you know what I mean.

For now, my question is this. Could the following be true:

1. That you know perfectly well that we don't just take the world in terms of objects—that is, don't take the world to consist of nothing but objects;[7] but

2. That it is exactly *object registration in particular* that you think plays the role of dynamic, non-consensual, inter-communal sharing you were getting at?

There is some reason to suppose that this might have been your view. In their imposition of identity on some kind of background flux—in their abstraction or ignorance of a wealth of fine details—objects may have "just the right stuff," may play just the right kind of role in processes of negotiation and renegotiation, for you to feel that *they*, in specific, are of the right ontological sort to play the boundary role. It is not a crazy thought. Here is something I myself once wrote, along these very lines:

"I sometimes think of objects, properties, and relations[8] as the long-distance trucks and interstate highway systems of intentional, normative life. They are undeniably essential to the overall integration of life's practices—critical, given finite resources, for us to integrate the vast and open-ended terrain of experience into a single, cohesive, ob-

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[7]Plus properties and relations; cf. the next footnote.

[8]Like most philosophers, I take properties and relations to be object paraphernalia—entities inexorably associated with, tying together, distinguishing, etc., *objects* (an idea with etymological support: that properties are *proper* to objects).

jective world. But the cost of packaging up objects for portability and long-distance travel is that they are thereby insulated from the inexpressibly fine-grained richness of particular, indigenous life—insulated from the ineffable richness of the very lives they sustain."[9]

I don't know whether you would agree with any of that. But I will say this: you did write, and not so long ago at that, that objects are "embodied, voiced, printed, danced, *and named*."[10] So maybe your view isn't entirely different.

On the other hand—and this is why I've been making such heavy weather of all this—for many years I have felt that I have been interested in what I take to be paradigmatic examples of your platinum insight, or anyway in situations that *would be* paradigmatic examples, except where this kind of objectual registration is *exactly not going on*.

A couple of quick examples. Think of the alliance between right-wing Christians and Zionist Jews, as regards their alliance on American foreign policy towards Israel. Or another example I remember talking to you about years ago, about cooperation between the American Friends' Service Committee (AFSC), Jewish and Communist social action projects, and such Anabaptist groups as the Mennonites. It turns out, as I discovered over several years, that these communities diverge, in fascinating ways, in their understanding of the selfless approaches to social justice around which they all coalesce (or to put it more carefully, in ways that hark back to my first question: that these groups diverge in their attitude towards that which, given my background, I would call "a selfless approach to social justice"). Or take another example from my own experience: back in the 1980s, a bunch of us organised a big multidisciplinary center, with participation from Stanford and two Silicon Valley research groups at SRI and Xerox PARC.[11] By acclaim, the Center was dedicated to what we all called *theoretical research*. A few years in, however, it emerged that—plus or minus—to the Stanford folks, 'theoretical' meant *non-experimental*, whereas to researchers from the industrial research labs, 'theoretical' meant *non-applied*.

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[9]"The Nonconceptual World," *Indiscrete Affairs*, Vol. II, Harvard Univ. Press, forthcoming.
[10]Star, op. cit., p. 603.
[11]The Xerox Palo Alto Research Center.

The difference created a vortex of all three of the vital characteristics you take to surround the notion of a boundary object.[12]

What strikes me about these examples is that it would be bizarre, or anyway so it seems to me, to call that on which they overlap an *object* of any sort.

My third question, to up the ante a bit, has to do with what has always struck me most about your characterization: your seeming presupposition that the contestation over boundary objects—struggle, negotiation, collaboration, discourse—is conducted solely between and among *parties*. That pesky sociality again! (Frankly, I don't collaborate much. In fact the only C I ever got, in twenty-plus years of schooling, was in kindergarten, in the course "Plays well with others." With respect to others, in fact, I am far more interested in communion than in collaboration or cooperation. That's why I loved those late-night conversations with you and Geof.)

Anyway, what I find missing is that with which I myself primarily struggle and negotiate: not other sociologically salient souls, but *the stuff itself.* That is: what I find missing in your description—to put it contentiously—is *the world.*

Now I need to tread cautiously. Above, I tried to be careful to avoid calling you a closet naïve realist. Now I need to be sure that I don't come across as, or fall into the trap of, being one, too. And so, if pressed on what I mean by 'world,' I can scarcely answer without describing it in terms of ontological constructs (whether I speak in terms of objects, properties and relations of the classical sort, or chronicle it in nonconceptual terms, or say anything at all—or even break out in song) that are particular to the contingencies, interests, biases, predilections, and so on, of my own projects. So it is a little dicey to know what to say, without running afoul of my first question.

The problem is not new, of course. Among other things, it has great religious pedigree. How can one say something about God, without limiting… him/her/it/they/whatever? One route is apophatic theology: the *via negativa*—talk only about what God is *not*. By analogy, here are some things that the world *isn't*. It isn't a great stew of objects, properties, relations, etc. Those are

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[12]Star, op. cit.

ontological or ontic structures, and inexorably plural. It isn't one—or two, or countable. It isn't what I think it is (the first step towards humility). But a *universa negativa* is not going to be enough to get at my fourth question—or to get at what this whole letter is about. So I need to do better.

In the *Objects* book, to deal with this problematic, I talk about *registration*, as I've said a couple of times already. The way I frame it, as you remember, and as I have already indicated here, is to say that one *registers the world in terms of objects, or features*, or whatever. More specifically, I use the world *ontology* ("what there is") for "the registered world"—i.e., for the world *as registered*. But now here's the critical move. *That which one registers*—that which founds or grounds our projects and processes of object registration, that which we and they are in and of and about—well, that is the world, *simpliciter*. So instead of calling it 'God,' or 'The One,' or 'everything,' I am going to call it "*that which.*"

OK, with this in mind, let's go back to the third question. You paint the process of non-consensual collaboration—what I am characterizing as cooperation across registrational difference—in roughly paired terms, with two (or more) symmetrical parties. My own sense, to betray my own background again, is that one cannot understand these processes except as a trinitarian—except by including not just those two parties, but also what I will call "TW" (which you can read as "*the world*" or "*that which,*" depending on your preference). It is not just that the parties use or overlap on the "same" object (which is to say, not the same object—that's your whole point). Nor is it just that they collaborate, or cooperate, or communicate. It is that, in doing so, they are *mutually engaged in the same TW*.

Just a few more points, and I am done. All of them have to do with how we should orient ourselves to the "that which"—to the inexorable TW.

To start with, I presume it is obvious that the "that which we register" underlies all three of the issues I've brought forward.

With respect to the first question, about your voice or perspective, what I understand you (and anyone else, for that matter) to be doing, in saying of a boundary object that it is "robust," is to be *commenting on the adequacy of the registration of the "that which"* with which the boundary parties—and, crucially,

you—are engaged. If one restricts oneself to the *ontic*—i.e., restricts one's attention to objects and properties, or situations, or actions and activities and practices, or processes, or features, or anything else *as registered*—then one deprives oneself of the resources needed in order to talk about the failure or success, or merits and demerits, or even, more to the point here, to the differential characteristics, to say nothing of overlap, of those objectual or other registration processes. If the "same" object differs, for example—as it does in the case at hand—then one lacks the resources necessary to say that the implicated parties are differentially registering the same or overlapping TW in and with which they are mutually engaged.

Robustness, I believe, to put the same point another way, is a *relation between an object and the "that which."* Sans ability to refer to the world, robustness must remain forever opaque. That is what I was never able to let go of in your initial characterization, these many years. And that, too, is why I have brought forward this talk of registration. In order to give voice to your robustness intuition, it seems to me, you have to get beyond or underneath talk that restricts itself to the registered (yes, I admit it: those are my words, 'beyond' and 'underneath'), in order to *disclose the registration activity itself*—a process that necessarily implicates the ineffable TW.

As regards the second question, about objects: if, as I don't recommend, one uncritically assumes that the world *is constituted of objects*—no matter how contested, contingent, multiply interpreted (actually that is odd: do we want to say that the *object* is differentially interpreted, or rather that different objects are the result of differential interpretations or registrations of the world, differential interpretations of the *that which?*)—anyway, if one takes the world to be constituted of objects, then one is liable to think that *objects* are the grounds of difference, or occlusion, or contestation. But I don't think the objects are the grounds of difference. I think *the world thereby registered* is the ground of difference. The divergences in individuated objects reflect differences that come out of differentially registering the shared "that which."

Third—but this is such a big issue that it is going to take a whole additional letter—if one takes the world to consist of objects, I don't think one can articulate an *ethics* worth a damn. For it is not just that one must be responsible

to the objects, in my view, but, and perhaps even more seriously, one must be responsible *for the objects that one takes there to be*. That is, one must take responsibility *for one's (ontological) registration*. And without the "that which," that is not a recognition to which one can give voice. Or forget voice: it is not even a recognition over which one can share a conspiratorial smile.

This all leads directly to my fourth question—which is the last, and may be unfair, but I can't resist. It has to do with *you*, this time, more than with boundary objects—or perhaps with your personal relevance to these issues, rather than with their relevance to an idea of yours. What might seem unfair to some people, though I know it won't seem unfair to you, is that I want to talk, not about your intellectual work, but about your *life*—specifically, about your Jewish-Buddhist-Wiccan-mystical explorations, the paths you traveled and the insights and practices from those dimensions of your life.

Now as you know, I have no use at all for most of what people think the word 'religion' names. I'm deeply anti-sectarian, and the rise of the religious right scares the bejesus out of me. But I wasn't kidding—as you knew perfectly well—when I talked about the apophatic theology and the *via negativa*, and about the impossibility of saying anything about God that isn't restricting. I'm not interested in God, or in death, or in lots of other things one is supposed to be interested in—or, for that matter, in "being unto God," or "being unto death." I am interested in *the world*, and in *being unto the world*. In a nutshell, it is *being unto the world* that's what I've been going on about in this letter.

And here's the thing: I think it's ultimately the world in which you've been interested, too—that it is being unto the world to which your life has stood witness. Or anyway that's what I have—and maybe it has—loved about you. And I know you found partial expression (the only kind we get) in Buddhist practices, and in the coven, and the Santa Cruz mountains, and perhaps more than anything in Geof, and in your friends. And I don't for a moment think that you *ever thought* that that towards which you were oriented, with and in those practices and people, can be captured in any kind of notion of an *object*, no matter how robust.

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So my fourth question is this. Don't you think we can—don't you think it is time for us to—make good on what matters to us about these not-r-word practices and understandings and insights and communities, and infect or inflect our theoretical language, our academic deliberations, our intellectual inquiries, with what they know, with what we've come to know through them?

   I'm not saying I know how to do that. But I will say this: It is that which I have been trying to do, in my own small way, in trying to get outside the object, in bringing forward reference to the "that which," in driving a wedge between ontology and metaphysics, in talking about registration. I am not saying that you will want to go this route. I would love to know where you foresee troubles, how you see it failing, what you feel it misses (besides sociality!). But mostly I know that you know that I have a ton of respect for these other dimensions of your life, as well as for your academic work—and also, and this is what matters, that I know full well, and have huge respect for the fact, that those other dimensions of your life were never *different*, or *other*, or *divorced* from any syllable you ever uttered, from any letter that you ever put to page. We all loved that: to hear you utter a single sentence was to be introduced to the whole full-blooded wondrous Leigh. So I thought it might help to put these few remarks into perspective—so that you could know, at least, what I have been trying to do, in making them.

Enough. I hope a bit of this makes sense—and who knows, maybe someday we will have a chance to talk with you about these things forever.
   Meantime—well, I don't wish you rest. But I do wish you peace.

San Francisco
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