

City University of New York (CUNY)

CUNY Academic Works

Publications and Research

Brooklyn College

2015

Insensate Oysters and Our Nonconsensual Existence

Karl Steel

CUNY Brooklyn College

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

More information about this work at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/bc_pubs/7

Discover additional works at: <https://academicworks.cuny.edu>

This work is made publicly available by the City University of New York (CUNY).

Contact: AcademicWorks@cuny.edu

Insensate Oysters and Our Nonconsensual Existence

Karl Steel

But the life of a man is of no greater importance to the universe than that of an oyster.

—David Hume, “On Suicide”

What is prematurely, or belatedly, called the ‘I’ is, at the outset, enthralled.

—Judith Butler, *Precarious Life*¹

The earliest version of this paper, delivered at the Oceanic New York symposium, tried to change the way people normally write about oysters. Oyster books love to talk about pearls and Chesapeake Bay’s oyster war; they love how oyster middens chart the passage not of cavemen but of “covemen,” who followed the beds of oysters around coasts in a kind of gustatory cartography.² These same writers happily accept the oyster’s fleshy invitation to aphrodisiacal excess. And when they look to New

1 David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion, the Posthumous Essays, Of the Immortality of the Soul, and Of Suicide, from An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding of Miracles*, ed. Richard H. Popkin. 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub., 1998), 100; Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), 45.

2 For a superior discussion of human development and the waters, see John R. Gillis, *The Human Shore: Seacoasts in History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

York City, they love to mourn the loss of its oyster beds, closed by pollution and over-harvesting, perhaps for good, in 1927, once home to trillions of the creatures, a seed-bed for nostalgia for the grittier appetites of New York's presumably populist past.³ I asked us to remember the oyster itself by remembering its shell, calcium carbonate, particularly important now to offset the increasing acidification of the oceans; likewise, I asked that we appreciate how prodigiously a living oyster filters water. What they ingest and don't eat, oysters eject as pseudofeces, which, coated in mucous, fall to the ocean floor to be processed by anoxic bacteria. The cleaner, deacidified water oysters leave behind is what just about everything else needs to live. I wanted us to look to projects to use bring oysters back to New York, like the architect Kate Orff's call for "oystertecture," an "invertebrate architecture" to help abate the force of hurricanes, to keep New York City safe from our future's inevitable Sandies.⁴

3 For a sampling of oyster books, see Mark Kurlansky, *The Big Oyster: History on the Half Shell* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2006); Rebecca Stott, *Oyster* (London: Reaktion, 2004); Drew Smith, *Oyster: A World History* (Stroud: History Press, 2010); Robb Walsh, *Sex, Death & Oysters: A Half-Shell Lover's World Tour* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2009); John R. Wennersten, *The Oyster Wars of Chesapeake Bay* (Centreville, MD: Tidewater Publishers, 1981). The libretto of an 1880 comic opera on the Chesapeake Bay Oyster Wars ("Driven from the Seas: or, The Pirate Dredger's Doom") is available online at <https://digitalarchive.wm.edu/handle/10288/17235>

4 For oyster facts, see the following *New York Times* articles: Andrew C. Revkin, "Students Press the Case for Oysters as New York's Surge Protector," Nov 12, 2012, sec. Opinion; Alan Feuer, "Protecting the City, Before Next Time," Nov 3, 2013, sec. NY/Region; and Douglas Quenqua, "Oyster Shells Are an Antacid to the Oceans," May 20, 2013, sec. Science. See also Kate Orff's "Oyster-Tecture" exhibit at MoMA's 'Rising Currents' 2010 Exhibition, <http://www.scapestudio>.

And that's all of course still important, but that approach still thinks of the oyster primarily there to be used, not as food this time, but as the ocean's purifier and our salvation. The oyster in itself still remains on the outside of our care, distinct from us, exiled to where even Peter Singer left them, with the plants and the rocks, when he notoriously declared that the line between ethically significant and ethically insignificant animals lies "somewhere between a shrimp and an oyster." When Singer himself says that there's "no good reason for avoiding eating sustainably produced oysters," because oysters are no more likely to feel pain than plants do, it seems that no one could possibly remain to care about the oyster as such.⁵ This helplessness, this absolute passivity of the oyster's flesh, will be the object subject of this essay. I see the oyster's passivity and exposure to being injured as not as alien to our human condition, but—maybe predictably—as emblematic of it, countering both the certainty that the chief feature of humans is our agency and that oysters, being just objects, are completely outside the possibilities of justice.

This carelessness about oysters is a rare instance where the thoughts of Peter Singer and his arch-nemesis overlap. Descartes' November 1646 letter to Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, argues that if one believed that animals had thought, like us, and therefore an immortal soul, then one would have to believe this of all animals,

com/projects/oyster-tecture/. I thank Alison Kinney for the phrase "invertebrate architecture."

5 For Singer's oyster opinions, see Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation: A New Ethics for Our Treatment of Animals* (New York: New York Review, 1975), 188; and Christopher Cox, "Consider the Oyster," *Slate Magazine*, http://www.slate.com/articles/life/food/2010/04/consider_the_oyster.html (accessed May 22, 2014).

oysters or sponges included, which are “too imperfect for this to credible [nimis imperfecta sunt, quam ut hoc de iis judicari queat].”⁶ In other words, says Descartes, because oysters are so evidently irrational, animals of whatever type are basically mechanical in their actions, like clocks. The monstrous implications and results of this conclusion are all too easy to trace. While Descartes’ lesson would obviously outrage Singer, both still finally write off the oyster. For both, the oyster, so helpless and so silent, is the point where we get to stop caring.

Our effort to save animals from Cartesianism and even Singerism might begin by giving oysters a voice. Two examples of this rare literary trick follow, one from the tenth century, the other from the fifteenth; readers are invited to continue this work into their own favored oyster literature, perhaps starting with the silent, misunderstood, and helpless victims in Lewis Carroll’s “The Walrus and the Carpenter.” The first of my examples, an Anglo-Saxon riddle, imagines an oyster, “unable to move” (literally, “feþeleas,” footless), whose first-person complaint helplessly anticipates the bestial voraciousness of some man who will tear it open “to devour [freten] my flesh” raw. Then, in the 1540s, we find another talking oyster, in Giovanni Gelli’s adaptation and expansion of Plutarch’s *Gryllus*.⁷ Plutarch features Ulysses’s philosophical argument

6 “To the Marquess of Newcastle,” *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, Vol. III: The Correspondence*, trans. Robert Stoothoff (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 304; for the Latin original in a version easily accessed online, see Renati Descartes, *Epistolae, Pars Prima* (Amsterdam: Blaviana, 1682), 109.

7 For the riddle, I use the edition and translation, with some modifications, from Mercedes Salvador, “The Oyster and the Crab: A Riddle Duo (nos. 77 and 78) in the Exeter Book,” *Modern Philology* 101.3 (2004): 400–419; for Gelli, I use Giovanni Battista Gelli, *Circe*:

with one of his men, since transformed by the sorceress Circe into a pig (Gryllus means “Grunter”), in which they debate the respective advantages of humanity and porcinity. The pig wins. Gelli outdoes Plutarch by letting Ulysses be out-argued by a series of increasingly complex animals until he, at last, convinces a philosophical elephant, and only the elephant, to let itself become human again. The first, and lowest, animal is, of course, an oyster, a former fishmonger, which argues that nature evidently loves oysters best, since, by outfitting them with their own home and clothes, she frees them from having to work.

Both the riddle and the philosophical dialogue grant oysters a voice through what Jane Bennett called the “touch of anthropomorphism.”⁸ However, while Bennett concentrates on the usually unconsidered agency of garbage heaps, earthworms, or power grids, these two oyster works speak not of agency but rather of what the oysters cannot avoid. As in “The Walrus and the Carpenter,” the voice of the oyster is mainly a voice of vulnerability. These unmuted oysters say that they, like us, want to live. They want not to be injured. The oyster of the Anglo-Saxon talks about nothing but its utter helplessness, while Gelli’s oyster agrees to speak only if “those confounded crabs shall not throw a stone between my two shells... [to] make a meal of me.”⁹

Consisting of Ten Dialogues between Ulysses and Several Men Transformed into Beasts, Satirically Representing the Various Passions of Mankind and the Many Infelicities of Human Life, trans. Thomas Brown, ed. Robert Martin Adams (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1963).

8 Jane Bennett. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 99.

9 Gelli, *Circe* 12.

We ought to seek out fictional experiments like these. It's good for our imagination and maybe good for our ethics and maybe even good for oysters. When we read or teach texts like these, we advance the new materialist discovery of agency in places where most people would never expect to find it. It may be exciting, even chilling, to suspend our disbelief to work out how even the most inert of animals might themselves resist, fight back, or make something new. Or call out to us. But the danger of doing this through texts like the riddle and the Gelli is that of thinking the main way to make an oyster, for example, ethically relevant is to throw our voices into it. Another danger may be exactly that "touch of anthropomorphism" in the new materialisms, which is normally a discovery that nonhuman things can, like us, act agentially. This presumes too much about what it means to be subjected to this human condition. As I will argue below, most of our existence is nonconsensual. Therefore, I am proposing that a more thorough posthumanism might work harder to move in the other direction, by concentrating not on agency but on helplessness. I plead guilty to the charge that new materialism posthumanism mystifies the relationship of humans and objects; but it's not that I want to make the table dance, but that I want to concentrate on the obtuseness of objects, humans and otherwise, because "agency" is only one, small way in which we all get to engage with our environment.

I will do this by taking advantage of oysters' most salient characteristic, which is not their voice, not their anxiety, nor their sensitivity, but rather the absence of any of this. As even Peter Singer reminds us, oysters are some of the most insensitive and helpless of animals. For the speaking oysters of the riddle and the dialogue, what

is most notable is not their (temporary) rationality but rather their particular helplessness, their ineluctable condition of injurability, which, more than any animal, exemplifies what Derrida called the “nonpower at the heart of power.”¹⁰ What may be needed, then, is not a “touch of anthropomorphism” to bring oysters over to us but rather a “touch of oystermorphism” to recognize how much of our existence we share with theirs. If we think with oysters, or even as oysters, we might recognize how much of our life is helpless, and how small a part rationality and agency play even in our lives. This essay will finally argue that we are more like oysters than not.

We will therefore leave behind the speaking oysters of the Exeter Riddles and Gelli to get more deeply into the ancient oyster tradition in which Descartes was writing. At least since Pliny, oysters were thought primarily as the animal without motion, without family, and with virtually no capacity to react. In the later fourteenth century, John Trevisa explains that:

The parts of the great world are so ordered and set that the highest point of the lower creature touches the lowest point of the next creature, as oysters and shellfish, which are the lowest in animal kind, surpassing but little the highest form of life of trees and plants, for oysters cannot move except in the way that kelp of the sea wags with the water, as otherwise they

10 Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, trans. David Wills, ed. Marie-Louise Mallet (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 28.

cling to the earth and cannot see nor hear nor taste nor smell; but they feel only when they are touched.¹¹

Philippe de Thaon's *Bestiary* (after 1121) believes that oysters are a kind of stone, which open to receive Heaven's dew "as if they were living creatures," which, having received the dew, "become again without shapes" [puis se revugnent senz faitures].¹²

Like rocks or plants, they were insensitive to pain, with only the barest glimmer of life. This semi-lifelessness meant they were fair game for Christians, even during fast days. Fish were allowed, primarily because their flesh, being so unlike ours, was unlikely to stir up our strength and our pleasure, and because fish were creatures that are, per Aquinas, "merely bodies having in them something of a soul" as compared to "land animals," which are "living souls with bodies subject to them."¹³ At least for those medievals who knew their natural history, oysters were anything but an aphrodisiac; being only barely alive, oysters were perfectly suited—according to one

11 John Trevisa, trans. *Polychronicon*, ed. Churchill Babington, Vol. II (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1869), 181, "Also as it is in þe parties of þe grete world þat þey beþ so i-ordeyned and i-sette þat þe ouermese of þe neþer kynde touche þe neþermeste of þe ouer kynde, as oistres and schelle fishe, þat beþ as it were lowest in bestene kynde, passeþ but litel þe perfeccioun of lyf of treen and of herbes, for þey mowe not meue hem but as culpes of þe see waggeþ wiþ þe water, elles þey cleueþ to þe erthe and mowe noþer see ne hire, ne taste, ne smelle, but onliche fele when þey beþ i-touched."

12 In Thomas Wright, ed. and trans. *Popular Treatises on Science Written During the Middle Ages* (London: Y.R. and J.E. Taylor, 1841), 127.

13 For the Aquinas, see his *Summa Theologica* I.72, "On the Work of the Sixth Day," and II.II.147, Art. 8, "The meats from which it is necessary to abstain."

fifteenth-century civic record—to signify the “sadnesse and abstinence of merth [that] shulde followe...an holy tyme.”¹⁴

In all these writers, oysters function mainly to occupy or delineate the space between inside and outside, in this case, between life and nonlife, animal and plant, and pain and a kind of mostly invulnerable life. Or they function to imagine the helpless materiality of fleshly life, animal life at its most stonelike. They do this in two ways: the first, as materializing life in its foundational quality, where on the scale of existence stones come to life, so here, then, is the bare basis for material animal life; and second, oysters materialize life in its insensible, material exposure to harm, to need, and to simply needing to be here or anywhere at all.

The oyster’s animal existence could not register more faintly on our attention, just as our own basic fleshy existence does not tend to register on ours, until, of course, something goes wrong. For all that, the oyster exists, plant- and rocklike as it is. And as such, the oyster is vulnerable. This inescapable condition is what ties us to oysters most strongly, for whatever the considerable uses of reason and speech, neither can eliminate our fundamental vulnerability.

We’re now in a position to reconsider Descartes’ letter to Cavendish. This short letter only slowly gets to its conclusive denial of thought and soul to nonhuman animals, and this it does only by retreating to faith: Descartes just insists that it would be absurd to believe that oysters, and so on, would have immortal souls. This

14 The quotation is from one account of the Lenten costume John Gladman supposedly wore for his January 25, 1443, revolt in Norwich; cited from Chris Humphrey, *The Politics of Carnival: Festive Misrule in Medieval England* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2001), 66.

is itself a kind of mechanical reflex, a rare instance where Descartes' free thought snaps neatly into place because of instinct. The irony starts earlier though, as much of the letter is instead about the automatism of most human life. It explains that somnambulant humans sometimes swim across rivers they could never cross while awake; for the most part, we need not think in order to be able to eat or walk; and if tried *not* to cover our face as we fell, we would fail. Our fellow humans may themselves be driven only mechanically, even in their most apparently thoughtful moments. All Descartes can say confidently is that, unlike animals, we ourselves can communicate things not relating to our passions, but, at least in this letter, he provides no sustained proof that the communication even of other humans is anything but mechanical repetition. That is, only irrational custom or an equally irrational sympathetic guesswork protects Descartes' human fellows from being eaten, used, and vivisected. This guesswork overlays a more fundamental animal condition that is, for the most part, unconscious. Like other animals, we have our passions; like other animals, our passions have us, and our expressions—of hunger, of self-protection, of motion—are the voice not of our freedom but of our vulnerable bodily existence. To use Descartes' image, we may not be clocks, not entirely, but we are *mostly* clocks.

For even Descartes begins by admitting that the dominant condition of being human is unwilled exposure. Our existence is at its root not chosen, not rational, not elective, but rather, primarily, nonconsensual. We flatter ourselves by thinking that our freedom of choice is our defining characteristic, but we might ask, with Derrida, “whether what calls itself human has the right rigorously

to attribute to man...what he refuses the animal.”¹⁵ We do not chose to be born. We do not chose the conditions of our being here any more than an oyster does. Our much vaunted ability to willingly move, which we hold out over the oysters, still doesn’t untether us from having to live *somewhere*. The same goes for our ability to seek out our food rather than just receive it as the water gives it, like an oyster, because we still must eat. Whatever the powers of our agency to supplement our fundamental inadequacy by building ourselves homes, by wrapping ourselves in clothes and armor, we can never eliminate our vulnerability. We cover ourselves for the same reasons, and with the same necessity, that oysters do.

We can now reconsider and even reverse the standard hierarchy of being that holds humans superior to plants and plants superior to rocks. The tradition is neatly expressed by the fifteenth-century Middle English *Mirror of St Edmund*:

You may see God’s wisdom if you attend to what kind of being God to each creature. Some he has given to be only, without anything more, like stones. To others, to be and to velive, like grass and trees. To others, to be, to live, and to feel, like beasts. To others, to be, to live, to feel, and to judge rationally, like men and angels.¹⁶

15 Derrida, *Animal that Therefore*, 135.

16 In *Religious Pieces in Prose and Verse*, ed. G.G. Perry. 1867. EETS o.s. 26. 2nd ed. (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1913), 22, “His wysdom may þou see if þou take kepe how he [God] hase gyffen to ylke a creature to be. Some he hase gyffen to be anely, with-owtten mare, als vn-to stanes. Till oper to be & to lyffe, als to grysse and trees. Till oper to be, to lyffe, to fele, als to bestes. Till oper to be, to lyffe, to

Usually, in Descartes for example, the last, rational kind of being is thought to be the most important. With reason, or so the story goes, we can do nearly anything. Through it, we can separate ourselves from our immediate circumstances and from every other living thing and then finally, at least in mainstream medieval Christianity, we might live forever through our immortal rational soul rejoined with a perfected body, so escaping vulnerability altogether. But among created things, only angels escape being tethered to the previous kinds of being. For everything else, every kind of being is additive, supplementing rather than replacing the previous ones. We could therefore read this hierarchy of being as one in which the final rational addition is a veneer over an existence that is mostly animal-like, plant-like, or stonelike. Like angels, humans can reason, but they *also* have the same capacities—and accompanying vulnerabilities and needs—as beasts, plants, and rocks.

In this time of climate change, a time, perhaps more than any other, in which the greatest forces are not bounded individuals but rather hyperobjects, far beyond our understanding, we should remember ourselves as being as helplessly and perhaps as ignorantly enthralled to the dangers as any oyster.¹⁷ As Judith Butler observes in *Precarious Life* and *Frames of War*, most of us are

fele, and with resone to deme, als to mane and to angells. For stanes erre, bot þay ne hafe nogte lyffe, ne felys noghte, ne demes noghte. Trees are; þay lyffe, bot thay fele noghte. Men are; þay lyffe, þay fele, and þay deme, and þay erre with stanes, [þay] lyffe with trees, þay fele with bestes, and demys with angels.”

- 17 See Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013); see also Steve Mentz's post-equilibrium ecology, expressed, for example, in “Strange weather in King Lear.” *Shakespeare* 6.2 (2010): 139–152.

compelled to be more exposed than others, most of us unheard, and most made more helpless than others; some of us like to pretend we are exempt, but ultimately, we are all vulnerable. All of us are more or less wittingly in a risk society, and even if we assemble the kinds of amateur scientific knowledge Stacy Alaimo traces in her *Bodily Natures* to learn just what in this environment is poisoning us, we still might find ourselves only more aware of our helpless enthrallment, without having solved the problem of just having to be here.¹⁸ All we might come to know is what the oyster of the Anglo-Saxon Riddle already knows, that something, completely insensitive to us, is coming to devour us and to move on, without knowing.

18 Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010).

