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Nature's Queer Negativity: Between Barad and Deleuze

Steven Swarbrick

Abstract: This essay offers a critique of the vitalist turn in queer and ecological theory, here represented by the work of Karen Barad. Whereas Barad advances an image of life geared towards meaningful connection with others, human and nonhuman, Deleuze advances an a-signifying ontology of self-dismissal. The point of this essay isn't to separate their two views, but to draw out the consequences of their entanglement. Insofar as Barad's work conceptualizes life (and art) as a vitalizing encounter, it cannot, this essay argues, account for the queer negativity at play in environmental politics, including the politics of climate change.

Animism taken to its final conclusion ... is not only a perspectivism but an "enemyism." —

Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics*

To love one's neighbor may be the cruelest of choices. —Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*

In *Cosmopolitics I*, Isabelle Stengers identifies two forms of ecological relation: first, ecologies of *practice*, which enmesh the human subject in ecological networks beyond the human; and second, ecologies of *capture*, which resolve entanglements of self and other into discrete representational figures through different forms of commodification and objectification (36-37). Capture, for Stengers, is what happens when nature actualizes into identity, and when the problematics of practice give rise to divisions of subject/object, nature/culture, and so on.

Drawing on Gilles Deleuze's language of the virtual and the actual, Stengers makes clear that ecologies of practice and ecologies of capture are never fully separable: life's networks exceed and suffuse the object captured; conversely, the object captured provides the grounds for the new. Deleuze defines this intra-activity of the virtual and the actual through the complex concept of "different/ciation," whereby virtual differences or problematics actualize the differentiated objects of representation.¹ Importantly, for Deleuze, different/ciation does not allow us to repair objects of capture through an appeal to notions of assemblage, connectivity, consilience, or symbiosis. Rather, life as different/ciation tends to destroy the very objects that one might otherwise seek to repair. Life, according to Deleuze, is by definition non-ameliorative: ecologies of practice depend on encounters that do violence to the very worlds we wish to build and protect.²

Recent turns to the nonhuman in science studies, queer theory, and posthumanities scholarship have done considerable work to elaborate an ecology of practice that seeks to repair histories of colonial, sexist, homophobic, and environmental violence. Much of this work builds on theories of repair developed by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in her reading of Melanie Klein, and Bruno Latour in his reading of Alan Turing.³ The turn to life in the humanities has emphasized consilience, friendship, and symbiosis. But what would a non-conciliatory relation to life look like? This is the central question posed by Leo Bersani in his essay, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" Turning the anti-pornography argument on its head, Bersani questions whether sex could ever have anything to do with the redemptive values of love or community *without* sacrificing "the inestimable value of sex as ... anticomunal, antiegalitarian, antinurturing, antiloving" (22). Bersani's point is not that sex *can't* be pastoralized; rather, he wonders "how a center of presumably wholesome sexuality ever produced those unsavory margins in the first place" (21).

“As long as it is assumed that pornography violates the natural conjunction of sex with tenderness and love,” he writes, “pornography’s violence” will be read as “a sign of certain fantasies only marginally connected with an otherwise essentially healthy (caring, loving) form of human behavior” (21). Translated slightly, the problem of life (or sex) in the Anthropocene is not how to reverse life’s capture through an ethics of repair (loving more, caring more), but rather to understand how a presumably wholesome nature produced Descartes’s “error”—the separation between mind and world—in the first place.⁴ What is nature such that it births its own extinction?

The recent vogue for Deleuze in new materialist and posthumanist theory has spawned a variety of attempts at repackaging Deleuzian aggression under the banner of life’s endless productivity. Is the earth’s biodiversity being driven to extinction by mankind? Call in the Deleuzian “assemblage,” or the Spinozist *affectus* to save the day. It would seem there is no limit to the fantasy that “life” will live on in this posthuman world, a world that is, let it be said, all-too-human.⁵ The turn to life that a certain reading of Deleuze has inspired recapitulates the fantasy of the Child theorized by Lee Edelman: life, ecology, and *affectus* have become the dominant metaphors for our future birth. Against this form of image-capture, in which we give birth to our own image in the form of connected, ambient life, Deleuze insists on coldness and cruelty as integral to the images of life worth defending. In short, it’s not our inhumanity that concerns Deleuze, it’s that we are not inhuman enough. Recent attempts at shoehorning or pastoralizing Deleuzian ethics recapitulate precisely the thing that Deleuze consistently inveighs against: treating the image of thought as an image of *philia*, love or friendship.⁶ In fact, Deleuze never ceased to insist that thinking is a matter of aggression tantamount to the death drive, an

aggression that redounds not only to the “object” but also to the “subject.” When I love my object, we both fall to pieces.

My goal in this paper is to invite deeper appreciation of Deleuze’s ontological aggression in relation to queer and posthumanist theory. I want to think the violence of encounter in Deleuze’s sense: to think anima (life, spirit, becoming) and animosity (violence, aggression, hate) in the same breath. In my view, there has been a steady draining away of negativity from new materialist, neo-vitalist, and object-oriented theory. Much of this work now operates under the image of life as the unquestionable object of the “good.” What I’m proposing instead is not only an injection of animus into ecological theory but also a queer ethics that runs athwart the optimism of repair.⁷

In contrast to the animism of today, the point is not to figure everything as “life” but to let live by letting go of life’s snare: to will our own lessness in the world.⁸ This is what Foucault famously called *askesis*, practices of the self as a mode of life. While Foucault might disagree, such “modes of life” are already at the core of a certain psychoanalytic thinking about the nature of the drive. For Lacan in particular, the drives operate according to a different temporality of becoming that is not the becoming of the present in which past and future are inflections of “our” time. The time of the drive is closer to what Deleuze calls Aion: a time of pure becoming in which there is no present, and thus no “us” to occupy the present (*The Logic of Sense* 184-185). The circuit of the drive short-circuits.⁹ It is not about reciprocity or the exchange of meaning. The drive is not *for* anything: reproduction of the self, the other, community, or love. Its being for itself, however, is its ethical potential. The drive cruises differences, full stop. If Lacan says true love breaks the other into pieces, that’s because the drive is only interested in this or that singular difference: I love the other not because of what he or she represents but because of this

or that singular difference—differences that are non-exchangeable, that do not add up to meaning or a final goal. As Joan Copjec explains in *Imagine There's No Woman*, in “the Lacanian phrase ‘I love in you something more than you,’” “everything depends on how one interprets the ‘something more’.... That is, the ‘is’ of the beloved is split, fractured. The beloved is always slightly different from or more than, herself. It is this more, this extra, that makes the beloved more than just an ordinary object of my attention” (43).

For my part, I want to attend to this “something more” by arguing for an environmentalism that is non-ameliorative in the Deleuzian sense. What would a posthumanist agenda look like that focuses not only on questions of liveliness and connectivity but also on violence, hostility, and phantasmatic splitting? The meaning of nature in this paper is not the redeeming nature of the pastoral; nature does not repurpose the bad in the form of the good. Nature, I argue, is pharmakological: anima (cure) and animosity (poison) in the same breath. I develop this argument with respect to Karen Barad’s and Gilles Deleuze’s dissonant naturalisms. Whereas Barad advances an ontology of repair geared towards meaningful connection with others, human and nonhuman, Deleuze advances an a-signifying ontology of self-dismissal. My goal in bringing their respective naturalisms together is not to reconcile their differences but to think the violence of their encounter, to ask: is there life without the optimism of repair?

The Dark Precursor

Let me begin by introducing two images. These images are by no means identical. In fact, they differ in a number of important ways, with respect to style, tone, genealogy, and politics. As images that are about the act of imaging, or appearing/not-appearing, they also overlap on the question of desire, on the material un/folding of desire, and desire’s *aim*. In the words of Karen

Barad, we can say that the two images I will present “intra-act”: they are not individual atoms or entities that encounter each other in the void, but are a-part (cut *and* cut-together, in one movement) of the same intra-active web. The first image comes from Barad’s essay, “Transmaterialities: Trans*/Matter/Realities and Queer Political Imaginings.” Barad describes her essay as an investigation into “trans rage.” It’s the nature and trajectory of that rage that I want to interrogate as a form of the ontological aggression that Deleuze identifies. Fixing on an image of lighting, Barad writes:

Lightning is a reaching toward, an arcing dis/juncture, a striking response to charged yearnings.

A dark sky. Deep darkness, without a glimmer of light to settle the eye. Out of the blue, tenuous electrical sketches scribbled with liquid light appear/disappear faster than the human eye can detect. Flashes of potential, hints of possible lines of connection alight now and again. Desire builds, as the air crackles with anticipation. Lightning bolts are born of such charged yearnings. Branching expressions of prolonged longing, barely visible filamentary gestures, disjointed tentative luminous doodlings—each faint excitation of this desiring field is a contingent and suggestive inkling of the light show yet to come. (387)

Barad teases the reader with a creationist story of emergence *ex nihilo*, of something coming into being “out of the blue” where before there was nothing, mere emptiness, void. Readers familiar with Barad’s theory of “agential realism” know, however, that that is not the case, or at least not entirely. The void consists of no-thing, but it is not nothing. The theory of “agential realism” that Barad develops in *Meeting the Universe Halfway* uses the apparatus of post-Bohrian quantum physics to show that all things, from the atom to the atmosphere, are intra-actively determined

through cuts. That is, things are neither present nor absent, real nor unreal, but rather flickering relationalities of trans/matter. If Western philosophers have tended to define being according to the One, from Democritus's falling atom to Spinoza's single Substance, then Barad's point of intervention is the not-One of intra-activity. The latter names "matter's experimental nature—its propensity to test out every un/imaginable path, every im/possibility. Matter is promiscuous and inventive in its agential wanderings" (387). Because *relations* for Barad take priority over *relata*, there are no positive terms "in" nature (hello, Saussure)—in fact there is no "in" of nature at all; instead there are virtual-material entanglements of "spacetimemattering" (or nature/*naturing*). The electrical body that appears/disappears "out of the blue" is therefore no-thing, since the agency of appearing—what Barad calls "agential realism"—cannot be localized or "detect[ed]." The "branching" agency that we perceive as lightning has neither a *to* nor a *from*, neither a filial line of descent nor a reproductive goal (lightning does not re-produce or re-present any *thing*). "No continuous past from sky to ground can satisfy its wild imaginings," Barad writes (387). Rather, lightning is a "dis/connected alliance," a virtual "desiring field" of relational potentialities whose *subtraction* from the human eye makes lightning visible. In an important sense, the human eye-brain is a-part of the very phenomenon "it" perceives, one of the infinite many electrical-neuronal bodies intra-actively entangled with lightning's "arcing dis/juncture."

Allow me to turn now to a second image, this time from Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition*. He writes:

what is this agent, this force which ensures communication? Thunderbolts explode between different intensities, but they are preceded by an invisible, imperceptible *dark precursor*, which determines their path in advance but in reverse, as though intagliated.

Likewise, every system contains its dark precursor which ensures the communication of

peripheral series.... The question is to know in any given case how the precursor fulfills this role. (119)

The “dark precursor” goes by many names in Deleuze’s oeuvre: the virtual “sense-event” in *The Logic of Sense*; “expression” in his writings on Spinoza; “becoming” in the *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* diptych (with Félix Guattari); and “plane of immanence” in *What is Philosophy?* (also with Guattari). It is no wonder, too, since the “dark precursor” names the disparate itself: “We call this dark precursor, this difference in itself or difference in the second degree which relates heterogeneous systems and even completely disparate things, the *disparate*” (*Difference* 120). As such, it is a disguised relation, a mask or *prosopon* for virtual becomings. The dark precursor is difference in-itself, the “there is” of difference, without identity or resemblance; yet it is also the engine (Deleuze calls it the “*differenciator*”) of identity and resemblance. The dark precursor is always *intagliated*, meaning that it reverses itself with every fold, every repetition of difference; it disappears in the after-image, forever eluding capture. If, following Bergson, all matter is light-image-movement, or “luminosity,” then the dark precursor is the negative, non-representational underside of every image of capture. Against the “natural perception” of phenomenology, which presumes a human observer as one of its conditions, Deleuze asserts that “the eye is in things, in luminous images in themselves. ‘Photography, [writes Bergson] if there is photography, is already snapped, already shot, in the very interior of things and for all the points of space’” (*Cinema I* 60). In other words, there are not individual perceivers (human or otherwise) who perceive secondarily; there is perception.¹⁰ The thunderbolts that “explode between different intensities” do so not by adding to an imageless void, but, on the contrary, by *subtracting* the infinite many possibilities for imaging that is light-matter-energy. The human

eye's power to perceive is just one of the many infinite powers afforded by this inhuman perception.

To risk an analogy, the “dark precursor” names the same chimerical, sub-representational reality that Barad calls “agential realism.” Barad’s theory of agential cuts is therefore akin to Deleuze’s idea of difference in-itself. Quantum intra-action, according to Barad, is not an agent or invisible hand but an impersonal/imperceptible apparatus of cutting together/apart the many differences that organic perception takes for granted: differences of self/other, male/female, human/nonhuman, animate/inanimate, and so on. In terms that are at once foreign to Barad’s theory of quantum entanglement and yet necessarily a-part of it, we can say that intra-action determines nature as not-One, as Lacan says of Being in *On Feminine Sexuality*. If Being for Lacan is not-One, that is because ontology in psychoanalysis is already *sexed*, already riven from the start; moreover, the object of desire is not a whole object (though fantasy persuades us otherwise) but a partial object or partial drives. This is Barad’s central point. She asks: “why should we understand parts as individually constructed building blocks or disconnected pieces of one or another forms of original wholeness? After all, to be a part is not to be absolutely apart but to be constituted and threaded through with the entanglements of part-ing” (406). Barad adds: “if ‘parts,’ by definition, arise from divisions or cuts, it does not necessarily follow that cuts sever or break things off, either spatially or temporally ... a patchwork would not be a sewing together of individual bits and pieces but a phenomenon that always already holds together, whose pattern of differentiating-entangling may not be recognized but is indeed remembered” (“Transmaterialities” 406).

Barad’s other name for intra-action is “virtuality,” and here we see another point of overlap with Deleuze. Both theorists aim to think difference in-itself in a manner that does not

reduce difference to identity, resemblance, or opposition. The lightning bolt is neither present nor absent in their examples, but an after-image of virtual differences on the move. “Virtual particles are not present (and not absent), but they are material. In fact, *most of what matter is*,” Barad writes, immediately suspending the “is”-ness of her statement, “*is virtual*” (“Transmaterialities” 395). Here “virtual” should be understood in both cases as the power *to differ*. Virtual cuts occur within phenomena, meaning that the not-One of being applies to all beings regardless of scale; if “I” am cut together/apart with “you,” that cut is internal to who “I am” and not external. We are all Frankensteinian monsters, Barad argues, “a patchwork, a suturing of disparate parts.”

Queer Impossibility

Barad’s insistence on the intra-actions of disparate parts, though similar in ways to Deleuze’s, is ultimately quite different with respect to ethics. I want now to draw out the consequences of thinking the dis/juncture of Barad’s and Deleuze’s respective ontologies.

For Barad, ethics runs through nature, such that ethics is first philosophy. Although Barad, like Deleuze, elaborates a detailed and complex theory of difference qua “agential realism,” the consequences of her argument take us in a far different direction towards an ethics of the “other” and “justice-to-come.” In other words, it is not the violence or indifference of the agential cut that interests Barad, but rather the responsibility to others (human and nonhuman) that follows from it.

In this respect, Slavoj Žižek is right to draw a parallel between Barad and Kant.¹¹ Agential cuts in Barad’s theory are *conditions* in the Kantian sense: “subject” and “object” do not encounter each other as external beings but as folds of the same entangled reality. The cut that makes a difference (material and semiotic) for Barad is a not-too-distant echo of Kant’s

transcendental conditions, only in Barad's hands the apparatus of the cut is disseminated throughout the universe so that the human subject is no longer an a priori requirement of being or appearing. In contrast to a thinker like Quentin Meillassoux, who tries to break the "correlationist" circle by absolutizing mathematics, or Alain Badiou, who absolutizes the human subject, Barad fractalizes correlationism so that the human subject no longer occupies the sole position of thinker, knower, or agent.¹² This is less a break from Kant than a radicalization of the Kantian conditions of meaning.

In keeping with this Kantian tradition, there is the practical side to Barad's theory of entanglement. If all being/appearing/knowing is intra-actively entangled, so that material cuts do not occur between beings but mark the quantum in/separability of existences within nature, then, as Barad puts it, ethics and mattering (in both senses of the verb) are one and the same. There is an infinite call to ethics and response-ability in Barad's queer naturalism. "I" am responsible to the myriad others with/from which I'm cut together/apart. Again, this puts Barad squarely within the post-Kantian tradition: ethics is an infinite task of response-ability to the other, human and nonhuman. Because the ethical act is not pre-determined but time-sensitive, as in Kant (the categorical imperative does not tell you how to act in all cases but only that you should act in favor of the Good), ethics is a labor of infinite care: "An ethics of entanglement entails possibilities and obligations for reworking the material effects of the past and the future," Barad writes in "Nature's Queer Performativity." "There can never be absolute redemption, but spacetime-matter can be productively reconfigured, reworking im/possibilities in the process" (47). Barad's cuts that make a difference are therefore already pre-signed within the order of meaning: cuts that make a difference are meaning-making in that they inscribe relations of sense and obligation within nature through nature.

Deleuze's ethics could not be more different. Despite his shared interest in a theory of difference not subordinate to identity and resemblance, the "dark precursor" is hostile to relations of survival, care, hospitality, and preservation. Difference as the power to relate for Deleuze is not for that reason a power to ensure that such relations will be meaningful or beneficial. Difference is the power of nonsense, of what is intolerable to thought. This, in short, is the sadistic side of difference. It is metonymic; in other words, it destroys the promise of meaning and metaphor by negating meaning's foundational act of the cut—the cut that blocks the metonymic slippage of difference that is the dark precursor's sole *drive*. Before nature's metonymic force makes sense through a stabilizing cut—the thunderbolt in Deleuze's example—it performs the cruelty of nonsense, a nonsense that insists on the actual in the empty form of a violent but disavowed repetition. Thought for Deleuze emerges only—and for that matter very rarely—in confrontation with this nonsense: cuts that do not "add up" (as in Barad) but "crack up."¹³ Every cut is an irrational cut according to Deleuze, a power of the false.¹⁴ Only some cuts take on a habitual pattern: the habit of saying "I," for example.¹⁵ The world is not geared toward meaning; it is not the best possible world (Leibniz). On the contrary, the world is a chaosmos. The task of thought according to Deleuze is to think the agency of cutting outside our usual habits of meaning. Only then can the new (or difference) emerge. To think the new, or difference in-itself, regardless of its damage to our images of the "good": that, for Deleuze, is the only ethics worth speaking of.

Thus we can say that Deleuze takes up the "other" side of the post-Kantian tradition, the one theorized by Lacan and radicalized by the so-called "antisocial" queer theory of Bersani and Edelman. In Lacan's reading of Kant, every object of the "good" is produced by cuts—that is, from calculations. Lacan delights in the apparent absurdity of Kant's "innocent subterfuge, that

... everyone, every man of good sense, will say no” to that which does harm (*The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* 189). This calculation, Lacan points out, always leaves a remainder. My “good” cannot be explained by your good, and so on. There is something excessive to ethics and to the “reality principle” that is its customary support. That is why Kant concludes that ethics must be purely formal, or else it is “pathological,” driven by egoism and self-interest. In Lacan’s analysis, ethics becomes synonymous with the *form* of desire as empty repetition, which has no “object.” Desire desires to desire, tout court.

Ethics for Lacan is thus brought to its pure state by Sade, who shows that an ethics that takes the object of the “good” as impossible (as something to be indifferent to, even hostile toward), as an object of desire in the Lacanian sense, is the purest form of ethics. The point is not that ethics is ultimately egoistic or pleasure driven. On the contrary, the point Lacan makes is that the ethical act has no object besides repetition; it is *beyond* the “good” defined by pleasure—an ethics, that is, of the impossible. This is the argument of “Kant with Sade,” in which Lacan determines that ethics is founded on something excessive, a gap within our field of meaning, or an excess of sense or nonsense in Deleuze’s philosophy. To suture that excess or that gap with an ultimate good (think the Child in Edelman’s *No Future*) is the worst kind of ethical breach in that it denies that ethics is a matter of breaching, of driving holes in meaning.

This, I would like to suggest, is the problem with Barad’s reparative ethics; it is much too seemly. Insofar as it tries to repair the cuts between self and other by including every “other” within the same intra-active web of meaning, it cannot not enact a violence that would seek to cover over a breached nature. In the queer naturalism of Lacan and Deleuze, by contrast, ethics does not seek to paste over these cuts but to multiply them—to formalize the gap between desire and its object. This is what Bersani calls an “ecological ethics,” which is no longer about “our”

desire but about the endless montage, or the ceaseless metonymy of the drive qua death drive.

The point is not so much to labor under the subject-other structure, but to escape it—the ego and the law—by subtracting oneself, one’s image, from every ethical act. To go beyond the pleasure principle, in short, towards an ethics of the real.

This is not where Barad takes us. Instead, the infinite task of ethics for Barad means response-ability to the other. In this sense, post-Kantianism in Barad travels the path away from Lacan-Deleuze towards Levinas-Derrida. For Derrida, too, ethics or “justice-to-come” is geared towards relations of *différance*, in which there is no “outside” to speak of. For Derrida, as for Levinas and Barad, ethics is first philosophy because the “other” is never outside the web of meaning: every “outside” constitutes an “inside,” and every “other” is my neighbor. Being in the world thus constitutes an infinite obligation or debt. Consequently, the gap that makes a difference (material and semiotic) in Barad’s ethics is not the same gap we find between object and aim in Lacan; on the contrary, *the former represses the latter*. Difference in Barad’s account is ultimately sutured by meaning, life, bettering, world-making (i.e. the future). As soon as the cut is made, life’s excess, indeterminacy, and *jouissance* are resolved in the image-horizon of intra-action. To bend Joan Copjec’s argument against historicism in a different direction, we can say that the reality of desire in Barad’s agential realism is “*realtight*, that is no longer self-external” (*Read My Desire* 14). As Copjec makes clear: “To say that desire must be taken literally is to say simultaneously that desire *must be articulated*, that we must refrain from imagining something that would not be registered on the single surface of speech”—on this point, Barad and Deleuze would no doubt agree—“and that desire is *inarticulable*” (14). Both/and: a single surface of sense, *and* an inarticulable never-to-be-articulated nonsense. Because Barad is committed to re-membering and re-articulating the social through an ever-

expanding web of inclusion, she denies the inarticulable its voice, its power to make nature stutter. All of nature is oriented ethically towards its objects because every object is considered our neighbor and friend.

We should recall what Freud says about loving one's neighbor. In Lacan's reading, "Freud was literally horrified by the idea of love for one's neighbor" (*The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* 185-186). If "Freud stops short in horror at the consequences of the commandment to love one's neighbor," this is because, as Lacan argues, "we see evoked the presence of that fundamental evil which dwells within this neighbor.... And what is more of a neighbor to me than this heart within which is that of my *jouissance* and which I don't dare go near?" (186). The biblical imperative to "love thy neighbor," in Lacan's translation, verges on the "pathological" love that Kant warned against. When I love my neighbors, "I imagine their difficulties and their sufferings in the mirror of my own." This, for Lacan, is the greatest evil. He states clearly: "My egoism is quite content with a certain altruism, altruism of the kind that is situated on the level of the useful. And it even becomes the pretext by means of which I can avoid taking up the problem of the evil I desire, and that my neighbor desires also" (187). A love that reflects my own image, that is, the image of myself that I would like to be, enacts a cruelty of conformity that passes for altruism. "It is," Lacan observes, "a fact of experience that what I want is the good of others in the image of my own. That doesn't cost much. What I want is the good of others provided that it remain in the image of my own" (187).

If Freud retreats in horror, then, it is because such a translation of "love thy neighbor" empties the self of its own self-image as loving and sociable. What is left is the empty repetition of a duty akin to Kant's formal ethics. Lacan's point is not that cruelty can be avoided; his paradoxical assertion that "to love one's neighbor may be the cruelest of choices" makes clear

his belief that no act of good will is free from a certain evil. The point, rather, and this is the guiding thread of “Kant with Sade,” is that true love embraces the emptiness of the image, and thereby becomes godly. The ground of God’s power, his freedom, according to Lacan, “resides in the capacity to advance into emptiness.” God created man in his own image, *ex nihilo*.

Although “there are beautiful images—and goodness only knows that religious images always correspond by definition to reigning canons of beauty—one doesn’t notice that they are always hollow images” (196). Indeed, “man, too, as image is interesting for the hollow the image leaves empty—by reason of the fact that one doesn’t see in the image, beyond the capture of the image, the emptiness of God to be discovered” (196). The radical evil that horrified Freud, when set free beyond the confines of self-preservation or self-capture, becomes a radical ethics of self-dismissal in Lacan: “When one approaches the central emptiness, which up to now has been the form in which access to *jouissance* has presented itself to us, my neighbor’s body breaks into pieces” (202).¹⁶

Life without Optimism

Readers of Barad and the new materialisms have in large part focused on the intra-action between entities to posit a queer ethics of repair. Reparative approaches imagine life as made of assemblages, flows, interconnections, and networks. This language accords with Barad’s idea of entanglement. However, this same language displaces or indeed represses the violence of the cutting agency. More precisely, reparative approaches that champion interconnection avoid the fact that every act of reparation involves a cut: between an ethics of care on the one hand, and hostility on the other. Lacan’s insistence on an ethics of the Real, one that maintains the violence of its encounters, emphasizes the cut that contaminates every future, every image of repair. For

important structural reasons, Lacan insists: we damage what we repair.¹⁷ This is why Deleuze has so little to say about ethics. At the core of Deleuze's ontology there is neither the subject-other structure nor its philosophical avatars: love of one's neighbor, the friend, or the face. For Deleuze, before there is ethics there is difference—the “there is” of difference; or rather, ethics is nothing more than the thought of this difference qua rupture: the question is not, how do “I” respect the other's difference, but rather, how do “I,” with respect to life's indifference to every difference, become *another*?¹⁸

This indifference to difference is another name for what Deleuze calls the “dark precursor.” As pure difference, it escapes representation while also conditioning representation. As repetition, it is both the seat of pleasure (Eros) and the highest affirmation of a difference that shatters (Thanatos). Deleuze's commitment to thinking the genesis of our conditions of thought means that his philosophy resists placing its focus on the forms of the conditioned, above all the “other” as condition of the “self.” Deleuze insists that philosophy's greatest mistake was to equate thought with *philia*. Such an image of thought hinges on a fundamental deception: that the other is our friend, neighbor, and companion. If there is one staple of Deleuze's philosophy that grounds the rest, it is this: thought only *thinks* when it encounters the cruelty of what is not-thought, the violence, that is, of the multiple, the disparate. Deleuze writes:

There are certainly many dangers in invoking pure difference which have become independent of the negative and liberated from the identical. The greatest danger is that of lapsing into the representations of a beautiful soul: there are only reconcilable and federative differences, far removed from bloody struggles. The beautiful soul says: we are different, but not opposed.... The *notion of a problem*, which we see linked to that of difference, also seems to nurture the sentiments of the beautiful soul: only problems and

questions matter.... Nevertheless, we believe that when these problems attain their proper degree of *positivity*, and when difference becomes the object of a corresponding *affirmation*, they release a power of aggression and selection which destroys the beautiful soul by depriving it of its very identity and breaking its good will. The problematic and the differential determine struggles or destructions ... every thought becomes an aggression. (*Difference and Repetition* xx)

This difference with respect to difference has important consequences for ethics, particularly queer and new materialist ethics, where questions of ontology are now at the foreground.¹⁹ On Deleuze's account, ethics is both creative and destructive, and not simply by turn. The ethical does not simply occasion aggression; insofar as ethics approximates the event, the clash of forces that Deleuze calls the dark precursor, ethics becomes an enemy of the beautiful soul and synonymous with violence. Deleuze's queer naturalism is thus inherently pharmacological: cure and harm in the same movement. This is not to say that Barad's ontoethics is utopian by any stretch. Barad makes clear that her queer naturalism does not aim to ignore power, hierarchy, or violence, and asserts that "agential realism" (the intra-action of all things) is directly concerned with cuts that matter. And yet, much of what Barad proposes with respect to cuts that matter amounts to making good on bad cuts (i.e. repairing bad connections, forging new alliances, and constructing better, more sustainable life-worlds).

For Deleuze, ethics is impossible (and Deleuze always championed the Lacanian notion that we should aim for the impossible, which is the drive's *only* aim) since nature is indifferent to our images of the "good" (the drive has no object). For Barad, by contrast, an ethics of repair is what nature *does*. In a telling example that will allow us to circle back to the electrical bodies with which we began, Barad writes of "the brainless and eyeless creature called the brittlestar, an

invertebrate cousin of the starfish, sea urchin, and sea cucumber,” who “has a skeletal system that also functions as a visual system” (*Meeting the Universe Halfway* 369). With “approximately ten thousand spherically domed calcite crystals covering the five limbs and central body of the brittlestar,” these “microlenses” made of crystal “collect and focus light directly onto ... the brittlestar’s diffuse nerve system” (370). Consequently, “these photosensitive brittlestars are able to navigate around obstacles, flee from predators, and detect shadows”; Barad notes the “ingenuity of the brittlestar’s bodily know-how” (373). She reads the brittlestar’s intra-active know-how in the same manner that she reads the flash of lightning, as a call to queer companionship with the rest of the cosmos:

The brittlestar is not a creature that thinks much of epistemological lenses or geometrical optics of reflection: the brittlestar does not have a lens serving as the line of separation, the mediator between the mind of the knowing subject and the materiality of the outside world. Brittlestars don’t *have* eyes; they *are* eyes. It is not merely the case that the brittlestar’s visual system is embodied; its very being *is* a visualizing apparatus. The brittlestar is a living, breathing, metamorphosing optical system. For a brittlestar being and knowing, materiality and intelligibility, substance and form, entail one another.... There is no *res cogitans* agonizing about the postulated gap (of its own making) between itself and *res extensa*. There is no optics of mediation, no noumena-phenomena distinction, no question of representation. (375)

Of course, any time Descartes’s mind-body dualism is trotted out for a beating, a statement on ethics is sure to follow. Barad adds:

Subjectivity is not a matter of individuality but a relation of responsibility to the other.... There is no getting away from ethics—mattering is an integral part of the ontology of the

world in its dynamic presencing. Not even a moment exists on its own.... If we hold on to the belief that the world is made of individual entities, it is hard to see how even our best, most well-intentioned calculations for right action can avoid tearing holes in the delicate tissue structure of entanglements that the lifeblood of the world runs through. (391-396)

Let's begin with the brittlestar: it's the perfect example of Barad's thesis that "matter and meaning cannot be dissociated" because "mattering is simultaneously a matter of substance and significance" (3). The brittlestar does not know or cognitively reflect its world from a standpoint exterior to matter; rather matter and meaning "entail one another" as components of the same intra-active event. To echo Deleuze, we can say that the brittlestar does not "have" eyes with which to see; the brittlestar's eyes are directly in things—the brittlestar "is" light-matter-movement. Barad is quick to separate "having" from "being" ("Brittlestars don't *have* eyes; they *are* eyes"). "Having" connotes property, whereas Barad's point is that nature is entirely improper; nature rebuffs Cartesian dualism and the possessive ideology it supports. This is the meaning of intra-action: that all things intrude into everything else. I want to suggest that this is where Barad's argument about matter and meaning runs aground. The world of the brittlestar, insofar as it is a world of meaning and not pure chaos, is a world that has been cut to the brittlestar's own image. The "body know-how" that Barad celebrates is an example of what Jakob von Uexküll would call the animal's *Umwelt*, the signifying practices that enable the brittlestar to make sense of its environment and thus to "have" a world (139-161). Nietzsche summarized this phenomenon—nature's narcissism—quite well: "if we could communicate with the mosquito," he writes, "then we would learn that it floats through the air with the same self-importance, feeling within itself the flying center of the world" ("On Truth and Lie in an Extra-

Moral Sense” 42). Far from imagining the nonhuman as uniquely attuned to nature, Nietzsche suggests that nature is narcissistic “all the way down,” and that human exceptionalism is not so exceptional after all (in fact, it is the trait of narcissism to imagine that we alone are narcissistic). The link between being and knowing, or matter and meaning, is, in Barad’s example of the brittlestar, another instance of Leibniz’s “best possible world” hypothesis, in which the monad, being compossible with its world, harmonizes with its surroundings. The difference here is that instead of God selecting the best possible world in which matter and meaning cohere, Barad introduces “agential realism” as the secular version of the monad.

Deleuze, following the early Heidegger, argues that the opposite is true: it is only the destruction of the world imagined as the “best possible world” that forces life to think. In *Cinema 2*, Deleuze insists on the “impossibility” of worlds and the absence of the link between matter and meaning in modernist cinema. In *Anti-Oedipus*, he and Guattari write about the desiring-machine’s world-making assemblages, akin to the *Umwelt* of the brittlestar, in terms consonant with Barad’s language of *mattering*: the desiring-machines are “a producing/product identity” (7). But Deleuze and Guattari do not stop there: they also write that “from a certain point of view it would be much better if nothing worked, if nothing functioned.... Desiring-machines make us an organism; but at the very heart of this production, the body suffers from being organized in this way, from not having some other sort of organization, or no organization at all.... [Everything] becomes unbearable to the body without organs” (7-9). Nature, according to Deleuze and Guattari, does not “entail” that matter and meaning stick together, as Barad argues. Nature, they suggest, is indeed most vital when it short-circuits, when it no longer works. Like the hysteric, nature feels it has holes in its body, holes that do not add up but *carve* up life’s images.

This is what is intolerable to Barad's ethics of entanglement, not that nature is open to infinite re-articulation/re-signification, as liberal humanism posits, but that nature contains inarticulable *never-to-be-articulated* fragments of animus in its very structure. For Barad, an ethics of entanglement means that we can "avoid tearing holes in the delicate tissue structure of entanglements," that we can have our animist cake and eat it too. But notice what happens when Barad separates her ethics from all that it is "not": "There is no *res cogitans* ... no optics of mediation, no noumena-phenomena distinction, no question of representation." Like the "no" of Freud's essay on "Negation," Barad herself tears "holes in the delicate tissue structure of entanglements" with every exclusion of life's negativity; she repeats nature's sadistic cut and thus gives voice to that which works against meaning and thriving: nature's death drive. Put differently, Barad's ethics of the other registers the "malignant *jouissance*" from which Freud retreated in understandable horror due to the thought of loving the neighbor as oneself. To be clear, my claim is not that Barad's reparative ethics falls short of loving more or including more. My claim is that every act of world-making *entails* an aggressive cut. The difficulty of what I'm calling "nature's queer negativity" lies in the fact that an ethics of repair is never external to aggression; repair and aggression are "intagliated," as Deleuze says.

Barad's redemptive posthumanism imagines a future in which we, having learned from our destructive error, rediscover that we are not violent and destructive life but rather interwoven parts of a much greater whole. This image of interconnected life then provides the stopgap we need in order not to encounter life's contingency, its many seams and tears. Take the idea of climate: climate change at once collectivizes the human species in a common tragedy, a commons, that is, of precariousness and fragility; life, we know, is at risk, and not just at the level of the individual or population: planetary life is under the threat of extinction. At the same

time, though, we encounter this problem as redeemable: the human species can now imagine a posthuman future in which “we,” having learned from our apparent error, can *live on* knowing ourselves to be at one with the web of life. Climate change thus becomes an alibi for our survival and future.

But life is not a meaningful totality that explains away the damage we have done to the planet. Even the very positing of life as a repaired or reparative whole neglects the fact that this figuration depends on splitting life from nonlife, vitality from its negation. Life, however, is expressed not only in vital or organic forms. *Sinthomosexual*, in Edelman’s vocabulary, stands for this unlivable and inhuman exit from the world of the living. It stands as an impasse to our survival because it makes legible a world in which “we” no longer exist, the world of the body-without-organs (Deleuze and Guattari), the drives (Lacan), and *jouissance* (Edelman). From the vantage of the *sinthome*, or symptom, we can envision an inhuman world in which life does not triumph after all, in which the post-apocalyptic or tragic does not bring about some final closure to our disappearance, but produces more and more explosive differences: differences of time, movement, and perception—in short, other worlds. Edelman writes:

As the template of a given subject’s distinctive access to *jouissance*, defining the condition of which the subject is always a symptom of sorts itself, the *sinthome*, in its refusal of meaning, procures the determining relation to enjoyment by which the subject finds itself driven beyond the logic of fantasy or desire. It operates, for Lacan, as the knot that holds the subject together, that ties or binds the subject to its constitutive libidinal career, and assures that no subject, try as it may, can ever “get over” itself—“get over,” that is, the fixation of the drive that determines its *jouissance*. (*No Future* 35-36)

The ecological subject cannot simply “get over” its relation to the *sinthome*, this nonmeaning or animus lodged in the side of sense and sustainability, because it is this destructive enjoyment of the partial drive, this unlivable passage beyond the world of sense and sensibility, that sustains (while laying waste to) the futural fantasy that we call “life.” The *sinthome* is what the posthuman haplessly trips over on its way to “getting over” the human. But there is another option besides this posthuman *Aufheben* or preservation-through-translation: the *sinthome* or drive, as symptom of a violent exclusion in favor of symbolic meaning, points to a life without us, without human meaning. Rather than intone the posthumanist call for flowing, meaningful life, which opts for the symbolic’s dependence on the smooth exchange of signifiers, the drive abandons all hope of survival in favor of the non-translatability, which is to say, the non-futurity, of enjoyment.

Instead of translating the symptom or threat of our extinction into an alibi for the future, can we imagine a future without us? Instead of becoming posthuman, which, as is now commonly said, we have always already been, can we, as Deleuze and Guattari suggest, “become-imperceptible”? Becoming-imperceptible would not mean redeeming our lost humanity, either in the humanist or posthumanist sense, but would mean experimenting with inhuman temporalities—the inhuman being not simply that which we would like to become, but that which is already not us: the inhumanity at the heart of life. Freud has already shown that beyond the bounded pleasure of the organism, there exists a world that cannot simply be let in without destroying the apparatus of the self. Whereas various neo-vitalisms today would have us reconnect with life as a way of putting off the deadening effects of sameness, Deleuze and Guattari remind us that life is not only vitalistic but also explosive: the return to life does not—cannot—mean a return to organic wholeness, because life just is this power of creative

destruction. The way out of the deadening effects of sameness is not the unity of the organism, Deleuze and Guattari argue; indeed, the instrumental organism is still too close to the lived. The way out would not be more life, but the unlivable.

Sinthomo-Environmentalism

Allow me to introduce a new ecologism, a word without future, to our critical vocabularies: *sinthomo*-environmentalism. No doubt it's a mouthful, this strange neologism of the *sinthome* (symptom) and environment. And yet, in it, I wager (echoing Marianne Moore's contempt for poetry), we find something beyond "all this fiddle" over life's sustainability.

Like the *sinthomosexual* in Edelman's queer account in "Ever After: History, Negativity, and the Social," *sinthomo*-environmentalism stands for that which, in the drive towards life, undoes the temporality of life "ever after" by confronting life with its own persistent repetition of, its libidinal investment in, the nonidentity qua *sinthome* of the drives—what Freud calls the death drive. To be clear, the death drive does not simply negate life, it is not opposed to the living; rather, as Lacan argues, every drive, including the so-called "life instinct," is *virtually* a death drive, insofar as the drive towards "life" circles endlessly around a void (Lacan's *objet a*) that is, in fact, the drive's sole aim and career, its access to *jouissance*. As Edelman explains, "*sinthomosexuality* makes visible the occluded presence of the *sinthome* at the core of the very politics intended to exclude it.... In such a context," which is every context, "*sinthomosexuality* would speak to the repudiated specificity of what *doesn't* and *can't* transcend itself. So repudiated, however, it enables the specification, *over and against it*, of what only thereby is able to appear as political universality" (472). Because of its refusal to translate a stubborn particularity into universality (such as the collective "good," or the good of life), "the

sinthomosexual ... gets denounced [by the Right and Left alike] for affirming a jouissance indulgently fixed on the self, while those who merit recognition as good, as communally minded, as properly social, address the suffering of the other.... *It remains the case that libidinal investment in the suffering of the other, regardless of whether its dividends come through preventing or producing that suffering, is also an investment tied to a specific knot of jouissance*" (emphasis mine 475). Far from confronting life from without, then, the death drive names that impossible negativity, the dehiscence or gap around which life ceaselessly turns, making every object of desire (be it community, love, or care of the other) a partial object. From the standpoint of the *sinthome*, the question is not, nor has it ever been, how to reconcile life beyond its antagonisms, but rather how to relinquish the will to find ourselves *beyond* antagonism, since the image of life as a loving, caring, auto-poetic whole is precisely that which lives on—that which sustains itself by means of—its repudiation of the *sinthome*.

Sinthomo-environmentalism thus materializes as the hopelessly queer figure that society repudiates. As the extimate remainder, however, of life's disavowed investment in negativity, this figure stands in stark contrast to the ecocidal subject and the posthumanist subject alike. What both of these subjects have in common (despite their significant differences) is a shared stake in the fantasy of life *after* negativity. For the capitalist subject, this means a life of unfettered accumulation without loss; for the posthumanist subject, this means cultivating a relationship of care with the environment without violence or destruction. Despite the important differences between these two positions, it does not suffice to say, with Naomi Klein, that what we are confronted with today is the opposition of Capitalism and the Environment. For beyond this real antagonism, which I have no intention of dismissing, there remains a deeper antagonism still, which structures both positions: that deeper antagonism is what I call *sinthomo*-

environmentalism, nature's queer negativity, which fits neither the capitalist's image of life as endless accumulation nor the posthumanist's image of life as endlessly adaptive network of living beings. Neither image can admit nature's negativity because both adhere to the pastoral fantasy of life without negativity—which does not prevent either position from enjoying a sadistic relation to negativity by repudiating and therefore making visible what is, in Bersani's words, “the inestimable value of sex as ... anticomunal, antiegalitarian, antinurturing, antiloving.”

Let us consider an example of *sinthomo*-environmentalism. Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement* is, among other things, a compelling analysis of the uncanniness of the *sinthome* as it manifests as climate change. Ghosh writes:

There is an additional element of the uncanny in events triggered by climate change....

This is that the freakish weather events today, despite their radically nonhuman nature, are nonetheless animated by cumulative human actions. In that sense the events set in motion by global warming have a more intimate connection with humans than did the climatic phenomena of the past—this is because we have all contributed in some measure, great or small, to their making. They are the mysterious work of our own hands returning to haunt us in unthinkable shapes and forms. (32)

Climate change, according to Ghosh, materializes the uncanny temporality of the symptom in that “it” (nature's “unthinkable shapes and forms”) returns in the form of a self-made disaster. To say that climate change is “self-made” is not to ignore the fact of structural inequality, nor that the parts of humanity hit hardest by climate change are those who have done the least to unleash the present calamity. As Ghosh notes, “those at the margins of [Western modernity] are now the first to experience the future that awaits all of us; it is they who confront most directly what

Thoreau called ‘vast, Titanic, inhuman nature’” (63). What strikes me as most compelling about Ghosh’s analysis is its universalizing gesture, which he relates to the universalizing ambitions of the English novel. According to Ghosh,

Here, then, is another form of resistance, a scalar one, that the Anthropocene presents to the techniques that are most closely identified with the novel: its essence consist of phenomena that were long ago expelled from the territory of the novel—forces of unthinkable magnitude that create unbearably intimate connections over vast gaps in time and space. (63)

For Ghosh, it is the *impossibility* of representing climate change, of filling the “gaps” within our cognitive maps, that may (if we’re lucky) trigger a negative universalism across “time and space.” Ghosh’s conclusion echoes that of Dipesh Chakrabarty in “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” only Ghosh’s negative universalism is (at least on the surface) primarily aesthetic, linked as it is to the production of the novel and to the aesthetic theory that, since the Enlightenment, has sought to define the role of art as a propaedeutic supplement to humanity. The question becomes, for Ghosh, a Kantian one: is there a redemptive image of life to be derived from the arts, one that might save our image of humanity at precisely the moment when “our” image is most threatened, as in the experience of the sublime?

Although not always framed with respect to the arts, this question, which treats the disaster as contingent, and thus surmountable, echoes throughout literature on environmental destruction, which looks for the cause of our symptom in an easily identifiable structure. This problem is articulated in the Marxist notion of social antagonism. As Žižek describes in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, “This traditional notion implies two interconnected features: (1) there exists a certain fundamental antagonism possessing an ontological priority to ‘mediate’ all

other antagonisms, determining their place and their specific weight (class antagonism, economic exploitation); (2) historical development brings about, if not a necessity, at least an ‘objective possibility’ of solving this fundamental antagonism and, in this way, mediating all other antagonisms” (xxvi). Within this tradition, capital becomes the master-signifier mediating all other antagonisms. Thus it is no surprise that both world-systems theorists such as Jason W. Moore and popular writers such as Naomi Klein identify capitalism as the underlying antagonism driving climate chaos. While this is true at one level, it remains a humanist alibi: in the reigning analyses of climate change, capital plays an exculpatory role. Klein, for instance, states that we are faced with an option: the survival of the planet, or the survival of capitalism. Of course, this is a fate accompli since the survival of the latter depends on the former. The stakes are clear: capitalism is at war with the Earth. Klein, among others, frames this choice as an “occasion” to band together and reimagine a more loving, nurturing humanity. In short, there is a “good” humanity to which we may return, one imagined to live in a more sustainable relation with the environment, *and* there is a “bad” humanity defined by a rapacious and destructive “Capitalocene.”²⁰

It is this image of “life” as essentially loving and caring that *sinthomo*-environmentalism contests. Bersani is perhaps the most valuable thinker here. Against the alibi of safe sex, Bersani suggests that what is most valuable about sex is its anti-loving, anti-communal nature. Faced with the threat of extinction, of AIDS, Bersani champions anal sex as a way of realizing a radical form of self-undoing that is internal to social life but rarely tolerated. “It is possible to think of the sexual as, precisely, moving between a hyperbolic sense of self and a loss of all consciousness of self. But sex as self-hyperbole is perhaps a repression of sex as self-abolition” (25). In his conclusion, sex negativity becomes a way of letting go of life and signals a queer

politics of extinction. Bersani writes, “If the rectum is the grave in which the masculine ideal (an ideal shared—differently—by men and women) of proud subjectivity is buried, then it should be celebrated for its very potential for death. Tragically, AIDS has literalized that potential.... It may, finally, be in the gay man’s rectum that he demolishes his own perhaps otherwise uncontrollable identification with a murderous judgment against him” (29-30).

To be clear, neither Bersani nor I am advocating for ecocidal destruction either at the level of the body or of the environment. To advocate for such violence would be to turn a nonproductive *jouissance* into yet another project of the self, and to ignore, moreover, the constitutive partiality of the drives, which, contrary to all self-idealizations, never totalize in the image of a unified self-will. What I am suggesting is that the pastoralizing project animating the return to “life” and “nature” repeats “a murderous judgment” against the nonidentity of nature—a nonidentity or *queer* negativity that, ironically, “could also be thought of as our primary hygienic practice of nonviolence,” particularly so in a time of suicidal resource extraction and will to power.

This last point brings us to the central thesis of Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus*, which both proponents and critics of Deleuze’s capitalism books tend to ignore: that capitalism is, despite our protestations, not an accident that happens *to* life, but rather a certain trajectory *of* life. As Claire Colebrook puts it: “Deleuze will not see capitalism (or any other supposed ‘evil’) as an accident that befalls life and that one might simply step outside of: if it is *possible* for the world to be reduced to equivalent, uniform, objectified and manageable matter ... then this is because there is a tendency in life towards organization, as well as a counter-tendency towards dis-organization” (*Deleuze* 34). This is *not* to say, as apologists of capitalism do, that human nature is essentially greedy or self-interested. Rather, it is to say that there is no essential

(human) nature. While some theorists point to indigeneity as an example of better, more sustainable life-worlds, this does nothing to change the fact that life, as Deleuze and Guattari posit it, isn't a self-sustaining, harmoniously balanced whole, but rather the abyssal site of radically deviational partial drives (i.e. "desiring-machines"). These "desiring-machines" are not an alternative to capitalism, a repressed "outside," since these same machines are responsible for the "great acceleration" of the past century. The political challenge, according to Deleuze and Guattari, is not to redeem life by setting free the supposedly productive, vital, and self-organizing forces of life (such a misreading underlies the "new materialist" interpretation of Deleuze, which can be found, for instance, in Hardt and Negri's idea of the "multitude," or Jane Bennett's notion of "thing-power"), but rather to release desire to its primary and circuitous occupation of self-negation. Why? For starters, it is getting harder and harder, as Elizabeth A. Povinelli argues, to separate "life" from "nonlife," or *bios* from *geos*. The will to reanimate life, human or otherwise, may be impossible because of climate change; more problematic still, the will to life, or animacy, and the concepts underwriting it (affect, event, emergence) prolong, in Povinelli's words, the very "geontological" division between "life" and "nonlife" that is fueling the Anthropocene condition.

Paradoxical as it may seem, then, the loss of self-image procured by the death drive's obstinate negativity could, from the vantage of the *sinthome*, be a more exact definition of what "going native" (a phrase used by Bruno Latour in his paean to the movie *Avatar*) ("An Attempt at a 'Compositionist Manifesto' 471-472) might mean with respect to indigeneity, since it is the unrelenting force of the death drive, figured as the unmovable "rock" of the Real, that makes "nonlife" a problem *both* for the established powers, which only see "nonlife" in the aspect of its utility for social and economic reproduction (think, for example, of Standing Rock) *and* for the

“cosmopolitics” of thinkers like Latour and others, who wish to see in the indigenous, the animal, and the nonhuman an alibi for the rapaciousness of the Western *anthropos*—an alibi, moreover, figured in the guise of life’s sustainability. What this alibi forestalls is the real question: whether the Western *anthropos*, as a massification built on the degradation of indigenous environments, is something worth saving in the first place? To this question, Latour’s subaltern cannot speak. And yet it is the paradoxical agency of the *sinthome* not to speak, not to accede to the demands of social meaning and recognition, but rather to undo the *anthropos* from within—without alibi. At a moment when those on the margins of temporal modernity are turned to in order to flesh out the face of humanity’s future birth, *sinthomo*-environmentalism echoes Deleuze and Guattari’s call to “escape the face” of humanity, to “become-imperceptible,” which the *sinthome* literalizes as “the risk of the sexual itself as the risk of self-dismissal” (Bersani 30). Becoming-imperceptible is not escapism, nor is it a privilege of the few. At a moment when capital merges with biopolitics to create living-dead zones of precarity where disappearance is an all-too-real threat, *sinthomo*-environmentalism refuses the pastoralizing project by drawing on the already-dead politics of the drive as access to a jouissance that breaks asunder the “sacrosanct value of selfhood, a value that accounts for human beings’ extraordinary willingness to kill in order to protect the seriousness of their statements” (Bersani 30). Far from consigning the precarious to imperceptibility, “becoming-imperceptible” as Deleuze and Guattari conceive of it would mean practicing self-loss as a riposte to Western “man’s” ruthless and destructive power-grab. My claim is that only a politics of self-loss as outlined here, through the lens of Deleuze and queer theory, presents a true alternative to the worldwide ecocide that demands of every *sinthomosexual* as a condition of political recognition the following choice: your desire or your life.

But if the queer drives that are the seat of what I call *sinthomo*-environmentalism are indeed world-destroying; if indeed they have no aim other than to return to the scene of a crime that is the subject's jouissance, and so circle endlessly around a void that is, from the psychoanalytic perspective of this essay, the constant and irrepressible *negation* of identity, meaning, and telos, then it is above all fitting that this essay should return to the space from whence it came: to the dehiscence between two images. Consider again the image of what Barad calls "trans rage." Barad introduces the reader to many figures of queer entanglement, including the atom, the lightning bolt, and of course, the brittlestar. But the figure that gives her ethical argument the most trouble is Frankenstein's monster, which, as Barad writes, figures lightning's re-animating potential. Frankenstein's monster gives the lie to nature's coherence, showing nature to be "a patchwork, a suturing of disparate parts" ("Transmaterialities" 393). The monster does not stand outside nature but rather figures nature as metaphor, a whole containing many different parts. Barad's political-ethical move here is to position the monster within nature. His flesh is not a crime *against* nature's seamliness; his disparate anatomy exemplifies nature's queer intra-active web.

Mary Shelley, by contrast, shows us the enjoyment the monster takes in destroying nature's patchwork. She thus offers a second image as *sinthome* to the former. After being cruelly abandoned by his family of "protectors," the "beloved cottagers," and losing faith in the "views of social life," which had allowed him temporarily "to deprecate the vices of mankind" and "to desire to become an actor in [that] busy scene" (107), Shelley's monster, "like the arch fiend" (111), Milton's Satan, unleashes a radical negativity aimed at every image of the "good." Reversing the spark that gave him life, Shelley's monster lets loose "a rage of anger" and sets

fire to everything he loves. The result: he makes a heaven of hell and learns to enjoy “the ruin” (111):

When I reflected that they had spurned and deserted me, anger returned, a rage of anger; and, unable to injure any thing human, I turned my fury towards inanimate objects. As night advanced, I placed a variety of combustibles around the cottage; and, after having destroyed every vestige of cultivation in the garden, I waited with forced impatience until the moon had sunk to commence my operations.... The blast tore along like a mighty avalanche, and produced a kind of insanity in my spirits, that burst all bounds of reason and reflection. (Shelley 113)

Let us recall here what Bersani says about the redemptive value of pastoral: it sacrifices all that is “anticommunal, antiegalitarian, antinurturing, antiloving.” Barad’s inclusion of the monster within nature does something similar: by avoiding this moment of “trans rage,” Barad’s renaturalization of the monster figures nature as a site of redemption, but only by sacrificing everything that does not animate a redemptive image of life. The monster becomes, once again, an image of *homo sacer*, an inclusive-exclusion of anima (the life we want) and animosity (the life that is intolerable to our images of the good). The bitter pill that Shelley’s monster wants us to swallow, however, is that nature is not only self-actualizing, re-animating life, but also violent, sadistic undoing. The question is not how to redeem crimes against nature, but what is nature such that it produces its own outside, its own violent and explosive force? Put differently, what is nature such that it produces its own abortion?

Ironically, the monster’s “views of social life” take on a deadening form insofar as life is made to repeat, taking on ever more predictable, seamless patterns of behavior, the image of ourselves that we hope one day to achieve. Just as organic voice depends on the machine of

language to extend its vitality, and, in doing so, extinguishes that vitality in a form external to the anima or breath of life, so “life itself” tends toward automation, a desire to act in “the busy scene” called “life” in the pursuit of being, finally, fully alive. The monster’s fantasy of familial identity serves to project an image of “protection,” of survival and sustainability, into the future as metaphor, as a presence or figure to be realized, *to come*. But it is the unredeemable “rage of anger,” the ego-shattering violence that “burst all bounds of reason and reflection,” that gives the monster his enjoyment in the end. Burning down the house is, to echo the Talking Heads, equivalent to getting what one’s after in the aftermath of love and community. As the song lyrics say: “Hey baby, what do you expect? Gonna burst into flames.”

Conclusion: The Metastability of the Earth; or, What You Will

My goal in this essay has not been to endorse an uncritical or unsympathetic nihilism. Truth be told, whether I (a white, Leftist, privileged academic) endorse nihilism or not does nothing to change the current suicidal pact between humanity and the planet; nor does it change the fact that, as Earth-Systems scientist Will Steffen points out, the idea of a conciliatory relation with the planet, what he calls “Stabilized Earth,” may very well already be out of reach. “Even if the Paris Accord target of a 1.5 °C to 2.0 °C rise in temperature is met,” Steffen writes, “we cannot exclude the risk that a cascade of feedbacks could push the Earth System irreversibly onto a ‘Hothouse Earth’ pathway,” in which “biogeophysical feedbacks in the Earth System could become the dominant processes controlling the system’s trajectory” (3). This does not bode well for human survival. In fact, such an image of Earth as a radically forking disequilibrium of forces bars any conception of the “good life” hitherto imagined by humans as the Earth itself now teeters on the edge towards that inhospitable desert of the real long ago forecast by Freud as

life's inevitable return to inanimate *geos* (nonlife). In other words, we might already be past the point of reconciliation with the Earth System, which is forking in the direction of forces inhospitable to human existence. What's more, we're learning that the very idea of a "Stabilized Earth," one that would be existentially *for us*, is only a temporary abstraction of metastability in an otherwise volatile and anarchic series of feedbacks. The "Stabilized Earth," though it is a necessary object of desire, and all the more so as it eludes capture, is and remains a fantasy object (*objet a* for the climate change era), one that drives climate change deniers and activists alike. So while my point is *not* to deny the importance of reparative projects aimed at stabilizing the Earth—far from it—I do wish to underscore the need for a counter-project of *sinthomo*-environmentalism. For a simple reason: if there was ever a time to think seriously about the evolutionary masochism of the drives, about their ego-shattering intensities and uncontrollable feedbacks, which are linked etiologically to the feedbacks of the Earth and which distain the pastoral fantasy of metastability, being aberrant energy systems themselves, now is the time.

Contra Barad, who, like Ghosh, turns to the novel (Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*) to capture a redemptive image of life, Deleuze (in line with Shelley) rejects the ecological alibi and even quarrels with the notion that art redeems (further and promotes) life. For Deleuze, art, whether it's the paintings of Francis Bacon or a bird's refrain, is at its best an art of self-subtraction, is already inhuman all the way down, such that "the work of art is a being of sensation and nothing else: it exists in itself" (Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?* 164). Nature's queer negativity, then, does not simply befall Mother Earth, though it does take on historically specific (and uncanny) forms—"fossil capitalism" being the most pressing of those forms.²¹ And yet it would be a mistake to conflate the history of capitalism with the negativity or *nihil* that Deleuze calls the "dark precursor," since the former is but a derived negativity

borrowed from the latter, on the condition that it transform the latter—a baseless negativity—into a planned weapon of destruction (i.e., Capital). In this regard, Deleuze and Guattari are quite clear: “We know very well where lack—and its subjective correlative—come from.”

Lack is created, planned, and organized in and through social production.... It is never primary; production is never organized on the basis of a pre-existing need or lack. It is lack that infiltrates itself, creates empty spaces or vacuoles, and propagates itself in accordance with the organization of an already existing organization of production. The deliberate creation of lack as a function of market economy is the art of a dominant class. This involves deliberately organizing wants and needs amid an abundance of production; making all of desire teeter and fall victim to the great fear of not having one’s needs satisfied; and making the object dependent upon a real production that is supposedly exterior to desire (the demands of rationality), while at the same time the production of desire is categorized as fantasy and nothing but fantasy. (*Anti-Oedipus* 28)

“Nothing but”: whenever desire is mistaken as “nothing but” the desire for object X, what is lost? Desire, precisely. The market is supposed to satisfy our desires, but all the while it creates “vacuoles” to which desiring subjects feel they owe (in both senses of the word) their life. What Deleuze’s (and Guattari’s) philosophy argues could not be more different: against the zero-sum game of fantasy, *real* desire takes satisfaction in the sweet nothings, the partial satisfactions, which the ordinary object yields. Against the logic of “nothing but,” there’s a revised relation to “nothing” that is, in truth, desire’s sole career: not to derive satisfaction *through* the object, on the *other side* of the object—that is the ruse of capitalism; but to take satisfaction in the this-ness of the object, which is desirable *because* it fails to fully satisfy, because it is utterly impersonal—not an object of self-fulfillment, but of self-emptying. Desire, in this case, is a radical production

ex nihilo, not in the Romantic sense of the artist-creator, but in the queer sense of repeating the “nothing” and the self-loss this entails as desire’s true aim.

From Deleuze’s “dark precursor” to Frankenstein’s monster, this essay has tried to unfold nature’s queer negativity in figures that do just that: they make “us grasp, [are] supposed to make us grasp, something intolerable and unbearable” (Deleuze, *Cinema 2* 18). To the question: is there life without the optimism of repair? Deleuze’s answer would no doubt be yes, but only insofar as “life” is conceived *otherwise* in relation to this “something” more (the intolerable, the unbearable, the queer), which insists in nature and which is Deleuze’s own way of repeating Lacan’s formulation on love in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*: “I love you, but, because inexplicably I love in you something more than you—the objet petit a—I mutilate you” (268). The trial of reading the “inexplicable” (that which does *not* unfold itself) in desire is, for Lacan, the truest act of love: not because it confirms the drive towards meaning, but rather because it “sees” in the object both the “something more” that “mutilates” meaning and, in the immortal words of Joy Division, the “something more” that “tear[s] us”—our image—“apart.”

¹ In *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze writes: “Whereas differentiation determines the virtual content of the Idea as problem, differentiation expresses the actualization of this virtual and the constitution of solutions” (209).

² See Elizabeth A. Wilson’s *Gut Feminism* for a related analysis of the “intrinsic hostility” of feminist politics (176). My thinking builds on the non-ameliorative biology theorized in Wilson’s book.

³ See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is About You”; and Bruno Latour, “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern.”

⁴ See Antonio Damasio, *Descartes’ Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*.

⁵ There are exceptions to this trend. For recent work on Deleuzian negativity, see Claire Colebrook, *Death of the Posthuman: Essays on Extinction, Vol. 1* and *Sex After Life: Essays on Extinction, Vol. 2*; Andrew Culp, *Dark Deleuze*; and Hannah Stark, “Discord, Monstrosity, and Violence.”

⁶ See Deleuze’s chapter on “The Image of Thought” in *Difference and Repetition*, 129.

⁷ To this end, I draw inspiration from the recent revival of negativity in queer and feminist scholarship. See in particular Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable*; and Wilson, *Gut Feminism*.

⁸ This mode of self-loss is what Bersani, at the end of “Sociability and Cruising,” calls “ecological ethics.” See Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave? And Other Essays*, 62.

⁹ See Lacan’s chapter “The Deconstruction of the Drive” in *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*.

¹⁰ See Claire Colebrook, *Deleuze: A Guide for the Perplexed*: “There is not [according to Deleuze] a mind or life and then the perception of images, for life is *imaging*, a plane of relations that take the form of ‘perceptions’ precisely because something ‘is’ only its responses” (5).

¹¹ See Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*, 906-940.

¹² See Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*; and Alain Badiou, *St. Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*.

¹³ On this point, see Deleuze’s reading of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s novel *The Crack-Up* in *The Logic of Sense*, 154-161.

¹⁴ On “The Powers of the False,” see Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*: “We no longer have a chronological time which can be overturned by movements which are contingently abnormal; we have a chronic non-chronological time which produces movements necessarily ‘abnormal,’ essentially ‘false’” (129).

¹⁵ On the nature of “habit,” see Deleuze’s reading of Hume in *Empiricism and Subjectivity*: “We are habits, nothing but habits—the habit of saying ‘I.’ Perhaps, there is no more striking answer to the problem of the self” (x).

¹⁶ This point brings us into contact with the ethical implications of the theory of the drive as explicated by Lacan-Deleuze: the drive perverts its aim. This is one of the theses set out in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, which Deleuze and Guattari’s anti-Oedipal desiring-machines raise to the level of a cosmology. The drives are *supposed* to move towards desexualized sociability, according to Freud’s argument. Only then can they renounce their partial objects (breast, voice, feces, and gaze, among others) and enter into social-symbolic exchange—the exchange of women in the case of marriage, signs in the case of language, and money in the case of capital. This is the law of the symbolic as Lacan conceives of it; it’s based on the exogamy law outlined by Claude Lévi-Strauss in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*. However, the rub is this: not only do the drives not give up their lost objects, they are radically *indifferent* to every substitute. Never satisfied with any old object, they break their attachment, circling again and again around the gaps in the subject’s field of desire. The drives are inherently incestuous, criminal, and non-relational: Lacan offers the image of a mouth sewn shut to illustrate the idea that what the drive wants has nothing to do with intersubjective communication but only the auto-eroticism of the mouth (*Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* 179). The death drive is this formal circling or repetition without end. It has no interest in constituted forms of relationality. It is only interested in what might be called the nonrelation within relation. And because this nonrelation is the negative of the self and of every constituted form of relationality, it has no proper object. As Lacan argues, every sexual object is a partial object, and every drive is a partial drive. Neither object nor drive reference a higher meaning or totality. The death drive “is” the properly transcendental condition of any self or relation of selves.

¹⁷ Of course, for Lacan, the structural im/possibility of repair stems from the interference of the sign-structure. The signifier cuts into the body, carving up its libidinal investments. That is, the sign, as stand-in of the drive, both re-presents and represses the drive’s metonymic movement, just as the sign represses the metonymic slippage of the signifier. Deleuze, by contrast, does not require this interference from without. For Deleuze, as for Barad, nature is already self-cutting. Whereas Lacan believes that you need a subject of the signifier in order to make sense, both Barad and Deleuze argue that matter is already sense-making. The bird divides its territory through song; in doing so, it makes sense of its milieu.

¹⁸ See Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 309, 312.

¹⁹ For a representative account, see Dana Luciano’s and Mel Y. Chen’s “Introduction: Has the Queer Ever Been Human?”

²⁰ On the terminological displacements surrounding the Anthropocene, see *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, edited by Jason W. Moore.

²¹ See Andreas Malm, *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming*.

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