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Elizabeth A. Povinelli, Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood, and Anton Vidokle

Editorial—"Quasi-Events"

How do we invent bad criteria for rotten infrastructure, the sliding of norms to the always incomplete and the already broken? The hack, the stupid fix, the patch—these are songs sung out of holes and faults and leaks. We are only now discovering that the limits to our endurance are actually far more constitutive than our daydream fantasies of a wholeness based in currency that already functions perfectly well as toilet paper. This is past the Romantic tradition of inspired cataclysmic becoming and inside of its ruin only because it's just not how things work out for most people who can't afford to imagine themselves into concrete circumstances that will ever align with basic needs.

This very special issue of *e-flux journal* features a series of essays in conversation with Elizabeth Povinelli's essay "Time/Bank, Effort/Embankments," the last in a three part exploration on time, effort, and endurance in late liberalism (see also " **Routes/Worlds**" and " **After the Last Man**"). At the core of the issue are a series of questions on how to fully inhabit the time that never arrives and the half project that never resolves, never completes, that changes into a frozen breakdown, yet secretes crime and half-solutions in the meantime. How do we situate a field of half solutions crucially allowing for a virtuosity in conception in spite of severe limits to their pragmatic application?

Neither in shambles nor in glory, the liberal project limps on, but to what end? Where Fukuyama once heralded the fall of the Berlin Wall as the augur of the universal triumph of liberalism, by 2008 this event looks increasingly less like the end of history than the mute herald of an impending implosion. But the spectacular collapse of financial markets never quite succeeded in bringing anything down decisively. Indeed, if these buckles in the liberal social order suggest anything it's that the idea and affect of "the end" (terminal futures, finitude) is merely another way in which liberal forms of governance secure their ongoing ethical claims and rectitude. The Big Disaster, the Decisive Event, the Last Wave: these forms of being and finitude wash away what is actually more decisive—the tsunami of quasi-events, where potentiality dwells, where normative identities collapse into crime, where crime ascends into statehood, where statehood slumps into museological conservation, but also, and perhaps most crucially, where forms of symbolic abstraction collapse to the point where objects and events crawl back into their referent, where forms of value detach from money and creep back into people. It is where potentiality is the refuge not of the hopeful but of the concretely ordinary and pragmatically banal.

We believe that to fail in this way is not to accept misery as a permanent condition. On the contrary it may be to supersede the function and wealth of the state materially and conceptually. And yet it may be a matter of accepting a certain discursive misery of a severe poverty of terms for situating activities taking place so far beyond the

stabilizing borders of the liberal project, and the richness of terms available for certain bounded expressions of polite freedom. To look beyond this is to restore historical pain and disenfranchisement back into expressions of freedom that could very well be as consumptive and corrosive, but also the very backdrop against which those expressions can only emerge. Uprisings that aren't? Welcome. We may not be idealistic, but we will always be subsidized by ourselves. We may never finish anything we start, but we deserve the richness of knowing why we shouldn't have to. And couldn't even if we tried. You are already one of us anyhow.

How does a life world already constitute a concrete money form? How do we understand and expand permanent incommensurability as the primary non-value of any form of social exchange? What figures does this produce as factors and variables in those exchanges, what does it draw into its vortex? Concentration, distraction, exhaustion, daydreaming, race, suffering, severe pain?

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Elizabeth A. Povinelli is Franz Boas Professor of Anthropology and Gender Studies at Columbia University. Her books include *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism* (2016), *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism* (2011), and *The Cunning of Recognition: Indigenous Alterities and the Making of Australian Multiculturalism* (2002). She is also a founding member of the Karrabing Film Collective.

Julieta Aranda is an artist and an editor of *e-flux journal.*

Brian Kuan Wood is an editor of *e-flux journal.*

Anton Vidokle is an editor of e-flux journal and chief curator of the 14th Shanghai Biennale: Cosmos Cinema.

Karrabing Film Collective

Holding Up the World, Part I

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Holding Up the World gathers short clips from *When the Dogs Talked* (2014) and *Low Tide Turning* (2012), films by the Karrabing Film Collective in conjunction with Liza Johnson and Elizabeth A. Povinelli, as well as interviews with its members. This short film forms the first of a four-part meditation in this issue of *e-flux journal* on the problem of time, effort, and endurance in conditions of precarity.

Trevor Bianamu was born and raised at Belyuen and is a senior owner of Banagaiya. He has acted in three Karrabing films, *Karrabing Low Tide Turning* (2012), *When the Dogs Talked* (2014), and *The Waves* (currently in post-production). He is a founding member of Karrabing Film Collective.

Linda Yarrowin was born and raised at Belyuen and is a senior owner of Mabaluk. She has acted in three Karrabing films, *Karrabing Low Tide Turning* (2012), *When the Dogs Talked* (2014), and *The Waves* (currently in post-production). She is a founding member of Karrabing Film Collective.

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Cecilia Lewis was born at Belyuen and raised at Belyuen and Roper River and belongs to Mabaluk. She has acted in three Karrabing films, *Karrabing Low Tide Turning* (2012), *When the Dogs Talked* (2014), and *The Waves* (currently in post-production). She served as Apprentice Director in *The Waves*. She is a founding member of Karrabing Film Collective.

Liza Johnson is a writer and director. She is the writer and director of the feature film Return (2011) and the director of Hateship Loveship (2013). She has also made many short films and installation projects that have been exhibited in festivals, galleries, and museums internationally. Her short films include South of Ten (2006), In the Air (2009), and Karrabing/Low Tide Turning (2012). She is currently writing a new feature film, Nervous. Johnson is also the author of many articles about art and film, and is Professor of Art at Williams College.

Elizabeth A. Povinelli teaches in anthropology and gender studies at Columbia University. She was previously editor of *Public Culture* and her most recent books are The *Empire of Love* (2006) and *Economies of Abandonment* (2011). Her writing and filmography focuses on the conditions of otherwise in Late Liberalism. She is a founding member of the Karrabing Film Collective.

Elizabeth A. Povinelli

Holding Up the World, Part II: Time/Bank, Effort/Embankments

These short remarks emerge from a conference that two editors of *e-flux* organized at Documenta 13 around the provocative assertion "I am my own money." Julieta Aranda and Anton Vidokle did not hide their investments. The panel was an extension of their globally situated Time/Bank, a tripartite arrangement consisting of a labor-exchange website, a series of conferences/panels, and curated exhibition spaces. At the center of Time/Bank is a working web-based skills exchange network in which participants offer and earn "hour-dollar" credits for labor exchange. "Time banking is a tool by which a group of people can create an alternative economic model where they exchange their time and skills, rather than acquire goods and services through the use of money or any other state-backed value." But Time/Bank is not one thing. It is a series of forms of activity—a working labor-exchange network for the art community; an evolving concept about value, time, and labor in the context of art and global capital; and a series of exhibition spaces for insubordinate objects—meant to produce a form of life.

Rather than mere statement then, "I am my own money" is a demand and an assertion about something this is real and yet not actual. Time/Bank claims that the skills that I have, the skills that I am (my art, my thought, my affects and senses; my life as an exercise of my potential), *can be* the vehicle of not merely a new form of labor exchange but a new form of the social. What I already am could be the foundation for what is not yet. When we act on the fact that we are *already* our own money, we will no longer need the authorized currencies supporting what actually is. We will instead exchange the concrete forms of our specific capacities, and in doing so, change the actual world in which we live. I will directly invest in you, and you in me. I will give you my capacity for perfect pitch; you will give me your ability to write software. Insofar as these kinds of capacity exchanges are oriented to an attentive other, the basic structuring category of social interdependence will be the specificity of my and your being and becoming in the world, rather than our measure against the illusion of an abstract coinage.

The tripartite activity-concept of Time/Bank and its assertion "I am my own money" stretches across two contemporary concepts of insubordination, if not insurrection—the concept of immaterial labor and the concept of the virtual—with the hope that these concepts could be concretized. But are these concepts adequate to capturing a certain kind of event, and certain conditions of the event, so as to create a counter-actualization (effectuation)?[1] In particular, how do these concepts help us understand something I have called "the tense of the quasi-event" (but that others have called "crisis ordinariness"[2] and "slow violence"[3]) and the conditions of the emergence and endurance of the otherwise? What would happen if we substituted the concept of Time/Bank with Effort/Embankments? The answers to these questions are not clear-cut.

A customer pays with Ithaca Hours at a local store, Ithaca, New York.

For Negri and Hardt, immaterial labor refers to the *informationalization* of capital that came about when the service sector broke free of the service sector, reorganizing and resignifying the labor process as a whole. As a result, the service industry can no longer be thought as merely referring to low-wage burger and coffee shop employment or call center employees. The service industry now refers to an entire reorientation of labor, production, and consumption, including the financial sector, dependent as it is on information and communication technologies oriented to learning about and responding to the desires of others. This information-communication network includes communication between software and machines and between commodities and market desires (other machines, other consumers, other producers). It doesn't matter what the concrete technology is. All sorts of technologies of information collection are deployed, including new algorithms that mine buying habits, paper slips distributed in hotels marked "give us feedback," and Facebook and Twitter feeds. What matters is the heart of this new logic of labor—affective-informational loops oriented toward capturing the desire of the other so that capital can insinuate itself ever more exactly, ever more anticipatorily, as the object of the desire of the other.[4] To be sure, service capital also seeks to anticipate what is real (virtual) rather than actual ("the next big thing"). But it does not seek to stage an antagonism of desire, out of which, the Hegelians posit, would come a world historical unfolding that began with the master-slave and that would end with the universalization of equal recognition.[5] Capital seeks to anticipate our desire, not antagonize it.

But rather than viewing immaterial labor as the last locked door of the prison house of capital, Hardt and Negri see it as providing "the potential for a kind of spontaneous and elementary communism" within capital. This is for the simple reason that *cooperation* and *mutually oriented* affect, the hallmark qualities of elementary communism, are "completely immanent to the laboring activity" of immaterial labor, as opposed to previous forms of labor in which *coordination* with the activity of machinery was dominant.[6] Coordination might seem quite close to cooperation—coordination demands a high order of cooperation after all. But Hardt and Negri emphasize the difference between something like the articulation of parts rather than a constant interrogation of others wants and needs. "Be your own immaterial labor," they might say.

Deep within the DNA of Hardt and Negri's concept of immaterial labor as a potential insurrection within actually existing capital is their long conversation with Deleuze—Deleuze's influence on their thought; their worry that Deleuze did not fully conceptualize political subjectivity; Deleuze's worry that his ontology was being too quickly collapsed into a Marxist-Leninist framework.[7] Irrespective of these thoughts and worries, the way that the informationalization of labor and capital might provide a deterritorialization of capital without positing an outside to capital is clear. Service capital provides a cartographic line that is within the given assemblage of capital but which is also against what this assemblage presupposes and, in presupposing, attempts to keep in place. In other words, the cartography of an anticapital immaterial labor is *real*—is really there in actual capital's immaterial labor—even if it is not yet *actual*. So, if it is true that this elementary communism is real if not actual, why not attempt to actualize this real? Create an event. Make a web exchange that orients artistic labor capacities outside abstract coinage; gathers scholars and activists to think about this informationalized utopia; petition the art curators to mount the exhibit; move the exhibit from New York to Berlin to Kassel ...

I am already exhausted. I say of my colleagues: I don't know how they do it; keep up, keep going; how they are able to do so many disparate things at such a high level at the same time and over such a long period of time. And then there are the parties.

This anticipatory exhaustion foregrounds what is in, but often not taken up in, the literature on counter-actualizing events, namely the effort of emergence and the endurance of the otherwise. To understand what is at stake in thinking about the effort of emergence and the endurance of the otherwise, we can turn to William James, who, as we know, Deleuze greatly admired. James proposed two still counterintuitive claims, namely, that *mental concepts are forms of effort* and *the event is a fantasy*. Let's start with

Charles Burnett, Killer of Sheep, 1979. Film still

mental concepts. According to James, the source of mental concepts would never be found by burrowing deeper into the mind in search of ever more abstract forms. Mental life is—and thus all mental concepts are—a cacophony of "efforts of attention." There are three results of conceptualizing the mental concept in this way. First, it demands we pay attention to the actual world in its vast multiplicity. Second, it demands we pay attention to the potential explanatory figurations (concepts) that might provide not so much an account of this world but an experiment in constituting it. And third, it demands we pay attention to where these constitutive figurations are able to emerge and why and whether or not they are able to endure the conditions of their emergence. For James, if we wish to find new truths, we will find them in the great energetic bustle, "the great mass of silently thinking and feeling men" and their myriad experiments in everyday life.[8] It is there where we will see how and why, or why not, initially murky sensations become ideas by a focused effort of attention that provides them with qualities and dimensions and then tests and toughens them in the very worlds from which they emerged. If we wish to understand why new truths wither or never quite emerge, it is because the same concrete social terrains that are creating and testing truth are also continually extinguishing potential worlds and thus potential truths in the quasi-events of everyday exhaustion.

Understanding mental concepts as a form of effort, James argued, demanded that we place mental life in the social worlds in which it exists—in which it is given dimensions and qualities, and spreads. In other words, mental concepts aren't merely situated in the social world. They are the social world as expressed mentally—and this is not the social world of meaning but the social world of distributed energies and abilities to focus on the task at hand. As a result, time itself is not something that can be presupposed any longer as empty, thus lending itself to a homogeneously smooth exchange (I will give you x hours of my capacity for y hours of someone else's). Who has

the energy to focus, and when? I can give you four hours of canvas stretching but I keep getting distracted by my child crying in the other room. This is why all mental-physical capacities, as well as truth, must be understood to exist in the "open air" of the "unfinished world," rather than as the artificiality and pretense of a normative rule or an abstracted measure.[9]One can see Deleuze's interest in James here. No matter his ontological claims about the preeminence of difference over identity, Deleuze believes that the only place that difference exists is: in world as figurating force; the multiplicity of actual differences within these figurating forces; and the immanent lines that are real within them but not actual. And these figurating forces and their actual and real differences are not abstract or equal.

Effort/Embankment would face is the actual conditions of energy distribution—the kinds of "events" that account for the lack of effort of attention. Events of even the most dramatic and self-evident sort are already constituted out of the dispersion of a multiplicity of quasi-events.

James makes this point clearly in observations on the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, published in *Youth's Companion* magazine. James notes that "the earthquake" was usually personified, often deified, even though in fact "earthquake" is "simply the collective *name* of all the cracks and shakings and disturbances that happen. They *are* the earthquake. But for me *the* earthquake was the *cause* of the disturbances."[10] Even the activity of shaking should not be given an identity: "the shakings" are an endless series of mutually composing relations, some still,

San Francisco, 1906.

Thus rather than a Time/Bank, we might seek to establish an Effort/Embankment—some way of building modes of enhancing different regions of effort. The problem such an

some moving, some small—a fly's wing, a footprint—and some quite large—a highway, a molten flow. Moreover, all

of these events are constantly occurring in and across every assemblage, even as each assemblage's abilities to persevere have already been reinforced or compromised. And this constant personification of a set of distributed quasi-events as morally personified force has a direct impact on our understanding of effort as an ethical failing or testimony. While acknowledging that we measure ourselves and others by many standards (strength, intelligence, wealth, good luck), James claims that "deeper than all such things, and able to suffice unto itself without them, is the sense of the amount of effort which we can put forth ... the effort seems to belong to an altogether different realm, as if it were the substantive thing which we *are*, and those were but externals which we *carry*."[11] In other words, those for whom no effort has been invested are then held accountable for not having the conditions for making the right kind of effort—the kind of effort that would eventuate a kind of event: the new, amazing, world-transformative concept-activity.

How do we think about various explicitly aestheticized forms and genres of concept-activity that at once analyze and make worlds in which these efforts of attentive endurance are formed, thickened, and extended? And where and with whom?

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This is the second of a four-part meditation in this issue on the problem of time, effort, and endurance in conditions of precarity, and pragmatic efforts to embank an otherwise.

Elizabeth A. Povinelli teaches in anthropology and gender studies at Columbia University. She was previously editor of *Public Culture* and her most recent books are The *Empire of Love* (2006) and *Economies of Abandonment* (2011). Her writing and filmography focuses on the conditions of otherwise in Late Liberalism. She is a founding member of the Karrabing Film Collective.

1
See Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* , trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1995).

2
Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2011).

3
Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2013).

4
See Elizabeth A. Povinelli, "After the Last Man: Images and Ethics of Becoming Otherwise," *e-flux journal* 35 (May 2012) http://pdf.e-flux-systems.com/journal/after-the-last-man-images-and-ethics-of-becoming-otherwise/

5
See Elizabeth A. Povinelli, "Routes/Worlds," *e-flux journal* 27 (Sept. 2011) http://pdf.e-flux-systems.com/journal/routesworlds/

6
Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press), 294.

7
See Michael Hardt, *Gilles Deleuze: An Apprenticeship in Philosophy* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1993). Nicholas Tampio has also argued that the "assemblage" is the political subject of Deleuze's virtual ontology. See Tampio, "Assemblages and the Multitude: Deleuze, Hardt, Negri, and the Postmodern Left," *European Journal of Political Theory* vol. 8, no. 3 (June 2009): 383–400.

8
William James, "The Present Dilemma in Philosophy," in *Pragmatism* (New York: Dover, 1995), 15–34, 29.

9
James, "The Present Dilemma in Philosophy," 20.

10
William James, "On Some Mental Effects of the Earthquake," reprinted in James, *Memories and Studies* (Rockville, MD: Arc Manor, 2008), 86–93, 88

11
William James, "The Will to Believe," *The New World* no. 5 (June 1896): 715.

Lauren Berlant and Elizabeth A. Povinelli

Holding Up the World, Part III: In the Event of Precarity … A Conversation

Elizabeth Povinelli: I don't know about you but my colleagues often remark on the deep conversational possibilities of our recent work, especially where my thinking about the endurance and exhaustion of alternative social projects through the quasi-event overlaps with your thinking about cruel optimism around non-event-like events. I am not surprised, of course. We began talking in Chicago almost a decade ago about the social and affective forms that characterize Late Liberalism. And it's probably not surprising that I would end up focusing more on what I would call energetic aspects, and you on feelings. I always err on the side of what I think about as the problem of the "endurant" and its social antonym, exhaustion and the problem of the tensile nature of substantialized power. Internal to the concept of endurance is the tense, substance, and eventfulness of Late Liberalism: the problem of strength, hardiness, callousness; continuity through space; an ability to suffer and persist. The endurant allows me to absent the question of feeling-affect. But that's what I love about your work. You don't.

Lauren Berlant: A decade ago! More like fifteen years. In 1999 you stole the manuscript of "Love, a Queer Feeling" from my study and sent it to *Homosexuality and Psychoanalysis*.[1] (Thanks for that!) The previous year, we did a word-by-word edit of your "The State of Shame" for my *Critical Inquiry* special issue, "Intimacy." My computer tells me that in this same year we invented the concept of Late Liberalism for our working group at the University of Chicago, which grew out of conversations between you, me, and Candace Vogler about starting a project called "Monster Studies" (that was its nickname, from Jackie Stacey's *Teratologies*[2]). The aim of the project was to conceive of the world beyond models of liberal intentionalist subjectivity, and its refractions in a monocultural nation-state. That project eventuated in the conference we ran, Violence and Redemption, which became a *Public Culture* special issue edited by Vogler and Patchen Markell.[3] (So it's funny and lovely to hear the return of the word "monster" in your current work on the anthropocene: we can't get away from it, the staging of a tragicomic alterity.) Then, in 2007, you heard about my article "Slow Death" from Michael Warner, and wrote to me to get it for inclusion in what became your article "The Child in the Basement: States of Killing and Letting Die," and from there we entered phase two of our collaboration.

So it's not surprising to me that resonances are heard in our work: we've been working together, in and out of conversation, for a long time; many of your now thickly and beautifully developed rubrics emerge from those working group days. What interests me so much is in your ever more explicit insistence on the ethnographic test for

theory: what you, in your recent keynote at an anthropocene conference, called a toggle between "on the table" and "on the ground," as in: "when immanent critique occupies the world it claims its own ground." I would love to hear you talk about that test—what constitutes the ground, what it means for you to say that, especially since you also, unlike many anthropologists, also mobilize the aesthetic.

But to get to your framing question. You and I share, for sure, an interest in "the endurant" and the exhausted: "Slow Death" was the first place I worked it out, but I'd long talked about politics as a war of attrition, riffing off Gramsci's "War of Position" and "War of Manoeuvre" as well as his keen sense of how hypervigilance and compulsive strategizing can wear a body out. Even in your first book, your interest in exhaustion emerged from structural and symbolic notions of economy that crossed the structural and collective sensual life.

But we're both also interested in how the ongoingness of life produces an *energetics* of endurance—through touch, proximity, and conversation that's both narrative (against the state and for the collectivity's self-adherence) and eruptive in particular moments of pleasure. I hadn't thought that our difference was a difference between a practice-based tracking and an affect-based one, though, since I am also compelled by how people live and spend a lot of time tracking practices of the reproduction of life from within life. Of course, I have to rely on other people's ethnographies for that, while also tracking their intensification and refinement as pattern in aesthetic mediations.

But you're right, I'm interested in the affectivity of disturbance, the reproductive and inventive labor of the unsaids and atmospheres, the moods and repetitions that exist without being congealed into normative forms. Maybe it's that you are more likely to track feedback loops of response and effect, and I am more likely to sit inside of the moment of disturbance before form provides an anchor? You are more likely to seek to capture a structure (of knowledge, power, expertise) in any of the exempla you offer, is that right?

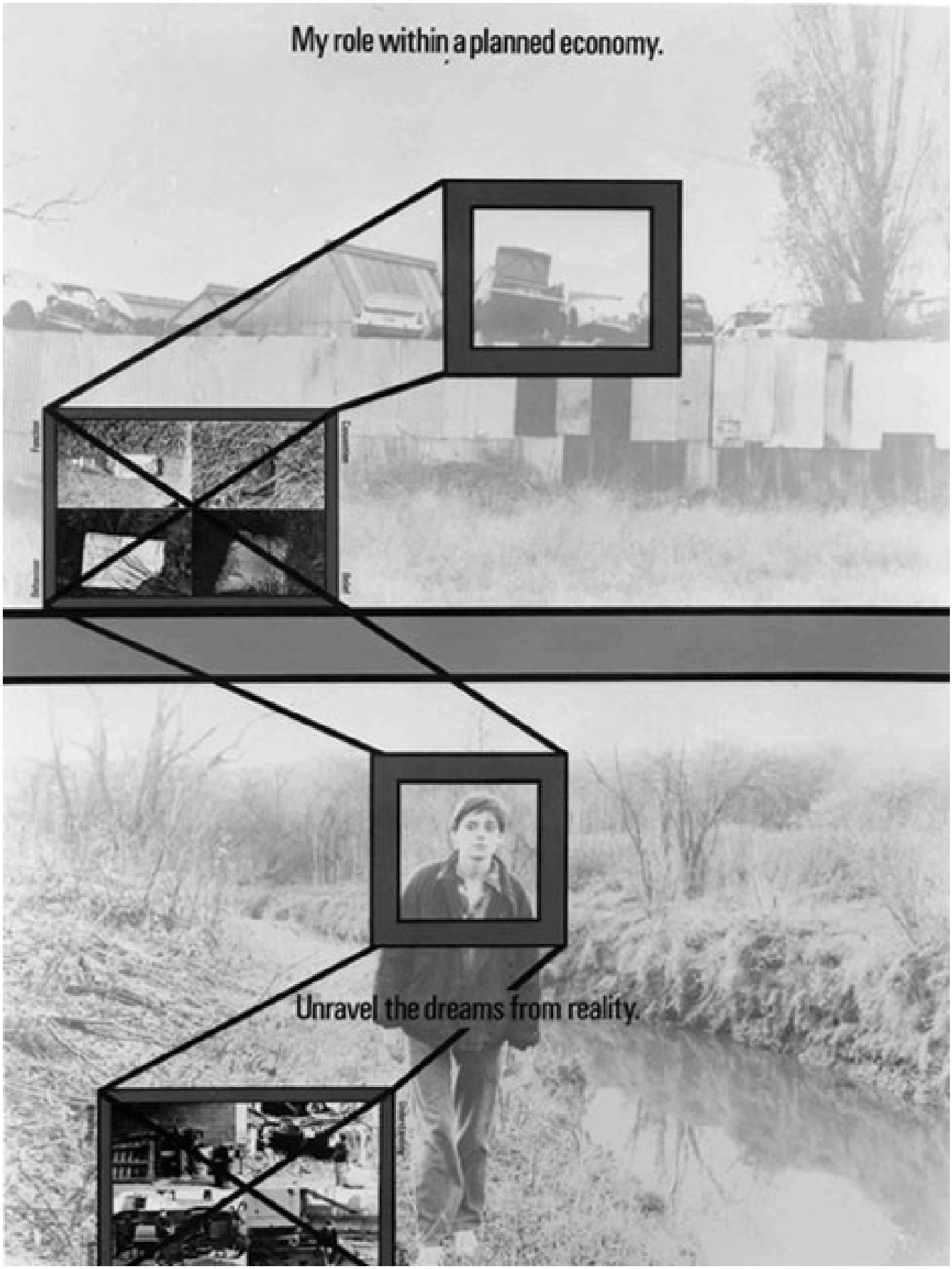
EP: Yes, I think the concept of a feedback loop is a nice way of imaging what interests me, but with the caveat that the loop doesn't loop so much as leak because of the superabundant varieties and variants of feedback crowding in the same space. A superabundance of the supervalent—to give a nod to the name of your blog where you define "supervalent" as a concept that generates all kinds of contradictions—can be magnified to induce an impact beyond what's explicit or what's normative.[4] Like Althusser's concept of relative autonomy on crack: the feedbacks are far more than can be descriptively or experientially accounted for, in part because they include all the potentialities expressed by an actual feedback loop. Leaving aside this caveat, I am indeed drawn, compelled perhaps, by aesthetic and argumentative artifacts that live at the precipice of the figured (normative, antinormative forms); the fog of becoming; something that might be something if the conditions of experiencing it or the conditions of supporting it are in place. And I am equally drawn to aesthetics and arguments that put two given figurations in play but then pause at the potentialities welling up at the moment they touch. In my own writing—and filmmaking and drawing—I struggle to convey the superabundance of feedback without quickly leaping over the moment before the fog **s** of becoming become dominant, or the moment before minority figures have clearly marked out the justice of their terrain.

This is why I have consistently thought with and within your writing. Of course, crawling around the interior of someone's mind for such a long time—fifteen years—makes memory a meandering loop. I don't remember making off with "Love, A Queer Feeling"; you're so generous with your writing, I doubt I would have done so except for some perverse pleasure. But I was not the least surprised when we both wound up at a Pembroke Center conference in March 2004 and you were working on [the chapter] "Two Girls, Fat and Thin" for *Cruel Optimism* and I was working through [the chapter] "Rotten Worlds" for *Empire of Love*.

What I do remember are much earlier conversations we had around drafts of "Sex in Public," [the essay you cowrote with Michael Warner]. I have always especially been drawn to the example that closes the essay. For anyone who hasn't read this essay, it describes a performance at a now closed sex club in New York:

> A boy, twentyish, very skateboard, comes on the low stage at one end of the bar, wearing lycra shorts and a dog collar. He sits loosely in a restraining chair. His partner comes out and tilts the bottom's head up to the ceiling, stretching out his throat. Behind them is an array of foods. The top begins pouring milk down the boy's throat, then food, then more milk. It spills over, down his chest and onto the floor. A dynamic is established between them in which they carefully keep at the threshold of gagging. The bottom struggles to keep taking in more than he really can. The top is careful to give him just enough to stretch his capacities.

The cum shot eventually happens. And then a series of questions you wish you could have asked the young bottom who was, so rumor went, straight, including: What does "straight" mean in such a context? How did he discover that this is the form of public intimacy he wished to share? How did he find someone to do this with him? I love these questions, and of course think you were right



Stephen Willats, The Lurky Place, 1978. Photographs, photographic dyes, Letraset, gouache and ink on card

that this was citing the money shot in porn. But when we talked about this essay, and when I teach it, I am drawn to all the things this performance was and might become—and in so doing, the way this performance might potentialize minoritization. What if the vomiting wasn't already a figure of the sex and sexuality we know, but an insistence that sex could be a minor form and drama of spitting? What might be the forces that would allow this virtual other body to emerge and endure?

overly semanticized approach to structure and event or structure and praxis. So I always start hyperventilating when I hear that I am interested in structure. And why, beginning maybe most explicitly in *Empire of Love*, I began to try to think about the enfleshed aspect of the fog of meaning and its coming into view. This is what I am exploring with the idea of an embankment rather than a bank of meaning and bodies and all the minor and quasi-events that hold these embankments in place.

Charles Burnett, Killer of Sheep, 1977. Film still

I think that's why I don't use the term "structure"—the capture of "structure"—and why I am trying to see what kind of conceptual work effort, embankment, and quasi-event can do rather than return to the discussions around structure and event, which, as you know, lead us to interesting but somewhat exhausted arguments. Your work on the labor of the uncongealed economies of unsaids, on dynamic and flat moods, on stifling and overrich atmospheres, is anathema or an antinomy to the

And its what I love about [Charles Burnett's 1977 film] *Killer of Sheep*, which is really what I was hoping we could think with and through.

LB: What questions remain for you in particular—you've worked with that text exhaustively, no?

EP: Well, yes that was lazy of me. I put *Killer of Sheep* to

use in *Economies of Abandonment*, but in a fairly crude way, picking out the parts, and what I saw as a strategy of the whole, to exemplify the cinema of the non-event. But in *Cruel Optimism*, you talk about the cinema of precarity, yes? And I find that very, very intriguing, especially as my very old friends in Australia and I are drawn into making a series of films about the conditions of agency and geography that characterize their ordinary lives under the auspices of the Karrabing Film Collective. I continually come back to our "Monster Studies" and your thinking around the aesthetics of precarity, and your thinking about film and media more generally. For me, this new endeavor forces me to think from two different but braided perspectives. On the one hand are questions that are text-internal or film-as-text: How to develop a compelling narrative form that breaks with presuppositions about the nature of the event? How to narrate the endurance outside liberal heroic tropes of the overcoming of all odds? What are the range of affects that typically track with the endurant and support what you call the forms of cruel optimism, and why?

On the other hand are questions external to the film-as-text. That is, the film from the point of view of its emergence: the group that scripts it, casts it, situates it in a specific location and then acts it out. And this is especially intriguing when, as in *Killer of Sheep*, or among the Karrabing Film Collective, the lives that are being acted out track the lives people are living. The conditions of life in which my friends find themselves radically attenuate agency—they "flatten people's batteries," in the local idiom. So the activity of formation, the activity of producing a life from within their own life, is a significant event-experience. It is also a mode of critique, since, as we script and cast and plot and act/direct, we ask, why this plot, why so-and-so in this role, why these events? What part of the narrative is likely to happen in our everyday lives—and what that is unlikely, surprising? And this is also an event happening from inside the activity of filmmaking. Of course, there's no separating these insides and outside—their extimate relationship is clearly evidenced when it comes to moving the filmic effect of all this into an editing room and then across the various platforms of viewership.

So, I was wondering how your thinking about the cinema of precarity would apprehend *Killer of Sheep* as not merely my crude way of taking bits and pieces of a film and using it as exemplary of a reading of a formation of power and possibility, but as part of the cinema of precarity in a fuller sense—how different kinds of practices of self-scripting don't merely represent the cinema of precarity, but also provide an embankment around the energy it takes to endure the conditions of precarity.

Or, how do you think about the makings you make on your blog?

LB: This morning on the way to the gym, I had a conversation with a friend about an ethnography of contemporary pleasure economies in which everyone tries to plan out an event that will be invariably disturbed by experience. We talked about the concept of "the bucket list," with its desire that life should entail experiences that make monumental memories that one can know in advance and predict, but that still demand the risk of an immersion whose frisson induces delight in the sense that one has really lived. Tonight, I went to get new glasses and got buyer's remorse, but they don't let you return your own face. Then I went to dinner, and although it was vegan and organic, it made me itch. Then I went for a walk, and although it was night, it got warmer and warmer. There were others in all of these situations, and a lot of warm noise. I checked my phone a lot, and answered email in the interstices such action makes. By the time I reached home, it was too hot to bear my cat sitting on my lap while I was reading a Gayatri Spivak piece. It was a good day, but I had a hard time maintaining my good humor in the middle of the sheer energy of sustaining all of the relations I encountered and imagined, the work of holding up the world—not feeling alone in it, exactly, but never quite knowing who the other was in relation to the sustaining project of mutuality. I could not make the cat leave. But I cast him as a friend with whom I pass warmth back and forth.

Julie Mehretu, Black City, 2007. Ink and acrylic on canvas. Photo: Stephen White.

Some forms of relation feel simple even though they are unbearable, unscripted, and at some level unnecessary, except in every way. Other relations are organized by the embrace of the competitive, the aggressive, the prematurely disappointed, and assurance about who's the victim and who's the unjust threat. Other ones proceed through sheer will, without much reflection on their cost. Others are convenient, conventional, and not forgettable, but easy to file away. Your films, like *Killer of Sheep*, are fantastic documents of the relation between antagonism and jostling in the episode and solidarity within a creative

and world-extensive structure. The kind of movement one makes to keep some things open and to deflate and shift the shape of the others is something like what you call the "embankment" around ordinary precarity.

The queer, the psychoanalytic, the ethnographic, the historicist relation to the event understands its relation to temporality to be not at all constituted by an immediate impact, but by what Shaka McGlotten calls the sensual "bleed," mediated through practices of life-making and projection.[5] This attitude grounds what engages us both: a skepticism, in the philosophical sense, that leads to attention to the bleed and the shape of the scar that keeps changing, fading, and becoming prominent over time, and reopening. Patterns emerge and converge and something is induced through their infrastructural mediation of the world to itself. Where we part a bit, I think, is on the question of the event. I prefer to say the "becoming-event" of an impact or situation rather than the "quasi-event," because your phrase still signals to me an anchoring in the self-evidence of impact. I always prefer to dial back the sense that a determining action has occurred—seeing impact as more like a prompt—and track its appearance as circulation, transformation, and mediations—what I boringly call its way of "finding its genre." From this perspective, precarity is ontological, the openness of the world to the relation among its structures and emerging patterns, our heuristic habitation of it all, and the forced openness we have to each other's tenderness, historical trail, and need for things to go as well as we want (where desire meets aggression). Again, that could be a caption for your films, or *Killer of Sheep*.

But the cinema of precarity is also specific and materialist. It is all about what resources remain for generating life beyond the minima of survival; it is about the costly demand on precarious individuals and populations to practice affective and economic austerity. In the precarious aesthetic, docility, exhaustion, and the minor pleasures are revealed to be ways out of defeat, modes of stuckness, and what needs destruction. *Who* the precarious are is less objective than it sometimes seems, nonetheless: there are so many different kinds of structure involved with precarity's fact and atmosphere. *Killer of Sheep* is an amazing demonstration of this: of the fragility among intimates, of being on the make as a way of refusing to be the sheep that one is killing, of understanding that violence and death are parts of the ordinary, are low-level attritions within it that also provide uneven kinds of nutrition. And then there is the precariousness of time for thought, of the capacity to experiment in life, of love. Those long, quiet shots. The importance of children playing without a plot, and improvising effects. The film asks the question: Which is worse, a fully developed consciousness, or the modes of dissociation that reduce suffering and allow for the expression of complex, contradictory, and counterintuitive motives and practices? I think the latter wins in the film: a consciousness from a biopolitical perspective that takes in everything and holds it in presence as a resource for living lives also with the threat of an affective collapse (see Fanon and Patricia Williams for more of *that*).[6]])]

So what I point to in the cinema of precarity is the operation of a structural state: a motile membrane of consistency absorbing many locales and lives into its logic—not the drama of antithesis to the affecto-practical place where intuitions are made from the visceral disturbances we share, but a structure of feeling like what you call fog. What an event is isn't the opposite, a non-event, but rather a developing scene in which *we pay attention* to what takes shape from within the disturbances of relationality. I worry about the language of the minor the way you worry about "structure"—it points so much to a reduced version of its opposite. But I guess in that sense we are both occupying and redistorting concepts that ought to be richer and inconvenient to the desire for efficient description.

Charles Burnett, Killer of Sheep, 1977. Film still

Sometimes within spaces of poverty, people's pleasure in reproducing life allows suffering to pass through time and action like the momentarily good and aversive smells one walks through all day. Desperation is a taxing noise that gets more or less intense. Sometimes in the places of economic cushion, emotional austerity is the norm for virtue, and waste makes ordinary action toxic and the atmosphere cortisol-cranky. I always try to remember that what we call the structural reproduction of life is about the relation of concentrations of wealth to other forms of social value and not just of who has the money. Your films show that pretty wonderfully. People wander, make music, put off the state and the law, have conversations, are quiet, eat, hang together even when they're separate, tell stories, try to make sense of things in a way that will get them a mode of living they can look forward to reproducing.

At the same time, so much of their creativity is bound up by fighting for a place in and outside of the state, and it is *this* drama, the binding of social energy to reproduce the bad life, that gets me and is the basis for what I gather into the domain of precarity aesthetics. So much amazing life energy is bound up in our own affective, bodily, imaginative, and practical poisoning for life. I feel that when facing the convenient stranglings of heteronormativity, white supremacy, colonial nationalisms; the ratcheting up of all of those toxic magnets amid the global elite's project of biopolitical shaming and release from liberal citizenship's already thin norms has now added new logics to the double binding.

What we have always seen together is the rich resource in relationality, richer than family and hoarded money. We have always seen together that the worst suffering and the most unbearable precarity is in the radical individuality sold as liberal freedom, where people imagine that competition is what's natural while relations that build worlds are exceptional, like dessert. We also reject the version of the family that stages as love the subordination of children to the parental fantasy that here, finally, sovereignty can organize everyday life. Who needs it? Well, lots of people think they do because that's how they learned love and learned to imagine belonging. Anarchists like Proudhon point out that it's cooperation that one can't live without, while competition is what threatens living.

You write that "the conditions of life in which my friends find themselves radically attenuate agency—they 'flatten people's batteries,' in the local idiom." But it is also true that batteries are flattened wherever the reproduction of life captures all of the creative energy of life, which is most places, no? Is that why you turn to art? Is that why you make figures to map transfers across time and space? Is that why you think of role-casting as counter-precarious? Why you keep writing? Because these modes unbind attachment, make counter-histories possible, and affirm effort?

EP: Yes, I think their metaphor of subjectivity as a flattened battery is quite extendable—their analysis of the problem of maintaining a relation to life, place, each other, worlding should not be understood as a local cultural idiom in the anthropological sense, but a theory, a rapacious analysis of the conditions of Late Liberalism as they land in places like Indigenous Australia. "Like in … " is of course more of a deflection of the problem than an answer to the question of what constitutes comparison, equivalence. In *Economies of Abandonment*, I discussed a washing machine lid that flew off the back of a rented truck as a group of us moved from a form of homelessness to a state regime of public housing. I used this as an example of the kinds of events that create the kinds of catastrophes that the state and the public tear their collective hair out over. How do we coordinate the snapping of a shoelace with the stubborn disadvantage of Indigenous social worlding? I also note that quasi-events are the general condition of all human social life. My shoestrings snap all the time. What my Indigenous colleagues are noting with the metaphor of the flat battery is the fact that quasi-events have a different kind of force depending on where they occur in the socially distributed world. The effort it takes to undo, reverse, move on from the trivia of derangements in their lives verses mine is not trivial. And here, that amazing rendition of the effort involved in procuring and then losing a motor engine in *Killer of Sheep* will never cease to haunt me. My colleagues insist that I understand that the effort it takes to recharge a battery in a context in which everywhere and everything is deranged is of a different order than recharging a battery where this is not the case. So the entire world might appear to consist of the same type of quasi-events, but because neither the event nor the quasi-event are transcendent to their immanent and actual conditions, what appears as a quasi-event in my New York world and what appears as a quasi-event in their, and their-and-my, Karrabing world, are not equivalent.

Maybe the phrasing "becoming-event" would help point to the way that forms of eventfulness can seem comparable across socially differentiated substance-space even as they are not of the same type or mode. But I think the phrase "becoming-event" actually points to the moment that obsessively compels us both, maybe; that is—and I don't have any powerful or beautiful language to describe this, alas—how and why and the moment when peopled places gather whatever creative energies they have left to derange and arrange these kinds of flattening nothings into charging somethings. After all, as we both know intimately and theoretically, the transformation of nothing into something is a miracle as a much as a manner of being. It was you who first said to me that the difference between zero and one is larger than any sum between one and infinity. And this difference is the difference that my Karrabing colleagues face. And thus, thinking about the cinema of precarity as a resource for generating life beyond the minima of survival is rich, crucial, and important.

And now I am going to say something truly sentimental and banal. Buddha supposedly said that there are many roads to enlightenment. But of course this is true only if we remember that the reason there is not *one* road to enlightenment is not because there are many roads to enlightenment, but because each way of approaching a problem reveals that the problem was not one problem in the first place. And this is indeed why I love thinking with you, whether, as in this case, our thinking together is via a Google document read and responded to across cafés, home offices, bush camps, or gyms, or whether our thinking happens via thumbed-through books and my pork fat and your veggie burgers in the interstices of talks and conferences. My road is never exactly your road, and so where we stand in the end is a shared place, an opening, but not a Heideggerian open. Ours is weirder, warped, shared but not the same. What could be better?

X

This is the third of a four-part meditation in this issue on the problem of time, effort, and endurance in conditions of precarity, and pragmatic efforts to embank an otherwise.

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Audra Simpson, Elizabeth A. Povinelli, and Liza Johnson

Holding Up the World, Part IV: After a Screening of When the Dogs Talked at Columbia University

Audra Simpson: Where was *When the Dogs Talked* made? And why was it made? How does it relate to the earlier short film by the Karrabing Film Collective, *Karrabing: Low Tide Turning*?

Elizabeth Povinelli: These film projects began as something quite different than what they ended up being. I talked a little about this in an earlier *e-flux journal* essay. A very old group of friends and colleagues of mine were working on a digital archive project that would be based in the community where they were living. But after a communal riot, they decided being homeless was safer than staying in the community. So what began as a digital archive that would be located on a computer in a building on a community was reconceptualized as a "living archive" in which media files would be geotagged in such a way that they could be played on any GPS-enabled smart device, but only proximate to the physical site the media file was referring to. We thought this augmented-reality–based media project would have two main interfaces, one for their family and one for tourists. And they thought this would be a way of supporting their specific geontology—their way of thinking about land and being—and create a green-based business to support their families.

But they faced two obstacles as they tried to build this living library. On the one hand, the Australian economy was increasingly oriented around a mining boom, supplying raw minerals to China. This raised the value of the Australian dollar and the price of goods and services, and crippled other domestic industries such as software design and tourism. On the other hand, a sex panic was gripping the nation around the supposed rampant sexual abuse of Aboriginal children in remote communities. The federal government used the sex panic to roll back Indigenous land rights and social welfare, and to attack the value of Indigenous life-worlds more generally. So instead of making the augmented reality project, my colleagues decided that we should make a film that tries to represent and analyze the conditions in which they were working—the small, cumulative events that enable and disable their lives. They thought this would give everyone a sense of the various kinds of media objects that could eventually be in their geontological library. And I should say that they wanted to make a film with people who could show them how films such as *Ten Canoes* were made. That is, they had a very specific kind of film in mind, one that, at least initially, demanded a level of craft that I didn't have.

I asked Liza if she'd come out, meet the Karrabing, workshop the story with us as a collective, and codirect our first film, *Karrabing: Low Tide Turning*. I had seen and

heard about a number of short films she had made, especially *South of Ten* and *In the Air*, and I thought she'd be perfect for what we wanted to do. *South of Ten*, for instance, is able to pay cinematographic attention to the ordinary material conditions of getting by in the wake of Hurricane Katrina without making them a weird dramatic personage. In one clip you see a woman washing dishes in a large white bucket with a FEMA trailer in the background. The heat, the industrial nature of the bucket, the FEMA trailer—these are the completely non-remarkable conditions of the cast-off and getting-by. *In the Air* also got my attention for similar reasons. It's set in the crumbling US rust belt, now the Meth Belt, and encounters a group of kids who have set up a circus school as a way of organizing a center to their lives. For me this film is a study of the small, non-spectacular ways people try to create projects and events that can sustain them in the midst of social and material decay. Oh, and I should say that both films work with nonprofessional actors.

Liza Johnson: Of course I knew Beth, and Beth's work, when she invited me to do this project. I was interested to meet her friends and family. I was also interested in the intellectual intersections of the project because it seemed like a compelling opportunity to work across the discourses of art, cinema, and anthropology, which have a lot to say to one another but often fail to say it. I hope and believe that this is changing, but for a long time I have felt the very strong legacy of modernism in art contexts, a legacy that can be suspicious of documentary impulses and ethnographic research, as if these methods are dangerously unmediated, or somehow claiming to be "in reality, in truth, not in ideology."[1]

And then on the flip side, in anthropology, it can seem as if *only* ethnography is real, and that there is no thinking done by representation—that filmmaking is just craft knowledge. I had collaborated with an anthropologist in the past, and when we finished the project he was very quick to claim mastery over the content, relegating me to the form side of the equation, as if the two could be easily separated. And as if you can have mastery over content when that content is itself a group of living people who have mastery over themselves!

Within art contexts, this split sometimes has formal implications too, most obviously between a representational paradigm that may aim to generate shifts in meaning or ideology, and a public art or relational aesthetics paradigm that may think of social relationships as the material and medium of the work. But isn't it possible to gesture in both directions?

Cinema and theater offer a lot of models that we could aspire towards, including: Augusto Boal's Theater of the Oppressed; the kinds of participatory projects that Jean Rouch made, and that Faye Ginsberg champions; classical and contemporary forms of neorealism; and even in the legacies of minimalism, like Akerman and Warhol, for the ways that eventfulness and the everyday are distributed. I've been very interested in Lauren Berlant's project, including her characterization of the cinema of precarity, and in Ivonne Marguelies's work on realism, and especially on the role of description in creating a kind of critical purchase on eventfulness. These references, in conversation with a set of references traditional to the Karrabing mob, were the basis of the workshop that we did with the Karrabing. Fundamentally we aspired to Boal: What are the conflicts of everyday life, and how might we act upon those conflicts if we try to act them out?

EP: *Karrabing*, *When the Dogs Talked*, and the film we're currently making, *The Waves*, are interesting hybrids, mixing Boalian and Karrabing analytical techniques, neorealism and collective ethnography, representation and enactment of social worlds. But the Karrabing is also an interesting hybrid, maybe deranged, social form. The Karrabing is not a "tribal group" nor a place. Karrabing is an ecological condition—it's the Emiyenggal word for the state when the tide has reached its lowest. Most members are from contiguous coastal regions around the Anson Bay, though from different so-called traditional lands. So the Karrabing decided to use this ecological condition as

the name of its legal corporation in order to emphasize that they are a kin/friendship group rather than a local descent group, namely, the kind of social formation the state recognizes as a form of land-based ownership and decision-making. So making films that represent and analyze the conditions in which they are living is also what allows the Karrabing to make a case that the kind of social form they are should create a space in state forms of recognition—especially the domineering classical anthropological imaginary of territorially based clans and tribes.

AS: *Dogs* seems at heart to be a critical analysis operating outside academic genres of explication. On the surface we seem to be watching a fairly straightforward plot. *Low Tide Turning* told the story of an extended Indigenous family who, faced with losing their public housing if they don't find a missing relative, embark on a journey to find her, only to wind up stranded out in the bush. *When the Dogs Talked* incorporates this plotline but seeks to tell a slightly different story: "As their parents argue about whether to save their government housing or their sacred landscape, a group of young Indigenous kids struggle to decide how the Dreaming makes sense in their contemporary lives." But the film stages, without being stagy, a clash between various kinds of authorities over the meaning and sense of what gets glossed in various literatures as "The Dreaming": the ancestral world of beings who made the present geography.

On the one hand, the film is slung around the continuing presence of a Dog Dreaming—a group of dogs who once walked and talked like humans. As the Dogs traveled along, as they tried to make a fire and eat the yams, they rubbed their fingers down until they turned into paws and burnt their tongues. So today, dogs can no longer speak. Each place where they were frustrated, they made a mark on the land. So the film shows, for instance, a set of water wells that the Dogs made as they tried to make a fire. These Dreamings do much more than mark the movement from territory to place. They connect people to that place and to each other through time. These Dreamings carry with them boundaries in their stories and in their telling of the story at places.

But even here the state has another "dreaming," and this "dreaming" would be the legal and public fantasy about what a traditional group should look and act like, how it should be composed, what people are allowed to think and say about their "traditions." This is what you're referring to when you say that the Karrabing do not conform to state-based modes of recognition. And we see this in Canada too, after the Van der Peet Decision—and maybe less virulently in New Zealand. We could say that the state has a dreaming of the Dreaming: a form that Indigenous and Native peoples must conform to in order to be traditional in the right way, the state way, to get back your pre-settlement rights to your land, *no matter that these state-ways are not your ways*. And throughout the Native world we see lives lived in a constant contortion, and it's not a good yoga pose. It's collectively experienced and carries great costs.

I love that the film pivots this analytics around a young Indigenous girl, Telish, and what *she* believes made the water wells—ancestral dogs who walked and talked like people? Or a human machine of some sort? Telish is being told the story of her mother's dreaming and thus her mother's land and her mother's law, what I think we might understand as law. Does she believe this, does she think it was dogs that do this or did this, or does she think the machines did this? This is the invitation I think: to sit with Telish and wonder what to think. Because settler and Indigenous dreamings are operating in the same place among the same people and it leaves in the center of the narrative a space for doubt or skepticism. Which should I believe? Is this state or this dog story really real, is this really true, should I believe this? This space of internal skepticism about both is very generative and productive, but so subtly played. At the beginning of the film, I saw the shadow of doubt on her face. And then at the end of the film, I saw no doubt, I saw a belief, and then I saw fear.

EP: I am glad you liked that. We wanted to dramatize that the materiality and sociality of the dreamings exists here and now and thus must continually find some anchor in the actual world people live in if they are to continue existing. So the pivot of the movie is about the kids asking themselves: If we agree that the world is literally, ontologically formed one way or the other, what does that make us retrospectively? If we agree that a huge dog that walked and talked like humans made the geography, what will we be? Primitives? Uncool? Backwards? Hicks?

So the film is cut to use Telish as the person who is considering this problem. If I believe and act on the belief that dogs made these holes, does this put me in an impossible space, put me in a space between the state, pop culture, and my love for my family?

AS: And I think this is why there's always been

ethnographic austerity in your written work, Beth—in what you write about your friends and colleagues. I'm seeing this now in this film. There's a politics in this descriptive austerity—we're shown the richness of the ways in which these people are communicating; the way they make boundaries; and what lies beyond boundaries and then simultaneous orderings, as well as the continued life on land with others. But the analysis is focused on the ways that the ordinary everyday workings of state bureaucracy and poverty drain the resources and energy from them—and how they nevertheless keep going along.

And here is where I see another kind of dreaming authority, white man's dreaming, by which I mean the state's dreaming, its architecture, its bureaucracy, and its regulations, its "standards of cleanliness" and ideas about safety. In *Dogs*, we see and feel the effects of this imagining or coming-into-being of the settler world as it re-instantiates itself over and over again in Indigenous life through its techniques of surveillance, regulation, and the production of poverty—the overcrowding in government housing, for instance, because they have made living in rural and remote communities almost impossible.

I say "the production of poverty" because you can see so clearly at one point the profound desire and exasperation that comes with this desire and call to hunt. This call and desire to hunt needs to be set aside to chase Gigi so that she can show up at territory housing, and I guess rather ridiculously, make a case for herself in terms that such a state will understand. Which is probably not the excuse that it probably is, which is simply, she's being a responsible family member while living in Darwin.

In terms of Indigenous life-worlds in what are called multicultural, liberal settler colonies or former colonies, there's a terrific press for performance. It's the performance of pure culture, it's the performance of not having lost what you were actually supposed to lose quite fast.

EP: Yes, this is exactly what the Karrabing want to get on the table—or the screen. How both of these positions—I believe that dogs once walked and talked like we do and that they made water wells that still exist; I don't believe …—constitute an impossible choice thrust upon them. And what kinds of efforts allow them to live the answer rather than answer the question. What I mean by this is fairly simple-minded. In making the film, in staging the kids having an argument about what might have made the water wells, the Karrabing are in fact keeping the water wells and the Dog Dreaming alive and active in their kid's minds.

AS: Do you care about the genre of this film? It doesn't seem to be ethnographic, it's not documentary, but the narrative is, if I am right, lifted out of the actual lives of the Karrabing. So there's that kind of slyness of genre in this performance. At what point does performance begin in that kind of dialogic space?

LJ: In this particular social context (and arguably in others) there isn't really an outside to performance. When we undertook this project, the question was intensified by the federal intervention—the rollback of Indigenous rights based on a sex panic. Prior to that moment, to secure resources from the state, it was necessary to perform your (real) relationship to tradition to get control over your land. And then suddenly, on a dime, to secure resources from the state, you have to perform your relationship to assimilation.

And so that conflict, while not articulated in those terms at every moment of everyday life, does place performance demands on subjects within their social worlds. And it also bears on the representational question within the film. I like how Audra is talking about how that is intensified in the figure of Telish, and I think a version of the same is also true for the other characters.

It raises a question about performance, one that can also be raised in other kinds of neorealism. This question has to do with what happens when there are "breaks" in performance. Do those breaks function in a Brechtian way, offering a critical distance of some kind? Or are they really even breaks, since the performing subject is *also* asked to perform in certain ways outside the framework of the film performance?

The story is designed collectively through a kind of workshop process. But as for the script, I don't think there is one. Improvisation, which in all its forms—comedy, jazz, acting—really only works when you're working off of a structure, is a really useful technique when working with nonprofessional actors. Through workshopping, everyone knows what's going to happen and knows what the scene is and knows what they're trying to do, but gets to say whatever they think is the right thing to say.

This is where it's also not just representational, but an enactment on the ground in a particular context. It's a very

contingent world, which has a determining impact on the narrative decisions. But on the other hand, there is no way to overstate the ways that the obstacles of poverty and racism can limit people's ability to do the things they want to do, and so we all had to ask ourselves, how much of a continuous story do we want to try to tell when it's completely unclear whether the people who can appear on day one of the shoot will be structurally able to return for the second day? And in that sense, it's radically different from industrial filmmaking, where that's all guaranteed and bonded by an insurance company.

Which actually was an interesting enactment while shooting because—and I mean this in a very non–self-congratulatory way, and I am suspicious of people who would congratulate me or Beth on this topic. But there is a real scarcity of meaningful work, or any kind of work. And on the days when we were working, there was, and that was an interesting enactment in the space—a day of meaningful work, though sometimes boring, is a different day than a day of no work. It's one of the relational things that is changed during the shooting.

EP: Yes. For while I was assigned the job of directing. Part of my job was allowing for constant potential rearrangements of character, dialogue, and story line. In our recent shooting of *The Waves*, for instance, one of the young men, Cameron, did not want to be cast as a member of the group of young men who stumble upon two cartons of beer. He wanted to be a Karrabing Land Ranger instead. His change of mind came fairly far into the story design, but because everyone thought this made sense for Cameron, my job was to help realign the story—and it didn't have to work out this way, but it turned and deepened the story as we incorporated this new character.

AS: What has the film done? Both of you have said it was as much about constituting Karrabing as representing them.

EP: Yes, that's right. Of course, one of the central questions is how does one shape the force, form, and direction of this constitution so that one can take advantage of certain, say, Late Liberal/neoliberal discourses of capacitation, even as what is being capacitated does not conform to the imaginaries of difference and markets within Late Liberal settler society?

LJ: I'm suspicious of certain new and powerful models, which are increasingly being used by documentary funders, of requiring documentaries to have "measurable impact." (Meg McLagan's work on this topic is extremely useful.) I think it's our job as artists and intellectuals to be out in front of things, like canaries in mineshafts, and to be looking for things which are there to be sensed—like a tingling and hopefully collective Spidey-sense—but which might not yet be there to be measured. Something more like "structures of feeling," or things that are in the air, which might have some other kind of impact, some immeasurable impact. Part of what we're doing is asking, collectively, what would be our categories?

EP: I think this is the perfect place to end.

X

This is the conclusion of a four-part meditation in this issue on the problem of time, effort, and endurance in conditions of precarity, and pragmatic efforts to embank an otherwise. All film stills are from *When The Dogs Talked* (2014), and *Low Tide Turning* (2012), films by the Karrabing Film Collective in conjunction with Liza Johnson and Elizabeth A. Povinelli. The films were written by and star members of the **Karrabing Indigenous Corporation**.

Liza Johnson is the writer and director of the feature film *Return* (2011) and the director of *Hateship Loveship* (2013). She has also made many short films and installation projects that have been exhibited in festivals,

galleries, and museums internationally. Her short films include *South of Ten* (2006), *In the Air* (2009), and *Karrabing, Low Tide Turning* (2012). She is currently writing a new feature film, *Nervous*. Johnson is also the author of many articles about art and film, and is Professor of Art at Williams College.

Elizabeth A. Povinelli teaches in anthropology and gender studies at Columbia University. She was previously editor of *Public Culture* and her most recent books are The *Empire of Love* (2006) and *Economies of Abandonment* (2011). Her writing and filmography focuses on the conditions of otherwise in Late Liberalism. She is a founding member of the Karrabing Film Collective.

Audra Simpson is Associate Professor of Anthropology at Columbia University. She is the author of *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States* (Duke University Press, 2014). She is the editor of the Syracuse University's reprint of Lewis Henry Morgan's anthropological classic, *League of the Haudenosaunee* (under contract) and co-editor (with Andrea Smith) of the ten-chapter collection *Theorizing Native Studies* (Duke University Press, 2014). She has articles in *Cultural Anthropology, American Quarterly*, *Junctures*, *Law and Contemporary Problems* and *Wicazo Sa Review*. She contributed to the edited volume *Political Theory* and the *Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) and was the volume editor of *Recherches amérindiennes au Québec* (RAQ: 1999) on "New Directions in Iroquois Studies." She is the recipient of fellowships and awards from Fulbright, the National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation, Dartmouth College, the American Anthropological Association, Cornell University and the School for Advanced Research (Santa Fe, NM). In 2010 she won Columbia University's School for General Studies "Excellence in Teaching Award." She is a Kahnawake Mohawk.

1
Hal Foster, *Return of the Real* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 174.

Natasha Ginwala and Vivian Ziherl

The Negative Floats: Questions of Earth Inheritance

The Shell In The Mountain

The theories of natural science that were nascent in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries may be re-excavated through the figure of the marine shell—encountered as a form of stone, and lodged mysteriously in the highest mountains of Lower Saxony. These stone shells (as well as eels), Voltaire said, "made new systems blossom." A cacophony of eminent philosophical and scientific voices entered to contest the origins of these aberrational geotic forms, summarized in Anton Lazzaro Moro's 1740 excursus *Opinions On Marine-Mountainous Bodies* (*De' crostacei e degli altri Marini corpi che si truovano su' monti*).[1]

[figure partialpage 2014_11_PregnantrockWEB.jpg "Rock pregnant with a shell," from **Ulisse Aldrovandi**, *Musaeum Metallicum*, 1648.]

Moro (1687–1764) theorized the postulations that such "shells" had been carried to mountain summits by the winds, or were perhaps birthed from a parent rock with a particle seed as "tricks of nature." Another proposition held that fishermen bearing crustaceans ate the flesh inside and left these exoskeletons to petrify into rock. And yet, whether the Great Deluge or other massive oceanic outflows that encased aquatic bodies in the upper echelons of the earth, this entrapped meeting between the positive of the mountain face and the negative of the shell raised universal questions of land-sea relation, of the land "trying to rival the sea in fertility," and of the alchemical quest for casting a molten biography of the subterranean.

Amid this controversy over earth-history, the incipient fields of geology and stratigraphy were joined at the interface of reflections on cosmogony, metaphysics, and a return to alchemical hermeticism. A problem of origins and nativity formed the key point of contention. Did the shell properly belong to the mountain as its geologic kin, or had it arrived from an elsewhere—as an "anti-object" imprinted as a marker of ancient displacements of sea and land?[2]

These disputes reached a point of fissure in 1644 when Descartes's *Principia Philosophiae* established a mechanical, materialist account of the origins of the earth. In this near-heretical telling, the sedimentation of potentially infinite terrestrial particles coalesced in a vault of boundless time. From this basis, Danish Catholic bishop, anatomist, and geologist Nicolas Steno (1638–86) conjectured in his 1669 *Prodromus* that Glossopetrae, or "tongue stones," were in fact petrified sharks' teeth. By this reasoning, they had preexisted the sediment surrounding them in a formation that was successive rather than simultaneous. "How unanimously they come together in agreement," he exclaimed of the manner in which water virtually held the soil, of how mineral sediment that was lodged in "muddy waters" solidified and

shaped the fossil shell, and of the mountains accumulating after the mollusks. This move was then one of temporality but also of matter—transmuted from softened oozing particles into solid mass.

[figure 2014_11_SystemaWEB.jpg
Systema Ideale Pyro-Phylaciorum, in Athanasius Kircher, *Mundus Subterraneus,* 1664/65.]

In a revivalist effort of the Classical Hermetic vision, German Jesuit Athanasius Kircher (1602–80) advanced a thesis that supported such an aqueous history of rock formation, although one that maintained the divine hand of creation. His "Subterranean World," or *Mundus Subterraneus* (1665), was a globe governed by fluid systems of water and fire arising through flows of *vis lapifidica* alchemically reacting with niter, alum, and vitriol . Drawing upon English physician William Harvey's recent description of the human circulatory system, the earth was figured as a respiring, arterial being. Fossil shells were hence grown of the earth, not entombed in dead stone. As "tricks of nature," their near inexplicable presence indicated sublime systems of meaning—cosmological truths hidden behind the veils of outward form.

Across generations of naturalists whose thought-models were rational, cosmological, and geopolitical, the fossil shell remained a cryptographic document to unlock a deeper archive of the "natural world"—to tell of a primeval time when the oceanic realm was a ground that bedecked both deserts and mountains alike.

The Cave Image as Living Testimony

In the Kimberley region of North Western Australia resides a scattered site of caves bearing rock art that is likely to have origins in the Pleistocene era—the most recent period of mass glaciations, popularly conceived as the Ice Age. In the mode of the fossil shell, the figurations molded in these caves convey another perplexing concern in the conjectural pathways of planetary history and humankind: the testimonies of geologic time and the manner in which the earth may "speak" to its emergence.

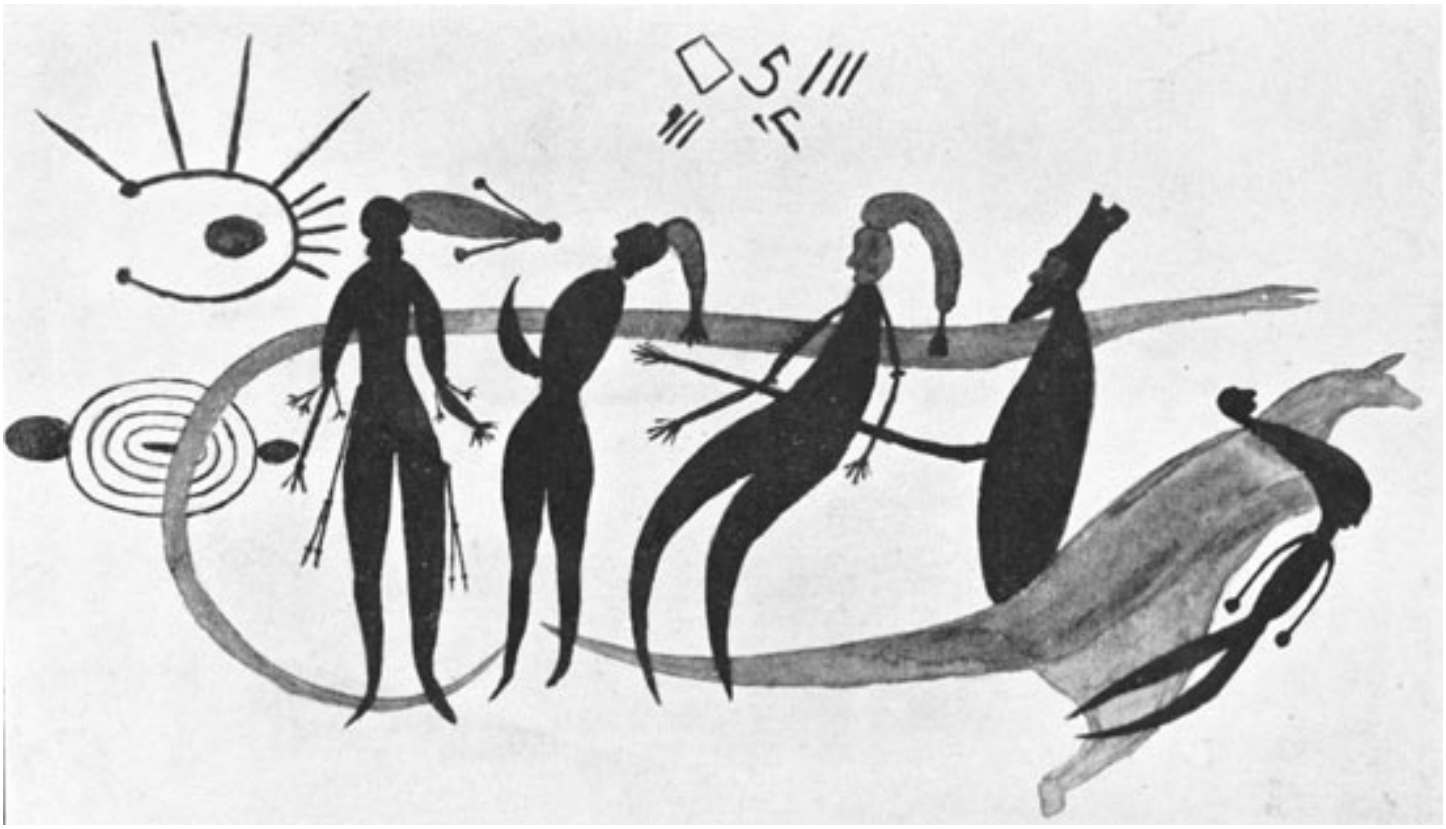
These anthropomorphic "Gwion Gwion" or "Bradshaw" paintings mediate the threshold of human and nonhuman in the micro-biochemical transactions of "living pigments."[3] Whereas other cave paintings in the region deteriorated in a few hundred years, the Gwion Gwion figures maintain a remarkable vivacity—their original painted surface replaced and replenished by a biofilm of pigmented bacteria. Over millennia, crimson cyanobacteria have etched themselves into rock surfaces, generating minute channels that hold certain image areas separate from those inhabited by black rock-adapted fungi. They are thus true petroglyphs—stone-image assemblages of mineral, bacteria, time, and semiotic form.

Radically distinct from the more recent "Wandjina" images that are in part maintained by local Aboriginal groups, the Gwion Gwion images seem to gesture toward another civilizational epoch and a more complex horizon of antiquity. The efforts of Australian neurologist Jack Pettigrew to decipher the inner secrets of the Gwion Gwion images depend upon a hypothesis that weaves ancient human history with climactic change, a supervolcano event and patterns of human/animal/plant cohabitation.[4] As geotemporal testimony, these paintings are estimated to date back to between 46,000 and 70,000 years ago, calculated by the extinction of depicted megafauna and the first appearance of the Australian baobab tree, which was derived from the African species. Pettigrew's hypothesis links hallucinogenic visions in shamanic Tanzanian Sandawe rock art with the "mushroom head" figure of the Gwion Gwion caves as an Afro-Australian civilizational common of sense-perception. In narrating their migratory origin, he suggests an epic human passage across the Indian Ocean in reed boats, carried by Ice Age currents and sustained by the long-lasting nutrition of the baobab seed.

[figure 2014_11_bulletinsWEB.jpg
Bulletins et mémoires de la Société d'anthropologie de Paris, series 5, vol. 4, 1903. Courtesy of the Wellcome Library, London (L0073383).]

The Gwion Gwion remain impermeable to the metrics of radiocarbon dating. As such, they are living images that refuse to yield to the carbon paradigm of biopolitical finitude, as theorized by anthropologist Elizabeth A. Povinelli.[5] They exist bound to the greater mountain, grassland, and waterway entities of the Kimberley region, along with the streaked deposits of coal and shale gas that reside beneath its skin. Here, earth histories are met at their material base by the speculative regimes of resource capital.[6] The rock's concave surface is hence refigured not as a primeval instance of the human imprint in "nature," but as a future anterior where radical efforts of interpretation are wrought by the conflation of extinct and extant.

The Platonic cave allegory is overturned in Gwion Gwion rock art as the real object incessantly eats its shadow; the cause interpellates as effect and therein casts its image back into objectivity. In this organic state of "freedom," the cave is set up as a time capsule propelled by microbacterial agents de- and recomposing ontology itself.[7] The terms of life and nonlife in the logic of planetary governance are thus changed in this visual condition of Gwion Gwion rock art. Yielding a new kind of event-image grasped beyond the carbon limit—stretching the imaginary of an end-time and incessantly looping back as a regenerative figure that is self-resourced.



"Gwion Gwion" or "Bradshaw" rock art figures, from "Notes On A Recent Trip To Prince Regent's River," Joseph Bradshaw, Transactions of the Royal Geographical Society of Australia (Victorian Branch) vol. IX (part 2), 1892.

Turbulent Bodies

At 5:12 a.m. on April 18, 1906, a massive earthquake shook the Gold Rush city of San Francisco for less than a minute.

What does it mean to read the earth as a bodily matter amid a global network of advanced warning sensors that ceaselessly mine the planet as seismic database? The gripping finitude of an end-time imaginary performs its everyday repercussions in the California earthquake's millenarian image. Here, a vast geoscience infrastructure and national security apparatus has grown around a collective apprehension of the turbulent contours of life along the San Andreas Fault. This massive tremor of 1906 nearly leveled the city. It left in its wake not only devastating residual fires but the embryo of the United States' seismological bureaucracy, with a committee of twenty scientists charged to study the geological skins of California.

The apocalyptic configuration of the California earthquake continues to reverberate through televised imaginings of "The Big One"—in which a southern segment of the San Andreas Fault is anticipated to unleash unprecedented catastrophe and shake Los Angeles "like a bowl of jelly."[8] This zone of temporal-territorial premonition is where The Otolith Group (Kodwo Eshun and Anjalika Sagar) surveys California's seismic psyche in their film *Medium Earth* (2013).

The camera conducts surface scans of the Southern Californian desert. It exists as a particle-terrain—a body-in-pieces. We become enmeshed in vast tides of scree and dust-storm currents. As rock formations come to the fore—striated, stitched, cracking, and withering—the voice-over narrates a tremor thus: "The ground becomes a seventy-second ocean." The desert's fluidity meets a stuttering lens that sets up the task of prospecting the fault line where it intersects with California highway Route 14. The state of transit is hence met with the transfer of earth stresses.

In this nonhuman cinema, the event of the earthquake is a generalized condition. The whorls of pressurized sediment act as a planetary fingerprint where geocorporeal palmistry may decipher an arid futurology. Beneath the "language of stones"[9] lies the corporeal reportage of Charlotte King, an earthquake sensitive. Through acute self-monitoring, King discerns "aches and pains" as precursors to earthquakes, which arrive hours or even days later across the globe.[10] Her being resides in radical complicity with the earth's event sphere. If earth is a medium for human life, King is a mediator at the threshold of seismic knowing.

Photograph of San Francisco in ruins from Lawrence Captive Airship, two-thousand feet above San Francisco Bay overlooking the waterfront. Sunset over Golden Gate, 1906, Geo. R. Lawrence Co., Chicago.

The question then remains, how might suffering manifest as aberrational phenomenon—not least as earth-image but also as impossible terrestrial formation? To borrow from Fernand Braudel, in what ways may landforms transfigure as events of interruption and be themselves "the dust of history?"[11] Against the sedimentary backdrop of monopoly power, land may be found in circulatory appearances[12] and as a force of eruptive displacement.

> Dust, however, as it is usually perceived by us, is, like dirt, only matter in the wrong place.
> —Alfred Russel Wallace in *The Importance of Dust: A Source of Beauty and Essential to Life*, 1898

The fault line is a form-in-crisis, yet also a limit-figure of human perception. How absurd then to launch an "archive of fault lines" upon which to assemble a total systemization of future warning. The notion of the event appears here as a conflated human and geologic horizon. Beyond the material limits of a death toll and destroyed habitus, devastation is received as another sort of negative, an aberrational form that subsumes the unseen below-ground to uphold the status of a floating signifier.

Perhaps Charlotte King's extreme self-exposure crosses lines with the efforts of Kircher to decode the earth's secrets by arranging to have himself lowered into the sulfurous core of Vesuvius. When the reassurance of a solid ground is refused, the measure of certitude lies beyond the reading of magnitude. Comprehending the seismic earth takes us to a meeting place between competing exterior scales formed in the presiding logic of the day and the dissonance of a bodily interior as geo-affective apparatus.

Is the Earth Still Our Ancestor? Or, a Necropolitics of the Mine

> If one is not a human being, what is one?
> —Achille Mbembe[13]

In the globalized economies of extractive capital, the fossils that propel consumption are no longer treated as living organisms. Rather, they become mere necrosed matter supporting the Cartesian hypothesis of the earth as an "extinguished star."[14] This same negation fuels an extractive imaginary of modernity, also conceived in the caves of Lower Saxony where land was remade as resource, serving paradoxically both the mobility of capital and the fixed territorial claims of sovereignty.

The Otolith Group, Medium Earth, 2013, HD video, 41' 8". Courtesy of the Artists and LUX Artists Moving Image (London).

It is in these Harz Mountains at the close of the seventeenth century that Wilhelm Gottfried Leibniz (1646–1716) arrives at the fossil shell's archaic fold of human and earth time. The great metaphysician had in 1685 been commissioned to prepare a genealogy of the House of Brunswick (Hanover) in support of Duke Ernst August's claim to the ninth electorate of the Holy Roman Empire. In 1692, the Duke's bid to investiture proved successful—Leibniz's promised genealogy, however, had metamorphosed into a monumental preface. Rather than a lineage of nobility, it proposed a multilayered ancestry of the earth itself, dwelling on the genesis of rocks, the classification of minerals, and the organic origins of fossils. It also included a famed reconstruction of a fossilized unicorn.

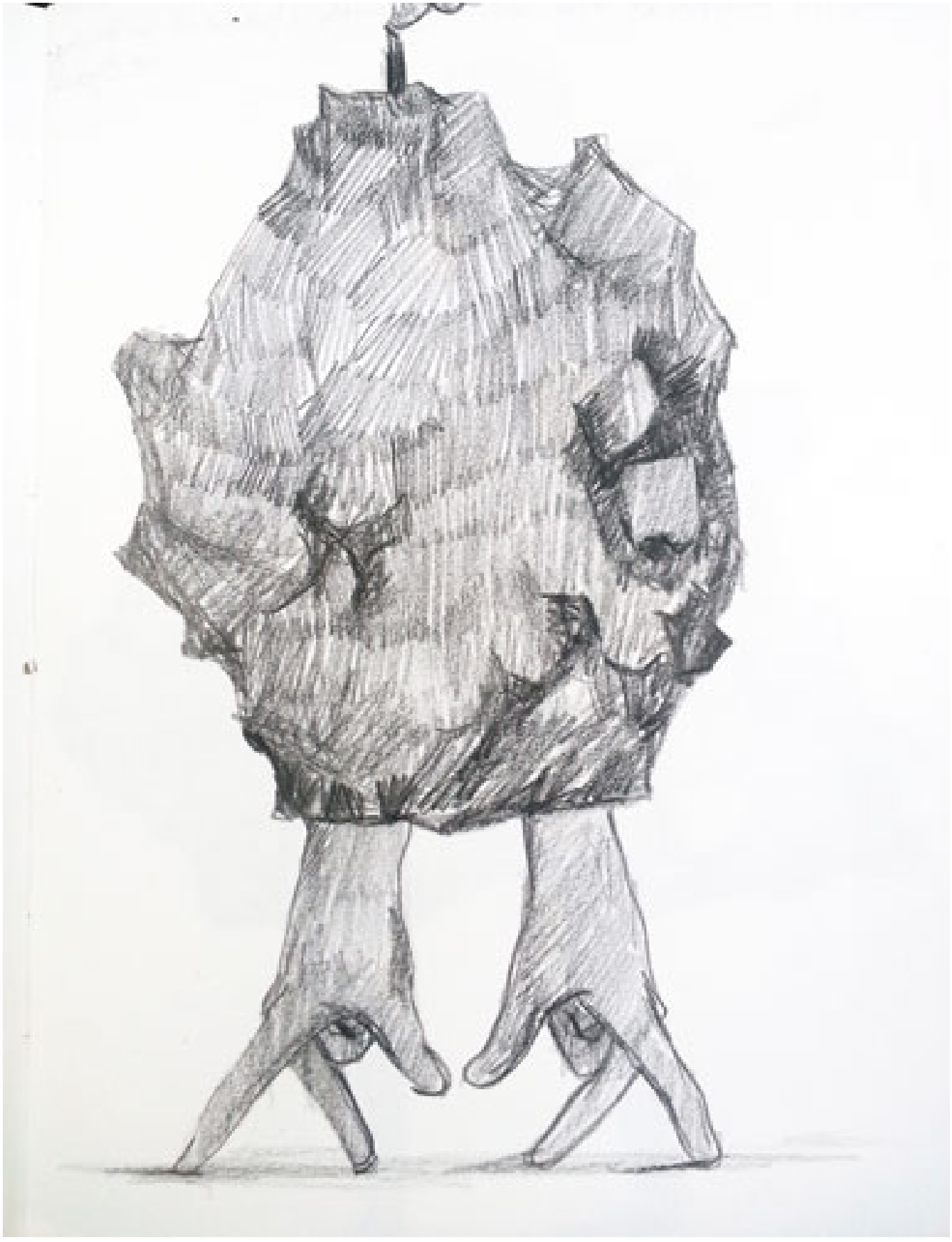
[figure 2014_11_boyd-drawingsWEB.jpg
Sir William Boyd Dawkins, 1974, "The Dream-Cave, Worksworth," (Buckland) in *Cave Hunting: Researches on the Evidence of Caves Respecting the Early Inhabitants of Europe.*]

Posthumously published, the *Protogaea* (1749) is an extensively illustrated treatise that supplants a territorial claim to sovereign inheritance with the planetary heritage of humankind. Its singular cosmogony arose from the annals of the earth as much as from the Duchy's grand libraries. Like Georgius Agricola (1494–1555) and Pliny the Elder (23–79 AD) before him, Leibniz's observations were gained through experimentation in the silver mines of Saxony and Bohemia—source of the Prussian Thaler, precursor to the dollar and chief "coin of account" of the burgeoning industrial economies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Where Pliny had experimented extensively with hydraulics to extract gold from earth-veins, Leibniz devised elaborate wind-turbine systems seeking to permit year-round mining operations.

However, *Protogaea* was also to sow "the seeds of a new science called natural geography."[15] For Leibniz's efforts stood at the time of the impending partition of geology from cosmology, of the extractive impulse from the excavatory urge, and of history from ancestry. And thus, *Protogea* also culminates the intrinsic ties between capital, the lineage of the nation-state, and earth-as-resource.

> Gold is found in our own part of the world; not to mention the gold extracted from the earth in India by the ants, and in Scythia by the Griffins. Among us it is procured in three different ways ...
> —Pliny the Elder[16]

As released and roaming substance, the elemental



Prabhakar Pachpute, Land Escape (Preparatory Sketch), 2014, graphite on paper. Courtesy of the Artist and Experimenter (Kolkata).

presence of mineral wealth may be found enmeshed in the wanderlust of global capital. Artist Prabhakar Pachpute's wall mural *Land Escape* (2014)[17] may be said to situate itself in the aftermath of Pliny's third mode of extraction, "where gold surpasses the labours of the Giants." Belonging to a family that includes three generations of coal miners, Pachpute provides a new anthropomorphic vision for the mineral body. The skeletal frame of coal, or "black gold," acquires legs to flee the land—to deny its existence as pure value—attaining a renewed life in a state-of-emergency. In the deathly matters of the mine, a flooded mine shaft may be transposed into a swelling lung as a lake of dust, and a giant mountain may morph into a putrid lake.

It is through the negation of planetary coevalness[18] that the mine takes form as a necropolitical void, sitting within the mountainous "debris of the past"[19] and yet within the accelerating temporality of industrial extraction. One loses all sense of an interface, encountering instead the limit condition of geography as the writing of "nonlife." The unseen deep recesses of the mine only come into view as artificial residue or negative nourishment. As an ultimate subtraction, mining-as-event is one in which earth bones meet human bones to stage a pulverization of bioterrestrial history. If the earth's insides are considered a bureaucratic storehouse holding the biodata of its manifold elements, the operative logic of the mine is the deletion of ancestry itself.

X

This essay was commissioned in conjunction with the exhibition and research project "Allegory of the Cave Painting," curated by Mihnea Mircan, Extra City Kunsthal (Antwerp), September 19–December 17, 2014. It has additionally been prepared towards the forthcoming edition *Landings: Witness Reports* featuring Elizabeth A. Povinelli with the Karrabing Indigenous Corporation and other guests, presented in collaboration with *Discipline Magazine*, the Institute of Modern Art (Brisbane) and Gertrude Contemporary (Melbourne), December 2014. The authors would like to express their deep thanks to Mihnea Mircan, Elizabeth A. Povinelli, Kodwo Eshun, Anjalika Sagar, Anselm Franke, Prabhakar Pachpute, Rachel O'Reilly, Denise Ferreira da Silva, Filipa César, Angela Anderson, and Angela Melitopoulos for their sustained dialogue during the preparation of this essay.

Natasha Ginwala is an independent curator, researcher, and writer. She was a member of the artistic team at the *8th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art* (2014). Her recent work includes the multi-part curatorial project *Landings* (with Vivian Ziherl) presented at Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, David Roberts Art Foundation, NGBK (as part of the Tagore, Pedagogy and Contemporary Visual Cultures Network), Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam and other partner organizations, 2013-ongoing, as well as *The Museum of Rhythm* at Taipei Biennial 2012 (with Anselm Franke). Ginwala has contributed to several publications including *Afterall Online*, *Art Agenda*, *C Magazine*, *e-flux journal*, *Pages Magazine* and *Scapegoat Journal*. She is currently curator-in-residence at Hordaland Kunstsenter, Bergen.

Vivian Ziherl *is a Curator at If I Can't Dance, I Don't Want to Be Part Of Your Revolution (Amsterdam).* Her recent projects include *Landings* (with Natasha Ginwala) presented at Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, David Roberts Art Foundation, NGBK (as part of the Tagore, Pedagogy and Contemporary Visual Cultures Network), Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam and other partner organizations, 2013-ongoing, *as well as the performance series "StageIt!" Parts 1 & 2 (with Hendrik Folkerts)* commissioned by the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam. Vivian is a Curatorial Fellow at the Institute of Modern Art Brisbane, 2014-2016 and is editor of *The Lip Anthology (Macmillan Art Publishing and Kunstverein Publishing).* Her writing has appeared in periodicals including *Frieze, LEAP Magazine, Metropolis M, Discipline,* and the *Journal of Art (Art Association of Australia and New Zealand),* among others.

1
An excellent account of this converging history of science and philosophy is given in Paolo Rossi's *The Dark Abyss of Time: The History of the Earth and the History of Nations from Hooke to Vico* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1984).

2
As architect Kengo Kuma notes, an "anti-object" is one that induces a reckoning with the external world through its inherent transgressability. See Kuma, *Anti-object: The Dissolution and Disintegration of Architecture* , trans. Hiroshi Watanabe (London: Architectural Association, 2008).

3
These "living pigments"—which subsist by cannibalizing former generations of the microbacteria—were identified in 2010 by a team of researchers led by Dr. Jack Pettigrew of the University of Queensland. See Pettigrew et al., "Living pigments in Australian Bradshaw rock art," *Antiquity* , vol. 84, no. 326 (Dec. 2010).

4
See Jack Pettigrew, "Iconography in Bradshaw rock art: breaking the circularity ," *Clinical and Experimental Optometry* vol. 94, no. 5 (2011): 403–417.

5
The carbon imaginary is an analytic device advanced by Povinelli in approaching the impasses of theorizing biography (life descriptions) and geography (nonlife descriptions) within the conditions of Late Liberalism. It pinpoints broad-based political and subjective dependencies on metabolic imagery of birth, growth/reproduction, and death. This conceptualization will be addressed in the forthcoming *Geontologies: A Requiem For Late Liberalism,* the last in a three-volume enquiry into Late Liberal government and the potentialities of an "anthropology of the otherwise." See also "Interview with Elizabeth Povinelli with Mat Coleman and Kathryn Yusoff," Society and the Open Site, March 6, 2014.

6
In court challenges over the development of an AUD $40 billion gas-processing plant—the largest in the world—these caves and their icons must make testimony to their "value" in contestations with protagonists such as "the environment," Aboriginal Traditional Owners, the voracious claims of the market, and Australian settler society. See "Gas hub: Controversy in the Kimberley," Australian Broadcasting Corporation, April 12, 2013 https://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-04-12/browse-lng-timeline/4625232 .

7
Here, the ideas and generous dialogue of Mihnea Mircan, with regard to the exhibition and research project "Allegory of the Cave Painting," have offered a wealth of concepts and approaches to the semiologic effects of these pigmented microbiological agents.

8
Alicia Chang, "Scientists detail impact of 'Big One' quake in California," *USA Today*, May 22, 2008 http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/tech/science/2008-05-22-big-one-california_N.htm .

9
Surrealist intellectual and historian of science and of ritual Roger Callois ventured an exemplary foray into such a field of petro-poetics in his unsurpassable volume *The Language of Stones* , accompanied by his own extensive collection of stone and rock cross sections. In preparation for the forthcoming sequel to *Medium Earth*, The Otolith Group will visit the Callois stone library.

10
Kodwo Eshun details the earthquake sensitive as a self-formed epistemic barometer at the thresholds of geo-acoustic awareness. See Eshun, "Medium Earth: Seismic Sensitivity as Planetary Prediction," in *The Whole Earth: California and the Disappearance of the Outside* (Berlin: HKW, 2013).

11
Fernand Braudel, *On History* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1982), 65–75.

12
Here we attempt a reading of landforms and their displaced circulation via Elizabeth A. Povinelli's conception of the " *embagination* of space by the circulation of things," as developed in her text "Routes/Worlds," *e-flux journal* 27 (Sept. 2011) http://pdf.e-flux-systems.com/journal/routesworlds/ .

13
Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2001).

14
René Descartes, *Le Monde* (1633).

15
Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz, "The Many Changes in our globe after its initial creation," chap. V in *Protogaea*, trans. and ed. Claudine Cohen and Andre Wakefield (Chicago: Chicago Univ. Press, 2008).

16
Pliny the Elder, *The Natural History of Metals* , Book XXXIII, chap. 1 (77–79 AD).

17
This site-specific mural was commissioned for *A Special Arrow Was Shot In The Neck ... (Curator's Series #7),* June 13–August 2, 2014. Curated by Landings (Natasha Ginwala and Vivian Ziherl) at the David Roberts Art Foundation, London.

18
In his landmark publication *Time and The Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2002), Johannes Fabian critiqued the ethnographic past in which the coevalness of the field was transmuted to a past tense in a process of othering through the written account.

19
Pliny the Elder, ibid.

McKenzie Wark

Designs for a New World

The sort of things that get called "art" these days exist on a continuum which, if it keeps stretching, will probably break. On one end, art becomes a kind of financial instrument based on singularizing money into an "object" that can have provenance. It can be any kind of object—conceptual, imaginary—all that matters is that there is a document stating who bought it from who. Mind you, pictures work particularly well as such instruments, particularly if they look good in the .jpeg sent to potential buyer's iPhone. What we might designate as the "art world" is this subsidiary financial market, one with side effects such as dissipating boredom, fostering art-fair tourism, and giving today's rentier class conversation pieces and home decoration. Artrank.com is this version of an art world perfected.

At the other end of the art continuum, there's the attempt to inhabit those spaces of production that the art world requires as its hinterlands—to do something else. Usually, it takes the form of experimenting in those spaces with practices of everyday life that could either have a negative, critical function or an affirmative, constructive function. Some old-fashioned art theorists insist on the negative role of art, as if still hankering for that industrial solvent smell of high modernism. But the jig is up. It's probably time to start focusing on the affirmative, constructive side, as Chris Kraus does in her brief but illuminating text *Lost Properties*. The design component is no sideshow. Once one starts looking afresh at the art-historical past, it is actually the main event. "Fine art" was an historical dead end, no longer of much interest. The avant-gardes really aimed to "change life!"—and did.

For Asger Jorn, the artist's role is as proposer of forms. He saw fine art as a temporary aberration, not least in its modernist incarnation. Capitalism split production into two separate domains: the production of form and the production of content. Labor gets reduced to the production of content, to the filling in of pre-given forms. Artists belong to another class, the class of form makers, makers of symbolic form, ritual form, social form, and so on. Art is a subset of design. But it is a marginalized kind of design. The strategy then is firstly to assert the role of art as design, and secondly to overcome the separation of form and content in production.

Jorn's image of that production was the tin of soup, which is the separation between form and content taken to the limit. It doesn't matter what content fills the can, it is just goop. He wrote about this before Warhol stepped off the path of trying to make new forms and started representing what the complete separation of form from content looked like. Art world versions of "contemporary art" stem from this retreat from the challenge of being experimenters and proposers of form. From Warhol comes art as financial instrument, art completely separated from anything but a container function.

To what class then do artists belong? To what many years

Asger Jorn, Fraternité avant tout, 1962. Oil on canvas. Silkeborg Kunstmuseum. Photo: Lars Bay; Copyright: Donation Jorn, Silkeborg/VBK, Wien 2006.

ago I called the hacker class. The figure of the hacker is perhaps a more compromised one than when I proposed it, but that only shows that there's something at stake in such a term. Artists belong to that class which makes the new out of the old, which transforms forms. It includes not just artists but also scientists and engineers. It is a class of all those whose efforts are captured by the form of "intellectual property" and made equivalent as such. It is a class which, whatever its "virtuality," is still obliged to work in conditions not of its making.

Of course labor still exists. Most of the world is still being proletarianized. But it is increasingly as labor which makes contents within elaborately designed forms. Labor is captured in forms that have both technical and aesthetic dimensions, and the hacker class, including "artists" and most certainly designers, have to make the forms that will capture labor. Those forms still sometimes look like soup cans, but sometimes they look like iPads. You can think of an iPad as a Campbell's soup can meant to hold not food goop but brain goop. It is your brain reduced to digitized slurry.

Andrew Norman Wilson, Workers Leaving the Googleplex, 2011. Courtesy of the artist. For more info see here →

So the thing to think about is whether there can be alliances as well as conflicts between two subordinate classes: worker and hacker. The attempts to disrupt the Google buses in San Francisco actually demonstrates both. On the one hand, it's workers against hackers, throwing rocks at their buses. On the other hand, it's more complicated. The bus protesters had inside information from people working within Google. Not everyone who designs code is a "brogrammer" who worships Ayn Rand.

Google is itself aware of the dangers of a hacker-worker alliance, as is well captured in Andrew Norman Wilson's *Workers Leaving the Googleplex*. The intense stratification of employees, with different colored badges offering different grades of privilege, shows among other things a certain nervousness about such alliances. When Wilson videotaped Google workers—people who scan books all day and are not allowed to ride the bus or eat the free lunch—he was instantly fired and his video confiscated.

Perhaps what we're dealing with now isn't actually capitalism any more—but something worse. Companies like Google are in the business of surplus information, not surplus labor power. The goal is to build and own an infrastructure that enforces an asymmetry of information, where for whatever information the user gets, much, much more is harvested. It no longer even matters whether this information is culled from work. It can also be extracted from everyday life. And lest one think Google is something of an outlier: take a look at the Fortune 500 companies and it turns out that most of them are now, in part or in whole, in the information business. Even the biggest of them, Walmart. Those big-box stores are just a physical manifestation of a financial and logistical data system. They are money and information congealed into a thing in the landscape. In that regard they are rather like art world works of art.

The ruling class itself has changed form. That's part of the reason the art world changed form. Art has a new kind of patron. One much less interested in the making of things than in the reaping of surplus from information. Its goal is the commodification of information flows. As such it undermines all of the old gift exchanges via which information used to flow, in the family, the community, via schooling, and so forth. What the capitalists did for the production of things, the new ruling class is doing for the production of information. I call them the vectoralist class. They rule through the ownership and control of the vectors of information, its stocks, its flows, its design.

The "dematerialization of art" was homologous with this transformation of capitalism into something else, something even more abstracted. Conceptual art is a side effect of the rise of conceptual business. But it was more a shift in the relation between information and its material form than a dematerialization. What transpired was an abstracting of information from any particular material expression, but not from materiality in general.

Incidentally, this is why I always dissented from certain categories made popular by Hardt and Negri. "Immaterial labor" is just an absurdity. A non-concept. What the hacker class does is neither labor as traditionally understood, nor is it "immaterial." Nothing could be more material than the information-abstracting infrastructure in which we now are obliged to live. Nor is it the case that labor became more cooperative or collaborative. On the contrary, what the hacker class is obliged to design is the exact opposite: commodified, individualized forms of information exchange. So while I salute the fact that Hardt and Negri were at least paying attention to the right things rather than droning on about Saint Paul, I don't think their analysis fit the lineaments of what's transpired all that closely.

Both the worker and the hacker are drafted into the production of a world against their will, and in a manner designed to pit them against each other in a war of all against all. Inequality and precarity are built into the infrastructure of labor and the everyday by design. Even the hacker class finds its conditions of existence radically bifurcated by the winner-take-all culture of the start-up. Unable to really measure the "output" of form-designing practices, the vectoral class would rather just outsource it altogether. The start-up is the perfect model of self-exploitation, where the hacker bears by far the most risk, while the vectoral class gets to hedge its bets and collect the rents on any intellectual property that might result.

I'm glad that Elizabeth Povinelli addresses the question of the *effort* that is involved in any kind of form-designing activity. Laboring is effort, but usually effort that has been standardized and segmented. Capitalism was about making labor time measurable, breaking it down into pieces and putting a price on each unit of it as time.

Hacking is also about effort, but it isn't so easy to break it down and quantify it, because it's a kind of effort that makes qualitative differences. "Information is the difference that makes a difference," as Gregory Bateson put it. It is very, very hard. But doing it might involve long naps on the couch, a walk around the block, waking up in the middle of the night and banging away at something until dawn. It's a different kind of effort, with a different relation to time.

It is not "immaterial" effort. Such language just sleds us back to old-fashioned romantic ideas about where ideas come from. Nothing could be more material than producing new ideas, forms, or designs. But there's a certain nonstandard use of the material resources. You could call it play, or experiment. You can fetishize the nonproductive aspect, particularly from an art historical point of view, but from a design point of view, what results is only secondarily negation. What results is new forms, and the very form of the new. All of what the avant-gardes did in the end is design.

Effort takes energy. The hack requires a surplus of energy. "Bataille was right." It's what a civilization does with its surplus that defines it, shapes it, prefigures its future. What our civilization chose to do with energy is make it measurable. And so we know that, going by the measure, this civilization can't last. Its time is already up. It has lost all confidence in itself. We can measure exactly what's gone wrong with what this civilization does with energy, but its ruling class can't or won't make the effort to do anything about it. The art they hoard shows it: this is a ruling class in decline. The obsessive ideological bleating about "pivoting" and "disrupting" is a cover for a glacial stasis.

And so there's nothing for it but to take their money, live as best we can, and try to build prototypes for another life in the margins. Any and every space might be a site for this. The results will likely be modest. Let's experiment! Who knows which new forms will take off and take hold? If the continuum connecting real creation to the art world breaks, so be it. It needs us more than we need it. For those of us from the art and language academy, perhaps the key is getting out of our deeply conservative, even reactionary, adherence to specialized traditions. Let's have done with fine art history and the history of continental high theory. No more Heidegger; no more Duchamp. We need a new archive of the present for a new kind of present time. And we need to collaborate more widely, to be in dialog with very different domains of both technical and aesthetic counter-production.

Or as Michèle Bernstein put it: "monsters of all lands, unite!"

Workers produce the Guy Fawkes masks used by Anonymous at a factory in Brazil. Photo: Reuters

Medeco key hack as presented at DefCon, the hacker conference in Las Vegas. Marc Weber Tobias and his team of lock crackers allegedly debunked the company's high-security locks at 2008 DefCon. Photo: Dave Bullock

X

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Rory Rowan

SO NOW!: On Normcore

One of my concerns over the last few years is what I see as a certain fear within some domains of left thought—the fear that, because we have repudiated any normative grounds for adjudicating between arrangements of existence, we must be blind to how our actions extinguish (kill) another way of life … the question must be what arrangements of existence do we want to try to pull into place or remain in place rather than disaggregating good essences from bad essences. In other words, the goal for me is not simply to state what I do not want—or how I am or am not more anti-normative than thou—but what forms of existence do I seek to put my shoulder into making normative in Canguilhem's sense: normativity is the power to establish norms. But aren't I paralyzed by the fact that I have no transcendental grounds or regulatory norms justifying why I shove here rather than there? And when I put my shoulder here rather than there, am I not shoving against not merely a different position but trying to shove outwards into a new arrangement of existence that will, if successful, extinguish what existed before? So am I not extinguishing others without reason? The answer is pretty much yes. And so I must take responsibility for this, this potentiating and extinguishing, without either shunting responsibility onto a transcendental truth or regulation, or onto a denigrated and demonized other. The current emphasis on anti-normativity is, at times, a refusal to accept this responsibility.
—Elizabeth Povinelli, 2014

Perhaps beyond normcore is another normal altogether, an aberration devotedly to be wished.
—Benedict Seymour, 2014

Over It: Post-Critical

The project of critique, at least as represented by critical theory, is in trouble. Indeed, the grandees of an older generation of critics are warning of the dangers of a "post-critical" condition, where presumably power does not only go unchecked but doesn't even have to suffer the indignity of critique.[1] Yet many leading voices in contemporary philosophy and social thought argue that critical theory has brought this crisis upon itself, and they are joining in the critique-of-critique chorus. Whether we look to Bruno Latour, whose influential critique of the epistemological foundations of critical theory has chimed

in with recent attempts to escape its anthropocentric limits; Jacques Rancière, who has advanced an epistemological and political equality in place of the hierarchies of knowledge-power built into the demystification at the heart of critical theory; Alain Badiou, with his forceful return to the universal terms of capital- *P* Philosophy after the wordplay of theory; Reza Negarestani, with his recent attacks on the antihumanism of "kitsch Marxism" in these pages; or Elizabeth Povinelli's push back against the constraints of anti-normativity on the radical Left, the familiar tropes of the critical project have been declared conceptually moribund and politically exhausted, and this by thinkers of the Left.[2] Yet, the idea that critical theory is in crisis may come as a surprise to anyone who has recently passed through a graduate program in the arts or humanities, where it remains dominant. Yet this is perhaps paradoxically part of the problem, critique having lost its sting as it became institutionalized, not only as a methodology but increasingly as a set of knee-jerk reactions and rote exclamations; a generation or two of those speaking truth to power assumed that power themselves, often resisting rather than producing change in their own institutional fiefdoms. Largely cut off from social processes and political impact in its academic enclaves, critical theory poses little threat to the powers that be, who are more or less happy to let it persist, defanged, in these melancholic holdouts where it waits for the generational dialectic to gather momentum.

In the midst of this slow crisis of critical theory, the contours of new models of thinking, new questions, and new concepts can be seen squirming, only partially formed, and they are already shaping the terms of social thought. This is perhaps most evident of course in the new forms of philosophical realism, materialism, and rationalism that have emerged over recent years, and the new attitudes to art, politics, technology, and the environment that have developed in an awkward tandem with them. However, despite all the distracting fanfare that has accompanied the mishmash of discussions about posthumanism, accelerationism, object-oriented ontologies, the Anthropocene, mass extinction, neorationalism, and so on, a more latent and still somewhat obscure transformation has been underway in how the relationship between difference and normativity is understood. This shift both tests some of the key conceptual pillars of critical theory, and bears directly on some of the more prosaic political concerns that have taken a backseat as abstract metaphysical and epistemological concerns have been dominating the social media spotlight and lapping the conference circuit. Difference has long been the lens through which radical social thought has approached all questions, setting itself the task of exposing the inside/outside exclusions or above/below hierarchies through which social power operates in every instance, and undermining all foundational claims with reference to some deeper contingency, where destabilizing reserves of difference can always be found. By contrast, normativity has often been considered a central aspect of the problems that critical theory ranged itself against. Normativity, seen from this perspective, was seen to provide the legitimating basis for the exclusions and hierarchies by which social power supports itself, and became a byword for authority, domination, and inequality. Yet today the dominance of this anti-normativity is beginning to loosen as various strands of radical social thought, weary of the claims made for difference failing to translate into tangible political gains or prevent the grip of capital tightening on ever more spheres of life, are returning to questions of normativity in the hope of gaining the type of traction on social reality that appears so far beyond the reach of critical theory 1.0.

Characters from Friends and The Shining share a doorway in this meme.

Here Come the Normies: Youth Mode

It is in the context of this "post-critical" moment and the tentative return to normativity in radical social theory that I want to examine the phenomenon of normcore. What normcore is and is not has been the subject of some

debate and the source of some confusion: Is it a fashion trend, a sociocultural concept, or some sort of downtown in-joke that has become a popular talking point for the press?[3] What now goes by the name "normcore" is probably a slippery mix of all three. The concept originated in *Youth Mode: A Report on Freedom*, a 2013 text by K-Hole, a New York–based "trend forecasting group," where it was not specifically understood in relation to fashion.[4] The text was first presented as part of the Serpentine Gallery's "89plus Marathon" in October 2013 and was subsequently published online.[5] After a much-discussed and disputed piece in *New York Magazine*, solely referring to normcore as a specific set of normie styles adopted by fashion-conscious kids, the concept went viral; it was picked up by the fashion and news media at the beginning of 2014, with *Elle*, *Vogue*, the *New York Times*, the *Guardian*, *Huffington Post*, *Salon*, and *Dazed & Confused*, amongst others, running articles on the subject and thereby putting normcore on the mainstream map.

In trying to grasp the nature of normcore, these publications have variously described it as: a style based on "the desire to fit in rather than stand out"[6]; "embracing sameness deliberately as a new way of being cool"; "fashion for those who realize they're one in seven billion"[7]; "one facet of a growing anti-fashion sentiment"[8]; "a trend amongst the privileged towards anti-fashion clothes of the kind available at Wal-Mart"[9]; and in one particularly off-the-mark, but perhaps telling, account, "a knowing piss-take on the heterosexual male's desperate desire to be sartorially unremarkable."[10] Despite the flurry of attention normcore received, some were left none the wiser, with *Vanity Fair*—arriving a little late to the party—still asking at the end of March, "Is Normcore Really a Thing?" However, by this point the question of whether normcore was "real" or not was of little importance, as the media reports took on the force of a self-fulfilling prophecy and the fashion press did its best to capture a variety of existing tendencies under this label. The concept of normcore that emerged from this media frenzy was of a fashion trend based around the idea that dressing normal was the latest form of cool, with frequent reference being made to Jerry Seinfeld, Steve Jobs, the inconspicuous chi of '90s Gap campaigns, and the unremarkable sartorial styles of "middle-aged, middle-American tourists" (at least as they appear in the imagination of fashion journalists).[11]

However, it is not the idea of normcore as it appears in the fashion press that interests me, but rather the concept as originally presented in K-Hole's *Youth Mode*. This is not because I assume K-Hole to be the architect of a "true" normcore trend that has been overlooked or sullied by the media and the fashion industry. If anything, rather than creating a trend, *Youth Mode* was in part responding to certain stylistic predispositions already present in a loose, largely downtown scene (even if those inclinations always appeared to be more about sportswear than Jerry Seinfeld, more Nike-socks-in-heels than mom-jeans-for-men).[12] Rather, it is because in *Youth Mode*, K-Hole attempts to analyze the changing relationships between individuals and community, difference and normality (or "sameness"), and map the way in which pop-culture strategies, including but not limited to fashion, have developed in line with these changes. In *Youth Mode*, normcore is not a term used to describe an existing or imagined trend, but a strategy of embracing sameness in order to address the demands of difference and the stresses it produces for the "youth of today."[13] It is in light of this that K-Hole's articulation of normcore has some bearing on the "post-critical" moment and the nascent return to norms, reflecting a broader shift away from difference towards normativity, albeit in the sphere of pop culture as opposed to critical theory. The questions it tries to address certainly appear to have purchase on wider concerns, something arguably demonstrated by the particularly acute way in which it has captured the imagination of many.

Nonetheless, what Benedict Seymour wrote of the trend in *Mute* might also apply to *Youth Mode*: "Normcore just is so now, so absolutely the state of things … Normcore is what the age demanded."[14] Perhaps that which gives the text its fascinating allure—its sheer sense of zeitgeisty nowness—also betrays it limits: a blinding complicity with the times, the text's very of-the-momentness making it more of a *symptom* of the age rather than an effective analysis of its character and ills. It is also clear that *Youth Mode* is not a work of critical theory or political thought, and K-Hole admits that they are "a little naive about politics in general," as their friend Christopher Glazek noted in a post on the group's Facebook page.[15] However, they do make some claim to produce works of social thought; Dena Yago, one member of the group, recently noted that their practice is "along the lines of sociological or anthropological thinking."[16] It is largely in this vein that I consider their work.

Although the majority of articles on normcore begin by attributing the concept to K-Hole—some even referring to *Youth Mode* as the "original Normcore manifesto"[17] —they then go on to misrepresent what they mean by the term. Indeed, as K-Hole and their defenders have been quick to point out, many articles confuse their concept of normcore with "Acting Basic," another idea that appears in *Youth Mode*.[18] This has unfortunately meant that the concept of normcore most frequently attributed to K-Hole is not the one they themselves proposed, but rather Acting Basic, a concept to which they critically contrasted their idea of normcore.[19] In order to understand K-Hole's conception of normcore it is thus important to first grasp what they mean by Acting Basic, so that the two terms can be distinguished, clearing up any potential confusion with the more common use of the term. The difference is of some consequence within K-Hole's thought, as the two terms imply distinct responses to the changing relationship between differentiation and normativity, individuality and community. By contextualizing these

terms in relation to the broader argument of *Youth Mode*, I hope to clarify their meaning and give a critical account of their implications for how the relationship between difference and normativity might be conceived today.

back, the brief dominance of MTV in the 1990s might be seen as a sort of pop rendition of the then (and still now) triumphant "no alternative" economics of neoliberalism, all outsides being subsumed into the "flat world" logic of market globalization, whether they were geopolitical,

Mel Brooks, Blazing Saddles, 1974. Film still

The Narcissism of Same Differences: Mass Indie

At the core of *Youth Mode* is a genealogy of post-oppositional pop-cultural formations that begins with a loaded reference to Kurt Cobain's suicide. It is in the wake of this event, they argue, that the current pop-cultural era emerges, which they refer to as "Mass Indie." "We live," they state, "in Mass Indie times."

> It's like someone yelled "Fire!" in a crowded movie theater the day Kurt Cobain died and everyone tried to find a different exit. Mass Indie is what happens 45 minutes later. Tired of fighting to squeeze out of the doors, everyone decides to stay in the theater. Panic subsides into ambivalence … Mass Indie ditched the Alternative preoccupation with evading sameness and focused instead on celebrating difference instead.[20]

Cobain's death not only neatly dates the period they have in mind but seems to provide a symbolic finale to the Alternative movement, itself the last stand of the varied pop partisans who had an antagonistic attitude to mainstream culture, before what used to be called "recuperation" reached saturation point.[21] Even the notion of "selling out" finally lost currency with the rise of Nirvana to awkward MTV stardom—screams of discontent traded in for a whimper of self-loathing. In fact, looking

economic, or pop cultural. K-Hole has little more to say about this Alternative past, and in fact, as so-called millennials, they have had little or no lived experience of a time when major pop-culture movements did not simply exist *within* an increasingly fragmented mainstream, however ambivalently, but actively defined themselves *against* dominant culture values as embodied in a recognizable mainstream. They have grown up in, as many more have grown used to, Mass Indie times.

The most useful definition of Mass Indie appears on a chart at the end of *Youth Mode*, where its key terms are explained in relation to the poles of "sameness" and "difference," crisscrossed with those of "celebration" and "evasion." Each of the four possible combinations represents an axis with a distinct character. Whilst Alternative is defined by the evasion of sameness, or what K-Hole refers to as the "axes of rebellion," Mass Indie is characterized by the celebration of difference, the "axes of tolerance." In its celebration of difference, Mass Indie is the pop-cultural form of a new sense of pluralism, a new form of difference marked by tolerance rather than antagonism. In Mass Indie times, difference is a matter of addition rather than opposition. K-Hole suggests that with the emergence of such a cultural space, all sorts of new combinations became possible: "Mass Indie has an additive conception of how culture works. Identities aren't mutually exclusive. They're always ripe for new combinations … Mass Indie culture mixes weirdness with

normalness until it levels out."

In this culture of tolerance and difference, the space for individuation seemed boundless. Yet, as K-Hole points out, the paradox of this pluralism lay in the fact that the more difference there was, the harder it became for individuals to stand out. Being different no longer had to find an outlet in rebellion but could be welcomed into the mainstream. Being "special," however—being different in a different way—remained a challenge. Hence, even as difference became ubiquitous, individuality remained exceptional (you no longer needed to be white to have white people's problems, although it still probably helped): "But just because Mass Indie is pro-diversity, doesn't mean that it's post-scarcity. There's a limited amount of difference in the world, and the mainstreaming of its pursuit has only made difference all the scarcer."[22]

The Mass Indie celebration of difference increased the competition for individuality, and as Peak Difference impended, the market for social capital grew ever fiercer.[23] As a result, the mining of difference became ever more intense and specific, making it harder to spot a real difference, to maintain durable devotions, to consolidate your own shtick or give a shit about others'. Hence, for K-Hole, the path to individuality lay across a terrain of differentiation fraught with dangers: "seeming like a clone"—"the details that distinguish you are so small that nobody can tell you're actually different"; "isolation"—"you're so special nobody knows what you're talking about"; "maxing out"—"the markers of individuality are so plentiful and regenerate so quickly that it's impossible to keep up."

In a sense, Mass Indie had seen the relationship (so crucial to critical theory) between exclusionary norms and liberatory difference switch roles. Difference itself had become the norm, and what was excluded was precisely the normal: "The rule is Think Different, being seen as normal is the scariest thing. (It means being returned to your boring suburban roots, being turned back into a pumpkin, exposed as unexceptional.)" In the logic of *Youth Mode*, differentiation, once the individual's escape route from normality, had itself become a prison. Mass Indie, a regime of compulsive differentiation—to echo a phrase from Benjamin H. D. Buchloh—had turned a machine of individual liberation into a technology of normalization, spawning a sort of inverted cultural conservatism. This rule of difference—where difference demands conformity rather than promising freedom—is what the ageless youth of Mass Indie are confronted with. It's a Mass Indie problem. But K-Hole suggests that the tide is perhaps turning as this jaded generation, drained by the relentless rigors of differentiation, seeks to return to the same, to get back to normal. As Emily Segal recently said in an interview with *Vogue UK*: "there's an exhaustion with trying to seem different. People are genuinely tired by the fact that to achieve status you need to be different from everyone else around you."[24] And thus the cargo shorts.

Meh Universalism: Acting Basic

K-Hole notes that more recently a new strategy has begun to emerge to address these Mass Indie problems. They call this strategy "Acting Basic."[25] The very demand for differentiation that defines Mass Indie, the fear of being seen to be normal, "paradoxically makes normalcy ripe for Mass Indie überelites to adopt as their own, confirming their status by showing how disposable the trappings of uniqueness are. The most different thing to do is to reject being different altogether." Hence, Acting Basic represents a strange dialectic inversion where being normal becomes the new way to be different: "When the fringes get more and more crowded, Mass Indie turns toward the middle. Having mastered difference, the truly cool attempt to master sameness."

It is of course immediately obvious that Acting Basic does not in fact exit the logic of differentiation that defines Mass Indie, but rather represents a paradoxical new twist within it. As K-Hole notes, "Acting Basic is not the solution to Mass Indie problems because it's still based on difference." Playing normal to be different is not a strategy that breaks with the demand for differentiation, but instead remains defined by it. "Sameness is not mastered, only approached," but approached from within the Mass Indie gold rush of differentiation—just one more look to set the individual apart.

Acting Basic—staking out one's difference by dressing normal—is recognizable as what is identified as normcore in most press articles, yet K-Hole's members themselves are critical of the idea. For them it is merely "an aestheticized version of the mainstream," inadequate for addressing Mass Indie problems, i.e., the demand for differentiation. "At the end of the day," they note, "superficial simplicity is just the denial of complexity, not its resolution." Further, the very superficiality of the sameness that Acting Basic gestures towards makes it immediately obvious to everyone: "Act Basic too long and you become extra conspicuous … The casual uniform begins to attract police attention."[26] Although, of course, it would seem that the very point of dressing normal to be different is to be noticed rather than to actually sink into the obscurity of broad daylight. Acting Basic is surely not so much the desire to be normal but to be *conspicuously normal*, to have transformed what is artless into an art form for the discerning eye of those who can appreciate the effort in your nonchalance. At any rate, in K-Hole's terms, Acting Basic is bound to fail as a solution to compulsive differentiation, as it rests on a fundamentally flawed relation to sameness: "going back to basics doesn't work when the scripts that determine the basics are out of whack."

Steve Jobs poses in front of an apple poster in this cropped image.

Before moving on to examine what K-Hole actually means by normcore, it's worth dwelling on some problematic implications of the concept of Acting Basic given that it is what most think of as normcore. First of all, as Thomas Frank and Benedict Seymour, two of normcore's more vociferous critics, have noted, normcore is in many ways incredibly condescending to those sections of the population (Middle American, tourist, etc.) whose "back to basics," fuss-free lack of sophistication is appropriated as a marker of social capital for a fashionable "set" (regardless of how many have discovered that sportswear is indeed comfortable for every occasion, or who consider themselves to be engaging in nobles acts of sartorial solidarity with the "average American"). As Thomas Frank notes, it's hard, "given the economic circumstances surrounding the normcore trend [i.e., Acting Basic]—the One Percent, the Financial Crisis, the withering of the middle class, and all that," not to see it as the latest iteration of the long tradition of "slumming," whereby the privileged adopt the modes and mores of the lower orders to enhance their own image, or in the delusional belief that deep social differences can be papered over in, or

authenticity found through, a superficial mimesis.[27] Seen in this light, Acting Basic gives expression to an inane form of class tourism in its appropriation of Middle American tourist style.

Perhaps more important from the perspective of the relationship between individuality and community, difference and sameness, which lies at the heart of *Youth Mode*, is the fact that Acting Basic assumes there to be a identifiable "normal" that can be plundered like a dress-up box—a normal of course defined by the Middle American nobody/anybody. Hence, subtending the supposedly stultifying "difference as norm" that characterizes Mass Indie is the bedrock of an even more basic normal, a normal that is not different from itself but everywhere the same—a persistent mainstream that runs deeper than the claustrophobic pop-culture cornucopia of Mass Indie, with its insistence on individual differentiation. In the end, Acting Basic, like the long passé Alternative movement, assumes there to be an actually existing normal from which one wants to differentiate oneself, even if now it inspires only indifference rather than a spirit of rebellion. It is the new sociocultural strata of differentiation that Acting Basic seeks to evade most of all, rather than the underlying normal, which is just accepted. In fact, Acting Basic seems to operate on the principle that it is possible to ironically return to one's "embarrassing suburban roots"—that sprawling empire of normal—in order to differentiate oneself from all the other Mass Indie paths to differentiation. In order to be truly "special" one has to go back to "normal"—and this of course relies on there being, somewhere, a normal to go back to.

Unspecial: Normcore

K-Hole contrasts Acting Basic to Normcore, which appears to be a more intriguing concept even as it is slippery and ambiguous.[28] It's hard to shake the impression that it's difficult to grasp simply because it lacks clear definition, but K-Hole welcomes this ambiguity, covering their tracks by claiming that Normcore "capitalizes on the possibility of misinterpretation as an opportunity for connection." This conceptual opacity lies in part with the fact that with the shift from Acting Basic to Normcore, K-Hole departs the domain of analysis and diagnosis for the world of speculation and prognosis, moving from an examination of contemporary sociocultural conditions (Mass Indie) and existing responses (Acting Basic) to the trickier task of pitching new cultural strategies to face them. At the crux of this change of perspective between Acting Basic and Normcore is a different understanding of the relationship between difference and sameness, and indeed a different conception of normal. As noted above, K-Hole considers Acting Basic to have "approached" but "not mastered" sameness, Normcore presumably being successful where Acting Basic fails. Yet, what conception of sameness, what normal, does Normcore suppose?

To be "truly Normcore," K-Hole claims, "you need to understand that there's no such thing as normal." Hence, unlike Acting Basic, Normcore does not assume there to be an identifiable normal that can be aestheticized. However, if there is no such thing as normal, what does "sameness" mean and how might it be mastered? Here lies the core of Normcore: a paradoxically normless sameness. Sameness, for K-Hole, is not defined in relation to a dominant mainstream, an identifiable normal, but is a plural, "situational" category. Being Normcore means adapting to the specific norms of each context one encounters, rather than assuming that one sameness fits all, or that all roads lead to Normal. Hence, K-Hole claims, "Normcore understands the process of differentiation from a non-linear perspective." Rather, it assumes an adaptable attitude that "cops to the situation at hand." As one of the group's members said when clarifying the concept in an interview with the Huffington Post, "At K-Hole we think it's all about being situationally appropriate."[29] It means accepting others for who they are and going with the flow, getting into it: "You might not understand the rules of football, but you can still get a thrill from the roar of the crowd at the World Cup."

Being "truly Normcore" requires one to cultivate a chameleon-like capacity to adapt to any situation and empathize with anyone, just as Woody Allen's Zelig takes on the character of those he encounters.[30]

In K-Hole's articulation of the concept, Normcore is thus "about adaptability, not exclusivity," and marks a shift from "a coolness that relies on difference to a post-authenticity coolness that opts into sameness."[31] K-Hole insists that this change of attitude opens up the possibility for connection, for forms of belonging that escape the trap of isolation laid by Mass Indie's demand for differentiation. Mass Indie (and hence Acting Basic) creates

> cliques of people in the know, while Normcore knows the real feat is harnessing the potential for connection to spring up … Normcore seeks the freedom that comes with non-exclusivity. It finds liberation in being nothing special, and realizes that adaptability leads to belonging.

Hence, for K-Hole, in emphasizing sameness over difference, Normcore values connection over individuation and marks a break with the entire logic of Mass Indie and its demand for differentiation. "Normcore," they write, "doesn't want the freedom to become someone. Normcore wants the freedom to be with anyone." It is grounded in an ethos of *being with* as opposed to *being special*. This, they suggest, is a more effective response to Mass Indie than merely appropriating normality as the last

New Jersey Governor Chris Christie and his wife visit the Western Wall in Jerusalem, Israel. Photo: Governor's Office/Tim Larsen.

frontier of differentiation, given that contemporary sociocultural conditions make a coherent, and supposed "authentic," individuality harder and harder to maintain at a higher and higher cost:

> It used to be possible to be special—to sustain unique differences through time … But the Internet and globalization fucked this up for everyone […] Individuality was once the path to personal freedom—a way to lead life on your own terms. But the terms keep getting more and more specific, making us more and more isolated.

In contrast to the isolating differentiation of Mass Indie and the pseudo-sameness of Acting Basic, in Normcore "one does not pretend to be above the indignity of belonging."

However, K-Hole insists that jettisoning outmoded models of individual "authenticity" and embracing the opportunities for belonging opened up by sameness doesn't mean that the self is eclipsed by the norm. As Emily Segal, one of K-Hole's founders, noted in interview with *New York Magazine*: "It's not about being simple or forfeiting individuality to become a bland, uniform mass [but about seeing sameness] as an opportunity for connection, instead of evidence that your identity has dissolved."[32] For K-Hole, one does not lose connection to oneself in sameness, but instead finds belonging with others. Indeed, at the very heart of K-Hole's conception of Normcore is the idea that the relationship between self and others has undergone a fundamental transformation, of which Acting Basic is a symptom, but to which Normcore offers a solution: "Once upon a time people were born into communities and had to find their individuality. Today people are born individuals and have to find their communities."

Normcore is the name K-Hole gives to this individual labor of finding communities. Hence, although Normcore is a product of individualizing conditions, it sees in them not

the confirmation of inevitable alienation but an opportunity to forge new connections, nurture new feelings of belonging, and find new communities. Of course, the idea that there is no longer a single, monolithic sociocultural mainstream that gives expression to a dominant set of cultural norms, but rather multiple sets of situationally specific normals, reflects to some degree the increasingly complex social realities that have accompanied globalization in all its permutations. Needless to say, however, dealing with the relationship between difference and sameness, individuality and community, belonging and isolation in complex societies is a lot more difficult than simply enjoying sports when you don't know the rules. And thus the problems.

Channel4 news interviews President Alexander Lukashenko in this segment on the dictatorship in Belarus, titled Undercover in Europe's last dictatorship, 2014. See →.

A Different Normal?: Yes Please

As interesting, and in some ways attractive, as the analysis advanced in *Youth Mode* is, a number of fundamental problems immediately present themselves. Perhaps the most striking limitation is that whilst *Youth Mode* presents a concise, PowerPoint-ready breakdown of various pop-cultural formations—Alternative, Mass Indie, Acting Basic, and Normcore—it approaches pop culture as if it were an autonomous sphere, immune to broader social, economic, and political dynamics. Yes, globalization and the emergence of the internet are mentioned in the opening lines, and the recent financial crisis is hinted at via references to Boomerang kids and exasperated Subway employees with PhDs, but the key categories are largely discussed as if they existed in a social vacuum. A sociologically shallow account of pop culture might not in itself be much of a problem, given the context in which the text appeared, and K-Hole of course does not present *Youth Mode* as an academic study with all the bells and whistles of rigor, let alone as a work of political theory. But they do set out to engage major sociological questions about the changing relationship between difference and sameness, individuality and community. In light of the concerns they take on, and indeed their own characterization of their practice as quasi-sociological or anthropological, their failure to engage with social forces, even superficially, or to even show an awareness that they exist, is a disappointment. It takes much of the steam out of their often-alluring provocations.

One of the most significant consequences is that the image of society that emerges from *Youth Mode* is almost totally emptied of power; the only hint that social power exists at all appears indirectly when mention is made of competition to accrue social status. Needless to say, an account of sociocultural differentiation—and indeed its changing relationship to individuality and sameness—that does not engage with the existence of social power and the way in which it structures the conditions in and through which such differentiation takes shape, will have little purchase on its object. *Youth Mode* is particularly notable in its absence of any discussion of differences that take antagonistic form. Granted, K-Hole focuses on pop-cultural formations that have emerged in the wake of Alternative—and hence major oppositional pop-culture movements—but of course the effects of social antagonism upon the domain of pop culture are by no means limited to the sepia-tinted dead horse of punk. They continue to structure pop culture fundamentally, albeit in new ways. K-Hole presents an account of society from which all antagonism seems to have been ironed out, where all differences are peaceful, bar the minor frictions involved in the competition for social status or the boundaries of cliques—and even these can be soothed by empathy, Normcore's primary affect. Only by excluding social power and antagonistic difference from their account of the social field is it possible for K-Hole to assume that individuals can float freely from situation to situation, adapting to the norms of each, without encountering the rifts, fences, and stratifications that play such a fundamentally structuring role in our societies.

The limitations of this account of the social field of course impact K-Hole's analysis of the contemporary problems with differentiation and the solutions they present to them. The Mass Indie problems that are central to *Youth Mode* —that differentiation has become compulsory at the same time as its capacity to generate individuality/social status has declined, leaving people exhausted and isolated—are themselves symptoms of wider social processes, but no engagement is made with the wider context, so they appear to be the result of purely internal pop-culture dynamics. Yet, even if Mass Indie problems are second-tier problems, this doesn't mean they are without sociocultural interest, or indeed that they are not real problems. The argument that differentiation has become complicit with the status quo, with forces of domination, is of course not new (despite the persistence of the idea in so much Left theory that institutional power and difference are necessary enemies). Many analyses that focus on the changing forms of subjectification that have accompanied

the spread of neoliberal economies—notably in relation to the increasingly important role played by precarious forms of affective and cognitive labor—have made precisely this point in one way or another. Whether we look to Deleuze on control societies, Federici on social reproduction, Boltanski and Chiapello on artistic labor and the entrepreneurial subjectivities, or Berardi and Fischer on cognitive labor and mental health, there is a common thread: an engagement with the ways in which capital operates through the production of subjectivities and thrives on extracting surplus value from the generation of social difference and individualization, not to mention the important ideological role played by self-actualization over and against collective identifications.[33] However, insofar as they fail to contextualize Mass Indie in relation to broader socioeconomic or political forces, K-Hole misses an opportunity to examine the demand for differentiation in the domain of pop culture in relation to wider patterns of neoliberal subjectification, something that may have provided greater traction on the phenomenon and allowed for more persuasive responses to emerge. Indeed, by defining Normcore in relation to adaptability and empathy—both admirable traits in and of themselves—K-Hole risks framing their solution to chronic differentiation in terms that replicate rather than challenge the ideological Trojan horses of neoliberal subjectification. It is, after all, the same ideological framework that insists on an adaptive labor force and the economic importance of affects such as empathy, that channels subjectification into the isolating vectors of differentiation. Hence, even if Normcore were to provide some respite from Mass Indie strain, tweaking the meat grinder of subjectification for comfort, it would remain subject to much the same set of social forces that knead contemporary lumpenbourgeoisie.

The image of the social chameleon finding both individual liberty and group belonging in drifting between situations is surely an appealing one, but it betrays a conception of difference from which power has been purged. This Normcore nomadism seems to assume that an individual will be welcomed into every situation if they are willing to be adaptable and empathetic. However, social differences and group identifications are hardly the product of individual self-fashioning alone but are shaped by the power dynamics between groups. No individual is likely to find belonging in every situation regardless of how adaptable and empathetic they are. Whilst a lot of this might come down to the individual's character, much might likewise depend on race, gender, sexuality, and other such factors around which power congeals. Normcore seems to assume that such factors will have no bearing on the ability of individuals to immerse themselves in a multiplicity of different normals. K-Hole's conception of Normcore assumes the valuable insight that there are different versions of sameness, but it doesn't address the fact that not all differences are the same. This is a point perhaps less pressing for those who less frequently find themselves on the wrong side of the subjective tracks in the view of others. Normcore smuggles in the backdoor an implicit idea of what is normal (white, middle class) even as it shuts the front door on the mainstream.[34]

These limitations and blind spots are hardly surprising given that *Youth Mode*'s account of contemporary society remains focused on the individual. Community is virtually ignored despite its changing relationship to individuality supposedly being a key. Although K-Hole claims that today, individuals must find their communities—and K-Hole associates Normcore with this process—no details of the forms of community that might be found or produced through this individual search are offered. The only collective subjects that seem to be considered worthy of mention are exclusionary Mass Indie cliques. The last line of *Youth Mode* perhaps sheds some light on this almost exclusive emphasis on the individual: "Normcore is a path to a more peaceful life." Normcore thus seems to be conceived above all as a self-help strategy for ensuring individual peace of mind. Hence, Normcore is best understood as a coping mechanism to help individuals deal with the stresses of differentiation, rather than a means to address the wider social conditions that demand it. In such an individualist account of social relations, there is not much need to address the contents of social norms. This perhaps explains the lack of discussion of this topic. Yes, adaptability, empathy, and a lack of concern for authenticity may all be virtues, but they hardly constitute a set of norms in and of themselves, no matter how useful they may be in facilitating a sense of belonging. In neither challenging existing norms nor positing others, K-Hole seems happy to accept existing social norms, or to assume that they don't exist. This contributes little to addressing the very real problems that shape the present, including neoliberal subjectification in all its forms. Nor can it do much to guarantee a peaceful life.

By ignoring questions of power and framing the social field in individualist term, K-Hole ends up sharing considerable conceptual space with mainstream conservative opinion. This is no doubt an accidental neoconservatism. Perhaps in a rush to flush out the calcified critical theory they were exposed to in art school, K-Hole opted into mainstream conservative provocations: *too much difference is the problem, individual responsibility is the solution*. Or perhaps it's fairer to say that *Youth Mode* settles on something closer to the sort of inclusive liberalism envisaged by Richard Rorty, where everyone gets along because they've swapped out authenticity for ironic detachment. There is of course something to be said for ironic detachment as a strategy for individuals navigating complex societies, where one might pass through various different situations in the course of a day or even a few blocks. But this likewise assumes that the social field is a neutral public meeting place equally open to all rather than an unstable terrain rent with power. The world envisaged in Normcore, where sameness is celebrated, is ultimately a realm of consensus, where difficult difference is pushed to the side even if sameness is plural.

Gisele Bündchen shouts out to other models on the runway at a staged protest for the Chanel SS15 Collection. Signs read for instance "Tweed is better than tweet," and "Be your own stylist" as well as "History is her story." Photo: DailyMail

"Perhaps," as Benedict Seymour suggests, "beyond normcore is another normal altogether."[35] Perhaps, too, other conceptions of normativity with a fuller grasp of social reality are emerging in these "post-critical" times. Elizabeth Povinelli's recent work, and the quote with which this essay began, offer one important instance worth noting by way of contrast.[36] Povinelli forcefully rearticulates the need to go beyond critiquing existing norms— *the way things are*—and make commitments to alternative norms— *the way things ought to be*—if social thought is to have traction on social reality. She rightly notes that this is something much critical theory has shrunk from, preferring instead the security afforded by anti-normativity. Yet, to refuse to engage with questions of normativity is either to fail to engage the realities of social power, or to vacate the terrain of political efficacy in favor of intellectual purity. In too often happily settling for the latter, critical theory has been complicit in ceding ever more ground to the forces of reaction. Intervening in social power complexes affords few clean hands and no pure outside: one must always start in the shit, in the middle of a social field cut through with power and antagonism from which difficult difference cannot be wished away. Making a commitment to one set of norms against another—whether defending existing "arrangements of existence" or trying to pull new arrangements into being—involves engaging in struggle and, as Povinelli's language makes clear, exercising one's force: "I shove here rather than there … I put my shoulder here rather than there."[37] Hence, for Povinelli, engaging in struggle means taking responsibility for the fact that, if successful, the arrangement of existence we seek to make normative may well "extinguish what existed before." Indeed, for her, the anti-normativity that defines so much radical social thought can be—if perhaps not always—a "refusal to accept this responsibility."[38]

Povinelli's articulation of normativity offers no exit from this conflicted terrain of struggle, but this is precisely its appeal. In contrast to the flat, neutral, depoliticized social world of Normcore, Povinelli's conception of normativity confronts social power and the realities of antagonism. In Povinelli's analysis, social norms are bound to struggles between groups who have made active commitments to contending conceptions of how things ought to be. And no matter how provisional, temporary, strategic, or conflicted those commitments might be, they must be defended or forced. If radical social thought is to help shape social realities, it needs to engage once again with questions of normativity. It mustn't be satisfied with simply wagging fingers at what's wrong with the world, but must also generate visions of how it might be otherwise. Following Povinelli into the shit would be a good start. You can wear sneakers if you like.

X

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1
Hal Foster, "Post-Critical," *October* 139 (Winter 2012).

2
Whilst once the critique of critical theory was the preserve of methodological and social conservatives, its most persuasive proponents today are located firmly on the Left. The Right, in the United States as in Europe, has instead now discovered the virtues of diversity, subjective relativism, skepticism of truth claims—all key aspects of what was once known as "theory"—throwing themselves with gusto into disputing climate science and playing the role of embattled white male minorities facing unfair discrimination due to all the immigrants, women, queers, and black presidents taking their jobs and tax dollars. For a pungent example, one need only look at the flurry of commentary sparked recently by the brave Princeton boy who, growing sick of being asked to "check his privilege" as a white male, penned a letter to *The Princeton Tory* that was picked up by the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* , *Time*, and other major bastions of the "liberal media" to say their dirty work for them.

3
Alex Williams made this useful distinction in an article that appeared in, of all places, the *New York Times* . See his "Normcore: Fashion Movement or Massive In-Joke?," *New York Times* , April 2,2014 http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/03/fashion/normcore-fashion-movement-or-massive-in-joke.html .

4
Available at http://khole.net/issues/youth-mode/ . K-Hole was founded by Greg Fong, Sean Monahan, Emily Segal, Chris Sherron, and Dena Yago.

5
The "89plus Marathon," curated by the loquacious ever-presence of Hans Ulrich Obrist, brought together "emerging practitioners born in or after 1989" with the usual eclectic jumble of old hands to discuss important questions facing the present and future in an "optimistic and generative tone."

6
Aimee Farrell, "Meet Norma Normcore," *Vogue UK*, March 21, 2014 http://www.vogue.co.uk/news/2014/03/21/normcore-fashion-vogue---definition . A sentiment echoed by Lauren Cochrane of the *Guardian*, who declared that "blending in is the new standing out." See Cochrane's "Normcore: The Next Big Fashion Movement?," *Guardian*, Feb. 27, 2014 http://www.theguardian.com/fashion/fashion-blog/2014/feb/27/normcore-the-next-big-fashion-movement .

7
Fiona Duncan, "Normcore: Fashion for Those Who Realize They're One in 7 Billion," *New York Magazine* , February 26, 2014 file:///C:/Users/Briad/AppData/Local/Microsoft/Windows/Temporary%20Internet%20Files/Content.IE5/K5O9DAK6/nymag.com/thecut/2014/02/normcore-fashion-trend.html .

8
Jeremy Lewis, the founder and editor of *Garmento* and freelance stylist and fashion writer, quoted in Duncan.

9
Thomas Frank, "Hipsters, They're Like Us! 'Normcore,' Sarah Palin, and the GOP's Big Red State Lie," *Salon* , April 27, 2014 http://www.salon.com/2014/04/27/hipsters_they%E2%80%99re_just_like_us_normcore_sarah_palin_and_the_gops_big_red_state_lie/ .

10
Simon Doonan, "Beware of Normcore: The Bogus-Sounding New Fashion Trend is All Too Real," *Slate*, April 7, 2014 http://www.slate.com/articles/life/doonan/2014/04/normcore_the_new_fashion_trend_and_its_perils.html . . Doonan, who holds the amazing title of "Creative Ambassador of Barney's New York," has "been moving in fashion circles for decades," as the *Los Angeles Times* reminds readers in its own article on normcore (May 18, 2014) http://www.latimes.com/style/la-ig-normcore-20140518-story.html .

11
Duncan, "Normcore: Fashion for Those Who Realize They're One in 7 Billion." More recently, Gap has run a campaign called "Dress Normal," with expensive adverts directed by David Fincher, attempting to capitalize on the normcore trend to revitalize their brand.

12
Nor is it because I assume fashion to be inherently stupid, frivolous, or unworthy of serious attention, common misapprehensions about a domain that is not only a fine instrument for reflecting broader social, economic, and cultural changes, but one that can occasionally put in a turn as a realm of aesthetic invention, creative experimentation, and social comment that far outshines the visual arts. Indeed, the response to normcore from the fashion press has not been without interest, especially given that a trend for "dressing normal" has the potential to undermine the industry's imperatives, if, say, too many people got swept up in the trend and realized that they preferred to "dress normal" and stopped buying in to the idea that new markers of difference are needed on a "seasonal" basis. A financial and aesthetic shudder has been perceptible. Some tried to knock things on the head before they got out of hand, with *Elle* leading the industry backlash with a piece entitled "Why the 'Normcore' Phenomenon is a Fraud." Others attempted to accelerate the trend and move on to something else entirely. Just two weeks after normcore "broke" in *New York Magazine*, *Vogue* asked, "What Comes After Normcore?," referring to the still nascent trend as a "useful palate cleanser," and identifying an "exit strategy: keep the sneakers and your ability to walk, wearing them with anything—even couture dresses!" Those craftier set out to instantly gentrify normcore, recuperating it for the top end of the market. As Adam Tschorn wrote in the *Los Angeles Times*, "a pair of off-brand heather grey sweatpants from Big 5 Sporting Goods won't cut it. The key is to wear a super-luxe high-end designer version ... that only *looks like* you're slumming it," and indeed Chanel has had two seasons of couture sneakers (although you can't blame Karl Lagerfeld for wanting some comfy shoes at his age). Thomas Frank and Benedict Seymour both picked up on the fashion-eats-itself potential of normcore, the former seeing in it the possibility of a "cultural-commercial Armageddon ... a complete collapse of the imperium of cool," and the latter, a more melancholic "end of dressing up." However, they both discuss the fashion industry as if it were the preserve of "the One Percent," led by a cabal of elite tastemakers—Frank: the "aristocracy of the tasteful"; Seymour: the "oligarcho-aristo-creative" class—whilst the rest of us presumably walk around in the nude except for our now faded blue collars. This vastly underestimates the scale and diversity of the industry, and fails to acknowledge the way in which social media has allowed trend formation to slip out of well-policed channels, even if the great brand leviathans are now learning how to make an amplification chamber of it, slipping in collections (resort) and seasons (pre-fall) to fit the social-media-enhanced pace of the fashion cycle.

13
K-Hole insists that youth is no longer to be strictly identified with the young, given that biological, economic, and cultural clocks having long fallen out of sync. Youth is thus "ageless." In fact, the first section of *Youth Mode*, which most clearly satirized the language of brand analysis and marketing reports, is entitled "The Death of Age." "Youth," they declare, "is a mode. It's an attitude." Being in "Youth Mode" is "about being youthfully present at any given age. Youth isn't a process, aging is. In Youth Mode you are infinite." Yet, this infinite, ageless youth seems to be the lifelong companion of an indebted, jobless future: "when Boomerang kids return to their parents' Empty Nests and retirement fades into the horizon, the bond between social expectations and age begins to dissolve."

14
Benedict Seymour, "Notes on Normcore," *Mute*, May 29, 2014 http://www.metamute.org/editorial/fifth-column/notes-normcore .

15
Of Glazek's comments the group said, he "nails it."

16
See "Curating the Internet," moderated by Karen Archey (*Kaleidescope* , Summer 2014). Of K-Hole's practice, Yago wrote, "our platform looks to consumer trends, and attempts to identify the larger motivating forces behind why and how decisions are being made. This is why we focused on anxiety and individuality on our past two posts."

17
Frank, "Hipsters, They're Like Us!"

18
Members of K-Hole have tried to address this confusion in

interviews with HuffPost Live and *Dazed & Confused,* and as reported in a number of other articles, the Los Angeles-based writer and friend Christopher Glazek noted on K-Hole's Facebook page that Fiona Duncan's initial piece in *New York Magazine* had conflated the two concepts and hence misrepresented what K-Hole had meant by normcore—something for which Duncan apologized, complaining that she had been forced to edit her article a number of times to make it more about fashion (which in itself hardly explains why the ideas had been confused).

19
It is not only in the fashion press that normcore and Acting Basic have been erroneously conflated. The two most substantial critical reflections on the phenomena, Thomas Frank's article in *Salon* and a subsequent piece in *Mute* by Benedict Seymour, both repeat this mistake, despite otherwise interesting interpretations.

20
The cinema setting also seems to evoke the mass shootings that have also been a fixture of American youth culture since the 1990s, although here too it seems that panic has subsided into ambivalence.

21
Or what Benedict Seymour refers to as the "final dregs of the punk negativity/self-fabrication process."

22
A logic that might actually work better for K-Hole's argument would be that because there was *so much* difference, its value was reduced, making it harder to achieve the type of individualism that traded on *unique* difference, or the type of difference that makes one really special.

23
K-Hole notes that in Mass Indie times, "mastering difference is a way of neutralizing threats and accruing social status within a peer group"; the master of Mass Indie was not the look-at-me mall punk with the last of the mohawks (although they were cool too), but the quiet comps connoisseur who told you about Awesome Tapes from Africa.

24
Farrell, "Meet Norma Normcore."

25
With Acting Basic, K-Hole of course reference the idea of being "basic," most frequently heard in relation to being a "basic bitch," an idea that emerged first in hip-hop (more specifically a 2009 release by Lil Duval) but has gone on to achieve more mainstream popularity, and somewhat shifted meaning, as a meme. Hence, "basic" might be considered alongside other terms like "twerk" and "shade" that mainstream culture has likewise appropriated from African American subcultures, hip-hop and drag respectively, in recent years. There is of course an interesting discussion to be had about the fact that hip-hop, or a certain hip-hop, has in fact long been one of the dominant aspects of mainstream pop culture. At any rate, as Glazek noted, for K-Hole, being normcore means being "unbothered by the politics of appropriation" (see Glazek above).

26
One of the most potentially interesting lenses through which to understand Acting Basic, or indeed the normcore trend in fashion, is that of the broader desire for anonymity—however perversely attention-seeking it might be—in a period of ever-more invasive and pervasive surveillance, not only from the state and other institutional powers (the NSA; CCTV cameras; police drones; Google street view; marketing algorithms that track online behavior, consumption patterns, etc.) but also from ourselves, our own constantly updated and geolocated social media feeds and well-curated spreads of publicly accessible selfies. Of course, wearing Birkenstocks is probably likely to attract less attention than a plastic *V for Vendetta* mask, but whilst it's relatively clear who anarchist protestors might want to conceal their identities/seek attention from, it remains to be seen what type of anonymity Acting Basic might be seeking. A number of authors have likewise referred to camouflage, understanding normcore (or rather Acting Basic) as the "latest urban camouflage" (Duncan) or even a form of "wealth camouflage" (Seymour), although of course whilst camouflage may always be used to conceal, the reasons for wanting to be concealed are many.

27
This point was not lost on all the fashion press. In an interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, Lizzie Garret Mettler, author of the 2012 book *Tomboy Style*, noted that "it's a bit condescending to wear normal clothing as a joke, like it's a costume, but maybe that's the next natural iteration of the hipster." See Adam Tschorn, "Normcore is (or is it?) a fashion trend (or non-trend or anti-trend)," *Los Angeles Times*, May 18, 2014 http://www.latimes.com/style/la-ig-normcore-20140518-story.html .

28
In what follows I will capitalize "Normcore" to indicate that it is K-Hole's conception of the term rather than the wider understanding, which will remain as "normcore."

29
"The 'Normcore' Fashion Trend," interview with Sean Monahan, HuffPost Live, March 6, 2014 http://live.huffingtonpost.com/r/archive/segment/5318afacfe344420bc0009fb .

30
I owe thanks to Suhail Malick for the comparison to Zelig.

31
Adaptability and empathy are key virtues for such an outlook, and these terms recur throughout *Youth Mode* in a variety of forms, like branded keywords.

32
Duncan, "Normcore: Fashion for Those Who Realize They're One in 7 Billion."

33
In fact, even older models of social thought, such as Freud's "narcissism of small differences," may offer some insight on the bubble economy differentiation that characterizes Mass Indie. Indeed, even Thorstein Veblen had long ago noted that "David Riesman and Vance Packard ... have shown that even the vast American middle class, which is as free from want and even more uniform than the circles described by Proust, is also divided into abstract compartments. It produces more and more taboos and excommunications among absolutely similar but opposed units. Insignificant distinctions appear immense and produce incalculable effects. The individual existence is still dominated by the Other but this Other is no longer a class oppressor as in Marxist alienation; he is the neighbor on the other side of the fence, the school friends, the professional rival. The Other is more and more fascinating the nearer he is to the Self." Quoted in Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* , (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994). Thanks to Eva Kenny for this point.

34
This doesn't even factor in the other side: the fact that there may be very many individuals, even adaptable and empathetic specimens, that do not wish to find belonging or embrace sameness in every situation, whether because they just like to keep to themselves or because some situations are built around social norms that they cannot empathize with or don't want to adapt to. You don't have to be a hater to not chill with racists. Not everyone is always happy to chant for the other team.

35
Seymour, "Notes on Normcore."

36
Another powerful instance of the contemporary return to normativity is to be found in the work of the philosophers Ray Brassier and Reza Negarestani. Brassier and Negarestani are both engaged in an attempt to develop a rationalist project of universal emancipation based around a concept of collectively generated and revisable norms that govern behavior along the lines of commitments to rational experimentation, testing en route the very limits of the human as such. As fascinating and persuasive as their abstract accounts of rational normativity are I need to do further work to grasp their implications for the processes of political subjectification, and vice versa, before I can discuss their political value with confidence.

37
Needless to say, force here should not be solely or even principally understood as physical force, even if this language evokes it. Rather, this terminology is used to highlight the fact that society is not a neutral sphere, and acting in it means engaging with a play of other forces, some of which will offer resistance, whether symbolic, physical, ideological, legal, and so on.

38
Povinelli talks of "extinguishing others," indeed "without reason,"

and even notes that extinguishing forms of existence can be equated with killing forms of existence. I would rather not affirm the language of extinguishing other social groups, given the history of this idea. I nonetheless take Povinelli's point that unless we accept the power in our actions and take responsibility for putting our shoulder into what we think ought to be over and above other forms of existence—without any transcendental or ultimate regulative ground—we will be petrified in discourse, paralyzed in disdain for those who dare do (an all too recognizable malaise today).

Tess Lea

"From Little Things, Big Things Grow": The Unfurling of Wild Policy

There are many forms of everyday violence that, to even be identifiable, have to be constituted as a particular kind of thing. For casual forms of street harassment (the eye-follow, the jostle, the unfunny catcall) to emerge as something recognizably prosecutable, for instance, rare conditions must coalesce. Minimally, (a) something definably illegal happens, which (b) is credibly witnessed and (c) of a certain large scale, that (d) institutional moves to take the ordinary into a prosecutable event are authorized—all presuming that (e) the maddening upheavals involved still seem warranted. By the time ordinary violence conforms to these (infinitely violating) conditions, the state apparatus that ordains ordinary violence in the first place has been conserved. Here, drawing on a form of posthumous ethnography—that is, concerning an event that most would consider done and dusted—the inverse correlation is explored: how big events can act like the sneaky, hard to pinpoint micro-tactics of everyday violence in sweeping non-eventful details-that-nevertheless-matter to one side.

Starting with the big event of the Australian government's Northern Territory Emergency Response of 2007, ostensibly targeted at child sex abuse within Aboriginal communities, together with a few cousin events such as the largest Indigenous public housing and infrastructure program ever conducted in regional and remote Australia, and a related tsunami of early construction failure, I consider the old-new forms of decomposition for Indigenous tenants left in the washout that have no particular character at all. These lesser forms of debris are everywhere, turning up in administrative mazes and rationing systems, as intensified landlord powers and tenancy humiliations, or the loosening of nuts and bolts in the innards of cost-compromised infrastructure. Understanding the feral unfurlings of bureaucratic ganglia, of what I prefer to call "wild policy," means confronting a surfeit of documents that are designed not to be read—that are replete with such arcane and mind-numbing sentences, such excessive minutiae, that they actively repel close attention. Recoiled, analysis goes somewhere else, to the scoop, the event, the sublime instance of corruption or system failure, when a project manager gets the sack and a construction company gets replaced. This in its own way is how the "red tape" of such inarguable political denouncement grows into a social policy thicket that resists easy containment or description.[1] Like water that leeches through structural cracks, such forces might lack the compulsory visibility and procedural legibility of an eventful wrongdoing, but are no less powerfully disassembling for being less dramatic. Finally, the essay considers what is it about dull administrative details and everyday wear and tear that casts such a pall over analysis; a question which helps situate the importance of Elizabeth Povinelli's capture of what she calls "quasi-events" and "the conditions of the emergence and endurance of the otherwise"?[2]

Events

In Australia, images of ruined Indigenous housing[3] frequently saturate the media, forming part of what one journalist involved calls "black war porn" reporting.[4] Things came to a head in June 2007 when the Australian federal government, under then Prime Minister John Howard, used a report on the seemingly rampant child sexual abuse and "rivers of grog" flooding Aboriginal communities to unleash the Northern Territory Emergency Response—known more widely by its simpler shorthand, "the Intervention" (then as "Closing the Gap," or its latest revamp, "Stronger Futures").[5] Processes of community consultation and Australia's Racial Discrimination Act were both suspended to enable extraordinary powers of land tenure resumption, the sequestering of welfare income, a vastly increased police presence, expanded powers of household entry without warrant to non-police bodies, the installation of government business managers in targeted communities, compulsory health screenings for children with a view to surfacing the hidden signs of sexual abuse, tight restrictions on the availability of alcohol and pornography for Indigenous adults (including limits on general internet access), compulsory school attendance, and, for a brief time, deployment of the national army to build or refurbish infrastructure on an emergency-driven in and out basis.

The Northern Territory of Australia was the site for intervention in part because this environmentally challenging region was among the last to be colonized and so retains the largest proportional body of Indigenous people per capita in Australia—but mostly because, under the Australian Constitution, the Northern Territory is not a state with its own powers of regulation, but a territory of the federal administration. It is thus not simply a postcolonial liberal settler state, but a frontier outpost, whose policy apparatus (including its self-government status) can be usurped at any time by the higher legal authority of the Canberra-based federal government. In other words, the Intervention enabled the federal government to put in place social experiments that it admitted contemplating for other Indigenous communities in regional and remote Australia, but which it could enforce in the Northern Territory without constitutional encumbrance.

The Intervention came with money, more money than ever before for health clinics, police stations, schools, data management systems, and—my focus here—housing and infrastructure. The Strategic Indigenous Housing and Infrastructure Program (SIHIP) was funded as part of the Intervention's institution-spreading largesse.[6] Houses were somehow intended as a precursor or foundation to the deliverance of liberalism's goods under market capitalism. With shelter and tighter tenancy responsibilities, Aboriginal householders would reconfigure their conditions of life and expectations, turning their newly secured bodies to the demands of school, work, and obedience to the law of the land.

The tight timeframe was complicated by multiple objectives. Among other things, SIHIP was meant to generate a minimum 20 percent Indigenous employment and certificated training out of its building works and allied services. SIHIP houses were also meant to comply with Australian building codes and best practice guidelines for Indigenous housing in the design, delivery, and implementation phases; have a minimum thirty year structural life span; and incorporate energy conservation measures. Attention to roads, sewerage, power, and water infrastructure was also promised, with the aim of ensuring that new, replaced, or refurbished houses do not suffer from inherited shortcomings in communal public utilities.

Fifteen months into SIHIP, the program was imploding from one cost blowout revelation after another, with claims of funds being siphoned into consultancy fees, of bloated bureaucrat fiefdoms, and confected pre-build construction figures. Journalists pounced on the stories, sensing the imminent death of an already vulnerable Northern Territory government.[7] Even former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd was concerned enough to send urgent messages from his European meeting with G8 leaders demanding that his federal minister in charge of the bulk of the funding for SIHIP, Jenny Macklin, urgently get the program under control.

National and domestic daily coverage, an explosion in blog and text messaging, a Wikipedia site and four hurried reviews, a political resignation, and multiple sackings followed.[8] Behind closed doors, the über-bureaucrats charged with putting SIHIP back on its rails met with representatives from contracted construction agencies. Their take-home message: the unit price of each house must come down.[9] What's more, the original SIHIP metrics ostensibly still applied: the same number of houses would be built to a newly restricted budget and in even less time.

[figure 2014_09_what-about-a-roofWEB2.jpg Figure 1: "All options are on the table," federal bureaucrats told sleep-deprived SIHIP contractors, given twenty-four hours to come up with the magic configuration:
Contractors: What about the requirement for 20 percent aboriginal employment on projects?
Government: It's on the table.
Contractors: Do we have to comply with the Indigenous housing guidelines?
Government: We should meet the key elements, not the "nice to haves." We need to reduce the footprint of the house. Do toilets need to be separated from bathrooms? Are verandas really needed? A seven star energy rating? It all needs to go on the table.
Contractors: What about a roof? Is a house with a roof in or out?[10]]

Right down to the absence of the Aboriginal householders in whose names subtractive decisions were being made, the room full of weary project men was a congress taken to represent the full problem of Indigenous housing.

In order to comply with the new requirements, the refurbishment program cherry-picked the best houses to fix, leaving those with rotting wet areas aside, in order to stay with the metric (*x* number of houses in *y* time) within the capped price. With objections thus neutralized by the invitation to "put it on the table," the discussion quickly turned to ways of building lower-cost houses at speed by lopping off such seemingly discretionary design features as louvered windows and sunhoods, internal flashings for waterproofing, or disabled access. In the flurry of designing and then undoing the designs for appropriate housing, it was the sound of a built house falling apart in the non-specifiable future that could not compete with the noise of a threatened-and-defensive government in the here and now.

It would be easy to dwell here, in the doomed alchemy of turning a fantastical metric into a house suitable for Indigenous tenants, to bear witness to the shrouded interconnections held in remote community and government offices that created countless failed houses, or what I have elsewhere called "non-houses."[11] There were houses built that had to be bulldozed; slabs of concrete poured where no house could be built; footings that twisted so badly they could bear no weight; and building materials that ended up as cereal for termites.[12] Large sums of money were squandered; in August 2009, a federal government report found AUD $45 million had been spent by SIHIP without a single house having been completed. Earth Connect Alliance, the building group entrusted with Groote Eylandt's building program, had to be sacked after massive cost overruns and shoddy workmanship.[13] Incompetent bad apples were trounced; and it took much effort for the program to return to business as usual.

From Table to Paddock

Let's admit that these are the kinds of events which satisfy the analytic desire to expose the kinds of compromised actions that lead to compromised human services. I have written about SIHIP in this way too: the program's public scandals are irresistible.[14] But stopping here would simply affirm the faux-realism of instrumentalist policy critique and its cauterizing steps. The scale of SIHIP was unprecedented—the largest Indigenous public housing and infrastructure program ever conducted in Australia—and its history is already being written as one of unintended consequences of what were the mostly welcome material benefits of the Intervention.[15]

Trouble is, event teleology posing as ethnographic exposé simply joins the massed forensics of imminent project failure and correctives that also accumulated around SIHIP as it unfolded. The effectiveness or otherwise of the "Northern Territory Emergency Response" and its sequels is highly contested by anthropologists and others.

Such assessments of the Intervention's effects are evaluative framings, proposing the continual possibility of review as a technique of self-correction.[16] The soothing notion of review also makes the collateral damage of interventions, or what is otherwise termed "the unintended consequences of policy," the stuff of investigation: how to get less of the unintended so outcomes align more with the intended. The idea of intentions gone awry pretends there was no foundational opacity within original policy forecasts, no refusal to calculate the cost of optimistic project loadings, in turn allowing wild policy to unfurl as if by surprise. This is the perfection of the phrase "unintended consequences": as a catch-all euphemism it refuses the more specific namings that were always possible yet somehow never feasible.[17] In effect, both the original housing metrics invented for SIHIP and the hasty mutations in the politicized public outrage that followed were estimated through a double-blind calculus, a true scientific objectivity. Not only were previous housing and infrastructure data locked in untraceable archives, the costs for fixing old and building new SIHIP houses were also estimated in a dim abstract, on paper, databases, and whiteboards, with no sampling of any actual house as a statistical verity or reality check. "Unintended" they say, so enabling (wild) policy to attain the semblance of coherence as Indigenous targets are reaffirmed as the unruly ones.

Such productive recuperations are a reminder that liberal policy is an organic—or as I prefer, a *wild*—force, a biota which thrives on the heralding of cataclysms and thus the cumulative need for policy beneficence. Importantly, as Povinelli's works insists, beyond the publicity of the big announcement or the sublime scandal, and the recovery of these events through sanitizing performances of media scrutiny and prescriptive defense and rapid image reformulation, more endemic forms of everyday corrosion stop-start away. The flow of money to save children from being (purportedly) assaulted by their own kin, and the specter of wasted money and sacrificed project managers, were mesmerizing events indeed. But beyond the dazzling chain of actions and reactions, new obstacles and thickened intrusions of the kind that clot Aboriginal life-worlds grew apace, from new tenancy regulations to misaligned house footings.

Corrosions and the Non-Event

To find the slow corrosion, one need only turn to duller scenes, such as the order and disorder of irretrievable archives or to SIHIP's back rooms, a fluorescent-lighting world of software prosthetics, incommensurable databases, Gantt charts, and urgent, time-consuming tasks represented in backlogged emails, paper stacks, and beeping mobiles.

SIHIP came with many non- or barely publicized stings in the tail, obscured in the bureaucratic back rooms. Take

how, to receive any housing and infrastructure funding in the first place, Aboriginal land title holders had to relinquish their tenure over community lands, under threat of compulsory acquisition. Tangentyere Town Camps, an Aboriginal housing organization based in Alice Springs, for example, protested the convergence of necessary public housing and infrastructure upgrades with extinguishment of their title in a failed federal court challenge. Under considerable duress, they signed a forty-year lease deal. As reported in the *National Indigenous Times*, Tangentyere's lawyers, Gilbert & Tobin, critiqued the Commonwealth's heavy-handed methods of securing an agreement: "The housing associations have agreed to enter into the sub leases for the simple reason that you have threatened them with compulsory acquisition if they do not," the Gilbert & Tobin lawyers wrote.[18] In its reassembly of legislated powers over Indigenous lands, the Australian government had also extended its existing federal right to issue mining licenses and leases to third parties over to local state and territory ministerial discretion. And they warned householders that they would face new tenancy and asset management regimes when the keys were handed over—which is where our story about the corrosive non-events behind more scandalous and contested spectacles properly begins.

Little things pile up," Povinelli says, describing how hope and despair "are conjured through the endurance of the exhaustion of numerous small quasi-events," the quadrillion little things that are hard to put a finger on, literally or metaphorically.[19] She writes, "It is hard to pull a thisness out of the ongoing flow of the everyday because so much decomposition happens below the threshold of awareness and theorization," and I think too of audit entropy and the thickness of unnamable obstacles that bureaucratic and NGO helpers wanting to do anything different also encounter.[20] As Australian anthropologist Patrick Sullivan notes, Aboriginal life is "almost entirely supported by grant and welfare regimes, and therefore by public sector administration and by Aboriginal community sector service delivery."[21]

Povinelli's concern is with both a sapping of will and the resilience of spirit for individual subjects living within what she calls "zones of abandonment," asking her fellow philosophers, what is the bodily cost of being the otherwise, of enduring under Late Liberalism, of representing the different ways of being in the world that the disenchanted intellectual so craves? My own concern has been to confront the productivity of infinite bureaucratic regress, to see liberal settler institutions as organisms seeking their own reproduction using circular remedies dressed as humanitarian responsibilities.[22] The hydra-headed administrative formations surrounding reform, depleting community-focused organizational energies and entangling clients alike, remain just as under-theorized for being nothing much in themselves.[23] Behind the publicized event(s) are multiple forms of administrative violence and ineptitude, petty corruption and graft, squatting alongside more ubiquitous quasi-events[24]—stalled payments, forms that are impossible to fill in, nonsensical databases, computers that don't quite work, freighted goods that arrive damaged or with missing parts—which lie behind the non-attendance of material problems in the Indigenous domain.

Such arrested moments and infrastructural stutters more properly explain the relentless breakdowns in function and sensibility of just about everything needed for Indigenous people to be what governments repeatedly demand they be (educated, employed, housed, tax-paying, self-disciplining). The moral torpor of words like "low SES" in evaluation reports and strategy documents helps recuperate the images of depravity, ill-health, and social suffering that originally energized the Intervention back into remedial targeting and its drone activities, subsuming anew the gritty textures of everyday-life difficulties into an actuarial aesthetic that soothes as it smoothes away any sense of policy shrapnel still being at large.

A final example can be drawn not from the realm of (admissible public) debacles—houses not being built, skyrocketing costs, dodgy project managers—but from the dull worlds of documents, software, and regulatory lines athwart regulatory lines.

Let's take the mainstreaming of Indigenous public housing—another promise of the Intervention writ large. This was meant to deracinate tenancy management, bringing the benefits of mainstreaming to previously discriminated-against Indigenous tenants. SIHIP constructions were added to existing public housing stock, leaving Territory Housing (the Northern Territory government department with landlord responsibilities) with housing of varying quality to manage and lease. Territory Housing accordingly developed graded tenancy arrangements to cover the differences between so-called improvised dwellings, legacy dwellings, and remote public housing.[25] Under the Residential Tenancies Act (RTA), residents of improvised dwellings should not pay rent, while residents of legacy dwellings are obliged to. However, the government does not define these charges as rental payments, but as "maintenance levies," which means the protections that come with the onuses of the RTA also do not apply. So when a man tried to recover the money he had been charged for the many weeks he'd spent living in a makeshift tent, waiting for SIHIP to refurbish his legacy dwelling into the higher-rent-attracting category of remote public housing, Territory Housing refused any refund, "arguing the tenant's payments were a Housing Maintenance levy charge and as such should have been paid."[26] As it turned out, Territory Housing was holding close to AUD $1.4 million in such untraced rental payments, gleaned from the poorest of Australia's poor.

Using the administrative windfall of Intervention monies,

all details of remote housing tenants were shifted onto a centralized IT database called the Tenancy Management System (TMS), ostensibly to reconcile the poll taxes (service fees or maintenance levies) being paid by individuals with the type of housing they were living in, so that the alleged fair rent would be paid. Yet despite the synoptic vision:

Territory Housing cannot easily provide rental statements for residents who are not on TMS. It also has difficulties identifying whether people are paying rent when they should not or, conversely, whether people are not paying rent when they should. FaHCSIA and Territory Housing have limited visibility of the true extent of overcrowding (both on an individual house and community-wide basis) and an incomplete picture of all housing stock and tenants.[27]

And while deductions for cruddy legacy buildings are meant to be capped to avoid overpayments, the database does not reconcile the number of people residing in a legacy house with what is being charged. It relies on the leaseholder to have read the tenancy agreement in the first place—in all its eye-glazing, unfriendly documentary hulk—to know that they are to keep the authority up-to-date on things like when visitors cease to be visitors and have become residents, which in turn relies on householders being trustful that having too many people in the house will not invoke other (very familiar) interventions—like an eviction. The elusive promise of reimbursability presumes knowledge too that one has been ripped off, of how the theft occurred, and confidence that the processes for recuperating the stolen money are worth the long and frustrating while, and not triggers for new traps. This is to leave aside the armory of techniques needed for battling through the multiple sentry points choking individual quests via a confusion of fine-print requirements and misdirects, defeat being the inadmissible purpose of these ubiquitous non-processes—a bit like the scaling up from street harassment to prosecution case file, one might say.

Non-Narratability

SIHIP is no longer a program. Enacted through multiple inquiries and public hearings, the mediatized event of SIHIP has sequenced the idea of project closure, complete with timed and costed boundary markers in the form of audits and acquittals. In its wake, the limitless movement of what the anthropologist of debt and anarchy David Graeber has called "bureaucratic violence," trying to define the wounds of infinite paperwork and procedures with no straightforward endpoint, just maddening rounds of being told you've waited in the incorrect line with a mistakenly filled or the wrong bit of paper.[28]

In his brief account of trying to get power of attorney over his mother's finances after she suffered a stroke, Graeber describes what colloquially people would call a runaround, a kerfuffle, a bitch of a time: synonyms for administrative delay and vapid interactions at counters and on phones, with piped advertorials and muzak as deaf witnesses to the tedious inconvenience. Only Graeber was not describing the kind of trifling hurdles that anyone confronting the prospect of supplications mediated by paperwork and official authorizations must endure. He was trying to explore the institutionalized, class-differentiated interpellations that makes supplicants "stupid" as they empathize with the procedural interaction, trying to get their part right, and in so doing, authorizing the institutional violence they are at once prey and party to; how "powers that be" are able to remain oblivious to how their bureaucracies are precisely organized so that its actors can never do their purported jobs. Graeber is never speaking to someone with the power to bend rules or do something about the cascade of technical absurdities. A complaint will transform into a pointless persecution of some junior functionary; pointless really. Then, just as he tries to explain why ethnographers barely deal with such non-eventful dynamics, the essay dwindles, lost in a formless critique of Weber and Foucault and a rant against anthropological conservatism.

This fading away of powerful explanation is not a problem for Graeber alone. Even before the compassion fatigue from overabundant broadcasts of global tragedies, the immensity and unwritability of lives lived beyond the parentheses of enclosed events, of lives wearied by their denied sustenance, of the damages done by happenings with no mark in time but warping the potentials of lived time for all that, has daunted artists and analysts, from Kafka to David Foster Wallace. Wallace's last work before he hanged himself, *The Pale King: An Unfinished Novel*, was set in an Internal Revenue Service office in Peoria, Illinois, where, the book's cover blurb tells us, low-ranking fiscal bureaucrats are immersed in such tedious routines that they receive boredom-survival training. But there is something profound being transacted in this least romantic, uneventful settings, here in the middling bulk of the liberal market economy. "Consider … the advantages of the dull, the arcane, the mind-numbingly complex," Wallace writes. "The IRS was one of the very first government agencies to learn that … abstruse dullness is actually a much more effective shield than is secrecy."[29]

In a different way, this is Povinelli's concern too, when she is describing the resilience of her families in northern Australia, the cleverness of people finding their own means of "making the world work" amid the slow violations and disjunctions in space and time which characterize the contemporary condition of Aboriginal life-worlds. Without romanticizing, she describes how the inventiveness of "making do," the strength of escaping daily crud with jokes, care, adjustment, and drink, disappears within discursive forces that can only recognize Indigenous people in binary terms: as a threatened-species-status people with eroding traditions

(the genealogical subject of anthropological pursuit), and/or as those who must be shaped into full market economy participants (the autological future-perfect subject of policy imaginaries). Events are framed and recorded through these signature codes too, making "the harms done within these brackets narratively disappear."[30]

Policy ethnography conducted as an event history—or as policy biography—enacts its own disappearances, reintroducing coherence and intentionality where inchoate rationalities and deformations in practice are the logical outgrowths. The shoddy workmanship that public housing tenants know to expect becomes, on the few occasions it is exposed, something exceptional, something that can be traced to aberrant moments, to hasty briefings or a faulty reporting structure, becoming in turn a pedagogical event, staked out in inquiries that draw out culprits and lessons.

I want to suggest that Graeber's faltering indicates another representational difficulty. By the time ethnographic intervention is made into the barely narratable, with words summoned to capture the absurd, the tedious, and the arbitrary, a new problem arises. There is a challenge to naming these ubiquitous practices as, yes, pervasive—but not as therefore experienced in common. Everywhereness is not an everysameness. Small non-events have cumulative consequences that are differently and differentially experienced depending on who, what, and where. An irritating inconvenience for me is not a denial of a vital service or funding line or a threat to my parenting capacities, what with my overeducated literacy, bureaucratic savvy, access to logistical equipment, influential networks, and fortnightly pay check. My mounting irritation does not transmute into a pathological and materially punishing portrait of me as a service-resistant, noncompliant, or intervention-warranting citizen. The ability to persevere, to minimize and to evade impedimenta, is differentially scaffolded, for individuals and their interfacing organizational clusters alike.

This then is another ground for the non-narratability of Povinelli's quasi-events. The ordinary rigmarole of administrivia is immediately familiar. It is every fight with a telecom service anyone has ever had; the prolonged madness of transferring a car registration across state boundaries; the infuriating one-step-forward, one-step-back delays in getting an overseas visa application cleared on time. The ordinary is something everyone recognizes as stuff that happens to them too. Only the ordinary is not a stable zone in fixed space-time that everyone is participating in as equals. There is no "an" or "the" prefacing a singular shared ordinary. Falling-down systems are neither decomposing nor encountered identically. Erosion attacks weaker, cheaper structures, with erosion's ramifications operating at and amplifying along differential scales and time dimensions. These may be shaped by the rapid exigencies of shifting policy personnel at the most abstract level, and by very particular, bitsy, analytically elusive, local experiences—a tradesman who does not show up; a structural corner that has been cut; an appointment that can't be met; a relative that drinks the rent money—that shift in meaning and noteworthiness depending on their (socially orchestrated) legibility.

Tracing (dys)function—how it occurs, and to whom, what, and how it is ascribed—might yield fleeting glimpses of the stealthy means by which systems of slow death occur under liberal beneficence, yet such hard-to-ameliorate, enclosure-refusing life routes also resist neat homilies. This too is a condition of their non-narratability: the requirement to abandon a text without satisfactory end, for morally affirming conclusion is also a misleading tact.

X

I would like to thank Dr Morgan Richards of The Design Embassy for her intellectual generosity in conceptualising and designing the intervention infographic.

1
The attacks on red tape with every announcement of savings cuts lets us imagine it is these mindless processes that will be dismantled, as if doing less with less is not already here, creating the thicket, as the logical result of cuts and rationings that pretended they were not attacks on frontline services. On red tape as cultural phenomena, see Akhil Gupta, *Red Tape: Bureaucracy, Structural Violence, and Poverty in India* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2012); and Matthew S. Hull, *Government of Paper: The Materiality of Bureaucracy in Urban Pakistan* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2012).

2
Elizabeth A. Povinelli, "Routes/Worlds," *e-flux journal* 27 (Sept. 2011) http://pdf.e-flux-systems.com/journal/routesworlds/ .

3
I borrow the term "ruined" public housing from Catherine Fennell, "The Museum of Resilience: Raising a Sympathetic Public in Postwelfare Chicago," *Cultural Anthropology* vol. 27, no. 4 (2012): 641–666.

4
Bob Gosford, "A yarn with Michael Coggan, journalist," Crikey, Nov. 28, 2010 http://blogs.crikey.com.au/northern/2010/11/28/a-yarn-with-michael-coggan-journalist/ .

5
The report by the Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse, titled *Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle: "Little Children are Sacred,"* can be found at https://humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/57.4%20%E2%80%9CLittle%20Children%20are%20Sacred%E2%80%9D%20report.pdf . For critical analysis of the Intervention, see *Coercive Reconciliation: Normalise, Stabilise, Exit Aboriginal Australia* , eds. Jon Altman and Melinda Hinkson (Melbourne: Arena Publications, 2007).

6
Millions of dollars were assigned to create 750 new houses, 2500 refurbishments, and 230 "demolish and replace" homes in some seventy-three Aboriginal communities within four years of the program's commencement.

7
See Nigel Adlam, "Path of Least Resistance for Angry Anderson," *Northern Territory News* , Aug. 1, 2009.

8
See, for example, Natasha Robinson, "Failure of indigenous housing policy in the Northern Territory," *The Australian*, Aug. 15, 2009 http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/investigations/refugees-in-their-own-land/story-fn6tcs23-1225761764965 ; and Victoria Laurie, "Home Improvement: Indigenous Housing," *The Monthly* 68 (June 2011) https://www.themonthly.com.au/victoria-laurie-indigenous-housing-home-improvement-victoria-laurie-3362 .

9
From here on, the most expensive house in the most isolated and climactically extreme conditions could cost no more than AUD $450,000, inclusive of indirect, freight, and labor costs, while refurbishments could not exceed AUD $100,000.

10
Witnessed by the author. Ethnographic fieldwork on SIHIP and other social policy fields took place in 2009, 2010, 2011, and 2012 as part of my Australian Research Council QEII Fellowship (DP1094139) pursuit of the question, "Can there be good policy in regional and remote Australia?" My time with SIHIP bureaucrats in government back rooms was limited to this brief period when the program was in crisis mode, before the federal minister Jenny Macklin made it clear that ethnographic documentation was not desired and my research permission was refused. (For more on the "event," see http://www.abc.net.au/news/2009-08-19/macklin-blamed-for-indigenous-housing-wrangle/1396706 ; also Murray McLaughlin, "Indigenous Housing Boss Removed," transcript, *The 7:30 Report* , Aug. 18, 2009, Australian Broadcasting Corporation http://www.abc.net.au/news/2009-08-18/indigenous-housing-boss-removed/2675114 .) I later traced SIHIP's ramifications in Groote Eylandt, including the attempt by the Anindilyakwa Land Council to establish its own civil and civic engineering works company so that future projects could be managed in situ.

11
Tess Lea and Paul Pholeros, "This is not a pipe: the treacheries of Indigenous housing," *Public Culture* vol. 22, no. 1 (2010): 187–209.

12
Tess Lea, "What's Water Got to Do with It? Indigenous Public Housing and Australian Settler Colonial Relations," in "Other People's Country: Law, Water, Entitlement," special issue, *Settler Colonial Studies* (forthcoming).

13
For discussion of Groote Eylandt and the sacking of Earth Connect, see Tess Lea, "Ecologies of Development on Groote Eylandt," *Australian Humanities Review* 53 (Nov. 2012) http://australianhumanitiesreview.org/2012/11/01/ecologies-of-development-on-groote-eylandt/ .

14
See Tess Lea, "When Looking for Anarchy, Look to the State: Fantasies of Regulation in Forcing Disorder within the Australian Indigenous Estate," *Critique of Anthropology* vol. 32, no. 2 (2012): 109–124.

15
See, for example, the Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, *Strategic Indigenous Housing and Infrastructure Program (SIHIP) – Review of Program Performance* , Aug. 28, 2009 http://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/05_2012/sihip_review.pdf ; Australian Government Auditor-General for the Northern Territory, *Strategic Indigenous Housing And Infrastructure Programme Report To The Legislative Assembly* , June 2010 http://www.nt.gov.au/ago/reports/2010%20June.docx ; ; Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, *Strategic Indigenous Housing Infrastructure Program (SIHIP): Post Review Assessment (PRA)* , March 10, 2010 http://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/05_2012/sihip_pra_report.pdf .

16
Anthropologist Jon Altman valiantly attempted to place an iodine trace on the plethora of evaluations that surrounded the Intervention to determine when its work could be considered "done." Failing to find the terminus, he instead turned attention to the exercise of trying to define "what is, or was, the Intervention?" This definitional quest likewise disintegrated.See Jon Altman and Susie Russell, "Too Much 'Dreaming': Evaluations of the Northern Territory National Emergency Response Intervention 2007–2012," *Evidence Base* 3 (2012): 1–24.

17
For instance, housing intervention and cost information from previous regional and remote construction programs was either deemed commercial-in-confidence by the private companies, or archived in Canberra by the aptly named storage specialists Iron Mountain and were not available for SIHIP project reference without both Freedom of Information probes and prior knowledge of exactly where the files were dispersed and how they were catalogued, down to level of barcodes.

18
See Chris Graham, "Macklin's town camp takeover derailed by Tangentyere letter," *National Indigenous Times* , July 31 2009.

19
Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism* , (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2011), 183.

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See Tess Lea, *Bureaucrats and Bleeding Hearts: Indigenous Health in Northern Australia* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2008).

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But see David Graeber, "Dead Zones of the Imagination: On Violence, Bureaucracy and Interpretive Labour," *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* vol. 2, no. 2 (2012): 102–128.

24
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25
Improvised dwellings are defined as a structure used as a place of residence that does not meet the building requirements to be considered a permanent dwelling, including caravans, tin sheds without internal walls, humpies, and dongas. See Nadia Rosenman and Alex Clunies-Ross, "The New Tenancy Framework for Remote Aboriginal Communities in the Northern Territory," *Indigenous Law Bulletin* vol. 7, no. 24 (2011): 11–16. See also Alison Larkins, *Remote Housing Reforms in the Northern Territory* , report by the acting Commonwealth Ombudsman, June 2012 https://web.archive.org/web/20140301095317/https://www.ombudsman.gov.au/files/remote_housing_reforms_in_the_nt_report.pdf .

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Larkins, *Remote Housing Reforms in the Northern Territory.*

28
Graeber, "Dead Zones of the Imagination," 121.

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Gean Moreno and Ernesto Oroza

“Un solo palo no hace monte”: Notes on the Otherwise’s Inevitable Infecundity

Once Upon a Time

Hamlet is seated on a throne. He’s bent and wasted. An imperfect Hamlet, frozen in place; history stretches between him and us like an unbreachable wall. His left hand holds up a fallen brow. All is dark around him. Foreboding. Tenebrous. The only light on the set is absorbed by the deep furrows on the prince’s hands. This is the wrong way for a film to start.[1] From the very beginning, it forces us to retune our understanding of the subject, to perk up in disagreement. As a growing sense that things are heretically amiss begins to take hold, a dramatic piano pumps life and suspense into the tableau. The camera zooms in. This confirms that our prince is the sexagenarian his deeply grooved leather-skin suggested. It also pegs other qualities to him, at least through the grain of the pirated version of the movie that we are watching. Something of the lugubrious old pervert, for instance. He raises his head, puts deep and penetrating eyes on us, admonishment for our audacity in thinking him any less a prince than other Hamlets. We take note of the cheap costume he is in. It renders him more jester than royalty, and ratifies that he is a counterpoint to the healthy young Hamlet, a bit melancholy but all the more attractive for it, that lords over the literary imagination of the West, indexing its supposed universality. Between these two Hamlets there can only be a strained relation. One that parody or deliberate misuse underwrites. It is never the young and vigorous Danish monarch who represents what is rotten in the kingdom. We cannot be quite sure this is the case with the flabby flesh of our Cuban lead. One can imagine a whiff of decay coming off him; the concoction of gases that churns in the carcass on the side of the road finds liberation through his pores as death slowly slurps the marrow in his bones and ravenous flies wait just outside the frame. A bit senile, this aged Hamlet even botches *the* question. “Are they or are they not?,” he asks with pointed disdain. An old bag of bones defiantly putting a challenge to the audience.

¿Son o no son?—That is the question. The first thing one has to ask is what sort of question is this, imperfect as it sounds to knowing ears, if not altogether grating and blasphemous. What is it referring to, beyond the words it misquotes? Who are these *son*, these “they”? Is it the Cuban people who have entered a divergent historical pattern? Is this a Hamlet with social concerns, slightly disenchanted with the timid social function that mass media and artists have surrendered to in the new society? If he’s mourning anything, then, it may be an opportunity that is being wasted. Or is the question imperfect in more ways than one? What if it is untranslatable in that it is asking about musical genres whose names have no equivalent in other languages, about rhythms pried free from the bones of dead animals? What if it’s posing an inquiry about the Cuban *son*, that most foundational of genres? The question *¿Son o no son?* is then closer to something like *The blues or not the blues?* It has to do

Julio García Espinosa, Son o no son, 1978. Film still

with popular music and shared experience, and not with the metaphysical inquiries that trouble the humanist or bourgeois subject—nor even with the theoretically crafted concerns for the collective that shape the unbendable militant.

Or maybe Son o no son—as in, are the methods employed in the film able or not able to do what García Espinosa needs them to do? *¿Son los que tienen que ser o no son?* is a way of wondering if the contradiction between autochthonous popular culture and a transnational film industry, if the exercise of rubbing one against the other, is fruitful. The film finds its shape as variations of the titular question. Figuring out which version of *¿ Son o no son?* aligns with what Hamlet intended is, then, less important than the fact that the inquiry keeps itself suspended over multiple possibilities, refusing easy disentanglement from indeterminacy as a way to propel a reflexive drive to the very end and at multiple levels.

However unstable the meaning of the question may be, our sorry Hamlet is as dramatic in his delivery as any member of a *teatro buffo* troop would find it proper to be, professionalism making its claims on all citizens of the stage equally. He strains his gravel-in-the-throat voice, sounding more like a goat than an actor, but graced with a certain Caribbean flow nonetheless. It's the paradox of guttural mellifluousness that renders old tobacco smokers so charming. His way of asking the question reminds one of that other botching of it. "Tupí or not Tupí?" asks Oswald de Andrade in his *Anthropophagic Manifesto* (1928), alluding to the deglutition of Pedro Fernandes Sardinha, Brazil's first bishop, by the Caeté Indians, a part of the Tupí people, in 1556. Does the otherwise—which is what these pages are about—not emerge and endure with the consuming and digesting of the alien, with rearranging a corrupt state of things that we can never quite line ourselves up with? And what is as alien to us nowadays as the strange and savage ways of Portuguese conquerors must have been to the Tupí in 1556 if not an economic "intelligence" that has reformatted the planet to serve the illusory goal of its infinite perpetuation, based on the fantasy that the resources at its disposal are endless? Or is it, as experience confirms, slightly different than this: Is the otherwise precisely that which emerges from a missed encounter, the fruitless exchange, with the alien? We try to find new potentialities in immaterial labor and other novel things that Capital may have generated, we test practices that may lead to an immanent derangement of things as they are, but the freedoms come to meet us are so shamefully small and so easily recaptured. We try to swallow the alien but it turns out that it digests us instead.

Julio García Espinosa, Son o no son, 1978. Film still

In order to anchor things to their historical moment, one has to be mindful of the fact that if our abject Hamlet is connected to a manifesto, it's to one that was published forty years after de Andrade's, in the midst of a revolution that wasn't only aesthetic: Julio García Espinosa's "For an imperfect cinema." "Nowadays," that text begins, "perfect cinema—technically and artistically masterful—is almost always reactionary cinema."[2]A perfect prince with his perfect question may be a stand-in for a contingent unity of the world that power sustains and naturalizes, not the least through reactionary cultural production, in order to favor those who wield it. We should keep this in mind as our Hamlet sets off on his monologue: " *What is better for the spirit—to suffer the blows and barbs of misfortune, or to take arms against a cluster of calamities and, taking it head on, put an end to it? To die. to sleep.*" Cheated of a grave skull to address, our prince leans his head against the large jawbone cradled in his right hand, and continues: " *Maybe to dream.*" He strikes the bone with the back of his fist. Clack. He looks up, to where one could think God or the director would be, if such reassurances were still believable and consoling. " *And for you to think,*

Shakespeare, that with a simple dream we could put an end to all our sorrows." He looks at the bone again. " *To die, to sleep. To sleep! Here we find fear of an existence that stretches so long in misfortune.*" Hamlet rises threateningly from his throne. He advances under a spotlight that he commands to follow him through the sheer and hypnotizing disdain lodged in every step he takes. He grunts words that we can no longer tell whether they are his or García Espinosa's: " *Who can endure the outrage of so many stupid songs and soap operas when one can procure for oneself eternal sleep with a simple dagger? But Silence! Shhh! The beautiful Ophelia approaches. Nymph, in your prayers remember* The Entire Son.[3] *Hahahaha.*" He strikes the mandible. "*¿ Son o no son?—That is the question*."

There is no symmetry here. The words we are hearing find no echo in our recollection, even as we have enough clues to plot things in the proper location. We know this play, even those of us who don't quite know it by heart. "I could be bounded in a nutshell / Yet count myself lord of infinite space / Were it not that I have bad dreams" ... and all that. We know it by ear, let's say. We pick it up when we hear a bit of it. It's in our cultural DNA; it climbs out of there as much as it comes from the actors who may be speaking the lines. It gurgles in our depths. And yet, every word uttered and every gesture enacted by our pruney Hamlet, obviously disarticulating the very role he has appropriated, marks a distance from familiar things, courts a certain disunity. The wrong body. The wrong attire. The wrong sort of defiance. The hoarse voice. Vehemence replaces sorrow. Fury displaces brooding. The absent skull. In its place, a mule's mandible. Our Hamlet strikes it repeatedly. To every blow the bone responds with a sound. Lacking organic tissue to fix them in place, the animal's loose teeth rattle and echo in the concavities of the bone. Music begins to take shape. Music from the other side. Entwined with death, yes, but also with Africa. We understand this in our bodies. This is also in our DNA. But it's more than this: because what the jawbone ultimately points to is a shift in cultural register. We've left the heights of fancy literature and have been deposited in the very heart of vernacular culture, of expressive particularities that refuse us the possibility of automatic decipherment that canonized artifacts allow.

Is *Son o no son* an instance of the otherwise, an exercise in undoing a unity of things that has been naturalized by power? Is "imperfect cinema" the form that the otherwise assumes in filmic space at *a particular moment*, against the treachery of a cinema of quality and the social order that sustains it? Does an imperfect cinema not already announce the alienness—the end—that stalks a neocolonial cinema of quality from the future? "What happens if the development of videotape solves the problem of inevitably limited laboratory capacity," asks García Espinosa, "if television systems with their potential for 'projecting' independently of the central studio render the ad infinitum construction of movie theaters suddenly superfluous?" What happens, we can add, when the digital overruns the world of celluloid and entire films can be produced on a cell phone and distributed on platforms of nearly global reach?

> What happens then is not only an act of social justice—the possibility for everyone to make films—but also a fact of extreme importance for artistic culture: the possibility of recovering, without any kinds of complexes or feelings of guilt, the true meaning of artistic activity. Then we will be able to understand that art ... is not work, and that the artist is not in the strict sense a worker. The feeling that this is so, and the impossibility of translating it into practice, constitutes the agony and at the same time the "pharisee-ism" of all contemporary art.[4]

Facebook Uprisings

In the same way that we associate Shakespeare's Hamlet with a human skull, after viewing the first few minutes of *Son o no son* we cannot unbind Garcia Espinosa's Hamlet from the mandible of a sterile mule. The repurposed jaw as a musical instrument is found in numerous cultures. Caribbean, Peruvian, and Mexican musicians have all employed animal jawbones to produce the rhythmic baselines of different genres. The bone is stricken with both the palm of the hand and the backside of the fist in order to generate different sounds. A thin branch or a lamb's rib is also dragged across the teeth. The drag and the thump, establishing a rhythm, often replace or accompany traditional drums in popular songs. To be able to use the fragment of the dead mule, it is necessary to first whiten and soften the bone with alcohol baths and by exposing it to the sun. It's as if the calcareous material needs to be freed of death's vapors for its afterlife-as-percussion to shed its shyness and step out of tenebrous silence. Colorful strings or thin reeds are woven into the front-most juncture of the bone to avoid that it be fractured by the constant striking, while also beautifying the instrument, binding beauty to function, function to death, death to undulating and sweaty bodies—things that often miss each other in thinking. This decorating of the animal's chin is an allegory of the relationship in the Caribbean imaginary between the notion of repurposing and the fatal end of things, acutely underscored by the fact that we are being set to dance by a fragment salvaged from a dead beast.

Doesn't the mule announce a path to a dead-end? Donkey and mare, animals distinguished by the number of their chromosomes, 62 and 64 respectively—a small difference that makes all the difference—are gifted with a completely sterile descendent. Biological forces close the path for what has been spawned. But it's also true that, while being

an atrophied creature, an appendix-like protrusion in the smooth trajectories of two different species, the mule has significant effects in the world. In the first place, the mule hauls behind it entire agrarian economies, and it does this precisely where other methods of transportation fail. Whether it's moving coffee or coca or cacao, the mule is part of the economic flows of very productive regions throughout Latin America. And it isn't just a question of replacing more technologically advance methods of cargo. In its travels the mule unintentionally participates as much as the deliberately swung hoe in the farming itself. Through its feces, it fertilizes the mountainsides that are favored by coffee growers and in this way is incorporated into of one of the most desired crops on the planet. What makes this crop so coveted and special, those addictive aromas that eventually envelope us when its beans finally brew in our kitchens and cafes, has been in part determined by the mule's gastrointestinal residue. The animal may stretch itself in space through its waste, but it remains bereft of the capacity to reproduce. It's a limit.

emerges, infecund after it crosses that line at which the very material and social conditions that demanded it have changed? Isn't this one of its structural limitations? Instances of the otherwise may come with built-in obsolescence, just like appliances; with expiration dates, like milk. And if the otherwise is going to be an important concept or category through which to understand practices that may divert us from the actual state of things, doesn't it behoove us to understand these limitations? Isn't the otherwise, the event or the practice that reminds us that another world is possible, not the very same thing that reminds us that we need to historicize our production? This is one way it clamors for an acknowledgment of its specificity and of the radical difference between its context and ours, priming us to be of service to our moment and not to the memory of practice whose time has passed.

Perhaps this is why *Son o no son* begins with a ruin of Hamlet—he allegorizes the transience of the truths that are being presented, the inextensible shelf life of their

This image is a screenshot of the Port of Miami Webcam's live stream.

Isn't *Son o no son* like a mule—useful, vital, indispensable at *a particular moment*, but somehow sterile in conditions it didn't arise from? It's as if the possibility of the otherwise is at the very same time the otherwise's condemnation to infecundity. Doesn't the otherwise announce a path to a dead-end, sterile as it is in generating any effects beyond the context in which it

usefulness. It's like a play mourning the finitude of its necessity. The otherwise is born with its coffin sitting beside it. This is underscored by García Espinosa's own awareness that his films were not specimens of a truly emancipated cinema, but efforts to clear a path toward it. And as such, of limited use, coursing toward the dead-end

that furnishes them with significance. Aren't instances of the otherwise, then, once they are properly historicized, what remind us that returning to the farm and the simple life, that making the imperfect revolutionary filmic essay, that producing tiny economies invested in a wobbly ethics of sharing, that going back to tactics we've inherited from the 1960s or the 1970s, that dreaming the Tricontinental dream, that eating Europeans or celebrating this liberating cannibalism may no longer be what is needed? All these things had their moment and now we must tune in to our times and see what emancipatory possibilities and difficult challenges *these* offer. We need to be extravagant in the demand for our instances of the otherwise to be utterly contemporary. We need to be obstinately demanding in this. The mule's mandible is now an app, and its noises are vectorialized through massive infrastructures. The otherwise, in our midst, has to grapple with scale. It has to find in things like privatized transnational platforms and global logistics the targets of its counterlogic and negation. New state apparatuses have become available through algorithmic manipulation. This is what it has to be alien in relation to.

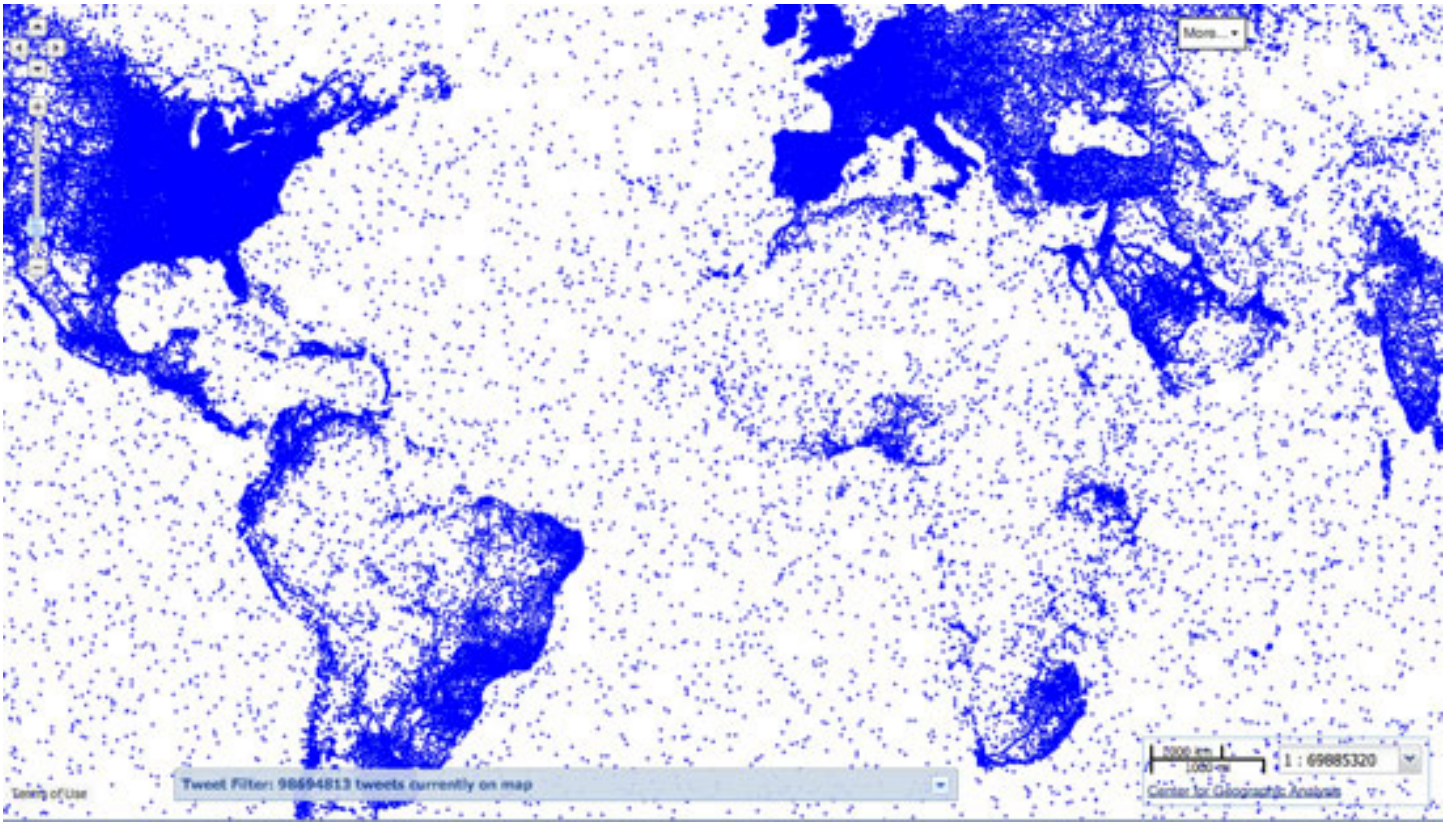
(It may be even more complicated than this in this age of mega-systems. Perhaps the otherwise, as a truly disruptive force, is something we can't generate anymore or even see coming. It emerges from the excesses and glitches in these systems, or from the planet retaliating against our wanton destruction. Maybe the otherwise nowadays is a rising sea that instead of attacking through the beach, like the Allied troops, climbs up through the limestone and floods the city from the center out, obliterating any sense that may have organized the regime of private property; or it's the volcano's model-defying massive ash cloud that paralyzes an entire continent and its markets; or its the earthquake that unleashes tsunamis in multiple directions at once, annulling whatever precautionary measures we may have taken and washing away the illusory distinctions that subtend our retrograde nationalisms.)

Pessimist's parenthesis inserted, let's get back to what we were saying. Historicized, instances of the otherwise may have a residual function, something that we can tease into significance by approaching them with a contrapunctual gaze that, while marking an absolute difference between the two states, may show us what they were good for as vital practices and what their possibilities may be as dead and sterile things. We can zoom out here, see things in their proper place, but also see what they can do from their state of exhaustion, rescuing some of their effectiveness from wholesale nullification. They can return as archival material, as counter-memories to what the present values, as the content of repressed genealogies, as zombie music of encouragement, as lures to refuse uncoupling our thinking from actual circumstances, as reminders to renew our fidelity to justice, as dispatches from other desperate times that summon us to be ambitious and quarrelsome in our engagements with the world we have been sentenced to. They can be models, but not in themselves. Only in their quality as being gestures that were in consonance, that were militantly synchronic, with the problems and demands of their conjuncture. In this way, we mediate the otherwise's unavoidable sterility into something useful; we turn the dead mule into a rhythm we can employ again in ways that may have never been apparent while the thing still had life in it.

Un-historicized, on the other hand, instances of the otherwise encourage replication. Or rather, we are prone to repeat them having misunderstood their limitations and knowing their formulas. And as repetition, instances of the otherwise are fetishes. They ineluctably simplify the social relations and material conditions that they claim to be rising against, as much as remain blind to what such a rising up entails. *Un solo palo no hace monte*: to repeat something because it worked once, to leave an unsubstantiated "transhistoricalness" unquestioned, doesn't add much to anything. Putting hammocks and swings in an empty lot; parading with sandwich boards on which we have laid out our complaints; inviting disenfranchised kids to karaoke; casting shovels out of a minuscule percentage of the obscene quantities of weapons in conflict-ridden territories; turning favelas into advertising for Sherwin-Williams—what is any of this for? What does it do? Does it do more than remind us of things that have already been tried, probably in situations in which they made more sense? Do they do more that tell us that their producers belong to the progressive camp that hates the commodity?

An important concern with repetitions of instances of the otherwise, of efforts tuned to the needs of other times, is often that the reach of their contestatory power, the circumference of what they affect, is insignificant in relation to the global forces that swirl around and even through them. The implications of their existence are symbolic above all. We need to generate social imaginaries that do more than rehearse the ones we were reared in, and produce things that are of consequence in actualizing them. Social media uprisings and the democratization of cultural production feed corporate Big Data appetites, as much as they do anything else. Contemporary art is the beauty mole of finance capitalism. These days, the dreams of an imperfect cinema, betrayed by history's vicissitudes, resemble Google business plans: they both pine for more and more producers. It is here where we begin.

The problem with duplicating instances of the otherwise, of using spent languages and strategies, is that as reproductions they are diachronic, unequal to the magnitude of the problems they face, and often saturated by nostalgia. They address arrangements of things that are no longer in place, rallying against the ghosts of problems that belong to circumstances we no longer find ourselves in. They seem, as ultimately aesthetizations of contestation, ready for reincorporation into the prevailing



This map charts worldwide tweets in an open source software. Copyright: Map-D.

logic, fully prepared to be in marketplace competition with other forms of supposedly more reactionary cultural and political production. To claim that they are world-making, the way that the things they model themselves on may have been, is to indulge in inflationary rhetoric. It's more honest to say that, at their best, responding to contextual necessity more than to theories of capitalism's evolution, they alleviate the real economic and existential pressures of certain populations. And this is not without value, but it is not a blow to the status quo. Disentangled from providing immediate relief, these diachronic instances of the otherwise are academic exercises, endowed with a counterfeit validity extended by the people involved in them and by the usually rarefied quarters in which they unfold—quarters in which everyone seems frightened of thinking in terms of the social totality, lest they come off as retrograde champions of "master narratives" or whatever. These instances of the otherwise are not a challenge to the state of things as much as an oblique reflection of a fragmented social life, reinforcing more than refusing the supposed impossibility of thinking our way through and beyond existing conditions. They put nothing in crisis, and often take up space that could be occupied by something other than hasty reproductions at risk of egregiously embodying a sham antagonism. These repetitions are ameliorative at best, and only important when they ameliorate real needs, when they displace burdens that leave their mark on disenfranchised and uprooted bodies.

It is only when we put *Son o no son,* "For an imperfect cinema," and other instances of the otherwise through a historizing operation that they can begin to be employed in a contrapunctual thinking that may revitalize them as counter-memories and material for alternative archives. It is only then, as sterile and reanimated at once, that they can serve as points of contradistinction not so much to the status quo but to the instances that seek to contest the status quo—a kind of metric with which to measure the effects that an event or a practice generates. Do these new exercises have the reach, contextual differences considered, of the exercises they are being compared to? Do they speak with efficacy to their moment? Does a monument to a dead thinker in the projects, taking into account all it does, for instance, have the same impact as anything associated with Third Cinema? It's not a question of fetishizing what has passed, but of using it. It is only then that the otherwise, too, becomes like the mule in its afterlife, which even after it has been fully drained of vital forces, unleashes the euphoria of the dancing mass. It does something, and it's something different than when it was alive. Sterile in life, it now populates certain spaces with sexual energy; it lubricates heated contact. The animal's shaken and stricken jawbone may provoke in the deep nights that shore up at the edges of the Atlantic a hurricane of muscular distention. The mule's teeth tremble in the dry bone, as deft bodies twirl to their contagious racket. After an exhausting day, catatonic coca leaf and coffee bean growers begin to sense, settling into

the recurrent clacking, a zombie music climbing into their bones. The mule's mandible tunes sonorous rhythms to hormonal rhythms as dancers loose themselves in the moment and in each other. This is not to say that the mule is alive again, or fertile, but that it can be contrapunctually revitalized, put to uses *other* than the original ones we may have devised for it.

X

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1
We are referring to Julio García Espinosa's *Son o no son* (1978). The fragments of Hamlet's monologue come from the first few minutes of the film.

2
Julio García Espinosa, "For an imperfect cinema," *Jump Cut*, no. 20 (1979): 24–26 http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC20folder/ImperfectCinema.html

3
This alludes to the genre of the son, but refers more directly to the title of Nicolás Guillén's 1947 poetry collection, *El Son Entero*.

4
García Espinosa, "For an imperfect cinema." Translation slightly altered.

Debbora Battaglia

Cosmos as Commons: An Activation of Cosmic Diplomacy

"Black Drop Effect"

It would likely be the last time that the medium of motion picture film would be used to record the transit of Venus across the sun—and Venus would once again elude technology's grasp. As artist Simon Starling narrates from his position amongst astronomers prepared worldwide to document the event, Venus approaches the limb of the sun—then appears to drop a bit, frustrating attempts to measure the star by the planet's progress.[1] No imaging technology had ever duplicated its own results or any other's in showing what had just happened. And this year's cosmic misbehavior was occurring in 2012, with all the energies of the Mauna Kea Observatories trained upon it—not in 1613, when a young Jesuit transcribed the sun spot onto a paper screen for the first time; nor in 1769, when Captain James Cook was dispatched to Tahiti to supposedly make his own observations of the transit of Venus, with similar results when compared with the figures of others: as Starling notes, this was an experiment that was to "prove the inadequacy of astrological measurement … for refining the mean earth-sun distance … [despite] vast international collaborations." But Cook would discover that the expedition was a cover: secret instructions from the Crown instructed him to journey on from his observation post to continue the search for Terra Australis Incognita. When he did finally land at Botany Bay in 1770, claiming the territory for England, the transit of Venus would have been fresh in the minds of the aboriginal peoples he encountered there, who for reasons not understood then or now were little surprised by the sudden appearance of the Endeavor …[2] Analysts intrigued by what Starling's film is doing turn to other sites, including parallels with French astronomer "Pierre-Jules-Cesar Janssen who brings together the study of astronomy and the medium of film, just as Starling has done."[3] Or to the artist's own voiceover: "In the universe, there are no ephemeropteraic moments—events go on forever, travel everywhere, are everywhere and everything."[4]

But of course, the field is infinitely open. For example, *Black Drop*'s long sequence showing Starling painstakingly cutting and splicing film strip suggests its own ruse of recovering materials of colonial archiving not only "for the last time," as he tells it, making a contribution to the "black drop effect" of celestial cinema, but perhaps to witness with his own eyes the blot on the British Empire's "sun which never sets." In one shot, Starling's own eyes screen the event in reverse as he is shown gazing at the images he is editing: his dark irises are two black "suns," the sun reflected in his eyes two tiny spots of light. "Being there" as part of a technoscientific media event implicates the artist in a cosmopolitical distortion of Aboriginal "worlds of vision" (as Eduardo Viveiros de Castro terms the cosmologies of Amazonia.)[5] And as some Aboriginal peoples regard the planet, Starling as implicitly Cook was enjoined to mark with them by other

means and names the tenuousness of any natural future for knowledge: from northeastern Arnhem Land, a Dreamtime narrative tells how the star Barnumbir lives on the Island of the Dead, and is so afraid of drowning as she travels across the sea from morning til night that two old women must hold her on a long string, pulling her back to shore at dawn and keeping her tucked into a basket during the day.[6]

This is Povinelli's message for approaching "geontologies." As she tells it when describing her collaborative project to produce digital archives with the Karrabing of Australia for a "living library," the work is to hold for the future images of local lives in tension between colonial-induced poverty, and the invisible heritage of Dreamtime productivities—as it were, placing these on a long cyberstring controlled locally, for managing states of fear.[7] The fears she articulates are many: of drowning in the forces of violence that are overtaking local communities; of drowning in feeling helpless to protect their natural cultural orders; of drowning in climate change creeks and beaches like that of Chepal—not just a resemblance to an ancestral woman, but an event site of a rape that must not be forgotten; Chepal who still lies there, "bioforming the subjectivity of the Karrabing," and further, "mark[ing] a legal border, [as] a legal relation"—in these two capacities supplying a "pathway for public affect"—generating what I think of as a *warm commons* that does not deny access to market capital.[8] Both rape and healing take many forms, after all, literally and figuratively.

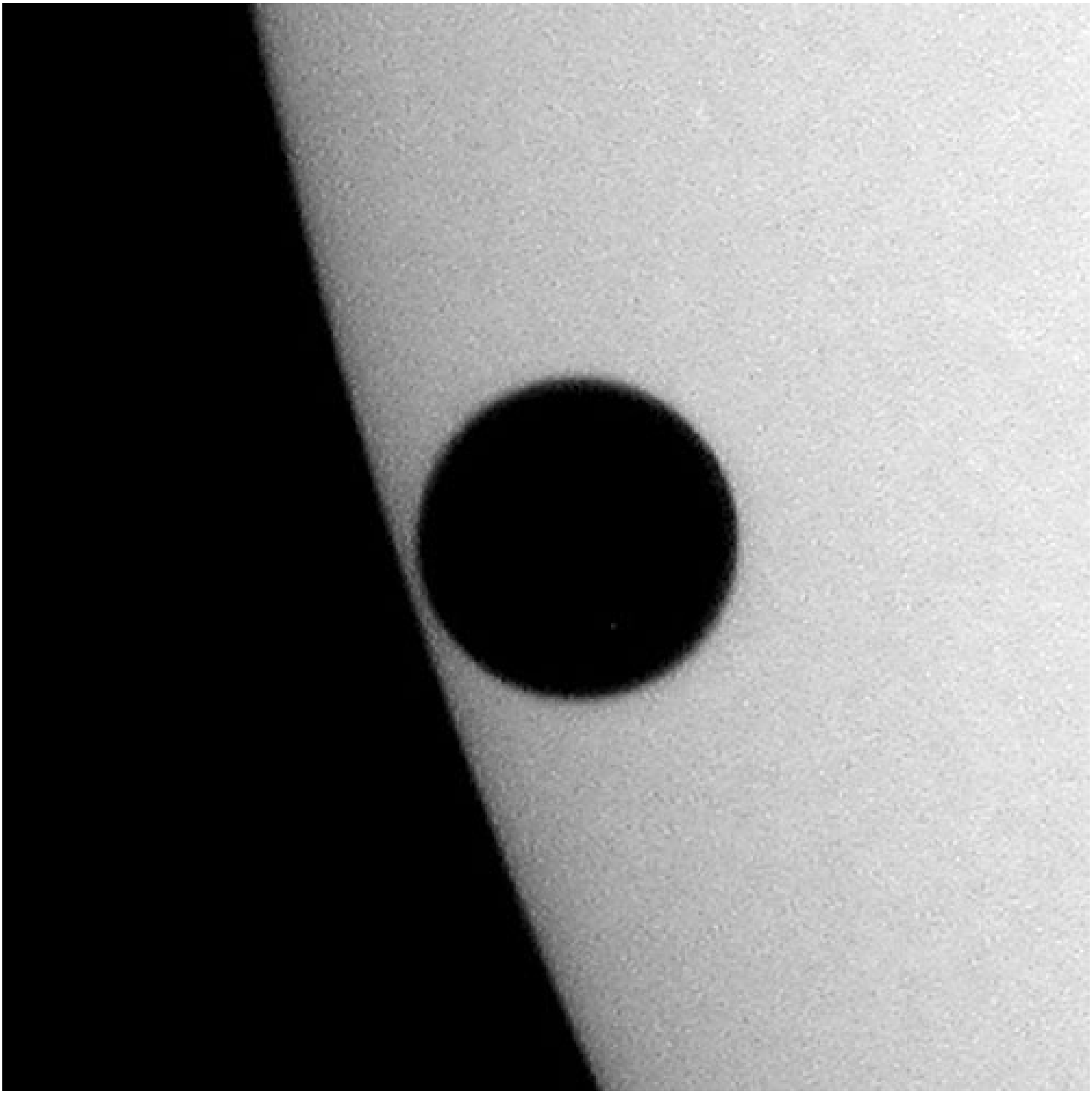
This complex geontological diplomacy, which conveys terms of reference for worlding otherwise than by dominant ways of knowing, enjoins us to hear not only what natural entities might have to tell humans in their own terms, and vice versa, but to study how nature-culture differences might be scaled to the purpose.[9] Further, the apparatuses of diplomacy at any site call for consideration of how knowledge exchange might be warmed to the project—might employ affective *onto-dispositifs*: devices which incline worlding ways to warm protentively to others'.[10]

***

Recently, I was captivated by a paper by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, "The Forest of Mirrors," in which he quotes at length a "dream of origins" from the Yanomami thinker and political leader Davi Kopenawa. Kopenawa tells how "the *xapiripe* spirits have danced for shamans since the first primordial times and … continue to dance today. They look like human beings but are as tiny as specks of sparkling dust … their paths look like spider webs shining like moonlight." Only shamans, enabled by the powder of the yakoanahi tree, can see their images, which are described as "magnificent," "thrilling" to behold. But while the text itself is clearly "a quite extraordinary document," as Viveiros de Castro appreciates, the ethnographic collaboration that brings it to light is compelling in its own right:

> Above all [the mythic narrative] impresses with its richness and eloquence, qualities that derive from the decision of the two co-authors to implement a discursive strategy with a high informational content and great poetic-conceptual density. In this sense, we are presented with an "inventing" of culture (sensu Wagner) which is also a masterpiece of "interethnic" politics. If shamanism is essentially a *cosmic diplomacy devoted to the translation between ontologically disparate points of view*, then Kopenawa's discourse is not just a narrative on particular shamanic contents—namely, the spirits which the shamans make speak and act; it is a shamanic form in itself, an example of shamanism in action, in which a shaman speaks about spirits to Whites and equally about Whites on the basis of spirits, and both these things through a White intermediary.[11]

Here, I stress the critical point of cosmic diplomacy, on one level, for adding into the mix of voices and doings of spirits and humans, some of nature's own; on another, for asking what the poetics of "shamanism in action" might be offering science in action, in the service of a cosmopolitical consciousness (as Stengers conceives of this), and vice versa. This "dance" of translatability opens to recognizing for the myth it is any possible "escape from perspective" which, as Goetz Hoeppe takes up the point from his theoretical ethnography of astronomical practice, has historically "been conceived as a pathway to objectivity" by scientists.[12]]: 597–618) and Thomas Nagel (*The View from Nowhere*, 1989), although what comes to mind here are references to Galison's important argument in his *Image and Logic* concerning the translation of different professional languages into workable terms in the context of collaborative scientific projects.] Further, it appreciates that "observing and theorizing are perspectival not just in a geometrical-optical sense, but more generally so in terms of the diverse properties of the instruments, models, and theories which scientists use *and the aims they use them for*" [emphasis mine]—a point of Giere'swhich Hoeppe echoes in his study of astronomers, who work in effect collaboratively from widely separated field sites.[13] The point bears extending to the aims of shamans, ethnographers, and the objects of their study. By placing reflexivity at the armature of accountability for what Hoeppe terms the "tacit cosmologies" of experienced scientists who routinely subject their data sets to diverse "evidential contexts" and to their own professional histories as a kind of "sanity check," we find ourselves positioned to examine moments when specialist knowledge and aims in different locations warm to each other by the invitation of not-quite or not-yet perceivable, but (as themselves *only)* inherently



The transit of Venus across the Sun as photographed through a telescope.

trustworthy, natural phenomena—a practical expression of what Eduardo Viveiros de Castro terms "multinatural formations."

Consider further these scenarios of diplomatic first contact.

Of Moons and Misbehavior

I imagine myself in the New World with Columbus for the first time … a symphony of sounds, of colors, of smells, of desires, and of hopes. Then I imagine myself on the moon with the astronauts, and all I see is gray, dust and barren rocks, and the earth I long for is far

Sebastian Brant Donnerstein von Ensisheim penned an early description of a meteorite's fall. The Ensisheim meteorite was observed to fall on 1492 in a wheat field outside of the town of Ensisheim, then Alsace and currently France.

> out of reach.
> —Claude Lévi-Strauss[14]

In a recent paper, philosopher and historian of science Simon Schaffer turns his mind to the case of the Ensisheim meteorite that collided with earth in 1492, in the region of Alsace. Schaffer writes how people have tried to make sense of the rock since its arrival amongst us. But more than as an object of historical interest, he wants us to consider the meteorite's capacity to "speak" as a thing, arguing that it can tell us more eloquently about itself than "those who would fetishize [it] under the regimes of [the] iconoclasm and demystification" to which it has been submitted. He offers this brilliant explication:

> There's a specific topography associated with these regimes … it's as though objects become things when they object … "We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us," writes Bill Brown, adding that such fetishism should be seen as a condition for thinking about how "inanimate objects constitute human subjects." Such remarks call for a specification of the places where objects can be deliberately made to stop working for us *and misbehave so much they become things to confront and understand.* In the life of things such as the Ensisheim stone, these include the field site and the lab, the cabinet and the museum, where objects' recalcitrance is somehow ingeniously turned into a pathway for understanding. There the embeddedness of things is challenged by change and alien confrontation.[15]

In stating his argument for listening to things on their "thingness," Shaffer notes Heidegger's distinction between things and objects: the first, self-organized, eloquent, and "craftily autonomous"; the second, defined as the sum of their empirically observed properties. How easily missed, the way that things get things done their way, *in relation to the socios of entification in which they are situationally embedded.* Add to this thought the resultant risks of hasty transfers and translations across the "pluriverse" of human and nonhuman actants within an accelerated informatics of biocapitalism, and we begin to see the value of *warming up* the epi-ontologies we live by—of acknowledging how and when affect gets into the act of constituting "the shifting nature of epistemic relations," as Marilyn Strathern puts it in a dialogue with Donna Haraway,[16] in our worlds of relations. What Lévi-Strauss imagines he would long for from the moon is the capacity to be moved there beyond the engineering ontology that in large part would have gotten him there, to a poetic sensibility—to encounters with the sensuous wetworlds of an animated, perchance misbehaving earth and its earthlings.

I cannot think of a more apt site for following out this line of inquiry than the first contact of Schaffer's meteorite, a disinterested cosmic entity, with humans who are unlikely even to realize the extent of their implication in its state of being, or for that matter in the cosmic force fields and human technologies which brought them into contact with the thing to begin with. With this in mind, I take up Schaffer's point about misbehaving rocks and alien confrontations, though by a different route, and to ends that ethnographers of indigenous worlding would not find in the least exotic. If things like extraterrestrial rocks speak of "the vast range of locations in which things live"[17] they

speak also of the vast range of felt connections they elicit. The issue is not, I hasten to clarify, one of "cosmologizing the human," as Robbert puts it in his terrific piece "The Mischief and the Manyness," referring to William James's, and later Latour's, concept of the "pluriverse."[18] Rather, I seek to approach first contact between disinterested and interested entities as a matter of degrees of affective mobility: What motivates first contact to move beyond connection, into a future of sustained engagement—and perhaps even of cosmopolitical sublimation?

The moon as photographed from the southern hemisphere.

Listening to Sabarl Moon

During my fieldwork with the Sabarl islanders of Melanesia in the mid-1970s, I was approached by Soter, a local political leader, who wanted to talk about the moon rock he had recently observed on a plaque in Port Moresby. The rock was one of many samples on tour from the Apollo program, and was accompanied by pictures of the lunar landing. Soter was deeply intrigued by what he had seen. Upon returning to Sabarl, he would report that the moon was "only a rock"—a startling claim, since anyone could see that there was a woman in the moon with a child on her back, weaving a basket.

Speculation on the conflicting empirical realities and how they might be reconciled would become a regular fireside pastime on Sabarl. Every child was familiar with some version of the mythic narrative of how old woman Dedeaulea had come to occupy the moon, and the narrative could only be "true" (*lihulihu suwot*): it carried a visible cosmic signature. By contrast, the story of how American men had walked on the moon was recent history, little more than hearsay before Soter delivered eyewitness news from Port Moresby. Given that material evidence always had the last word in the matter of truth claims, this was a moment of cultural, not to say cosmic,

dissonance. But for me, Dedeaulea Moon has the stronger claim to relevance in the contemporary moment. For *it is she who converts cosmos to commons*—she "furnishes" the cosmos, as Alberto Corsín-Jiménez argues for the epistemic objects (material and conceptual) that "furnish the commons" of occupying social movements, with what I've come to think of as a *feeling-thing* for collective reflection.[19]

The versions I collected of the Dedeaulea myth begin with a scenario of willful cosmic consumption and human violence. The moon (*wahiyena*), under cover of darkness, has been stealing the cooked red fruit that women have placed inside their baskets. Finally, the moon is caught in the act by a woman spying on the scene. The woman picks up a stick and attacks the thief, breaking the moon into pieces. Afterwards, an old woman, Dedeaulea, spots one of the glowing shards on the ground and uses it to light her way to the garden as night approaches. Noticing how she is leaving the village at night and returning in the daytime, her son-in-law suspects she is a night-flying witch. Offended, Dedeaulea leaves the family home, climbs a casuarina tree (known locally as the "witch tree"), and steps into the moon, taking her granddaughter with her. There she remains, weaving her basket, "striking" women once a month so that they bleed, threatening storms and flooding tides when she menstruates (which shows as a red ring around her), and without warning, sending out white-hot packs of flying witches, visible as shooting stars, who wreck canoes and feed on the flesh of their crews.

Now, as a morality tale—what Malinowski appreciates as a charter for social action—the Dedeaulea myth is lapidary with guidelines and messages of right and wrong action. At a glance, there are the consequences of negative reciprocal exchange, of transgressive feminine consumption, of possessiveness and retributive anger and audacious inversions of "natural" orders of gendered work, and of masculine responses to these—all encoded in transformations and displacements that would warm the hearts of hardcore semioticians. The vocabulary of symbolic forms is elegant also: at the most elementary level, Sabarl recognize images of red fruit foetuses, of basketry wombs, of first- and third-generation termini of matrilineages.

The text warms the hearts and minds of students of nature-culture interdiscursivity as well: we learn of humans and nonhumans positioned as interchangeable co-actants in exchanges that both produce and threaten their ongoing relations, and also their distinct worlds—and not just by way of anthropomorphism. Each entity naturalizes the other's capacity to engender feeling that both transports social action and transforms social relations.

When Soter scientized Sabarl Moon, he of course proclaimed the de-feminization of the brightest agent of *calculated* transgression in the cosmos—its coolest operator. Abstract this capacity and the moon is indeed "only a rock," as barren to Sabarl islanders as Lévi-Strauss imagined it to be, *other than to itself*: again, neither good to think, nor good to feel with—much less to feel *for*.

But to the extent that this new information performs an expansion of the commons to include remote entities and environments—for example, extraterrestrial fields of possible relations, or for that matter a scale of world so tiny that only technologies of trance or things like modern instruments of observation can access it—new questions emerge which at their most radical seek accountability and remediation for a world of diminished meaning, but also, of fewer *ways of feeling.*

Listening to Goodwill Moon

Samples of moon rock first began touring the world at the conclusion of the Apollo program, in the mid-1970s. As "goodwill rocks," they were artifacts, in effect, of US diplomatic agendas. Port Moresby, via the Australian National Museum, was on the itinerary for one such rock (NASA has lost track of many of the others, as have the recipients, and is currently trying to map their locations). But the moon rock's social life in diplomacy had begun before the point of gifting it across the globe to heads of state and museum directors—it began on the moon. Prior to the final Apollo 17 moonwalk, astronaut Eugene Cernan, the last person to walk on the moon, joined his colleague Harrison Schmitt in requesting permission to return to earth with a "very significant rock" from the valley of Taurus-Littrow. Notice how Cernan's argument to mission control builds to the point of conveying "the feelings of the Apollo Program":

> The rock is composed of many fragments, of many sizes, and many shapes, probably from all parts of the Moon, perhaps billions of years old. But fragments of all sizes and shapes—and even colors—that have grown together to become a cohesive rock, *outlasting the nature of space*, sort of living together in a very coherent, very peaceful manner. When we return this rock or some of the others like it to Houston, we'd like to share a piece of this rock with many of the countries throughout the world. *We hope that this will be a symbol of what our feelings are, what the feelings of the Apollo Program are*, and a symbol of mankind: that we can live in peace and harmony in the future.[20]

To state the obvious, this rock has a lot packed into it. For one thing, Gene Cernan has notably anticipated Latour's call for scientists and social scientists to take up a

Goodwill moon rocks were a series of diplomatic gifts collected by Apollo 17 and distributed by Nixon administration.

diplomatic role in making peace with the cosmos, *in its terms*.[21] Then again, the moment Cernan acknowledges the significant craftiness of the extraterrestrial rock, he liberates its poetic capacity for cosmic bricolage to model a properly cosmos-warming cosmopolitics. But his action also implicitly argues against military designs on the cosmos, which the scientific arm of the space program and as well the international effort to shape guidelines for peaceful uses of outer space were and are dedicated to implementing. To pick up a point I am grateful to Alberto Corsín-Jiménez for calling to my attention from art historian Svetlana Alpers on seventeenth-century painters who were aware of social conflict surrounding them but instead of painting about conflict "painted out of conflict," this rock instantiated for Cernan the praxis of human-space contact crafted as event-time out of cosmic time. And here Corsín-Jiménez moves to the point in commenting on Cernan's gesture:

> The painterly pacific, in sum, is an account of how forms of pacification often require handling the materiality of strife: the pacific is the moment of warmth that extends and elates across pigmentpainter (nature-culture).[22]

In short, as a diplomatic engagement, this gesture portends a cosmopolitical double-take. In one direction, the rock's displacement serves the cosmic diplomacy that Cernan envisions, namely, the distribution of a sublimated nature-culture denizenship.
Yet removing the rock from its altogether natural context recalls colonial collecting practices driven by presumptive rights of extraction: the gesture is vulnerable to being pressed into service of interests that include mining the moon for minerals, for example, and more generally to fusing the warp speed sovereignty of the space race with global capitalism.[23]

Here is the Goodwill Rock as it actually traveled across the globe:

One can only wonder what in this display persuaded Soter to report that the moon was "only a rock." Whatever we might speculate, the evidence of matter out of place, and what Viveiros de Castro terms "time out of joint," conjoin to unsettle cosmic diplomacy—to say the least.[24]

At the moment of its conceptualization, in situ, as a Goodwill Rock and testimony to human-moon "being there," the moon rock opens to the structural irony of a future in appropriation that requires its destruction, and exposes its vulnerability as a goodwill onto-dispositif.

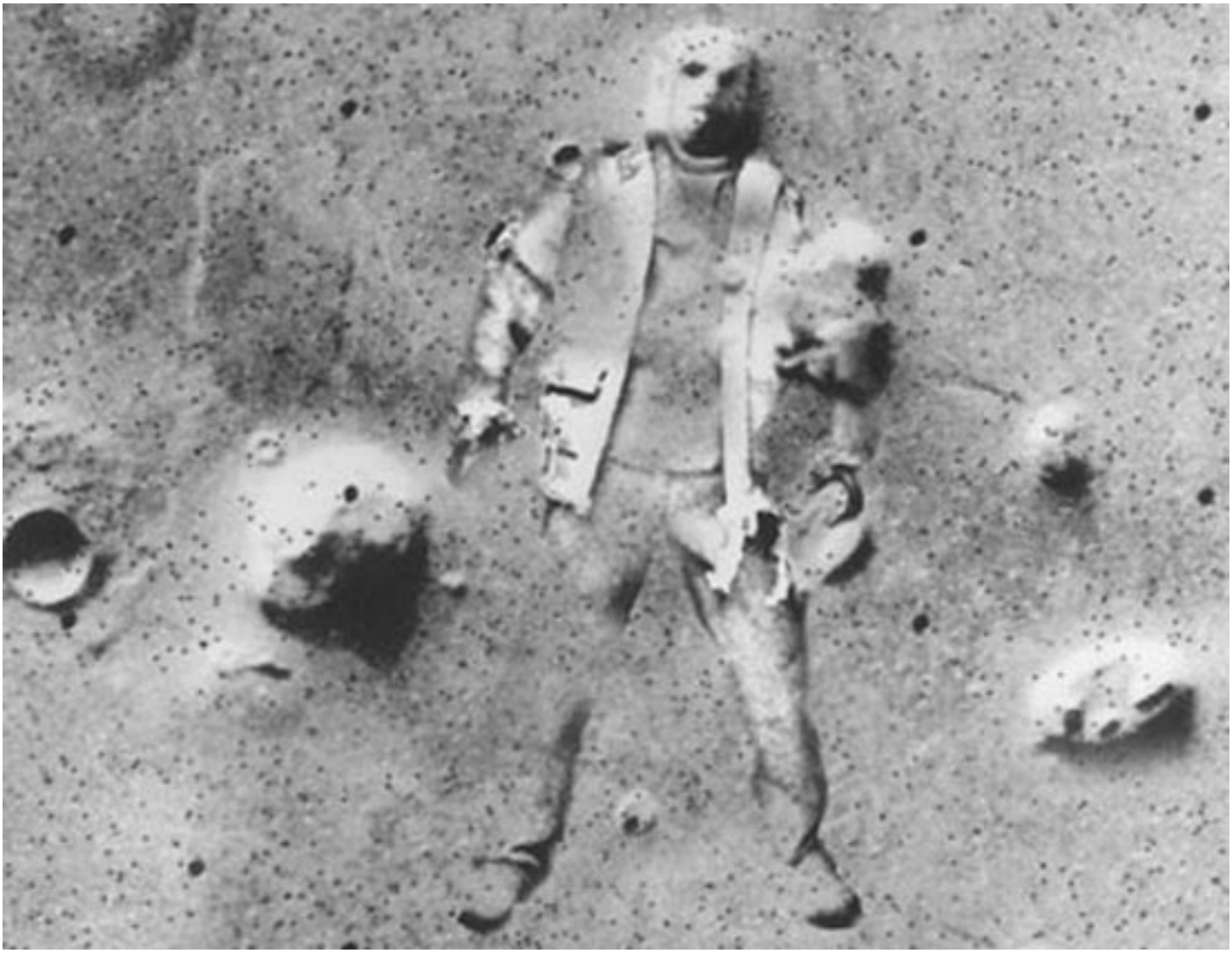
Venus and the Goodwill Moon abstract questions of cause and effect for attributing science a purity of detachment from sociopolitical violence—the first as an extension of dominant-culture values, the second as a nation-making gesture of altruism—whereas Sabarl Moon returns attention to the affective entailments of violent acts which concern not so much the technological apparatuses of violence (shattering the moon with a stick or shattering a reputation with words) as consequences for humanity of destroying the divide between temporal orders: of allowing event-time to become naturalized as if it were an eternal world order, and inaccessible to diplomacy. This is the promise and the threat of global mediascapes. This is what Starling's *Black Drop* exposes by demonstrating that, celluloid and personal or digitalized and programmatic, "pure data" is insufficient to the production of cosmos as commons. This is what the Karrabing project contains, against the social and cultural forces of dissolution.

Seen here is the Goodwill moon rock specimen donated to the State of Illinois along with the state flag, which accompanied the mission. Photo: Illinois State Museum/NASA.

Warming to Cosmic Diplomacy

> To put it crudely, human and nonhuman actors appeared first of all as trouble makers.
> —Bruno Latour[25]

Eugene Cernan's own vision of the moon in its capacity of partible circulation was an act of deterritorializing nature, but also cultures of expert knowledge; it opened to dialogue with local knowledge cultures *expert and otherwise*. With this, we are back with the Amazonian shaman, who would I'm sure recognize this cosmopolitical alliance and its capacity to make feeling things travel for activating public spheres of debate, policy-making, and resistance—another order of business, of course, but one attuned to the sensibility for diplomacy that cultured nature equipped for finding a commons in the cosmos. And as Soter saw the issue in apparently coming face-to-face with an alternative to Sabarl Moon, troublemaking is not the enemy, so much as an invitation



Section of the Cydonia region, Mars, taken by the Viking 1 orbiter and released by NASA/JPL on July 25, 1976 known for its "face on mars" features. The meme here completes the face with a body.

to worlding otherwise than we have been, in the service of a warmed-up *cosmo* politics.

X

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Marilyn Strathern, "Shifting Worlds" (paper presented at the workshop Emerging Worlds, convenor Danilyn Rutherford, University of California at Cruz, Department of Anthropology, 2013).

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Dilip Gaonkar

After the Fictions: Notes Towards a Phenomenology of the Multitude

People do not riot every day, but they have rioted often enough in the past, especially since the onset of modernity. People continue to riot with alarming regularity in the present, especially in the so-called Global South, as the saga of modernity continues to unfold now in its global phase. This repeated and continued reliance on rioting as a distinctive, but historically and culturally variable, mode of collective action (if not agency) merits greater attention than it has hitherto received. People riot over all sorts of things—the price of bread, oil, and onions; the publication of a book; the screening of a film; the drawing of a cartoon. They riot on account of police brutality, political corruption, and the desecration of the holy places. They riot when subjected to ethnic or racial slurs (real or imagined) and when continuously deprived of basic necessities like water, electricity, and sanitation. They riot for being ill-treated at health care facilities, for being denied entrance to once public, now privatized, spaces of pleasure and recreation, and generally for justice denied and petitions ignored. They riot after soccer games, cricket games, music concerts, and also before, during, and after elections. The list can be extended indefinitely.

Rioting today has multiple triggers. It is no longer provoked primarily by the sudden rise in food prices, especially the price of a loaf of bread (the standard four pound French loaf), as it did once in the well-documented cases of food riots that periodically convulsed Europe in the early modern period and became more frequent and intense in the eighteenth century.[1] Rioting today, along with modernity, has gone global and manifests itself in multiple registers. While the sudden and steep fluctuations in the price of basic staples like onions and cooking oils remain powerful triggers for rioting, especially in Asia and Africa, the scarcity and deprivation of food is no longer the primary trigger for rioting. The passions stirred by injuries and indignities—humiliation, betrayal, anger, and resentment—are no longer confined to hungry bodies. Even during the eighteenth century food riots in England, as E.P. Thompson has shown convincingly, hunger alone was never a sufficient motive for rioting.[2] There was always hovering in the background a palpable feeling of disappointment and perplexity stemming from broken promises and unmet expectations that were once taken for granted. Rioting is rarely a tantrum; rather, it accompanies social rupture.

The early modern European food riots, while provoked in each case by very specific local causes and circumstances, were unmistakably shaped by larger forces transforming a quasi-traditional society based on a predominantly agrarian and partly mercantile political economy into a modern industrial society driven by the logic of capitalist accumulation. Similarly, the period preceding the Second World War had its own share of protesting crowds, mobs, revolts and riots linked with a wide range of political movements—socialist, anarchist, fascist, and anti-colonial. However one elects to periodically mark and divide the historical continuum, one

rarely escapes the crowd phenomenon from about the beginning of the seventeenth century. Each period, including the ancient and the medieval times, hosted, nursed, and disciplined its misbehaving crowds and the disorder they wrought. And each instance of misbehaving (judged as such from the normative optic of order, the gift of political community) was invariably motivated by local provocations, but those provocations were, in turn, shaped and set in motion by the larger formations—national, regional, and transnational—themselves under duress.

Riots today, while extraordinarily variable in terms of their local color and physiognomy, are also shaped by larger forces. Those forces may be characterized, albeit less confidently on account of one's interpretive proximity, by invoking phrases such as globalization, financialization, the neoliberal state and its distinctive mode of governmentality, the so-called third-wave of democratic transitions, and the new media ecology ushered in by the new game-changing technologies of information, communication, and surveillance. How might one name the present, or the societies of the present, constituted by an uneven coming together of those forces? How might one account for the persistence of rioting and the rioting crowds of people within the evolving trajectory of capitalist time and terrain? In my judgment, our time and terrain is caught in an inextricable paradox: coveting crowds and fearing riots.

The careers of the crowd as a social formation and rioting as a mode of collective agency have a parallel but not identical history. The crowd is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for any mob/riot to materialize. While the attitude towards rioting has remained steadfastly hostile, crowds are seen as unavoidable. Rioting, often viewed as politically motivated (although it does sometimes erupt in religious and recreational contexts), is denounced as having no "redeeming social value." Crowds are a different matter. Modern capitalism, in its various phases from the mercantile to the financial, has made peace with crowds. Within the capitalist imaginary, crowds have progressed from being regarded as a necessary evil (the consumer crowd) to a source of wisdom (crowd sourcing). Moreover, the crowd ethos is considered an indispensable (and enhancing) part of the consuming experience. By contrast, the liberal democracy remains deeply fearful of crowds. From that perspective, there is something intrinsically "illiberal" about the crowd to the extent that it leads to the dissolution of the "individual." Within the liberal imaginary, the individual is the bedrock of social ontology, moral responsibility, and economic calculation and the crowd jeopardizes all those invaluable assets. Every crowd is a potential mob and susceptible to rioting. Hence, the contemporary conjuncture (or political economy) is caught in an irresolvable aporia: coveting crowds and fearing riots. The following will track the implications of one side of this aporia: the genealogy of the riot fear.

2.

> Nothing is more surprising to those, who consider human affairs with a philosophical eye, than to see the easiness with which the many are governed by the few; and to observe the implicit submission with which men resign their own sentiments and passions to those of their rulers. When we enquire by what means this wonder is brought about, we shall find, that Force is always on the side of the governed, the governors have nothing to support them but opinion. "Tis therefore, on opinion only that government is founded; and this maxim extends to the most despotic and most military governments, as well as to the most free and most popular."
>
> —David Hume, "Of First Principles of Government," *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects*, 1758 edition.[3]

It is ironic that for Hume "a philosophical eye" surveying the human affairs would disclose the surprising fact that politics is grounded in opinion and hence in rhetoric. This ironic musing is literalized when the same phenomenon is viewed from a "historical eye" such as that of Edmund S. Morgan's in his prizewinning book, *Inventing the People: The Rise of Popular Sovereignty in England and America* (1988). Starting with Hume's quote, while charting the shift from the doctrine of *the divine right of kings* to *the doctrine of popular sovereignty*, Morgan asserts that the shift under review simply replaces one political fiction with another. That shift can be measured neither as an epistemological gain from error to truth nor as a normative gain from unjust to just.

> Government requires make believe. Make believe that king is divine, make believe that he can do no wrong or make believe that the voice of the people is the voice of God. Make believe that the people *have* a voice or make believe that the representatives of the people *are* the people. Make believe that governors are the servants of the people. Make believe that all men are equal or make believe that they are not.[4]

What happens when fictions fail? Morgan himself concedes that fictions can and do fail:

> In order to be viable, in order to serve its purpose, whatever that purpose may be, a fiction must bear some resemblance to fact. If it strays too far from fact, the willing suspension of disbelief collapses. And conversely it may collapse, if facts stray too far from

May Day, Istambul, 2013. Photo: EFE/Tolga Bozoglu

> fiction that we want them to resemble. Because fictions are necessary, because we cannot live without them, we often take pains to prevent their collapse by moving the facts to fit the fiction, by making our world conform more closely to what we want it to be.[5]

Morgan is not intrigued, as I am, with what happens when fictions fail and what sort of politics ensues in the wake of their collapse. What intrigues Morgan is how fictions come into being, are sustained against contingencies of history and antagonisms of the social, and how we prevent them from failing and collapsing because they are "necessary, because we cannot live without them." Perhaps this is because he is writing about the golden age of political fictions, the age that gave birth to the greatest of all fictions, *the doctrine of popular sovereignty—the idea that there is such an entity called the people, more precisely the self-governing people*. Morgan goes on to write a stunning narrative about a web of conceptual and institutional strategies mobilized to sustain those master fictions. The book truly is a rhetorician's delight. These fictions are so outlandish, by his own account, that they are constantly pressing against credibility. And yet they are always magically rescued in the nick of time: by a conceptual innovation such as "King's Two Bodies" in the case of the doctrine of divine right of kings, and the enigmatic theory of "representation" in the case of the popular sovereignty. Sustaining these fictions requires an elaborate ideological apparatus, giving rise to a host of secondary elaborations (which is nothing short of rhetoric motion) to suture fissures and contradictions.

Moreover, the fiction thesis entails an interesting displacement of the notion of *people as force* by the notion of *people as fiction*. One of the implications is that fictions, once established, endure and gather a force of their own. Even if the British Parliamentarians might have invented the idea of people as a fiction to erase and supplant the fiction of the divine right of kings, the former once established becomes no less "real" than the latter in terms of its material effects. Now the parliamentarians have to contend with a fiction of their own creation, but somehow always in terms of its force as a fiction (and/or as a myth) rather than in terms of a putative force originating in or pertaining to the materiality of people as poor or as multitude or as governed—something disclosed by history and galvanized by a set of normative claims inherent in any political imaginary, especially the

modern democratic ones.

Frontispiece of Thomas Hobbes's book Leviathan reveals the sovereign constituted by his subjects.

3.

While the idea of "people as fiction" is appealing and is made to carry considerable hermeneutic burden (as with Hume, Morgan, and many others), the corporeality of the people, the very phenomenon, is repeatedly deferred from theoretical attention and analysis. It is not as if the phenomenon is intrinsically elusive. People are everywhere in various configurations and agential capacities as groups, assemblies, gatherings, crowds, mobs, and multitude. This raises the question: Why is there so much resistance to recognizing the people as corporeal in their multiplicity rather than as fictive or imagined in their unity in political theorizing?

To be sure, the gatherings of the people and their varied modes of being and doing (in terms of forms, functions, temporality, and telos) have been the subject of rigorous and extensive scholarly inquiry. This is especially true of the crowd phenomenon, the ubiquitous twin of modernity, ever since La Bon hyperbolically declared in 1895 that we had entered "the Era of Crowds." Ironically, this was only a few decades after the so-called "springtime of the people." The power of the crowds, according Le Bon, is "the last surviving sovereign force of modern times." He continues: "While all our ancient beliefs are tottering and disappearing, while the old pillars of society are giving way one by one, the power of the crowd is the only force that nothing menaces, and of which the prestige is continually on the increase.[6]

Le Bon was not the only one who was preoccupied with the crowd phenomenon in his time. He was actually a latecomer, someone who drew on the scholarly works of his predecessors without properly acknowledging his debt. He borrowed from thinkers such as Scipio Sighele and Gabriel Tarde whose interest in crowds stemmed from being criminologists.[7] However, Le Bon was a consummate publicist who knew how to package the contemporary fascination with crowds and mass politics (with memories the Paris Commune, the spectacular rise of Georges Boulanger and the Dreyfus Affair still agitating the French mind) to promote his brand conservative ideology.

The fascination with crowds, which endures to this day, was further accentuated and conflated in the early twentieth century by the growing concern and discourse on the coming of mass society. The concepts and theories about mass man, mass psychology, and mass culture were to become intertwined with ideas about "the man in the crowd," crowd psychology, and crowd behavior. Ortega y Gasset's bleak assessment of the masses in *The Revolt of the Masses* (1929–30) bears an uncanny resemblance to Le Bon's anxious reckoning of the crowd:

> There is one fact which, whether for good or ill, is of utmost importance in the public life of Europe at its present moment. The fact is the accession of the masses to complete social power. As the masses, by definition, neither should nor can direct their own personal existence, and still less rule society in general, this fact means that actually Europe is suffering from the greatest general crisis that can afflict peoples, nations and civilization.[8]

For Gasset, the mass-man could be anyone: the bourgeois, the Fascist, the Syndicalist (" *a type of man who did not care to give reasons, even to be right*, but who was simply resolved to impose his opinions"[9]), the expert (the learned ignoramus), and preeminently the consumer (the smug pleasure seeker who craves for "the products of civilization" without the slightest understanding of civilizing principles and processes). The masses are bereft of measures, standards, or norms; and yet they "intervene in everything and ... always intervene violently."[10]

As with Le Bon on the crowd, Gasset was not a pioneer in writing about the masses. The various facets of mass society, especially life in the metropolis simultaneously anonymous and electric, had already caught the attention of Georg Simmel, Karl Manheim, Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer, and many others. But their voices were more scholarly and less frantic. They wrote about stranger sociality, flâneur/flânerie, commodity fetish, mass culture, new media (especially architecture and cinema) with fascination and in vivid detail, but rarely dismissively. Gasset, like Le Bon, was an alarmist and spoke loudly to command attention.

For Le Bon and Gasset, each conservative (often reactionary, insufferably elitist, and eurocentric) in their own distinctive ways, this was the hour of the irrational. They were neither the first nor would they be the last to raise such an alarming clamor about the barbarous horde from within and without poised to destroy Western civilization. The agitated voices that followed them kept raising the stakes, sometimes prompted by the turn of world events: deepening economic crisis; intensification of class conflict; the authoritarian turn, especially the rise of Fascism; and the challenge of anti-colonial movements. The European hegemony did, indeed, seem imperiled. All of these unfolding events had one thing in common: they brought the people into the streets and squares all over the world. During the interwar years, the gatherings of crowds, mass agitation, the general strike, and the politics of direction action (well before its nonviolent variant was fashioned by Gandhi) became frequent and inescapable.

A crowd of Taft supporters gather at Allis-Chalmers works, Wisconsin, to hear the candidate's speech, September 24, 1908. 5x7 glass negative. G.G. Bain Collection.

4.

Nevertheless, the concept of the people in political theory, especially in liberal democratic theory, remained largely untouched (as it does today) by all those manifestations of the people in crowd formations. Crowds are a sociological phenomenon and political theory, fiercely normative, has little to do with them. This exclusion stems from two sets of motivations: ideological and conceptual.

First, among the elites, there is a deep and abiding anxiety regarding the capacity for self-governance by the popular classes—deemed lazy, fickle, covetous, lacking in political judgment, and not easily amenable to rational persuasion. It begins with Plato's image of the demos as the great beast which the *rhetor* (oratorically gifted politician) mistakenly believes he can mobilize and manage to realize his ends (*Republic*, VI, 493). According to Plato, irrespective of whether the ends sought by the rhetor are those of personal aggrandizement or of common good (often confused in the mind of someone like Alcibiades), he is doomed to fail because, in the long run, the direction of influence is reversed. The manipulator becomes the manipulated; the seducer is seduced; and anarchy is let loose. Plato, if possible, would exclude the demos as a collective political agent altogether. However, as Aristotle realized, even in a mixed constitutional polity the agency of the popular classes has to be acknowledged because they are the primary source of political legitimacy, if not the sole source of sovereignty. With the near universal acceptance of the doctrine of popular sovereignty in the aftermath of the great revolution of the late eighteenth century, one would have thought the demos-anxiety would lessen and subside among elites. Instead, the anxiety intensified as to what the demos might want now that it had legitimate access to power and how the demos might proceed to obtain what it wanted. A series of ideological and institutional strategies are devised to discipline and neutralize the demos in the newly formed republics. This is strikingly obvious in Madison's defense bicameralism and the "necessity of a well-constructed senate" (then "appointed not immediately by the people") in *The Federalist* 63:

> (I)t is clear that the principle of representation was neither unknown to the ancients, nor wholly overlooked in their political constitutions. The true distinction between these and the American governments lies *in the total exclusion of the people in their collective capacity* from any share in the *latter*, and not in the *total exclusion of the representatives of the people*, from the administration of the *former*.[11]

For Madison, the superiority of the American mode of representation is grounded in that total exclusion because it obviates the danger of the so-called legislative despotism, or in Jefferson's phrase "elective despotism." What is in need of regulation is the crowd like behavior of the people or their representatives assembled in a single house susceptible to being "stimulated by some irregular passion, or some illicit advantage, or misled by artful misrepresentations of interested men, may call for measures which they themselves will afterwards be most ready to lament and condemn."[12] The institution of senate, not answerable to people directly (at that time), would serve as an "anchor against popular fluctuations" and "blend stability with liberty."

Thus, political theory from Plato to Madison (with Machiavelli and Spinoza being the key exceptions) appears to be deeply distrustful of the crowd. This is especially the case with liberal democratic theory where

the crowd is viewed as intrinsically "illiberal"—to the extent that it allegedly dissolves the "individual." Hence, the collective agency of the people in whatever form has to be emasculated: the crowd has to be broken up and dissolved. The actual taming of the crowd could be left to the police and the behavioral scientists and the marketing of the crowd to businessmen, publicists, and the big data analysts. Since theory cannot carry out such operation in the real world, it has to be accomplished conceptually. In theory the crowd can be relegated to the margins and rendered conceptually inconsequential. This relegation is actually accomplished by privileging two other concepts—one with ancient lineage, citizenship; the other of modern vintage, the public. In theory, the energetics of the crowd, its palpable material force, is diminished and depleted by bolstering the normative force of these two relatively abstract concepts: the citizen and the public.

A crowd marches towards Cinelandia during a protest in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 2013.

5.

The deferral of the crowd is already implicit in the classical distinction between *populous* and *multitude* which goes back to the ancients, especially to Cicero, a distinction that has been given a new reading recently by Hardt and Negri, Paolo Virno, and others associated with the Autonomia movement—all of whom draw their inspiration from Spinoza's political writings.[13] The people and the multitude refer to two different forms of human collectivities or gatherings of individuals as they become manifest in the political realm. The former signifies the mode of becoming and being one and the latter dwells on becoming one while remaining a plurality. One might think of them as two different modes of being political; the mode of being one and the mode of being many.

These two modes and their competing claims to agency, authority, and legitimacy are closely associated with the authority and legacy of Hobbes and Spinoza respectively. In each of their political writings, what is distinctive about the people and the multitude turns on their differential relationship with a third term, namely the state or whatever else constitutes and represents the unity of a given political community and its sovereign authority. The autonomists, such as Virno, portray Hobbes as an implacable opponent of the multitude. According to that reading, Hobbes posits a strict either/or binary: "if there are people, there is no multitude; if there is a multitude, there are no people."[14] This is an overstatement. As Malcolm Bull points out convincingly, people and multitude continue to exist side by side, although in different juridical/normative orders.[15] For Hobbes, in order for a multitude to become a people (the passage to peoplehood) it has to be incorporated into a political community. Cicero, not Hobbes, was the first to advance such a claim: "a people is not any collection of human beings, but an assemblage of people in large numbers associated in an agreement with respect to justice and a partnership for the common good" (*The Republic*, I.39).[16] Hobbes simply gives a more robust, albeit fictional, reading of what is entailed in becoming "associated in an agreement." He has much to say about the contractual mode of incorporation: how in the state of nature ("poor, solitary, nasty, brutish, and short") with one's natural rights rendered null and void by being continually exposed to the "violent death" through the predation of others, the individuals (or parts of a multitude) are made to accede to social contract and found a civil society; and, thereby, yield some their rights to the sovereign body that would govern them unconditionally. Unlike Aristotle's citizen body, which both "rules and is ruled" in turn (*Politics*, III, 1277), the relationship between the multitude and the people is fixed and not reversible. The multitude cannot resist, let alone rule, because any attempt to do so would be an act against the state and against the people—the state and people being one and the same thing. Since power of the sovereign body as the protector stems from the sovereign powers originally surrendered by the people, the reasons and acts of the state are in fact the reasons and acts of the people. This paradox is acutely illustrated in passage from De Civa, cited by Bull:

> In every commonwealth the *People* Reigns; for even *Monarchies* the *People* exercises power, for the *people* wills through the will of *one man.* But citizens, i.e. the subjects are a *multitude.* In a *Democracy* and in an *Aristocracy* the citizens are a *multitude*, but the *council* is the people; in a *Monarchy* the subjects are a *multitude,* and (paradoxically) the King is the *people*.[17]

By contrast, Spinoza's philosophical anthropology, given his Aristotelian stress on human sociality and rationality, bypasses the fabled passage through contract (as form and as moment) in its account of the civil state that

resolutely refuses the fiction of "peoplehood" in the Hobbesian sense. For Spinoza, a multitude is perfectly capable of acting in unison to found and sustain a commonwealth without renouncing its plurality, its mode of being many. A multitude's mode of being one and many simultaneously, especially in its relationship to the state (or the sovereign body), is made legible in terms of the interplay between three concepts operating in seemingly different registers: right (juridical), power (physical), and fear (affective). Each individual, like any other singular entity (human as well as non-human), possesses the natural right to exist and to act in a manner appropriate to its mode of being. However, for Spinoza, right is strictly coextensive with power in the order of nature. One can exercise an unrestricted right only insofar as one has the requisite power to do so. Since a single individual's right and power are negligible, it is only natural that human beings fear solitude: "But since fear of solitude exists in all men, because no one in solitude is strong enough to defend himself, and procure the necessaries of life, it follows that men naturally aspire to the civil state; nor can it happen that men should ever utterly dissolve it".[18] Thus, a multitude's entry into the civil state has little to do with the voluntary acts of autonomous individuals coming together. It happens naturally because "men must necessarily come to an agreement to live together as securely and as well as possible if they are to enjoy as a whole the rights which naturally belong to them as individuals and their life should be no more conditioned by force and desire of individuals, but by the power and will of the whole body."[19] The sovereign body constituted on the basis of such a compact, if it were to succeed, must set aside the pull of desire that draws each man in a different direction, and instead, be "guided in everything by reason" and under the guidance of reason act as if it were of "one mind."

A body so constituted (under the sovereignty of one, few, or many) is a repository of wide range of rights and powers before which the individual must yield in fear and reverence but also with hope. It has, among other things, the sole right of laying down laws, and interpreting them in case of disputed meanings; of applying and enforcing the laws; and, compelling men to obey laws by the threat of punishment, including "universally feared punishment of death."[20] This might sound a bit like the contract with the Hobbesian Leviathan, but there is one crucial difference. The rights and powers of the sovereign body, just as in the case of the individual, are coextensive. Its right to command and to elicit obedience depends in the last instance on its power (real or perceived) to impose its will: "sovereigns only possess this right of imposing their will, so long as they have the full power to enforce it: if such power be lost their right to command is lost also, or lapses to those who have assumed it and can keep it."[21]

Two additional features of power bind the sovereign and the subject (or a multitude) in a complex matrix of fear. First, the subject's power is not fully transferable. It cannot be detached as if were a movable property and handed over to devise an omnipotent entity devoid of fear. According to Spinoza: "No one can ever so utterly transfer to another his power and, consequently, his rights, as to cease to be a man; nor can there ever be a power so sovereign that it can carry out every possible wish." [22] Thus, the sovereign can never be fully secure from the fear of his subjects who have transferred him their rights and power, but not irrevocably.

Second, power grows numerically. An individual's power increases when combined with that of another. So it is only natural that individuals would form groups to augment their power to live securely and to live well; and thus, to enjoy their rights collectively. The greater the number, the greater is the power of the multitude. Precisely for that reason, the sovereign body standing for "the power and the will of all (or of a multitude in its mode of being one)" is formidable and inspires awe, fear, and reverence among its subjects. However, its power is not absolute and indivisible as imagined and posited in the juridical register. It may and is often challenged and resisted in the physical register by a multitude in its mode of being many. Spinoza insists that a multitude's mode of being many is never evacuated and rendered void by its mode of being one.

In fact, the sovereign and the multitude (in its default mode as many) are bound together in a cycle of reciprocal fear which can never be permanently arrested or fully erased. While an individual's fear of the sovereign is palpable and continuous because any infraction of the law could elicit punishment, the sovereign's fear of a multitude is fitful and diffuse. This asymmetrical cycle of fear is driven by motivations grounded in Spinoza's rather starkly realist view of human nature. According to Spinoza, what makes an individual abide by his promises is not an innate sense of moral obligation but a calculus of fear and hope: "Everyone has by nature a right to act deceitfully, to break his compacts, unless he be restrained by the hope of some greater good, or the fear of some greater evil."[23] The same calculus motivates and governs a multitude as to whether it adheres to or abandons a compact. For Spinoza: "This law is so deeply implanted in the human mind that it ought to be counted among the eternal truths and axioms."[24]

Spinoza has much consul to offer on how to manage such a symmetrical dynamics of fear. Much of what he says, he claims is quite obvious to everyone, something gleaned from experience. According to Spinoza, a commonwealth "founded and guided by reason" is bound to prosper by avoiding arbitrary actions and by promoting the common good; and thus, striving to attain the ends of the civil state which is "nothing but peace and security of life."[25] Such a commonwealth would command the allegiance of her subjects, both of body and of mind, and instill fear and reverence. By contrast, a commonwealth is bound to ruination where the sovereign authorities are prone to

arbitrary actions—who "proceed to slay and rob subjects, ravish maidens;" who compromise the majesty the office by "running with harlots drunk or naked about the streets;" who engage in "open violation or contempt of laws passed by themselves;" and who, more than anything else, prevail upon their subject to act unnaturally—to embrace what they hate and shun, what they admire, that is, the things they regard with honor and that excite ridicule and disgust. In such a commonwealth, fear turns into indignation, reverence into contempt, and "the civil state into a state of enmity."[26] The necessary principle for erecting a durable commonwealth is quite simple: "to frame our institutions so that everyman, whatever his disposition, may prefer public right to private advantage." And yet, while "necessity is often the mother of invention," notes Spinoza ruefully, "she has never yet succeeded in framing a dominion that was less in danger from its own citizens than from open enemies, or whose rulers did not fear the latter less than the former."[27]

Such is the three-fold play of right, power, and fear constitutive of a politics as imagined from the standpoint of the masses (or of multitude). In his seminal essay on Spinoza, Balibar has convincingly argued that Spinoza views and analyzes politics, especially in making his case for democracy, from the stand point of the masses—a standpoint saturated with fear. **28**

Pro-democracy protesters exhibit DIY protective gear on the first day of the mass civil disobedience campaign Occupy Central, Hong Kong, 2014. Photo: Epa/Alex Hofford

6.

This threefold play of right, power, and fear is triggered by the multitude's default mode of being many rather than of being one. It could be argued, as Malcolm Bull does, that Spinoza's multitude in its mode of being one is not significantly different than Hobbes's people in its sovereign embodiment in the juridical order, standing apart and above the multitude that constitute it.[28] Moreover, Spinoza is no more sanguine than Hobbes about the multitude's susceptibility to unruly passions and to act savagely and self-destructively. Time and again, he registers his fears about the turbulent temper and fickle behavior of the multitude. The key difference between the two, as indicated before, pertains to a multitude's mode of being many. For Hobbes, a multitude as plurality ceases to exist except as subjects when transfigured into a sovereign people, united and indivisible. For Spinoza, a multitude as plurality never ceases to exist even when united and acting as one mind under the guidance of reason. Without romanticizing the multitude, Spinoza reckons with a multitude's potential to act rationally, especially under democratic governance. As with Aristotle, Spinoza believes that a larger deliberative body is less prone to irrationality or to act covetously in its own narrow interests. The greater the number (of many), unlike a small faction (of few), it is less likely that everyone's untrammeled passions and ill-conceived interests would converge to produce policies and actions detrimental to the commonwealth. While one's individual passions are countermanded by the passions of another, one's capacity to reason is augmented by that of another in the deliberative process. A multitude, whether while curbing and managing its wayward passions or while augmenting its prudence and wisdom, draws its strength from its plurality rather than its unity. A multitude's residual power and dynamism (bio-power, as it were) lies with its mode of being many rather than of being one.

Thus, it is not surprising that a wide array of contemporary political thinkers, drawing their inspiration from Spinoza (and Machiavelli) among others, have been drawn to theorizing a multitude's mode of being many and the varied corporeal manifestations of the many—especially the crowd—rather than the traditional preoccupation with the formation of the sovereign state, its myth and mystery. The internal contestation and self-division built into the mode of being many is the necessary condition for challenging and deterring the sovereign body from turning politics into administration (Weber), into governmentality (Foucault), or into police (Rancière). Thus, the multitude as a plurality inaugurates an imaginary and a practice of politics as agonistic rather than consensual, as nomadic and open rather than tethered and contained (as under a constitutional regime). What fascinates many political thinkers today—Etienne Balibar, Partha Chatterjee, Ranjit Guha, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Ernesto Laclau, Warren Montag, Jacques Rancière, James Scott, Paolo Virno, and many others is the multitude's drift towards a politics given to exploring the possible—the good, the bad, and the ugly—rather than mastering the habitual and the probable.[29]

My thinking in this essay is deeply indebted to this tradition of reflection, fraught with gaps and contradictions, often not given to privileging the concept of multitude (or drawing a sharp distinction between

Hobbes's people and Spinoza's multitude). What I want to do in the rest of the essay is to dwell on some hesitations (rather than refusals) and silence in this body of reflection, especially regarding the crowd as the paradigmatic manifestation of the multitude in our time marked by the ever deepening global disorder.

A protestor throws back a smoke bomb in a clash with police in Ferguson. Photo: Reuters

7.

The master fiction of democratic politics since the onset of modernity posits an abstract entity called the people, or more precisely a self-governing people. But this fiction, riddled with mounting anomalies, is withering. It has strayed too far from reality. We no longer live in the golden age of fictions as recounted in Morgan's book. Perhaps, we are between fictions with no alternative master fiction ready to supplant the "self-governing people" in sight. In the interregnum, we live among failing states, collapsing societies, and insurgent citizenry. Such is the case, at least, in large parts of the Global South. One might ask whether it is viable to continue to think of politics in our time, especially the triumphant democratic politics of our time, as something that is or can be sustained by recourse to fictions, such as of one people united, indivisible, and embodied in a sovereign state. If one suspends, if not abandons, such fictions, the palpable reality of the multitude in its plurality, in its mode of being many, has to be mapped and theorized: Where is a multitude? Who constitute a multitude? How does a multitude manifest itself? There is no comprehensive set of answers for these pressing questions. However, one could venture some preliminary observations.

An adequate answer to these questions, in my judgment, would require the formulation of what one might call a phenomenology of the multitude. Such a phenomenology, to be worthy of that designation, should strive to disclose a multitude's historically variable mode of being political. From its earliest appearance in Western traditions—as *demos* among the Greeks and as *plebs* among the Romans—the multitude as an agential category and as a form of subjectivity signals the primacy of the political in its engagement with the world. In our times, not abruptly but following an enduring historical trajectory, the multitude's mode of being political is imagined primarily

within a democratic idiom. Nowhere is this more evident than in the unshakable link forged since the onset of modernity between the idea of democracy and the doctrine of popular sovereignty within the framework of the nation-state.

This departure from the class inflected ancient view multitude as demos, an entity barely conscious of its sovereignty, to an idea of a *national people*, sovereign and indivisible, is a tropological mutation/swerve put in play by Herder among others, which powerfully combines cultural identity, nationalist longings, and democratic aspirations. The idea of a self-governing national people, which steadily replaced the liberties of the ancients (that privileged political equality and collective participatory agency) with those of the moderns (à la Benjamin Constant)—once again through a series tropological maneuvers by liberal and republican ideologues alike, such as the equivalence between bourgeois/citizen/human being or the subsumption of the "individual will" under the "general will"—continues to haunt as well as galvanize modern democratic imaginaries fueled by nationalist movements. It is only now, under the pressures of globalization with the idea of the national form fraying at the edges, that the idea of the multitude—the people without history—is returning to its ancient roots as demos and plebs.

A phenomenology of the multitude would have to begin where they live: the slums, and where they congregate: the street. In Mike Davis's catchy phrase, we live on a planet of slums.[30] This is an indispensable starting point. The slum is a sort of interior and also a horizon; the street is the public space of mutual display. The street and the slum have multiple functions: they serve as a workshop (production), a market (exchange), theatre (style) and more than anything else as a school. In the autobiographical writings of the Black Panthers in the United States and of the Dalit Panthers in India, the street and the ghetto/slum is often characterized as the primary site of pedagogy for the oppressed.

The most striking political phenomenon in our time is the Return of the Crowds in the streets and squares everywhere. The crowds in the street often live in slums and work in the informal economy, thus free from the supervisory gaze and the punitive arm of the state. From Lagos to Peshawar, from Manila to Mexico City, pretty much everywhere in the Global South, the specter that haunts the Western-style liberal democracy is no longer guerillas in hills but crowds in streets and squares.

Reference to the street is critical. It does not merely refer to the fact that people (qua multitude) pass through the street during a demonstration, which they certainly do, but to something more. Today, people are in streets as a permanent condition. It is where many of them live, if not in the nearby slum. The street is where people come together; where they look at each other; where the *mutual display* takes place; and, where common horizons, however temporary, are established. According to Marx, only the industrial labor, unlike the fragmented peasantry, is capable of a revolutionary consciousness and hence of revolutionary action (necessarily collective) because they work and live together in a common and visible space that alerts them to their mutual plight, their state of being exploited and oppressed. Today, the street has replaced the factory. The street is theater—the mirror in which people recognize themselves as poor and oppressed and yet strong and indispensable.

Streets and slums mutually reinforce each other. Slums are proliferating across the globe at an extraordinarily rapid rate. Today more than two billion people live in slums or slum-like conditions and that number is expected to double by 2030. Life in the slums as described and analyzed both in scholarly studies and in popular media is one of the most dynamic points of intersection of the good, the bad, and the ugly. The material conditions of life, especially sanitary conditions that severely compromise public health, are palpably ugly. The bad is pervasive in slums: crime and corruption, violence and intimidation, sheer poverty, inequality and injustice point to the general abuse of human beings by other members of the same species. On other hand, there is also much that is good in slums: resilience in the face of adversity, community spirit, creative and economic use of scarce resources etc. Without celebrating the slums, there is much to learn from slums, especially the practices of politics in camped spaces, both literally and figuratively.[31]

The discussion about strategies for strengthening democratic forces in the Global South is usually conducted in terms of the complexity of civil society, the vibrancy of the public sphere, and the recognition of human rights. One cannot positively correlate these liberal democratic themes and aspirations with the emergence and continuing presence of people in streets. Many components of civil society, especially the NGOs of every ilk, and of political society, such as political parties and trade unions, are actively engaged in trying to shape the direction and to harness the energies of people in street. But they don't control them. The sheer and obdurate presence of people in the street exceeds any specific mobilization in their name by any given state institution, political party, or NGO. This is the key point. There are many instances of mobilization by specific groups for specific purposes, many of them quite successful, from electoral politics to NGO work.

At one level it seems like "people in the street" is a reserve pool from which the state, political parties, trade unions, NGOs, crusading religions, or anyone in need of bodies can borrow to mount their demonstration and display their populist power. This is evident from what has been happening recently in Turkey and Egypt. Both sides, the anti-government protesters and the pro-government supporters, have been able to mobilize huge

demonstrations. The anti-government rallies in Gezi Park and Taksim Square in Istanbul and Rabaa al-Adawiya Square in Cairo were gamely matched by the pro-government forces in adjacent venues. Most of the bodies for these rallies came from streets. This gives the impression that people, under duress and in discontent, are being manipulated. Perhaps they are but they are not unaware of it. What we have here is the phenomenon of the *fungability* of people. People are being borrowed for a variety of purposes, both in the economic and political realm. People also know that they are being borrowed and they are lending their bodies. Fungability refers to the fact that people can and are continually inducted into various programs and projects generated both by the governmentality of the state and by the politics of mobilization. People are the privileged object of governmental hailing, but the structure of that subjectification is rather haphazard. It does not have enduring properties ascribed by Althusser to the dynamics of interpellation. It is often conducted en masse with a rhetoric so loud and tired, especially in its appellative mode, the message or inscription is bleached in white noise. Never before has political rhetoric been in such a state of fatigue. One has been hailed so many times, for so many different and contradictory causes and campaigns, sometimes with a reward of a meal and a glass of beer or a movie ticket or a festive but risky ride in an open truck to a rally. This is hardly what one might call effective interpellation. The practices of people in the collective political mode are full of irony, skepticism, feigned humility and enthusiasm. In marching, one is simply lending one's body and that body has been lent one too many times to bear the imprints of a legible ideology.

Today, people know who they are. Under the spell of the nationalist democratic imaginary one is prone to imagine people as sovereign/citizens, but people think of themselves primarily as the "governed" and "poor," especially in the Global South. If two out of eight billion inhabitants on earth think of themselves primarily as poor (eking out a meager existence on earnings of a dollar or two a day) and engage the political in the language of poverty that fluctuates between patience and violence, what is the ideological function of imagining and positioning the people through the mediating category of citizenship? The politics of the people, the politics of the governed (in Partha Chatterjee's phrase) cannot be understood exclusively in the idiom of citizenship, even though they do not disavow it. The slum-dwellers often invoke the idiom of citizenship to claim municipal rights, i.e., fair access to water, electricity, and basic public health services, but citizenship with its promise evacuated by corruption and neglect, is no longer the hallowed point of political arrival, but a portal through which they pass, time and again, strategically.

Although the idea of peoplehood serves as the ground in the founding performative phrases such as "we the people," it is soon made to yield to something more specific and legible such as citizenship. It is assumed that the telos of a people as a collective entity is to become rights bearing individual citizens. Once the juridical reality of the rights bearing citizen is reified and objectified, the grounding of the principle of peoplehood is seen as a mere trope, a founding fiction. What is forgotten is that the "people," if it is a mere trope, is no more a trope than the trope of citizenship its spawns. The priority of the people is displaced by the actuality of the citizen with yet another tropic maneuver, metalepsis. Hence, saying that the people are a trope is simply another version of the fiction thesis. It does not erase the fact that the multitudes keep mulling about in increasing numbers in streets, squares, and slums.

Moreover, the material reality of the people qua multitude cannot be scattered and settled into a matrix of multiple identities and roles offered by the associational life of civil society, nor into class solidarities, nor into the cultural identities of race, gender, ethnicity, or sexual preference. This confirms and discloses the fact that the category of people is a collective remainder, ever present and operative, something that exceeds all (real, imagined, and hailed) identities. People precede them both as a source and survive as the remainder as they pass through these identity forms.

The closing years of the last millennium and the opening years of the new millennium have witnessed the so-called people without history, or on the edges of history, storming the gates of history in the streets and squares everywhere: Tiananmen (Beijing, 1989), Azad (Tehran, 1979 and 2008), Tahrir (Cairo, 2011), Taksim (Istanbul, 2013), Maidan (Kiev, 2013) and elsewhere. In this twilight of political fictions these monumental showings of the people might be no more than mere surface eruptions of a gathering momentum of the micropolitics of crowds, mobs, and multitudes.

X

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