THE CHANCE OF A LIFE:
A NEW MATERIALIST COMPARATIVE STUDY
ON BIOPOIESIS

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Justin Butler

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Introduction: Limits and Method

“Language stops being representative in order to...move toward its extremities or its limits.”

—Deleuze and Guattari

This is a dissertation about limits. What one discovers at thresholds are the ways in which they reveal integrations, exchanges, decompositions, re-compositions. It is a dissertation about pain and ecstasy, about sickness and love, about violence and flesh, about bodies and death. It is also a dissertation about politics. Democracy, fascism, feminism, potentials, possibilities, impossibilities, changes. In order to realize this work, this dissertation will examine different genres from diverse perspectives, but with one primary interest always in mind: how is life understandable, what are the insights that it yields, when studied at its limits? Since the limits in question might easily be considered as presenting themselves as representations, and since representations themselves might be considered as inherently at a remove from any limit, we will address this concern at the onset. The position throughout that we will assume is in keeping with the epigraph quoted from Deleuze and Guattari (from Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature). It is by and through the virtue of striving toward a limit of any sort that we will drop the pretense of representation. To do so is both liberating and determining. It frees us from having to worry about facile notions of fidelity to an original; yet at the same time it binds us to the realities of what we will confront. We are no longer buffered by the zone of distancing
that representation affords. This work will not allow us such indulgence. The work of collapsing the zone is manifold, but necessary insofar as it helps us to think not only across genres, but also across disciplines. Thus, with interdisciplinarity in mind, the first zone we will collapse is the zone between the humanities and the sciences. If scientific language is not considered metaphorical, then why is humanistic language? Here we will accept the realities of scientific discourse in order to deploy the insights of science for literary and philosophical contemplation. As that which science is able to claim as objectivity, so we will affirm in our limit cases. In so doing, we will draw initially in our work from the hard biological science of genetics, not out of deference, but out of a recognition that scientific understanding can ground humanistic or post-humanistic understanding in ways quite similar to how Science once took its inspiration from the Humanities when it seized upon Reason in order to develop its methods. All of this we will do with an eye toward making a contribution to the emerging methodology of new materialism, which, as will be discussed in more detail below, seeks to incorporate realities of the sciences. Among our primary aims will be to challenge and disavow dualisms, chief among these, dialectics, not for their uselessness—certainly, one can admit them as a kind of conceptual tool—but, rather, they will be disavowed for how they present themselves to us as an ontology that subtends and governs epistemological dynamics within fields ranging from the scientific to the humanistic. Such methodological imposition we will contest and replace in order to think through a new materialism that owes its own methodological understanding primarily to structuralism, post-structuralism, and scientific method. Thus, as we engage genres that include film, novel, and poetry, we will do so with philosophy that shares in the new materialist spirit.
Our interest, as we go about combining these diverse, yet complementary modes of expression, is in articulating a kind of union that comprehends the realities of biology and poiesis. We call this union biopoiesis or biopoetics. Biopoetics as a term to encapsulate our inquiry doesn’t only announce a joining of science and humanities; it also very clearly evokes a resonance with another conceptual combination: biopolitics. With this resonance profoundly in mind, we will explore and articulate biopoiesis as a kind of foil to biopolitics. Where the latter is about the various strategies that political power has developed for the purpose of managing and controlling life, biopoetics recognizes the inherently absolute uncontrollability of life. This reckoning, in turn, as we shall see, has implications for a new sort of politics—a politics drawn out of a careful reading of life that affirms life, rather than one that seeks perpetually for strategies to control, and therefore deaden, it.

Let us then turn our attention to two key thinkers—one primarily a biochemist, the other predominantly a philosopher (at least as we’ll engage him here)—whose writings will in many respects foreground or frame the project that is this dissertation. In the discussion that immediately follows we will therefore put this twentieth-century scientist and this nineteenth-century philosopher into contact in order to establish a kind of purchase of the biological (biology as the science of understanding the material substrate of life) and the political (politics as the effect of contingent human biology in a contingent nonhuman environment), in a move toward a new materialist reckoning that
will, in this Introduction, lead us to biopoetics. These two figures are Jacques Monod\textsuperscript{1} and Karl Marx.

I. Jacques Monod, \textit{Chance and Necessity}

The twentieth-century French geneticist Jacques Monod wrote that the duty of scientists is “to apprehend their discipline within the larger framework of modern culture” (xiii)—a notion, we might readily observe, that stands in contrast to our current understanding of science, which seemingly seeks to overdetermine culture by means of its own rationales, calculations, or reasonings. For Monod, the point of science was to “enrich” the culture around it with “humanly significant ideas.” Monod was clear that one should go to all possible lengths in order to ensure that the ideas “suggested by science” (italics original) not be confused with “science itself.” This distinction was of importance for Monod due to the emphasis he placed on a real material reckoning with biology that, in his view, would inform culture. Since science was to enrich the world around it, its conclusions had better be true, had better be real, had better be grounded in the most careful understanding of the material under examination.

In \textit{Chance and Necessity}, an essay that emerges from the series of Robins Lectures he gave in 1969 at Pomona College in California, Jacques Monod asserts unequivocally that “it does not seem likely that the study of living beings will ever uncover general laws applicable outside the biosphere” (xi). This is an astounding claim, both in its responsibility and its swift clarity. Monod, in effect, is declaring that the study

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\textsuperscript{1} Monod shared the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine in 1965 with François Jacob and André Lwoff.
of biology likely will not yield timeless universals (above all, if we understand universals as pertaining to the universe). What Monod contends instead is that the “ultimate aim of the whole of science is...to clarify man’s relationship to the universe” (italics added). In so saying, he admits—or even affirms—that human scientific knowledge will “clarify” a human relationship to what may never be available to human scientific knowledge. In this way he is able conceptually to prioritize, to delimit; and so to this aim, biology is granted some special consideration on account of its role in understanding what a human is. For Monod, in 1970, it is the theory of genetic code that “constitutes the fundamental basis of biology” (xii).

Important to Monod’s argument is the distinction between “artificial” and “natural” objects (3). The distinction is of interest because of how the former is “projective,” while the latter is “objective.” For Monod, objective, natural objects such as rivers or rocks “have been molded by the free play of physical forces to which we cannot attribute any design, any ‘project’ or purpose” (3). This opening framing of his argument as such will function to underscore how biological objects emerge absent purpose, but are nonetheless deployable in its service. Life emerges by chance; and, in so doing, discovers necessity. Take, for example, the eye organ, about which Monod writes:

…how arbitrary and pointless it would be to deny that the natural organ, the eye, represents the materialization of a “purpose”—that of picking up images—while this is indisputably also the origin of the camera. It would be more absurd to deny it since, in the last analysis, the purpose which ‘explains’ the camera can only be the same as the one to which the eye owes its structure. (9)
It is important to note the use of quotations in this passage, making the passage thus suggest that how things are utilized allows for their having a purpose attributable or assignable to their functioning. But, Monod will be very careful in dealing with this subject matter. Nowhere in *Chance and Necessity* does he enlist for his argument the word “teleology”—a word which would indicate a final cause or what we might call a preordained outcome grounded ineluctably in its initial cause. Such a notion going back to the ancient Greeks of course has been understood as one in which purpose is attributable to all matter in the universe. Nowadays, English speakers in the United States quite commonly say that “everything happens for a reason.” Whether uttered by the ancients or by our own contemporaries, nothing could be further from Monod’s thinking about matter or about general materiality. Monod does, however, use the word “teleonomy” in order to signal apparent purposefulness of structure. In order to define life, Monod identifies, in addition to teleonomy, the qualities of “reproductive invariance” and “autonomous morphogenesis.” Reproductive invariance is an object’s ability “to reproduce and to transmit *ne varietur* the information corresponding to…(its)…own structure” (12). Autonomous morphogenesis refers to the quality of “virtually total ‘freedom’” that an object displays in relation to “outside agents or conditions” (11). These agents or conditions may be capable of “impeding” the object’s development, “but not of governing or guiding it, not of prescribing its organizational scheme to the living object.”

An biological object’s reproducibility is possible, for Monod, precisely insofar as it avails itself simultaneously of the aforementioned qualities that he identifies and that are key elements for defining what *life* is. The “essential teleonomic project,” he writes,
consists in “the transmission from generation to generation of the invariance content characteristic of the species” (14). This transmission of biological information—the ability to do so, realized—ensures “species’ survival and multiplication” (15). Teleonomy, autonomous morphogenesis, and reproductive invariance are thus “closely interconnected in all living beings”: “Genetic invariance expresses and reveals itself only through, and thanks to, the autonomous morphogenesis of the structure that constitutes the teleonomic apparatus” (16).

Monod arrives at his understanding of biological life by employing a (the) “scientific method” that is “objective” (21). By this he means that for any knowledge to be tenable, it cannot be arrived at by “interpreting data in terms of final causes” (21). In so saying, he makes clear his refutation of teleology on the ground that it itself is a kind of idealism that has no place in objective science. (“Objectivity,” writes Monod, “is consubstantial with science.”) However, it is objectivity, as understood by Monod, that obliges us “to recognize the teleonomic character of living organisms, to admit that in their structure and performance they act projectively—realize and pursue a purpose” (21-22).

Monod’s distinction between teleonomy and teleology—and his jettisoning of the latter—is crucial for his thought because of how the former emerges biologically while the latter is ideologically imposed. One is real and the other is not. Biologically speaking, teleonomy appears by chance after the appearance of invariance (which also appeared by chance). “Invariance necessarily precedes teleonomy” (23)—or, more specifically:
the Darwinian idea that the initial appearance, evolution, and steady refinement of ever more intensely teleonomic structures are due to perturbations occurring in a structure which already possesses the property of invariance—hence is capable of preserving the effects of chance and thereby submitting them to the play of natural selection. (23-24, italics original)

Monod is careful, however, to avoid the errors of what he terms “vitalisms” and “animisms” that he views as endemic in religious and philosophical systems that seek to account for the “strangeness of living beings” (24). Vitalist theories, for Monod, invert the relationship between teleonomy and invariance. They hold, again, erroneously, according to Monod, that “invariance is safeguarded, ontogeny guided, and evolution oriented by an initial teleonomic principle” (italics original). According to vitalism, all living, biological phenomena are manifestations of this original principle. Animists, in turn, posit a “universal teleonomic principle, responsible for the course of affairs throughout the cosmos as well as within the biosphere” (25, italics original). For the animist, all material—organic and inorganic—is oriented by a preordained purposefulness that finds its highest elaboration in humankind.

Monod assails numerous philosophers and scientists for their uncritical (indeed, unsuspecting) adherence to either vitalism or animism. Bergson and Teilhard, for example, represent, respectively, schools of “metaphysical vitalism” and “scientific vitalism.” Monod seems, however, if we are to judge by the number of pages dedicated and the strenuousness of objection supplied, to be most concerned with “animist projection in dialectical materialism” (33), particularly as it appears in the works of Hegel
and in Marxist thought. (He seems more interested in critiquing Engels than Marx and, similarly, more interested in Marxists than in Marx.) The error in Hegel’s philosophy in general, for Monod, is that it postulates subjectively derived laws as universal. To wit, since, according to Hegel, thought proceeds dialectically—and there is no authentic reality except mind—it is therefore the case that “the laws of the dialectic” (34) govern the entirety of nature. That Hegel would extract from his own subjective processes an abstraction into the universal workings of all matter is, for Monod, “to effect the animist projection in the most blatant manner,” thereby discarding wholesale any attempt at objectivity—scientific or otherwise. What Monod identifies to be at stake in Engels’s writings is a kind of inversion of Hegelian thought. If, for Hegel, the natural laws of material reality are but a manifestation of Geist, then, for Engels, knowledge of matter, since it can only be obtained dialectically, as such reflects (and is part of) the mode of movement that is itself the mode of existence of matter. Monod further takes issue with Marxists that see in dialectics a “science of the general laws of change, not only in society and in human thought, but in the external world which is mirrored by human thought” for the simple reason that he doesn’t accept that the external world, in all of its multitudinous complexities, could ever be “mirrored by human thought” (36).

II. Karl Marx and the Atomic Swerve

Monod does admit that, as regards Marx himself, his “own writings could be cited in opposition” to the concept of dialectical materialism. To support Monod’s suggestion, I would like to briefly touch on certain passages of Marx’s dissertation that bear on this discussion, particularly as it addresses the questions of chance and necessity. Marx’s
dissertation, entitled “Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature,” offers insight into the long-standing nature of the philosophical debate concerning the aleatory and the necessary. Citing Diogenes Laertius, on Democritus, Marx writes: “Necessity is, according to Democritus, fate and law, providence and the creator of the world. But the substance of this necessity is the antitype and the movement and impulse of matter” (102). He then paraphrases Stobaeus: “human beings like to create for themselves the illusion of chance—a manifestation of their own perplexity, since chance [Zufall] is incompatible with sound thinking” (103). At issue in these two citations are (1.) how necessity precedes the world as idea (“antitype”) of a “fate” (read: telos) that informs and directs the movement of matter and (2.) how chance does not exist. All things happen for a reason.

Marx then smartly contrasts the Democritean position with the Epicurean. In Epicurus:

Necessity, introduced by some as the absolute ruler, does not exist, but some things are accidental, others depend on our arbitrary will. Necessity cannot be persuaded, but chance is unstable….it is chance, which must be accepted, not God, as the multitude believe…It is a misfortune to live in necessity, but to live in necessity is not a necessity. (103)

Marx then turns his attention to the “declination of the atom from the straight line” (108). By declination, we mean purely random swerve (or clinamen, which is what Lucretius will subsequently call the declination). The thought experiment is this: In a universe of falling atoms that precedes form, how do forms appear? According to Marx, Democritus and Epicurus agree that (1.) one motion of atoms is the “fall in a straight line” and that
(2.) another motion of atoms is the “repulsion of the many atoms” (108, italics original). Where they disagree is in the “deviation of the atom from the straight line” (italics original). “The declination of the atom from the straight line differentiates the one from the other” (italics original). Regarding Democritus, Marx cites Bayle, who states that “Democritus ascribed to the atom a spiritual principle” and “reproaches Epicurus for having thought out the concept of declination instead of this spiritual principle” (114). On the other hand, for Epicurus, the random swerve or declination gives reality to “form-determination” (112). Which is to say that not only does form emerge by chance (atom declination), but also that the declination itself indicates freedom from determination precisely until form appears.

What we have in the preceding brief foray into Marx’s dissertation is precisely the question of the relationship between chance and necessity as well as the discussion’s relevance to the appearance of form. As regards the larger contemplation of Monod’s *Chance and Necessity*, we can see a clear, classical, canonical antecedent in the writings of Democritus and Epicurus, particularly as they’re given to us by Marx. The way the two thinkers of antiquity consider the atom has considerable consequences both for materiality and alterity, which I’d like to discuss here for how these might apply to a new materialism. The stakes are this: if one accepts the Epicurean appearance of the swerve, the Democritean freefall of atoms would entail the perpetual non-appearance of form. In this sense, falling perpetually is perpetual formless “determination” (or, if you will, fate). But, because atoms meet “only by virtue of their declination,” they are no longer their “own sole object” only relatable “to themselves” (116-117). Instead, by the mere chance that is declination, the atom meets its other (as other atom) in a dynamic that Marx
interestingly calls “individuality” (117). (One wonders about the role played by shared etymological valences of the words “atom” [Greek] and “individual” [Latin] as both meaning “indivisible.”) Marx quickly—in the very next sentence—turns his discussion from atoms to the “individual human being” in order to affirm a dynamic of a self as inherently self-othering: “individuality is only realized conceptually, inasmuch as it relates to something else which actually is itself.” He then goes one step further, increasing yet again the stakes of his argument, by personalizing it: “But when I relate myself to myself as to something which is directly another, then my relationship is a material one” (italics original). What seems to be happening very economically in these few sentences of his argument is that, in effect, the appearance of form is necessarily a material one because it happens, by chance, only in material (materiality). Form’s material appearance can only happen by the atom’s move into and/or repulsion from the other. All material is therefore, materially speaking, not itself insofar as the original collisions and repulsions of atoms were with other atoms. At the same time, however, these atoms as atoms of the same material field can only collide, if they are to do so, with each other. Marx writes: “their materiality, which was posited in the fall in a straight line, and the form-determination, which was established in the declination, are united synthetically.”

III. Toward New Materialism

In the preceding discussions concerning both Marx and Monod we see the engagement of two key claims of new materialist thought. The first is that a dynamic of self-otherness and self-othering is vital to notions of new materialism, which, as
commentators have observed, understands everything as being in a state of constant change. This is to say that not only is stasis of any sort barred from a new materialist approach to material, but that an entity’s passing from one moment to the next is of a transformational sort that understands identity as inherently non-identical. The second claim is that everything is contingent, which is to say that everything is subject to change. Marx’s dissertation, of course, is interested precisely in the role that the aleatory plays in the emergence of form as discussed in the classical texts of Democritus and Epicurus. As regards Monod, central to understanding the qualities of life and its biological forms that he describes is the notion—indeed, the reality—that they do not depend on a natural law. They have emerged entirely by chance. Monod’s thesis: “the biosphere does not contain a predictable class of objects or of events but constitutes a particular occurrence, compatible indeed with first principles, but not deducible from those principles and therefore essentially unpredictable” (43, italics original). Nothing is under any obligation to exist. To recapitulate in somewhat different terms our earlier discussion: DNA is the “fundamental biological invariant” (104) that, as a structure, is the source of physiological diversity. The appearance of “genetic code,” however, is “chemically arbitrary” (108, italics original) and will always be susceptible to “perturbations” and “errors of translation” (111). These kinds of events are “accidental”; they are “random occurrences” (112). And because they are the only source of modification of the genetic text, it follows that “chance alone is at the source of every innovation, of all creation in the biosphere” (italics original).

2 See Graham Harman.
3 Ibid.
Recognition of the role that chance plays in the appearance of life and its manifold iterations is of significant consequence for any notion of anthropocentrism, which Monod compares to a “heliocentric theory” (41). When evolution first appeared as a viable theory, it was received as a way of making humans the “natural heir” to all biological development. Chance undoes any such illusion by introducing absolute uncertainty into the appearance of life (and therefore of humans) and by relegating that appearance to a kind of freakishness. The “accident” only becomes “necessity” through natural selection, which is, in effect, an account for how qualities, properties, traits, and so on find themselves available to reproducibility given the also random nature of the environment in which they appear. Without favorable conditions, mutations fail. It is this interface between an emerged life form and its milieu that grants a species “stability” (121). What this means for humankind’s persistent efforts to degrade the environment is that human stability as a species is equally debased and therefore threatened. Of course, in keeping with the absolute destruction of anthropocentrism, the true concern here is that all life forms and their stability are equally degraded and threatened, which, as it so happens, is abundantly evidenced by recent documented assertions that Earth is undergoing a sixth mass extinction. As regards particular manifestations of human capabilities, Monod writes: “Intelligence, ambition, courage, and imagination are…factors of success in modern societies, to be sure; but of personal, not genetic success, the only kind that matters for evolution” (163, italics original). Likewise (and to conclude this discussion of Monod) Monod takes care to distinguish between science—which, again, insists on knowledge through study and without pre-determined methodological imposition (such as found in animisms or vitalisms)—and technology:
“technology and science are not the same thing” (172). Because it ignores them, science “outrages values.” The destruction of nature, on the other hand, “denotes a faulty technology” while seeming to be of a piece with the value systems in which technologies appear.

To return to a more directed discussion of new materialism that makes use of some of the contemporary literature about it, one of its fundamental tenets is, just like what we’ve observed in our discussions of Monod and Marx, its suspicion of and resistance to dualisms. As William E. Connolly has remarked about new materialism, “classical ontologies of mind/body and self/world dualism are challenged with what might be called a protean monism. Protean monism focuses on how life and mind evolve out of nonlife as it simultaneously refuses the mechanical modes of explanation in classical materialism” (399-400). Again, in many respects Connolly’s statement about new materialism in general captures the very particular significance of Monod’s project. And insofar as it rejects dualisms, new materialism is critical of dialectics. A typical dialectic in keeping with the Hegelian model posits, of course, ongoing states of transformation; but, it does so through modes of negation and sublation. New materialism contests this methodology with an understanding of a “protean monism” that avails itself of structuralist and post-structuralist methodologies such that an entity appears, contingently, in a field of material relations and aggregations, of pressures and withdrawals, of productions and expulsions. Negation as confrontation conducing to synthesis has no part in a new materialist methodology. Absence, instead, and an ongoing dynamic of inherent auto-erasure, however, do.
Chief among dialectic models of course would be the Subject/Object dialectic. To the extent that new materialism wishes to avoid dualism, one might suspect that it wishes to discard wholesale some of its vocabularies. However, new materialism does not jettison the concept of the Subject per se. As Connolly says, “the tendency neither to erase the human subject nor to restrict it entirely to human beings and/or God is accepted” by new materialism. He affirms the importance of treating “the human subject as a real formation that is also not the fundamental ground of things.” The efforts of new materialism thus are oriented toward stretching “prevailing modes of subjectivity in a new direction.” The idea here is to think subjectivity as something not merely malleable, but also something existentially implicated in its physical, political, biological, ideological, nutritional, environmental—to name just a few—surroundings. Like what we saw with Monod, an additional effect (and intention) of new materialism is thus to decenter the human, to remove it from its historical and evolutionary self-understanding as an ultimate end, thereby stripping the category of the human of its privileged position vis-à-vis both the environment as well as a relation to a god. It is the real multiplicity of life singularities in their complex relations that new materialism seeks to think.

It is here that we can also note that, like Monod’s understanding of life and the biosphere, new materialism is adamantly not vitalist. Connolly specifically addresses the concern, in fact. He writes that “notions of matter as dead or, more often, secondary to the form imposed on it” are, in new materialism, “replaced by an evolutionary model in which there is vitality installed in energy/matter complexes from the start” (400). But, importantly, he goes on to say: “This is not a form of ‘vitalism’—though that tradition is to be respected—in which a divinity invests élan vital in material processes. It is a notion
of energy-matter complexes, in which each organised entity is less than eternal and replete with surpluses, noise and remainders.”

As a monism, new materialism understands the world as immanent, which is to say that there is no transcendence. After Deleuze, we can say that all resides on, or, better, is part of a singular “plane of immanence.” Deleuzian materialism, Serge Hein writes, refuses to “devalue Nature (i.e., matter) by taking away from it any virtuality or potentiality, any immanent power, any inherent being” (133). In this view, “all matter has its basis in this immanent plane.” In this reckoning, life and matter are “states of the same plane—immanence”; he concludes succinctly by noting “that immanence itself is the necessary condition for all of life…in its becoming.”

Similarly, St. Pierre et al have remarked on the plane of immanence that it is “flat” and that it “contains both the virtual and the actual (the virtual and the actual are both real). It is pre-conceptual and composed of unformed matter that intensifies in singularities, multiplicities, whose forces actualize the virtual through chance encounters with other singularities” (103). The significance of the monist plane is such that it necessarily includes both the political and the social for new materialism. In his online LA Review of Books article on the New Feminist Materialism, Steven Epstein says that new materialism reconceptualizes “the terms of social theory, such that the social is seen as a part of, rather than distinct from, the natural, an undertaking that requires

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4 To be sure, Hein, refers to life as something “immaterial” (a definition that this dissertation rejects) that avails itself of matter, which, in his understanding, seems to be inert; indeed, he understands the immaterial and the material as being poles in a binary on the plane of immanence (also a position that we eschew insofar as we are avoiding dualisms and dualistic thought).
a rethinking of the natural too.” In this newly monist view, the proper response to the threat of biological determinism—the claim that biology is destiny or that our fate lies in our genes—is not to reject the natural sciences and assert the primacy of the social, nor indeed to treat the world as text, but rather to grasp the inseparability of the “bio” and the “social,” as captured in the word “biosocial.” In place of a linguistic process of representing the world, the new materialism proposes “mattering” as the generative process through which matter comes into being. Material stuff—bodies, tools, objects—are understood as imbued with vitality and dynamic force.

In light of the neologistic term “biosocial,” and while maintaining awareness of the role of the biopolitical in this dissertation, we will here return to a discussion of biopoiesis in order to more fully explore it in this introductory framing.

IV. Biopoiesis and Sara Guyer

We’ll recall that what’s at issue, both politically and poetically, in many respects in this dissertation is a critical engagement with Michel Foucault’s notion of biopolitics. Foucault, in Society Must Be Defended, observed the political shift in paradigms of control or governmentality as one that has moved from sovereignty to biopolitics. To do so he noted that “old” sovereign power’s right was “to take life or let live” (241); however, sovereignty’s “new right,” which did not jettison the old, but, rather complemented and permeated it, was the right to “make live and let die” (241). This new
power is biopolitical power, or biopower. In his *Security, Territory, Population* lectures at the *Collège de France* from 1977-1978, Foucault describes “bio-power” as “the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species become the object of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power” (1). The mechanisms for execution of such strategy are essentially those of population management.

“Etymologically, *statistics* is knowledge of the *state*, of the forces and resources that characterize a *state* at a given moment” (274, emphasis added). He then supplies some examples of the kinds of statistical knowledge he has in mind as regards the biopolitical turn:

> For example: knowledge of the population, the measure of its quantity, mortality, natality; reckoning of the different categories of individuals in a state and of their wealth; assessment of the potential wealth available to the state, mines and forests, etcetera; assessment of the wealth in circulation, the balance of trade, and measure of the effects of taxes and duties, all this data, and more besides… (274)

By gathering such precise and ample data across various indices, the state can set about developing and employing its administrative techniques. But let us not lose sight of the important fact that this data necessarily grounds itself in the biology of a state’s population and, as such, emblematizes how biopolitics is the technical management of life.

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5 Foucault seems throughout the relevant *oeuvre* to use the words “biopower” and “biopolitics” interchangeably.
Sara Guyer, in her online article entitled “Biopoetics, or Romanticism,” published in *Romantic Circles*, identifies and describes a dynamic of British Romanticism similar to what Foucault articulated regarding biopower. For Guyer, a lyric sovereignty emerged that imbued poetic voice with a kind of managerial authority. She writes of the Romantic nineteenth-century poets’ newfound power:

This is a power that the poets also sought to categorize, calculate, and manage, if not through new forms of record keeping and sanitation, then through new uses of older tropes and figures. In this sense, poetry can be understood as another of the “concrete arrangements” or “techniques” of power for the management of life, another site of the power over life…

This “power over life” was exerted, however, not only over biological material, but over literary production as well. Guyer notes how the author of *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley, “famously refers to her literary fiction as a newly formed life, more or less substitutable with and even allegorized by the life-form whose existence the novel traces.” In this instance, the novel is more than a representation of what might happen when science attempts to commandeer and reassemble biological material; it is also an insightful acknowledgment of the kind of biological power operant in literary and cultural production. Such production, in this sense, is itself biopolitical not because of its representational status, but rather because of its biopolitical effects within a population.

So, to the extent that nineteenth-century Victorian life can be understood as a simultaneous “medium of political and poetic power” in which sovereignty is affirmed politically and poetically as “lyric subjectivity,” it was also an iteration of Foucauldian biopower insofar as it was not oriented toward the individual (of lyric subjectivity).
in the nineteenth century thus emerged as an object of poetry and politics, but also as a kind of excess that wed the nineteenth century conceptually to the post-modern twentieth (i.e., 1970s Foucault). Guyer, in her essay, seeks to contemplate this excess as a “figuring and instantiating” of life “as beyond…the opposition of life and death.” Her critical impulse itself exceeds the dualism, the binary of life and death, and orients itself toward a kind of refuge. Re-fugere: to flee back. The refuge here is the instinct of survival, the compulsion to survive. The understanding that Guyer produces is thus one that equates life with survival. And in so doing, it seeks to recognize “the excesses that biopower and its institutions inherently fail to contain.”

Such thinking by Guyer bears importantly on the question of power: “life is always on the side of nonpower, and that its containment fails to sustain the newly formulated opposition between life and death that is at the heart of the shift that Foucault so compellingly describes.” In addition to Foucault’s thinking, Guyer draws on the work of Barbara Johnson, Paul de Man, and others to analyze how literary apostrophe figures in articulating a connection that exceeds the binary of life and nonlife. Apostrophe of course implicates a reader by addressing itself to her. However, apostrophe also can, when poetically directed toward an inanimate object, imbue that object with a kind of vitality of its own. Literary critics writing in English have traditionally tended to call this effect personification or prosopopoeia. Guyer, however, is more interested in how animating an object through apostrophe is a kind of making live. Such a notion, of course, is of a piece with the new brand of biopolitical sovereignty that Foucault describes as well as that of the sovereign lyric subject that she articulates. Guyer’s intervention, however (and, again, after Johnson), is to interrogate how the literary figure
connects literature to politics to life. In many respects, at issue, fundamentally, in Guyer’s discussion is the question of violence: who will receive and who will wield it. And it is here, in the question of violence, where Guyer reveals, quoting Johnson, an “inherent” connection between figurative language and questions of life and death” (italics original). The essay takes up literary works that contemplate abortion—in particular, works which deliberately confuse and trouble the apostrophic “you”—in order to consider the political depths of “making live.” To live or not to live. Along with Johnson’s, Guyer’s critical reading of these works (along with her reading of Johnson herself) allows Guyer to ask “whether life is the poetic nexus of the political?” The question strives toward understanding the poetic or linguistic not only as merely representational, but also as able “to relate the power of poetry (or language) over life and death.” It is in this light that Guyer wants to define “biopoetics”\(^6\) as a “lyric thinking life itself” (rather than to articulate a “biopolitics of literature” or a “literary biopolitics”).

The excess at issue for Guyer seems to be a kind of ongoing making live of life, objects, and subjects. Although she acknowledges that “life is on the side of nonpower” both theoretically and critically—and along with this, recognizes how life’s “containment fails to sustain…opposition between life and death”—Guyer does not develop a kind of thinking of excess that points toward materiality, multiplicity, escapability, impossibility, or supplementarity. It is at these kinds of nodes of interrogation that this dissertation works in order to add to, and to broaden, the notion of biopoiesis. Life is excess, yes; and

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\(^6\) Guyer repurposes the word “biopoetics” as it was first advanced by Brett Cooke and Frederick Turner in 1999. For Cooke and Turner, the term hews to a more general humanistic program insofar as it should aim to “to seek artistic universals and features that reflect our common humanity” (5) as observable in an evolutionary account of aesthetics. Guyer, by invoking a Foucauldian frame of biopolitics, redirects the term toward lyric subjectivity’s relationship to power and its investment in life.
biopolitics defines the ongoing administrative effort to manage, contain, and control that excess. The task of this dissertation is thus to explore an understanding of that excess that preserves it as such, while also facilitating a preservation to come.

In one of her concluding gestures, Guyer, as her departure from Cooke and Turner would suggest, seems to turn away from “using scientific method to understand the emergence of art as a living thing” in favor of what she calls “a new humanistic method” that comprehends the implication of politics and poetics in sovereignty. My rendering of biopoetics begins with an engagement of science in order to call forth an aggregational complementarity—perhaps, even, a kind of indistinguishability—that is at the heart of thinking together epistemological approaches to understanding life. By this, in no way do I do not mean to invoke universalisms or universality that one might imagine as being a cornerstone of all disciplines. Rather, I seek to account for ways of critical and contingent understanding that remind us all of the never ending work of thought as it emerges simultaneously by materials, in materials, and as materials.

VI. Concluding the Introduction

In her essay, Guyer focuses almost exclusively on poetry. While I respect and admire this scholarly impulse, my own reckoning of biopoiesis will focus on different media and literary genres (novel, film, poetry) of cultural production for their instructiveness and insight into the biopoetical question because of the political, poetical, and biological imbrications that I have been outlining in this Introduction. Therefore, my aim in this dissertation will not simply be to show how some texts are new materialist “examples” of biopoetics; rather, it will be to think politics and biological bodies together
with the novels, poems, and films that we’ll examine. With this in mind, one might say that this dissertation itself partakes of the biopoetical ethos that it is at the same time attempting to articulate. The new materialist position of this dissertation accepts and affirms the fact that poems, films, novels and other kinds of artistic cultural production enter the world and affect that world as part of it. They do not merely “reflect” the world; rather, they contribute to its shaping, its production, and its becoming. They differentiate, polemicize, normalize, and texturize the world and its constituent subjectivities in ways that, in turn act, react, and enact their encounter with it. New materialism in this sense is about recognizing that poems and films and art do not appear in a void. Rather, they are nodes of intensity like animals, plants, humans, and machines on a plane of immanence.

To think the questions outlined above, Chapter 1 of this dissertation will engage Marie Darrieussecq’s novel, *Truismes*, and the concerns therein such as flesh, politics, hunger, sex, and neurosis—to name only a few—that it presents. In this novel, we encounter a protagonist who finds herself in a post-apocalyptic or dystopic world. The flesh of her body, which transforms along a continuum stretching from the human to the porcine and back, and settling on various in-between states, is a key focus of the dissertation’s inquiry for how it interrogates and explores the notion of becoming as found in the writings of Deleuze and Guattari. Becoming in the sense that we consider is always becoming-other. We explore the becoming-other in the ways that the novel’s protagonist becomes-animal, itself an alterity, here figured in the flesh of a transforming body that transcends species and therefore, it goes without saying, identity. The dynamic throws into question the absolute contingency of identity when considered in the light of
flesh that transforms as a kind of stationary line of flight. Flight, as we understand it here, is part of the biopoetic impulse. It not only evades capture, but it evades control; and, in so doing, it avails itself of unpredictability. The unpredictability in question is that of an unruly flesh that would seem to have a mind of its own by transforming in ways not only beyond the reach of exogenous forces that would seek to control it, but also in ways that are beyond the protagonist’s own abilities to manage or direct its metamorphoses. As a subject, the protagonist of Truismes is subject to her multiple physiological mutations, which resituate her in her world and invest her with differing kinds of powers and potentialities as she navigates through a hostile political world. Flesh in this sense becomes a kind of language, or better, a semiotic expression. After Merleau-Ponty, we see that thought and extension are not simply united in flesh; rather, they are flesh, but in a way in which they cannot be experienced simultaneously. Instead, thought and extension appear in an obversal and reversal relationship typified in the practice of writing—evidenced in this novel by the device of the “found manuscript”: the author, who has transformed into a pig has written the document, the first person account, that we are and have been reading, who herself has, in Kafkaesque fashion, had the realities of her situation repeatedly and violently inscribed into her flesh. What breaks down is the duality of thought and extension as wholly discrete categories.

Another binary at issue in the novel would be that between the human and the nonhuman. Desire itself emerges as a new materialist materiality that, on the one hand, can be prodded into occasioning the corporeal transformations of the protagonist, yet on the other, can never fully be commandeered by biopolitical power. What emerges in the novel is a clear sense of the normalizing and normative force at issue in what it is to be
human. The novel challenges notions of sameness that attend the Human as a regulatory category by showing how desire itself is a material for exceeding dualisms precisely to the extent that it is not so interested in territorializing the other as it is in de-territorializing the self. And, in this way, it is a motor of self-othering.

Chapter 2 will analyze Carlos Saura’s film *La caza* in order to explore the significance of virus, violence, friendship, alliance, justice, and climatological heat. Chapter 2 focuses its attention on an analysis of Carlos Saura’s film, *La caza*, a film in which three Francoist veterans who fought in the Spanish Civil War set out to spend an afternoon in an arid Castilian landscape drinking, reminiscing, and hunting rabbits. What transpires is hardly a casual afternoon of camaraderie. Instead, what appears in the film is a kind of diseased state latent within all of the film’s characters (save, perhaps, one). The state of human illness and debility is foregrounded in secondary characters who are dying or wounded; it also presents itself in the rabbit population that is suffering from myxomatosis, a disease that had been introduced in order to control rabbits on a couple of farms in France, but that ended up spreading to rabbit populations across Europe. At issue is not a strong-over-weak politics that views the infirm as, in keeping with a cultural logic of the Darwinist ilk, justifiably conquered. But rather what emerges as a setting is a biopolitical state in which all are subject to various forms of control including the biological, but also including apparatuses of surveillance. The violence that unfolds throughout the film in various forms—man on rabbit, dog on rabbit, man on man, and so on—does so in a context that indicates a kind of limit of violence that is directed upon the other. To wit, eventually it will turn on itself.
The chapter takes up the concern of autoimmunity and its relationship to democracy. In order to think this concern, however, we arrive it by interrogating the (biopolitical) role that technology plays in trying to ascertain and impose order. Through a discussion of key texts in Valéry and Arendt, we come to understand human progress as a kind of fool’s errand to the degree that the technologies that it develops in order to control or contain unpredictability in fact generate increasing degrees of chaos. The new materialist and biopoetical role of the aleatory thus figures prominently by showing precisely how biopolitical and bureaucratic systems invite the appearance of greater chance encounter, by which we do not mean fortuitous encounter, but rather a kind of absolute unforeseeable event. Derrida (along with Valéry, we should note) refers to this event as rogue. And the rogue, it turns out, plays a key role in democracy. For, Derrida, there is nothing pre-ordained about democracy: it is undecidable and “always to come.” That it is thus offers a kind of hope for its potential, but it also indicates a darker side that is complicit with its ongoing deferral. Democracy, for Derrida, has an inner solidarity with totalitarianism. Derrida understands democracy’s weakness as a kind of “suicidal” potential that it harbors, a parallel that we explore in the film *La caza* and the unfolding of the small group’s suicide. To the auto-destructive tendency, Derrida presents what he calls “auto-affection.” By “auto-affection,” he does not in any sense mean narcissism. Rather, what Derrida refers to is how the self divides itself in order to understand itself. Again, we note the appearance of a dynamic of self-othering at work. The self is able to divide itself thanks to what Derrida calls a “spacing” known as *khōra*; as a space *khōra* thus gestures beyond categorical opposition, beyond a binary. But it is key for the emergence of difference, which itself is the necessary condition for affection; to put it
differently, without difference, there can be no affection. Thus if the auto-destructive tendency implicates autoimmunity to the degree that a body—a self or a body politic—can destroy itself by insisting on its sameness (i.e., by eradicating external bodies it considers invasive), then auto-affection offers a way that a body (or body politic) can preserve itself through recognition and admission of difference.

Chapter 3 will contemplate the poetry of two Spanish poets from the second half of the twentieth century, José Angel Valente and Fernando Merlo, in an effort to interrogate such matters as economy, pharmacology, silence, passivity, decision, waste, and ahistoricity. The aim of this chapter is to redirect the dissertation’s energies toward a fuller thinking of materialism as expressly found in the reckonings that the poets effect regarding their own biology, their own respective corporalities. The chapter shows how discrete bodies in their sense and sensuousness can involve poetic utterance in ways that can ultimately serve to recompose the social body. In select poems by Valente, for instance, we observe how certain songs in the cante jondo tradition produce an enunciative limit that effects a kind of self-erasure, which is in certain respects in keeping with Althusserian notions of subject-less-ness. In addition to an ongoing dynamic of self-displacement, what we find in Valente is an alert and attentive listening, if you will, to materiality itself as it is encountered in the material expressions of a body—be that the body of another or that of the self. Valente carefully articulates events and encounters of a kind that therefore gestures towards a materiality of stillness and passivity not only to further dynamics of self-othering, but to recognize within these states an ethic unto themselves. It is an ethic that understands material as self-loving, both as it binds and unbinds itself. And in so doing, it implicates the other in its processes. Temporalities
stall; infinities emerge. Thresholds appear as sites of an indecision, even madness, that “rends time” and, in so doing, makes the just decision possible insofar as it lets the decision emerge from the other. Justice therefore becomes itself divested of any absolute, always, if conceived in these terms, ready for material to speak so that it—meaning justice—may “decide” uniquely, according only to the conditions of any form’s contingent appearance. Indeed, materiality emerges here, not as form, but as the condition for form. As a non-form in itself, materiality is thus inherently divested of the historical, whereas form is not. In its movements and collisions, materiality is a process of formation, a kind of endless plenitude. Here biopoiesis finds another characteristic: if elsewhere it was flight and escapability; here it is also addition, supplementation, and ever-expanding fullness. Desire, as supplement, reappears—again, not as erasure of the other, but, now, as supplement to the self in a dynamic of co-individuation. What’s at stake, just as in Valente’s tactical use of infinitive verbs, is the infinitization of desire, a desire which according to some thinkers like Stiegler and Baudrillard is undergoing a period of recession. Reinvesting desire with infinity in this biopoetic sense constitutes an effort that is not objectifying, but rather communal. To reanimate society’s depleted desire is thus an effort at restoring vitality and community in ways that will always be beyond predictable control.

Javier Monforte has stated that a new materialism “demands pauses, silences and breathing” (384). Our new materialist method will practice the patience necessary to allow materials to speak. And what they will reveal is complex. Non-identity, democracy, sovereignty, animality, friendship, alliance, flesh, physics, biology, control, pain, desire, bodily processes, semiology, law, justice, decision, means and ends,
fragment and form, unpredictability, singularity, subjectivity, auto-affection, economy, silence, passivity, waste, pharmacology, and supplementarity—these are the stakes that will emerge and inform our inquiry in order to think a new materialist poetics figured as biopoiesis.
Chapter 1

New Materialist Desire: Darrieussecq’s *Truismes* and the Flesh of Becoming-Minor

The epigraph to the novel *Truismes*, by Marie Darrieussecq, is an excerpt from Knut Hamsun’s *Benoni* and reads as follows:

\[ \text{Puis le couteau s’enfonce. Le valet lui donne deux petites poussées pour lui faire traverser la couenne, après quoi, c’est comme si la longue lame fondait en s’enfonçant jusqu’au manche à travers la graisse du cou.} \]

\[ \text{D’abord le verrat ne se rend compte de rien, il reste allongé quelque seconds à réfléchir un peu. Si ! Il comprend alors qu’on le tue et hurle en cris étouffés jusqu’à ce qu’il n’en puisse plus.} \]

Then the knife plunges in. The farmhand gives it two little shoves to push it through the thick skin, after which the long blade seems to melt through the neck fat as it sinks in up to the hilt.

At first the boar doesn’t understand a thing, he remains stretched out for a few seconds, thinking about it. Aha! Then he realizes he is being killed and utters strangled cries until he can scream no more.7 (*Pig Tales*)

In this hardly subtle gambit, the reader quickly realizes that she is located squarely in the terrain of vulnerability as it is depicted in the experience of the boar. This boar doesn’t understand immediately what is happening to it, requiring as it does a few seconds to grasp the reality of its death. By the time it realizes what has befallen it, the comprehension of its having been stabbed is attended not only by understanding of its imminent death, but also by the realization that the understanding is already too little too

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7 Translations, when supplied with page numbers, are taken from Linda Coverdale’s English translation of *Truismes*, which is titled *Pig Tales: A Novel of Lust and Transformation*. Otherwise, translations of the novel from French into English are my own.
late. That the boar doesn’t realize how vulnerable it is until death is a foregone conclusion shows us how vulnerability is coterminous with the taking of life: beings are always already vulnerable. In like fashion, the reader of the epigraph cannot do anything to stop the boar’s death either. In fact, this opening passage is so sudden and abrupt that, at reading it, it is already too late to go back, too late to un-read it. Thus the reader is, by extension and analogy, revealed in her exposure as also always already vulnerable.

In this way, the epigraph frames what ensues in the novel in biopolitical terms. If traditional political sovereignty claims the power to take life or to let live, then Darrieussecq’s novel quickly adds to these stakes, following in effect the shift in the trajectory of power that Foucault observes in history. In Society Must Be Defended, Foucault shows that what was once sovereign power with the ability to take life and let live transforms into what he calls “biopower,” which is the power to make live and let die (241). Whereas, historically speaking, sovereign power relied on the deprivation of goods and the disposal of lives, “biopower” integrates these abilities of the sovereign into a larger program, which he describes in The History of Sexuality, Vol. I, “bent on generating forces, making them grow, and ordering them, rather than one dedicated to impeding them, making them submit, or destroying them” (136). Power is thus diffuse, makeshift, saturating relations and networks. Going another step further, in “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” Deleuze distinguishes between structures of enclosure and mechanisms of control: “Enclosures are molds, distinct castings, but controls are a modulation, like a self-deforming cast that will continuously change from one moment to the other” (4). Control need not be coherent; it need not be rational. It directs itself toward the maintenance of its power by whatever means best suit ever-changing
circumstances. Under these conditions—and in a state of perpetual vulnerability (economic, sexual, existential)—the unnamed narrator of Darrieussecq’s *Truismes* must navigate her life, fend for herself, and be productive amidst constantly shifting alliances and relationalities in a dystopic world. As Deleuze says (albeit in gendered language), “The disciplinary man was a discontinuous producer of energy, but the man of control is undulating, in orbit, in a continuous network” (5-6). That Darrieussecq’s protagonist is unnamed, *sans nom, anonyme* in itself suggests how in certain respects she is a cypher, an entity in flux that cannot remain pigeonholed by the strictures of identity and the rigorous imposition of its codes. As networks of relations change, so does she.

Written in the first person, *Truismes* is a dystopic novel (set, presumably, in a time after a nuclear event) about a young, naïve, and nameless girl who takes a job at a parfumerie, which, instead of being a beauty boutique, turns out to be a massage parlor brothel. Her appearance, she is told by the shop’s “director,” is of utmost importance to her employment: “Le directeur de la chaîne me disait que dans la perfumerie, l’essentiel est d’être toujours belle et soignée...” (13). She must always be beautiful and well-groomed. Yet, her appearance quickly becomes curiously difficult to maintain as her flesh quite literally begins to change, to metamorphose, into that of a pig. This dynamic of her transforming flesh—back and forth between human and pig—will attend her plight throughout the novel. Along the way, she will meet a host of characters who take an interest in her and her unusual physiological situation as she navigates a post-apocalyptic setting. In addition to the *directeur*, Honoré, her first boyfriend, takes an interest in the early stages of her bodily transformation because of the suppleness of her flesh, which he initially finds attractive. Edgar, a politician whom she meets at an extraordinarily
debauched party that takes place at a water-park-bathhouse-themed venue called Aqualand (where she had also met Honoré), decides to utilize her in his political campaign precisely because of her transformed state. He will deploy her human-pig image as accompaniment to the campaign’s slogan: “Pour un monde plus sain.” For a healthier world. In a post-apocalyptic world, health figures as a chief concern for the unnamed protagonist, who, in addition to her corporeal and dermatological alterations, suffers from acute bouts of bleeding. She begins to see a marabout (also one of her clients), who takes an ongoing, if somewhat detached, traditional medicine interest in the young girl’s state. Finally, there is Yvan, her boyfriend after Honoré, who is also, it turns out, a wolfman. As such, Yvan is subject to bodily transformations of his own. The state of transformation that the protagonist shares with Yvan will provide a point of contact that will serve to forge an alliance.

The protagonist’s changing body in the enactment of its metamorphoses is, as we shall see, a kind of non-dialectical resistance to control to the extent that it at times commandeers, and at other times flees, dynamics of power themselves. If power can be diffuse and continuously shift its demands and locations, then she can modify herself accordingly. She is not simply conforming to power’s requirements; rather, she escapes them through change. This escape, this evasion, is a kind of affirmative response to her plight and as such therefore represents a model other than one of dialectical confrontation. *Truismes* offers what I here will call a biopoetical response to power, which is to say that the novel explores processes of an inhering evasiveness or unpredictability that is essential and material to life. Biopoetics embeds processes of becoming, which is to say, of generating difference. *Truismes* is a biopoetical novel
insofar as it offers a non-dialectical response to biopower and biopolitical modes of control that it posits as set in an imagined post-nuclear future of scarcity and environmental degradation. Indeed, by inventing and addressing a dystopic future, the text, as science fiction novels and films alike tend to do, speaks more or less to our current historical moment (as it did at the time of its publication in 1996) and, in so doing, articulates strategies for engaging apparatuses of control within a kind of actual dystopia we all are inhabiting.

Darrieussecq’s *Truismes* provides us a reckoning of flesh—that of human and animal situated on a continuum of carnality—in its relation to contemporary political and economic tendencies. In so doing, the novel refashions what Deleuze and Guattari have outlined as the processes (and stakes) of what they term the *minor literature*. Here we’ll explore the developments of certain aspects of the minor literature as they appear in *Truismes* and then further theorize strategies of assemblage, of bodies combining, in order ultimately to convert post-neoliberal (or ur-neoliberal) and post-apocalyptic regimes into sites of singular response befitting a contribution to new materialism. But first the discussion of some of the fundamental aspects of the *minor literature*.

In the chapter from their tractate *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* entitled “An Exaggerated Oedipus,” Deleuze and Guattari refute (and reverse) the primacy of the Oedipal effect as an operant dynamic in the minor literature. The Oedipal effect’s role is important because of its relationship with neurosis. “In short,” they write, “it’s not Oedipus that produces neurosis; it is neurosis—*that is, a desire that is already submissive and searching to communicate its own submission*—that produces Oedipus” (10, italics original). It’s important to observe that desire in the Oedipal dynamic (which obtains
here) requires of itself submission. Desire is not for these authors about requiring another to submit or succumb to its advances. Desire, which seeks out otherness, has a latent passivity to it. It is also worth noting that the mixture of neurosis and desire such as that found in Darrieussecq’s protagonist, however, reveals, as we shall see, two things: the exhaustion of desire on the one hand and, on the other, the disconcealment of desire as eminently positive in itself.

The neurosis of Truismes, of its protagonist, is fully apparent early on in the novel as she is pulled in many directions by numerous competing forces, people, and desires—most of which can hardly be said to have her best interest at heart. Let us then provisionally assert that her neurosis may be less the result of having or suffering desire than of a wholesale exhaustion of desire—hers, of course, but not only hers—altogether. (We will also quickly add here that at the novel’s end it is revealed that all along the narrator’s father plays/has played a prominent role in her struggle.) A nameless narrator, she is barely able to earn a living, receiving just enough to pay for her transportation to and from work and to make a meager contribution to her boyfriend for the rent. Her profession as a “masseuse” is replete with the concerns and dangers that attend the weekly listings of backpage employment ads. Her clients make increasingly explicit demands with which she complies. Her boss, known simply as the “directeur,” plays no small role in her professional “formation,” ensuring that her body can conform to the exigencies of her clientele in ways that leave all customers satisfied. Such a satisfaction as they require is for her of the most physically and spiritually demanding sort. (If it isn’t yet clear, she a prostitute.) The dystopic world in which Truismes is set is a post-apocalyptic world. Bridges have been bombed out. Children are scarce; animals are
practically non-existent. Mass migrations of populations have taken place. Anxieties of various sorts abound: economic, existential, political, to name a few. It is within this context that in certain respects we can say that desire itself as a material in its own right is in the process of being, or has already been, destroyed. As Bernard Stiegler has observed in an interview with Frédéric Neyrat, commenting on our contemporary condition: “I think that desire is destructible, I think it’s (a) big mistake to say that desire is indestructible, it’s very dangerous. I know people whose desire has been destroyed… the major pathology today is the destruction of desire. There is nothing more dangerous: it’s psychosis as a massive social fact” (11). As regards Truismes, if desire can be said to be alive at all in this text, it is only because of the life-support of a post-apocalyptic economic order of “rationality” that summons it forth in order to consume it. In other words, in the novel, economic, existential, and political anxieties collude, yes, to produce desire, to keep bodies in circulation; but they do so precisely at the expense of eradicating the desire that they require.

The force of these anxieties (economic, political, existential) works in what Deleuze and Guattari call a reterritorializing dynamic, a dynamic in which power inscribes itself into whatever sites may have been deterritorialized. A deterritorialization is a kind of recontextualization, an escape from the constraints which (over)determine identity. In certain respects, a post-apocalyptic backdrop reads as a deterritorialized site par excellence because of how it presents a world in which one might presume that many previous constraining power structures have been dismantled. Given such a situation, subjectivities might thus presume themselves to be liberated from persistent structural holds on and of identity. A curious dynamic of Truismes seems to be that this
deterritorialization may very well be the product of reterritorialization, if not an exemplar of the process itself. That is to say that reterritorialization conduces to apocalypse—and as can be imagined, even apocalypse itself cannot guarantee freedom from administration. Reterritorializing forces thus remain everywhere.

Among the most prominent forces that Deleuze and Guattari seek to deterritorialize in their text on Kafka are the Oedipal ones. (The minor literature’s aim in general is to deterritorialize the major [and its territory]). Indeed, in many ways, *Truismes* reads as an effort to achieve what Deleuze and Guattari, in their examination of Kafka’s works, value as an attempt at “deterritorializing Oedipus into the world instead of reterritorializing everything in Oedipus and the family” (10) precisely to the extent that power would appear to be dismantled. Yet in other ways in Darrieussecq’s novel an old regime has been replaced by a new, more ruthless order, suggesting, in effect, a weakness of the minor (literature) and how it may very well be incapable of deterritorializing the major, which is adaptive, totalizing, and hegemonic.

In *Truismes*, the symbols of the Oedipal appear to be supplanted by the Electral (the counterpoint to the Oedipal, in which the child competes with the mother for the affections of the father). The nameless narrator by novel’s end, it is revealed, has been in a complicated, if not in many ways inverted, version of Electral psychosexual competition for the father, or, here more specifically, the father figure. But, again, things are not so simple as to fit within the narrow confines of the category of the Electra Complex. The nameless protagonist doesn’t seem to know throughout most of *Truismes* that she is in a professional relationship with the *directeur* of a *parfumerie* who, it turns out, is having carnal relations with her own mother. That this *directeur cum* stepfather is
charged with the task of ensuring his stepdaughter’s sexual pliability bespeaks a radical inversion of more typical psychosexual dynamics. In particular, it is the forcing of desire, the mechanical and structural institutionalization of processes that produce bodily availability so that the urges of another might be satisfied, that is at issue. For example, the *directeur* /stepfather completes her “training” by shoving “something in her rear end” ("quelque chose dans [son] derrière” [36]). At the end of *Truismes*, the narrator may be seen nearly to reverse the psychotic relationship with her mother and stepfather when she kills them both, but in effect what obtains is not love of, nor for, either the mother or the father figure—a condition necessary for the fulfillment of the Electral. Obedience and deference, on the other hand, are clearly manifest in the narrator’s accession to the requests of the stepfather / *directeur* throughout the text, along with her generally compliant behavior.

In the words of Stiegler, “libido is constituted by technics: it’s not an energy that develops spontaneously, but is articulated on the basis…of ‘fetishes’ and, more generally, *prostheses*. It (is) technè, the artifactualization of the living, that constitutes libido” (10). The forcing of libido in Darrieussecq’s text, the constitution of it, is accomplished by rendering the flesh of its main protagonist technè. Flesh here becomes the fetishized prosthesis, the artifactualized object of desire. And since flesh, as object of desire, is also the site where subjective desire constitutes itself, an interruption or short-circuiting occurs. Desire as subject to and modifiable by the calculations of the marketplace, which in turn structures the status of the narrator’s flesh in her profession as “masseuse” (prostitute), is voided in its capture. It becomes what Stiegler calls “drive”—and drive cannot be individualized, particularized, or lent to processes of individuation. However,
as a force, it still erupts, it still seeks outlet. Such outlets as one finds depicted in *Truismes* are variegated. On a societal level, one sees the ruin of social structures, the prevalence of biological sterility (as evidenced repeatedly in the text by the lack of children or the narrator’s spontaneous abortions), and the absence of animals, who are sacrificed in a regime of glorious expenditure: the last rhinoceros on the planet is killed in order to harvest the horn for its medicinal properties; giraffes are butchered and eaten; sharks are thrown into swimming pools in order to devour guests before themselves succumbing to the nutritional deprivations of fresh pool water rather than getting the saltwater that their existence depends upon. In these instances, the drive reveals itself as a full expression of destruction. At the level of individual being, the drive seeks outlet in the transformations, the metamorphoses of flesh. The human protagonist becomes pig; or, later, as pig, becomes human. There are no identities—only processes.

One of the chief areas of concern for Deleuze and Guattari is that of undoing the tyranny of the *molar*, which stands for self-identity, self-similarity, a stasis of being. In a certain respect, molarity is being as such. To the *molar* these philosophers oppose the *molecular*, which actively undoes the stagnation of molarity. The molecular becomes singular, decomposing molar aggregates. Indeed, if the molar is *being* in its totality, then the molecular is *becoming* in its differentiations. This *becoming* is a pre-dialectical, pre-ontological dynamic for Deleuze and Guattari and thus it subtends *being*. As it applies to the Oedipal complex, *becoming* reveals how the Oedipal is not ontological; rather, it is an order grafted onto ontology. In so doing, the Oedipal insinuates itself into ontology, territorializing it. For Deleuze and Guattari molecular *becoming* escapes the totalizing imposition of Oedipal reterritorialization.
In Kafka’s writings, the two philosophers observe, the power of the father condenses the forces of “judges, commissioners, bureaucrats, and so on” (12). Such a power can never be met head on; however, its effects are such that entities in relation to it articulate new formations of non-identity (both of self and of father figure). For Deleuze and Guattari, a triad is the essential formation that occasions becoming within the minor literature, a formation they also refer to as a “triangle of transformation” (12). In *Truismes*, the triad of the narrator, her mother, and the director informs this dynamic.

There is also what Deleuze and Guattari call throughout their writing a “line of escape”: “To the inhumaness (sic) of the ‘diabolical powers,’ there is the answer of a becoming-animal: to become a beetle, to become a dog, to become an ape, ‘head over heels and away,’ rather than lowering one’s head and remaining a bureaucrat, inspector, judge, or judged” (12). These lines of escape in Kafka’s tales are manifold, as the philosophers show. Some involve leaving the country for the city or the city for the country. Other *lignes de fuite* can even be found, or articulated, within a certain stasis, as seen in the example of Gregor Samsa never leaving his room. Such change, whether of surroundings or otherwise, leads to processes of both deterritorialization as well as reterritorialization.

For those figures who represent such forces as power, law, and bureaucracy, their reterritorializing impulse prevails. In the figures of the animal and, more specifically, of *becoming-animal*, however, efforts at deterritorialization hold sway. Deleuze and Guattari write:

> To become animal is to participate in movement, to stake out the path of escape in all its positivity, to cross a threshold, to reach a continuum of intensities that are valuable only in themselves, to find a world of pure intensities where all forms come undone, as do all the significations,
signifiers, and signifieds, to the benefit of an unformed matter of
deterritorialized flux, of nonsignifying signs. (13)

All forms come undone. The key to deterritorialization is in its decoupling from relations of reference that support its (territorialized) significance. In Truismes, it is the biological form of the human body itself that is continuously coming undone and then redoing itself. It comes undone en route to a body of a pig. And then, at becoming pig, the form of the porcine body comes undone yet again. The narrator’s body itself is quite literally “unformed matter of deterritorialized flux.” At each transformation, or process of transformation, each becoming-animal, the narrator’s body should thus escape—according to the logic that Deleuze and Guattari lay out—the reterritorializing forces of power. The flight is a flight from power and it manifests itself in the transforming, deterritorialized body. Yet one cannot help but notice that up to a certain point her transformations, severed as she finds herself from the relations that once sustained a territorialized significance, now make her more desirable. This is key. In contrast to the forced desirability of the territorialized body whose desire is ceaselessly prodded into performativity, desirability of a body in processes of ongoing deterritorialization is thus revealed to truly assemble itself outside of territorialized dynamics (and processes of reterritorialization)—beyond the pre-conception of form. At first, the more she becomes pig, the more supple and elastic becomes her flesh, the more others find her attractive, the more clients of the parfumerie demand her business. Then, later, as she finds herself having to work harder and harder to maintain appearances (due to an ever-increasing unruliness with which her flesh comports), the becoming-pig overtakes the reterritorializing forces of business, of demands placed upon her body. Nowhere is this
clearly more evident than in her inability to stay within her uniform. Her suppleness pours out of the constraints of the garment; her new flesh will not be contained. Such bodily transformations are nothing less than the flesh’s material effort at deterritorialization. Her hair becomes thicker, more bristly; greyish spots appear on her skin. Clients begin to find her less desirable; she, in turn, makes less and less money until she is barely able to get by. Finally, even Honoré, her boyfriend, loses interest in her.

Like Kafka’s animals for Deleuze and Guattari, Darrieussecq’s narrator doesn’t “refer to a mythology” (13). Rather, she embodies a zone of “liberated intensities where contents free themselves from their forms as well as from their expressions” (13). As alluded to earlier, flight can be seen in the literal flight from town to country, just as one observes in both Kafka and Darrieussecq’s protagonists. Such flight traces a vector, quite explicitly, away from authority and from masculine power that is frequently present. In Truismes, we see when the narrator first meets Honoré: “...lorsque Honoré m’a approchée, dans l’eau, j’ai d’abord fui en nageant vigoureusement le crawl” (15). (“…when Honoré came over to me in the water, my first reaction was to flee.” I swam off with a vigorous crawl…” [6]) She enacts a kind of slow-motion flight by doggy paddling away from him. She also escapes the confines of the parfumerie whenever she can between clients to go to the park where she takes her lunch break: “Alors vous comprendrez que j’aimais à me réfugier souvent dans le square, même s’il ne fait pas de doute que je manquais là aux règles les plus élémentaires du travail” (50). (“So you will understand that I loved to escape to the little park whenever I could, even though this was a clear violation of the most elementary rules of my job” [43-44].) She flees from the
police who come looking for her after she startles a mother with a baby. She flees underground with her “six petites choses” (91) after giving birth to them. She flees the psychiatric ward shortly after it appears she might be eaten. Indeed, Edgar’s world—the political territory he has created and now governs—is one that is completely susceptible to the exertions of his masculine authority. He is not afraid to issue periodic raids to rid the city of undesirable citizens such as those of Arab origin in particular, nor is he afraid to napalm certain buildings which house other types of undesirables such as the mentally ill as he does when he destroys a dilapidated psychiatric ward.

And, of course, in a very important act of flight, the narrator and Yvan’s situation is such that even though at first they leave the country periodically, they ultimately decide to hide from the law while never leaving Paris itself. This brings us to the other kind of flight that comprises the minor literature: the stationary flight. In Kafka’s tale, Gregor Samsa’s metamorphosis occurs entirely within his room. And it is because of this stationary flight that Gregor is able to flee the authority of the oppressive workplace; it is a flight of deterritorialization. Yet his stationary flight also produces a reterritorialization by the father, whose power at times reemerges after he goes back to work. It also wanes—is deterritorialized—as is shown by the fact that the family has to take on renters to make ends meet or in the fact that the father’s new job so consumes his life that he sleeps with his uniform on while sitting in his chair in the living room. In Truismes, both the narrator and Yvan exhibit similar stationary “flight.” Her changes into pig form are occasioned by stress more than anything: “Ces émotions...me maintenaient sous forme de cochon les trois quarts du temps” (125). Yvan tries to teach her how to manage (i.e., reterritorialize) her transformations, insisting that they can be controlled through
concentration and will (“une grande volonté” [121]). And while she experiences some moderate success, her flight is very much linked to the world around her and how she is interacting with it. Yvan’s flight, his becoming-animal, is, on the other hand, linked not to the stresses of social forces, but to the mysterious workings of the moon. His is a transformation occasioned by the physical draws of literally otherworldly forces.

Escape from any life circumstance can be, of course, difficult to effect. The intensity of becoming thus plays a prominent role. Bodily change must occur in order to become-animal. This may sound like metaphoric language. But it is important that it be understood as precisely not the case. Indeed, the very notion of metaphor, of a parallel approximation that through difference, shades new meaning into the referent, is for Deleuze and Guattari questionable because of its Aristotelian basis in imitatio. Becoming, as a deterritorializing effort, can never be an imitation: for Deleuze and Guattari, “imitation...is always territorial” (14). The body, the mind, must become other than they are in the act of escape; they must not follow a prescribed line or they will succumb to a new kind of territorialization, a new order that will impose itself upon them. The narrator’s flight in Truismes is the product of her unique and particular engagement with her environment. In its particularity it cannot rely on imitation; it must, rather, seek its own path. The flight, the metamorphosis, the change from human to pig—this movement discovers itself during its expression. It does not have the self-consciousness to pattern itself after a model. It partakes of the impulses of inventio rather than imitatio. Since lines of flight are aggregate, their positivity will enfold that which cannot be confused with the optimal or, better, the ideal. Life (becoming, becoming-animal, becoming-life) is situationally adaptive, availing itself of whatever resource materials are
at hand. Possibilities, selections, are contingent. Thus all aggregation is necessarily suboptimal—this is not the best of all possible worlds. Molecular aggregation drives in unpredictable, unremitting, and uncontainable ways. How, then, does one produce affirmation, or what I’ll here call affirmativity, within conditions generously described as suboptimal and more realistically described as damaging, territorializing, and hindering a being’s own adaptive strategies? The minor struggles to articulate itself within the major; it struggles to become. The major—form, precedent, authority—either stifles becoming or, if not perfectly successful in (re-)producing the selfsame territory of the major—induces neuroses within the minor. The ethic at stake involves the understanding of limits, thresholds, inasmuch as neuroses are manifestations of bodies struggling to adapt. In the various repeated fuites of the nameless protagonist of Truismes one finds not only neuroses, but sickness, nausea, revulsion, and disease. As Rosi Braidotti notes in her essay “The Ethics of Becoming Imperceptible,” such manifestations of illness are symptoms of limit attainment. She writes: “Your body will…tell you if and when you have reached a threshold or a limit. The warning can take the form of opposing resistance, falling ill, feeling nauseous or it can take other somatic manifestations, like fear, anxiety or a sense of insecurity” (5). For Braidotti, these “corporeal warning-signals” (5) evidence the limit cases of bodies pushed beyond their habituated affective threshold. The reason that limit cases of a body involve such a full reckoning of ethics and ethicality is owing to a Spinozist logic of capabilities (potentia, not potestas) in which one’s ability to act or not is exactly synonymous with one’s ability to dwell in ethicality. These are not parallel concerns. Rather, they are literally one and the same. The pain that Truismes’s protagonist so regularly endures—and struggles to assimilate—
figures as a physical impediment to activity. However, to the extent that she is able to integrate successfully the negativity that she encounters, she is empowered, partially. Again, Braidotti: “The ethical subject is one that can bear this confrontation, cracking up a bit without having its physical or affective intensity destroyed by it. Ethics consists in re-working the pain into (a) threshold of sustainability, when and if possible” (8).

When and if possible. Many things can happen. One can fail, of course, to rework the pain into thresholds of sustainability. Negative encounters may often prevail over positive assemblages of bodily affects in sickness, neurosis, violence, and weakness. Indeed, in extreme cases, one may succumb fully to reterritorializing powers which diminish affective capabilities. With such concerns in mind, Darrieussecq’s protagonist is, again, only partially empowered. Interestingly, and in spite of the many degradations she suffers, she does not ever throughout the narrative voice a platform or a manifesto of how to resist the many indignities she and others around her must endure. In a curious sort of way, her abilities, her strengths, lie in the abundant movements of her transforming corporeality and the kind of biosemiosis it evidences. If any sort of positivity is going to recompose itself, it is going to do so, as we shall see a bit later on, through interconnection with other beings, other becomings.

In order to be a minor literature, a text need not express itself in a minor language. Quite the contrary: it must express itself—as a minority—within the major language. The difficulty of expression resides within the force of the major as it exerts itself upon the minor. (One is reminded of Bakhtin’s centripetal and centrifugal forces of linguistic development.) To be minor, it must aim to deterritorialize the major. For Deleuze and Guattari, Kafka of course marks the clearest expression of this dynamic within literature.
They note for Kafka “the impossibility of writing” as well as the “impossibility of not writing” for a Czech Jew within the German language (16). In Truismes, these impossibilities are inflected with a new difficulty, to wit, the physical impossibility of writing when one either is, or risks, transforming into a pig. Hooves for hands, impaired memory, ideation linked to speech itself or its lack thereof: the conditions of impossibility curiously enough produce the conditions of possibility for the text itself. It cannot not be written. Truismes’s deterritorialization of French consists in large part of its use of the language to express what is not, or what has not otherwise been. The metamorphosis to and from the porcine by the human is here forged in an idiom with a certain matter-of-fact quality, evincing a kind of Wordsworthian poetics that values, above all, the language of the everyday as the most effective means for reaching and transforming consciousness. The impossibility of the transformations that the narrator undergoes is to this extent naturalized, rendered possible—indeed, more than possible—by its entrance into the French language.

The minor literature is political in intention and produces political effect. Deleuze and Guattari insist that “everything in...(the minor literature)...is political” (17, emphasis added). The restricted space of the minor literature “forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics” (17). They go on to say that the “individual concern thus becomes all the more necessary, indispensable, magnified, because a whole other story is vibrating within it” (17). Now, a lot needs to be said here. What’s curious is that, for starters, the narrator of Truismes states repeatedly that she has never understood anything having to do with politics (“Je n’avais pas d’avis sur la question, je n’ai jamais eu d’opinions bien précises en politique” [59] and “Moi je n’ai jamais rien compris à la
Indeed, unlike other more typical protagonists of a minor literature, the narrator of *Truismes* has formed scant alliances. She is estranged from her mother. The director of the *parfumerie* can hardly, as we’ve seen, be said to have her best interests in mind. The other girls working at the *parfumerie* view her with jealousy. We won’t even mention her clientele, who instrumentalize her flesh as object. Honoré, her onetime alliance, abandons her. And she is almost killed during the Aqualand fête where she eventually meets Edgar, a political party boss. Yet, this apparently apolitical position is also announced within the context of certain noteworthy alliances. A *marabout* appears periodically to monitor her metamorphosing condition. Edgar eventually allies himself with her, or better, her image, strategically, as the occasion deems. She forms certain alliances with prisoners—who later, of course, thinking she might still be a pig, want to eat her—and also with other figures such as a group of homeless people or the Arab man who cleans the hotel where she stays for a spell. But her strongest alliance is with Yvan, the wolfman. What’s remarkable about this alliance isn’t simply that it is composed of two figures who share a proclivity toward metamorphosis. Rather, it’s the curious combination of pig and wolf that makes the alliance of these animalities so conspicuous. A staple of Western fable lore of course is that of the Three Little Pigs who are in continuous struggle against the strength of the wolf (and his breath) and need to use their wits (and stronger materials) to build wolf-proof houses. Here, in *Truismes*, however, it is the alliance of wolf-man and pig-woman that forms to guard against humans, their governments, and their sweeps of the population for those deemed not part of the group. The alliance of the narrator and Yvan also keeps them fed—she with vegetables and pizzas and he with meat and pizza delivery guys. But, what is most curious about this
alliance within the context of the novel, and here explored within the rubric of the minor literature, is how the alliance is emblematic of a push toward autarchy, or self-rule, of the “communal” sort: “autarcie communautaire” (124). What does this juxtaposition of contradictory terms, this paradoxical formulation, mean? On the one hand the disparaging tone of the text toward such a political arrangement might indicate a poke at baser forms of communism that may have enjoyed moments of success in the twentieth century. On the other hand, however, it may indicate a drive of those forces within a government or an economic regime that seeks to dismantle the provision of services, both social and regulatory. It is a libertarian vision that is at stake, a reactionary political arrangement disguising itself as one intending to provide the greatest possible individual freedom without forgoing the utopian impulses of the communal. Orwell himself would be proud. The state has been enlisted to secure the highly individualistic positions of the élite (with)in the name of the community—a doublespeak par excellence. The alliances that form under the sanction of communal autarchy are at once both indicative of alliances and not. That is to say that an alliance formed within such a structure is still an alliance, but it is formed under conditions that value self-rule, i.e., that value independence from alliances. The types of assemblages may indeed represent a new order, but one cannot help but be reminded simultaneously of a reversion to, and revision of, tribal allegiances.

Transformations in the light of the kinds of alliances being discussed here—namely those secured by the state in the name of a greater good—in certain respects seem to avail themselves of the Gramscian logic of passive revolution. Gramsci, as is rather well known, affirmed in The Prison Notebooks the intellectual capabilities of all, arguing,
however, that not all “have in society the function of intellectuals” (9, italics added). All, outside of their professional obligations, carry “some form of intellectual activity…(as)…a ‘philosopher,’ an artist…(participating)…in a conception of the world…(and contributing)…to sustain a conception of the world or to modify it, that is, to bring into being new modes of thought.” Gramsci’s understanding of the Fordist logic of production grants him insight into the “problem of creating a new stratum of intellectuals” when workers spend their days having their “muscular-nervous effort” directed decidedly toward non-intellectual activities. Employing an understanding of the classic materialist influence of practice upon consciousness, he seeks to reorient the politics of a worker’s intellectual capabilities by changing her labor practices—if workers are able to engage a labor that requires more intellection, their habits of mind will transform commensurately. He wants that this effort be part of “a new and integral conception of the world.” In order to achieve such integration, he proposes that “technical education, closely bound to industrial labor,” be the foundation for organic intellectuals in a modern world. The program that Gramsci proposes shares in a democratizing impulse that valorizes the participatory role of the organic intellectual. But Gramsci is concerned by what he sees in the consciousness of the “great masses”:

The “spontaneous” consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is “historically” caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production. (12)

The scare quotes warrant commentary because of how they question the legitimacy of the decisional authenticity (and spontaneity) exhibited by the great masses. Casting doubt over the validity of the historical draws attention to the problem of history, and its
attending structures, as natural or, again, legitimate. This dynamic of “‘historically’ caused” “‘spontaneous’ consent” develops into and undergirds what he’ll later call *egemonia*, or hegemony. Hegemony, in turn, is the condition of possibility for the passive revolution.

Hegemony is “leadership”; the hegemon leads. Etymologically, *egemonia* also suggests a dynamic of domination. For a social group to win power in government, it must “exercise ‘leadership’”; the successful social group “dominates antagonistic groups, which it tends to ‘liquidate,’ or subjugate perhaps even by armed force” (57). In order to avoid such violence as is typically associated with seizing control of government—that is to say, a revolution—Gramsci comes to valorize “‘revolution’ without a ‘revolution,’ or ‘passive revolution’” (59). The passive revolution depends on what he calls “absorption” for its success. Absorption is the assimilation of one’s political adversary through non-violent means. (To be clear, Gramsci has no illusions about how domination itself may involve “decapitation” and “annihilation” of adversaries. Absorption as an aspect of “leadership…(is)...merely an aspect of the function of domination.”) The concept of absorption insofar as it concerns non-violence anticipates Althusser and his theory of ideology in which people are *always already* interpellated by power. In a passive revolution, the task of the hegemon is, with respect to intellectuals, to “exercise such a power of attraction that, in the last analysis, they end up by subjugating the intellectuals of the other social groups; they thereby create a system of solidarity” (60).

We can call this passive revolution, ideological interpellation, or manufactured consent: however we do so, the point bears on our discussion of the political in the minor literature *vis-à-vis Truismes*. What Gramsci is describing is effectively a territorializing
power (that, to be fair, he wants the left to understand so as to be able to appropriate it).

Passive revolution thus for Gramsci concerns itself with, to borrow the phrase, winning hearts and minds. I want to cast the passivity—the absolute reluctance to fight—of Darrieussecq’s protagonist’s behavior as something much different in a materialist sense, yet as something still eminently revolutionary.

At issue, rather, in her comportment is a quasi-operant affectivity that, while still pre-discursive, nonetheless reveals an itinerant impulse or mode of expression that evades capture and, as such, allies itself with the minor and its deterritorializing tendencies.

What Gramsci neglects to acknowledge is that change will happen in unforeseeable ways. In spite of best intentions to inform workers, they may reject new ideas, or, what’s of particular interest to the argument here, they may not so neatly ally themselves with other people (and their bodies). By being mindful of unpredictability (which, in certain ways, is synonymous with possibility), Truismes offers an alternative model of materialism. If the historical materialist regards the formation of consciousness as directly linked to bodily practice, Truismes’s protagonist gives us something different by providing an articulation of a body expressing itself in pre-discursive ways. Certainly, she is besieged by the predatory dynamics of a market that measures and grades flesh; but, she also presents a vision of a kind of, if not willed, then idiosyncratically achieved, naïveté. The absolute undecidability of her flesh indicates a dynamic of perpetual becoming that in itself belies the type of facile dynamic of labor determining thought as the typical historical materialist perspective would have it. The profound and continuous naïveté of the nameless protagonist instead bespeaks a dynamic of the sort that Deleuze and
Guattari, in *A Thousand Plateaus*, discuss—a dynamic of absolute mutability that they perceive in the figure of the girl. They write:

Doubtless, the girl becomes a woman in the molar or organic sense. But conversely, becoming-woman or the molecular woman is the girl herself. The girl is certainly not defined by virginity; she is defined by a relation of movement and rest, speed and slowness, by a combination of atoms, an emission of particles: haecceity. She never ceases to roam upon a body without organs. She is an abstract line, or a line of flight. Thus girls do not belong to an age group, sex, order, or kingdom: they slip in everywhere, between orders, acts, ages, sexes; they produce *n* molecular sexes on the line of flight in relation to the dualism machines they cross right through. The only way to get outside the dualisms is to be-between, to pass between, the intermezzo… (276-277)

What we see in this passage is a movement away from a conservative, hegemonic notion of power and toward a kind of revolutionary potentiality only available in movement, in the non-stasis of the passage between two points of identity. *Truismes*’s narrator’s naïvité evidences the absence of calculation (rational or not) within or during all of her transformations. The transformations instead present themselves as a kind of corporeal thinking—a thinking that is not expressed by the character’s deployment of the linguistic sign. In contrast, her use of language—in particular, of writing—appears when she is in moments of repose, able to recollect and codify experience in period of relative stasis. The deterritorialization of the French language, i.e., the *major*, thus occurs first and foremost in the flight from language itself and into a state of unintentional, non- or pre-rational change. Upon her return from transformative activity, as she begins to write she reinserts herself into the French language (along with all of the attending constraints of entrance into *logos*) as a significantly altered being. Her deterritorialization reverses to territorialization; the minor goes to work upon the major. Again, what counts is the role of the corporeal. It is the *body’s thought* that initiates not only singular transformation,
but also the revolutionary rethinking of the major in a dynamic of absolute unpredictability and non-intentionality. What we have then is a kind of thinking activity that gets “outside the dualisms” of which Deleuze and Guattari are so mindful.

Earlier in this essay we left to be later resumed a part of the argument concerning a transformative positivity that takes place with other beings. An alliance of the sort that needs to be examined here develops at the end of Truismes, where a significant relationship between animal life and the Earth emerges. This link is forged through the sense of smell. I excerpt a longer passage that deals with this link because of its significance to the matter at hand:

C’était la première fois que je voyais des arbres aussi hauts, et qui sentaient si bon. Ils sentaient l’écorce, la sève sauvage ramassée à ras de tronc, ils sentaient toute la puissance endormie de l’hiver. Entre les grosses racines des arbres la terre était éclatée, meuble, comme si les racines la labouraient de l’intérieur en s’enfonçant profondément dedans. J’y ai fourré mon nez. Ça sentait bon la feuille morte de l’automne passé, ça cédait en toutes petites mottes friables parfumées à la mousse, au gland, au champignon. J’ai fouillé, j’ai creusé, cette odeur c’était comme si la planète entrait tout entière dans mon corps, ça faisait des saisons en moi, des envols d’oies sauvages, des perce-neige, des fruits, du vent du sud. Il y avait toutes les strates de toutes les saisons dans les couches d’humus, ça se précisait, ça remontait vers quelque chose. J’ai trouvé une grosse truffe noire…j’ai croqué dans la truffe, du nez le parfum m’est entré dans la gorge et ça a fait comme si je mangeais un morceau de la Terre. Tout l’hiver de la Terre a éclaté dans ma bouche… (139)

It was the first time I’d ever seen trees that tall, trees that smelled so good. They smelled of bark, of sap gathered in at the base of the trunk, and all the slumbering strength of winter. The ground around the thick roots was loose, crumbly, as though they were kneading it as they plunged deeply into the soil. I buried my nose in it. It smelled wonderfully of last autumn’s dead leaves and broke up into small, brittle clumps scented with moss, acorns, mushrooms. I dug, I scrabbled—that odor was like the whole planet entering my body, conjuring up in me seasons, flights of wild geese, snowdrops, fruits, the south wind. All the strata of all the seasons were in those layers of humus. The scent grew clearer, closing in on something. I found a big black truffle…when I bit into the truffle, the
perfume went from my nose to my throat and made it seem as though I were eating a morsel of the Earth. All the winter of the Earth exploded in my mouth… (140-141)

The whole planet entering the body—the female body—through the sense of smell. One is reminded of Simone de Beauvoir, who in The Second Sex writes,

Flesh is no longer filth: it is joy and beauty. Merged with sky and heath, the girl is this vague breath that stirs up and kindles the universe, and she is every sprig of heather; an individual rooted in the soil and infinite consciousness, she is both spirit and life; her presence is imperious and triumphant like that of the earth itself. (376-377)

In this passage of Beauvoir, the girl becomes-earth in her encounter with it. And, as in the narrator’s description of her encounter with earth in Truismes, this is not merely a synchronic, but also a diachronic encounter: the history of life finding its way into the narrator’s body. This history is one of biological processes, naturally. And yet, as a history, this life has to be reckoned in its political implications. History is not simply an endless series of random events. Neither is it, as some strains of Marxist critique would suggest, only a record of the struggles of human beings to liberate themselves from other human oppressors. It is not teleological. What I would like to try to articulate here is a notion of history or temporality that understands the political, the human, the animal, and the Earth as all implicated in the same enormous and inexhaustible process. It’s a kind of bio-history that is not the history of biology, but instead a kind of biological duration, to use a Bergsonian term, that’s at issue. Thus it isn’t merely biological life that resonates within the nameless narrator’s body; it is its history and a kind of temporality as it pertains to the dystopic disaster produced by humans that has befallen the world as expressed in Truismes. For it is within the context of this dystopia, this world with practically no animals and with fewer and fewer children, that the shudder of a past
replete with the flourishes of life finds its way into the individual body of the narrator
through the encounter with the truffle and its odor.

Dans tout mon corps j’ai viré à nouveau avec le tournoiement de la planète, j’ai respiré avec le croisement des vents, mon coeur a battu avec la masse des marées contre les rivages, et mon sang a coulé avec le poids des neiges. La connaissance des arbres, des parfums, des humus, des mousses et des fougères, a fait jouer mes muscles. Dans mes artères j’ai senti battre l’appel des autres animaux…(140-141).

With my entire body I felt once again the spinning of the planet. I breathed with the shifting winds, my heart beat with the surging tides, and my blood flowed like a torrent of melting snows. I flexed my muscles in communion with trees, odors, mosses, ferns, and rotting leaves. I felt the rallying cry of the animal kingdom course through my body… (142)

The cry of the animals beating through her arteries. The cry that could only be occasioned by their historical defeat—a defeat which depended both on a particular ontological and historical regard of the animal world with the animals’ status as beings reckoned through the conditions that history has provided—is nonetheless evidence of a kind of endurance of an otherwise defeated life.

Animals in the Cartesian tradition, it is well known, have been regarded as soulless, and as such have been subjected to entire histories of instrumentalization, histories that have culminated in the modern factory farm, the exploitation of animal life for scientific research, and, not unimportantly, the contemporary cosmetics industry. It can be of no small coincidence that the narrator is a pig working in a parfumerie; indeed, one of the perks of her job is that she has access to all the best make-up, whether discounted by the store or stolen outright by her. The abuses of the cosmetics industry are legion. The aims of cosmetics companies have been to test their products on animals (pigs, rabbits) to see if they produce allergic reactions. The narrator of Truismes is perpetually
worried about the state of her skin. Indeed, in one particular moment, she sees a
dermatologist in order to have injections that will mitigate the disastrous state of it so that
she might put on some makeup: “Mais le soir j’ai pu me maquiller sans allergie trop
importante...” (57). Also, the marabout expresses concern that a life of exposure to toxic
chemicals (not necessarily, or merely, exposure to atomic radiation from the nuclear
power plant, “Goliath”) has produced her very state: “c’est un cas assez intéressant,
peut-être un effet de Goliath, ou alors un cocktail de saloperies diverses” (110). History
(human, or otherwise, if this can be said) and animal life are irrevocably intertwined in
duration; this ligature has had humiliating and altogether disastrous effects upon the
animal life, as can be seen not only in the production of cosmetics, but in the fact that
within the narrative the population of most animal life has been severely reduced. Still,
after all this, the foil to the dualist logics of history as oppression is available to the
narrator within her condition as something that abides. In Bergsonism, Deleuze’s careful
reading of Bergson reveals that “duration…is a case of a ‘transition,’ of a ‘change,’ a
becoming” (37, italics in the original). He goes on to say that this duration as becoming
“is a becoming that endures, a change that is substance itself” leading always to
“experience enlarged or even gone beyond.” Duration thus is a kind of motor of
multiplicity, or multiplicities, which find “phenomena unfolding in them or in the forces
acting in them” (39). As a multiplicity, duration “divides up and does so constantly…but
it does not divide up without changing in kind. It is therefore a kind of intensity deeply
imbricated in processes of becoming. Truffles, seasons, Earth—all move and divide in
the limits and multiplicities of Truismes’s narrator’s becoming. Her duration as
becoming in these multiplicities is a kind of affirmation of life’s histories—biological,
aesthetic, political—with respect to past, present, and future (becoming) temporal locations. Indeed, it is particularly affirmative in light of how she endures (in) pain throughout much of the novel. Thus, again, we are never removed from the question of ethics insofar as she perceives and lives potential. Pain as a threshold here is revealed as a site of its own kind of potentiality to the degree, again, that it is endured (or endurable) and enables becoming. As Braidotti suggests, such limits can “be seen as dynamic connectors or attractors” (11).

Duration and its multiplicities bring us to the question of the collective, which is of course of significance to any notion of a minor literature for Deleuze and Guattari. As they say in their text on Kafka, everything “takes on a collective value” (17). Nothing can be separated from “collective enunciation” (17). But Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of a collectivity here in this case is clearly understood as one pertaining exclusively to humans: “literature is the people’s concern” (18). Such a framing highlights the agency of human beings, but not their subjectivity, or better, their discrete subjectivities. The site of enunciation indeed is only a collective; the individual voice melds into it the more it is expressed. If in Kafka’s writings, the letter K “designates...an assemblage” (18), then the absence of even such a marker altogether in Darrieusseq’s text warrants exploration.

The nameless narrator is evocative of Beckett’s notion of the self—a self that is always dissolved by its self-declaration in the first person, singular pronoun (“Je,” “I”). At the moment of the enunciation of the je, one is already no longer in the realm of the je. The self, the je, dissolves, expands, combines, reforms, reassembles at the moment of its naming. The je in Darrieusseq’s text however does not adhere so neatly to the strictures of the minor literature, of the dissolving of the self into a human collectivity.
Rather, it reforms, reassembles this aspect itself of the minor literature. The becoming in *Truismes* is explored for how animals and humans and Earth are linked. A human-animal-Earth collective—humans becoming animal and, as such, linking to the histories of the planet. The self that dissolves as it is named is also produced in its recombinations with animal and Terrestrial life.

Questions of self, even if it’s a self-dissolving self, come close to, or overlap with, questions concerning the subject. Before moving too far into them, however, it’s fitting to first acknowledge that concepts of the subject and subjectivity have fallen out of favor in many critical and philosophical circles for a variety of good reasons. Chief among these are the dialectics entailed in a Hegelian subject-object paradigm in which one subsumes, sublates, or negates the other. Another objection is found in the rigidity of the subject as a Kantian category. Still, other attending humanist concerns involve the positing of the human subject as the center of terrestrial life—almost exclusively in a role in which the human (invariably in the masculine form) has absolute dominion over the earth and its creatures. All in all, there are good reasons to be wary of the concept in its historical iterations. That said, it might be hasty to discard it altogether, which is to say that there may still be other reasons for holding onto something like it. Actant, collection of intensities, agent—these are some of the ways in which a notion somewhat akin to the subject has been retained. Subjectivity as a notion unto itself might still be salvageable because of its significance to certain sub-disciplines in humanities studies such as post-colonialism and feminism. Figures as renowned and relevant as Manuel Delanda have insisted on its importance by saying precisely that “a theory of the subject is absolutely necessary” (46). But it is the work of Rosi Braidotti and her concept of *nomadic*
subjectivity that is of particular relevance to the stakes of *Truismes*, the Deleuzean and Guattarian concept of flight, and the development of the project of new materialism. In her book, *Nomadic Subjects*, Braidotti writes:

> The nomad does not stand for homelessness, or compulsive displacement; it is rather a figuration for the kind of subject who has relinquished all idea, desire, or nostalgia for fixity. This figuration expresses the desire for an identity made of transitions, successive shifts, and coordinated changes, without and against an essential unity…The nomad enacts transitions without a teleological purpose. (22-23)

The idea of the nomad of course is taken from Deleuze and Guattari. The nomad traverses terrain in an unfixed state. As they say in *A Thousand Plateaus*: “The life of the nomad is the intermezzo. Even the elements of his dwelling are conceived in terms of the trajectory that is forever mobilizing them” (380). The in-between-ness, the absence of fixity, the trajectories of flux—these are the nomadic qualities that Braidotti retains and enfolds into her thinking of the feminist subject.

Braidotti describes the “enfleshed…nomadic subject…(as)…an in-between: a folding-in of external influences and a simultaneous unfolding-outwards of affects” (3). She is very careful not to reinforce any notion of identity along with the stasis inherent in such a concept. She does say, however, that an entity is “faithful to itself” (4), but without the kind of sentimentality that fetishizes the self. Neither does her argument concern itself with the trappings of “authenticity of a self,” which she views as “a clearing house for narcissism and paranoia—the great pillars upon which Western identity predicates itself.” She continues: “It is rather a faithfulness that is predicated upon mutual sets of inter-dependence and inter-connections, that is to say sets of relations
and encounters. These compose a web of multiple relationships that encompass all levels of one’s multi-layered subjectivity” (4).

It may of course be the case that we don’t need the notion of the subject to accomplish such ideation. But, again, given the concept’s importance in feminist and feminine positionality in this chapter, we’re here employing it for its usability and possible recuperative potential for the concept itself. If, after all, new materialism is invested in rewriting (and rereading) past genealogies of thought, then the subject and subjectivity certainly should not be exempted (neither, of course, is feminism, for that matter). Darrieussecq’s protagonist’s development is predicated on the kind of faithfulness to self we’re discussing here: her transforming flesh does what it wants to do. It has, as it were, a mind of its own. Her affects emerge according to her body, its fluxes, and the relationships within which she is embedded. Try as she might, the novel is clear that “she” has no control over her body. Quite the contrary.

The body is the locus of transition, the site where the in-folding of influences and the out-folding of affects emerge and recombine in flux. One of the most important means by which such recombinations, such assemblages, are effected is through the mouth. For Deleuze and Guattari, the “mouth, tongue, and teeth find their primitive territoriality in food” (19). Here a brief foray back into Kafka—in particular, his short story, “The Penal Colony”—is in order. The reader will recall that the device of punishment in Kafka’s short story is a machine that inscribes the law into the flesh of the condemned. The procedure of this inscription as a gruesome, complicated, all-day affair, lasting until the condemned perishes. This machine that executes, in the fullest sense of the word, with the order of the law is a force of reterritorialization without peer. Its effect
is no less than to entire the body within its utterance. Once this procedure begins, no escape is possible; the only flight remaining is death as the spirit flees the body.

Describing the processes of the machine to the traveler, the officer in Kafka’s story says:

Do you understand what is going on? The Harrow is beginning to write; once it has finished the preliminary layout of the script on the man’s back, the layer of padding rolls over, and slowly turns the body onto its side to give the Harrow fresh space. Meanwhile the places that have been written raw are lying on the pad. Because of its special treatment this will stop the bleeding at once and prepare for engraving the script more deeply. Then, once the body is turned again, these teeth at the edge of the Harrow will tear the padding away from the wounds and eject it into the ditch—and there is fresh work for the Harrow. In this way it writes deeper and deeper the entire twelve hours long. (83)

The law mercilessly writes itself into the flesh. (It is important, also, to note that no trial itself ever takes place. There is only “judgment,” which is pre-judgment, as a verdict of guilty that is effected in the law’s corporeal inscription.) The body is consumed, exhausted by the law.

Food, for Deleuze and Guattari, has similar functions in the minor literature. Moreover, food’s relationship to writing is not negligible. The teeth territorialize food, territorialize bodies; that is to say, the teeth assign a single purpose to these bodies that utterly determines them in their consumption, in their exhaustion. The relationship between eating and utterance is literal: for Deleuze and Guattari, to “speak, and above all to write, is to fast” (20). They note Kafka’s “permanent obsession with food” (20). If such obsession is prominent in Kafka’s writings, it pales in comparison to the degree to which it is explored in Darrieusecq’s Truismes, whose narrator perpetually finds herself in a state of hunger: “je m’étais mise à avoir constamment faim” (12). So much eating of course has its effect on the body as she quickly notices one day when trying on her
bathing suit: “C’est là, en l’essayant, que je m’étais aperçue que mes cuisses étaient devenues roses et fermes, musclées et rondes en même temps. Manger me profitait” (14). (“It was while trying on the suit that I’d noticed my thighs had grown pink and firm, curvaceous, yet muscular. I was filling out from all that eating” [4].) This hunger not only coincides, however, with a changing of her bodily appearance, but with the possibility of pregnancy, which she is frequently loath to admit. In all instances, however, bodies are recombining. In her hunger, the body that is food is combining with her body to form a new assemblage. In her pregnancy, assuming it is real (we are able to verify on only one occasion that it is), her body is also combining with other bodies to form new bodies. As her hunger territorializes food, so too is her own body consumed. No more is this on display than in her professional life. Her body is a piece of meat destined for the satisfaction of sexual desire. Eating and sex: two of the most elemental desires of all bodily existence.

Indeed, on the one already mentioned occasion when she is at the psychiatric ward, the protagonist faces the threat of others wanting to eat her when they believe they might find her in her pig state. Yet, this episode also occurs at a moment of curious comestible comportment:

Le problème, c’est que les grilles étaient fermées par des chaînes, et qu’on n’avait plus rien à manger. Certains d’entre nous commençaient à avoir sérieusement faim. Moi, avec mes réserves ça allait, mais j’en voyais qui lorgnaient sur moi avec le même regard que les piranhas dans les égouts. Ça m’a fait peur. Alors c’est moi qui ai montré l’exemple. Je suis allée renifler les corps dans la cour et ça m’a paru tout à fait bien. C’était chaud, tendre, avec de gros vers blancs qui éclataient en jus sucré. Tout le monde ou presque s’y est mis. Moi, tous les matins, je fourrais mon museau dans les panses, c’est ce qu’il y avait de meilleur. (96)
The problem was that the gates were chained shut, and we’d run out of food. Some of us had begun to be seriously hungry. Me, with my reserves, I was okay, but I saw some others ogling me with that same look I’d gotten from the piranhas in the sewers. That put some fear into me. So I was the one who led the way. I went out to sniff the bodies in the courtyard and decided they were just the thing: warm, tender, with big white worms bursting with sweet juice. Almost everyone joined in. As for myself, every morning I stuck my snout into the bellies, that was the best part… (93-94)

It is in this moment, this cannibalistic moment in which the bodies of deceased psychiatrists are consumed, where very complex tendencies of the minor literature are on display. The territorializations of the bodies of the minority, the mentally infirm, the narrator herself, have until this point in the text succeeded. Flesh has been instrumentalized to satisfy the lusts of men. Minds and bodies have been broken down by indefinite placement within the psychiatric ward. The powers of the law have been inscribed in the flesh, in the corporeal practices, in the habitus (to use the word in the Bourdieusian sense). The bodies have been, to a real extent, consumed. Yet in their hunger they are here driven to consume the bodies of those who assign values, who territorialize them through dictates of psychological evaluation. Eating the bodies of psychiatrists is a saucy anti-Oedipal move insofar as it enacts a kind of revenge upon the practitioners. In fact, this moment occurs not too many pages after the narrator has gone to church, entertaining the possibility of communion, of consuming the body of the Christian Savior: “j’avais senti à l’époque que ça m’avait fait beaucoup de bien de manger le corps du Christ. Je voulais manger ça à nouveau” (75). (I had felt at the time that eating the body of Christ had done me good. I wanted to eat it again.) The priest, of course, refuses to give her the host. She is denied the body of Christ because the priest believes she has not confessed to him everything. The link between bodies and speaking
is here invested with a deeply religious significance. Salvation depends both on the utterance (the confession) as well as on the consumption of the body (the taking of the body of Christ). Consistent with Deleuze and Guattari’s conceptualization, the narrator’s utterance, her allegedly insufficient confession, prevents her from eating, from consuming Christ’s body.⁸

In the transubstantial order, not only is the host Christ’s body, but the Word of God is made flesh. Language isn’t just inscribed in the body, it is the body. It is around this point that much of the difficulty of our analysis here finds its orbit: the link between word and body, or word and flesh. It bears mentioning that immediately after the cannibalistic moment of delectation of psychiatrists’ bodies in Truismes, the narrator stumbles upon some books—books she at first tries to eat (but which are too dry to chew easily): “...j’ai trouvé des livres...J’ai essayé de les manger, au début, mais c’était vraiment trop sec. Il fallait des heures et des heures de mastication” (97). Resonances with Kafka, of course, abound. Here, one has in mind again “The Metamorphosis,” where the appearance of food is curiously attended by the written word. At the supper table, Gregor had the habit of reading the newspaper in the evening. Likewise, the gentlemen who come to rent a room in the Samsa residence also read their papers immediately after dining. But perhaps the most significant juxtaposition of printed word and food is when Gregor’s sister, Grete, brings him food, “a large selection, all spread out on a newspaper” (46). The food that Grete brings, of course, is rotten food because she is trying to think her way into the diet of a vermin. That it is putrid food linked here with

⁸ This refusal on the priest’s part begs the question of Who is eating whom? The body of Christ, by being consumed, would presumably territorialize the one who consumes it.
the newspaper suggests the quality of text that the newspaper itself is: it is rotten, hardly palatable for human consumption, and lacking in optimal nutritional content.

Darrieussecq’s narrator soon decides to quit trying to digest texts with her stomach and opts instead for doing so with her mind by reading them. Consuming the texts in this manner, she discovers, has the effect of diverting her attention from her hunger: “Je me suis mise à lire tous les livres que je trouvais, ça faisait passer le temps et oublier la faim parce qu’on était rapidement venu à bout des cadavres” (97). These books are, of course, housed at the site that Edgar will soon decide to napalm—a veritable cleansing of the body politic, a “foyer d’infection” (99) it is called by one of the neighbors. After all, the Knut Hamsun text is one of the texts taken from there and is a text which the authorities decide to incinerate on account of his having once received the Nobel Prize, issuing, as it were, from “l’inique régime intellocratique, capitaliste et multi-ethnique” (101).

The threat of a text (in this case, Darrieussecq’s) resides precisely in its capacity to be consumed as flesh. Such a notion, of course, needs further elaboration beyond what I’ve been able to achieve so far through Deleuze and Guattari. To delve further into the matter I will here delineate an important and relevant argument of the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose thinking on the flesh is in this writer’s humble estimation without par in terms of its richness and its profundity. In The Visible and the Invisible, in his essay entitled “The Intertwining—The Chiasm,” Merleau-Ponty begins by acknowledging the difficulty of identity—a difficulty which we’ve already addressed to a certain degree in the contemplation of the je, the self, that is always other than what it is
at the moment of its enunciation. For Merleau-Ponty, such non-identicality of anything with itself is the basis on which all things can be apprehended:

What there is then are not things first identical with themselves, which would then offer themselves to the seer, nor is there a seer who is first empty and who, afterward, would open himself to them—but something to which we could not be closer than by palpating it with our look, things we could not dream of seeing “all naked” because the gaze itself envelops them, clothes them with its own flesh. (131)

Here is a vision, if you will, of the gaze itself as the flesh that subtends all being. In such a dynamic, the subject-object distinction, the dialectic of aesthetic apprehension—indeed, dialectics itself—is stressed to the point of collapse. All that we see is literally touched by our looking—our looking which participates in the flesh, our looking which “clothes” what it sees “with its own flesh.” In a footnote, Merleau-Ponty adds that

it is that the look is itself incorporation of the seer into the visible, quest for itself, which is of it, within the visible—it is that the visible of the world is not an envelope of quale, but what is between the qualia, a connective tissue of exterior and interior horizons—it is as flesh offered to flesh that the visible has its aseity, and that it is mine—The flesh as Sichtigkeit. (131)

Flesh emerges in this light as also faithful to itself, but faithful to itself in its connection to the world. Thus to understand the flesh as a medium between subject and object is to misunderstand it fundamentally. The flesh, in the same footnote, is “the body bound to the world through all its parts, up against it...all this means: the world, the flesh not as fact or sum of facts, but as the locus of an inscription of truth: the false crossed out, nullified” (131).

The flesh as the locus of an inscription of truth. One cannot help but be reminded of Kafka and “The Penal Colony” here—or Darrieusecq’s Truismes, for that matter. Merleau-Ponty understands the flesh as cohering the world. All things in the flesh are
known before knowing they are known, they are felt by the palpating gaze because of the flesh that they share. Chaos thus is mitigated not because of the imposition of a territorializing order, but because of the shared “connective tissue.” In a dynamic reminiscent of Althusser’s concept of ideology, what is not known gets reinscribed, according to Merleau-Ponty, into the known as if it were always known, as “though it were in a relation of pre-established harmony with them, as though it knew them before knowing them” (133). The distance between bodies “is not the contrary” of proximity. Rather, it “is deeply consonant with it, it is synonymous with it. It is that the thickness of flesh between the seer and the thing is constitutive for the thing of its visibility as for the seer of his corporeity; it is not an obstacle between them, it is their means of communication” (135).

As concerns our discussion of language and flesh, the two are thus indistinguishable. In a parenthetical remark, Merleau-Ponty reveals much of the philosophical stakes of his argument:

(the immediate and dualist distinction between the visible and the invisible, between extension and thought, being impugned, not that extension be thought or thought extension, but because they are the obverse and the reverse of one another, and the one forever behind the other). (152)

How might one best understand this claim? Merleau-Ponty goes to great lengths to elaborate a description of the left and the right hand as they touch one another. While it is true, clearly, that the hands in such a scenario touch one another, only one hand can be felt touching the other hand at a time. For example, say I “feel” my right hand touching my left. As soon as I become conscious of my left hand being touched by my right—in effect, touching my right—I cease to feel my right touching my left. Naturally, the
opposite obtains. This dynamic, whose conceit is depicted, not by chance, in the touching of human flesh touching itself, is what Merleau-Ponty means when he refers to thought and extension as the “obverse and the reverse of one another.” Thought is the obverse and reverse of extension; extension is the obverse and reverse of thought. They are united in the flesh; or, perhaps better, they are the flesh. They are not, however, experienced simultaneously, nor can they be. The body (extension) is what Merleau-Ponty calls a “sensible for itself” (137). In his invocation of Husserl, Merleau-Ponty opens thinking of the body as “a being by porosity, pregnancy, or generality” in which the “body and the distances participate in one same corporeity” (149).

This pregnancy, this shared corporeity, is of course very much at issue in Darrieusecq’s Truismes. The narrator, as we’ve observed, is often undergoing various pregnancy-like experiences throughout the story—indeed, she is, as earlier remarked, one time revealed exactly as being such. Such pregnancy obviously partakes of shared corporeity. But not only is she in the throes of pregnancy or pregnancy-like bodily behavior with all the attending swellings and changes, she also appears to be participating in a shared corporeity between human and pig bodily instantiations. Her body is effectively a porosity between these two types of bodies as she metamorphoses from one to the other and back again. Her flesh is emblematic, in this respect, of the one sensible for itself flesh, the flesh that unites. The reversibility of her corporeal states is seen, for example, in the difficulty she has remembering things in the human world when she is a pig. It requires a great feat of the will to remember, say, how doors work, when she’s in the pig form—even when her life depends upon it!
But, again, this reversibility, while obtaining within the realm of all extension (hand on hand touching, for example), must also be understood in terms of extension’s relation to thought, to ideation. Merleau-Ponty writes that ideas in art, literature, and music “cannot be detached from the sensible appearances” (149); indeed, without a body, they would not be knowable: “they could not be given to us as ideas except in a carnal experience” (150). Their transmission occurs in the flesh; as such, the ideas are inscribed in it. Ideas thus as the “other side” of the physical are “the other side of language” (153). And, of course, in reversal, bodies are the other side of ideas. “As there is a reversibility of the seeing and the visible, and as at the point where the two metamorphoses cross what we call perception is born, so also there is a reversibility of the speech and what it signifies” (154). I am here somewhat de-emphasizing the very important role that sight plays in Merleau-Ponty’s conception in order to focus more on that of speech and of language. Merleau-Ponty upends basic tenets of semiotics by suggesting that the word does not merely gesture or point toward the referent. The implications for his thinking rather are such that the word not only partakes of the referent; rather, it is the referent. It is the reversibility of the object to which it refers, intertwined in the same flesh. The same is true even for musical expression: “the moments of the sonata, the fragments of the luminous field, adhere to one another with a cohesion of the parts of my body, or the cohesion of my body with the world” (152). In linguistic utterance, the “meaning is not on the phrase like the butter on the bread, like a second layer of ‘psychic reality’ spread over sound: it is the totality of what is said” (155).

Jean-Paul Sartre, in a chapter from Qu’est-ce que la littérature? entitled, unsurprisingly, “Qu’est-ce qu’écrire?” approaches an understanding not unlike that of
Merleau-Ponty as we’ve heretofore discussed. Concerning more specifically, however, the poet, he writes:

...pour le poète, le langage est une structure du monde extérieur. Le parleur est en situation dans le langage, investi par les mots ; ce sont les prolongements de ses sens, ses pinces, ses antennes, ses lunettes ; il les manoeuvre du dedans, il les sent comme son corps, il est entouré d’un corps verbal dont il prend à peine conscience et qui étend son action sur le monde. Le poète est hors du langage, il voit les mots à l’envers, comme s’il n’appartenait pas à la condition humaine et que, venant vers les hommes, il rencontrât d’abord la parole comme une barrière. Au lieu de connaître d’abord les choses par leur nom, il semble qu’il ait d’abord un contact silencieux avec elles puis que, se retournant vers cette autre espèce de choses que sont pour lui les mots, les touchant, les tâtant, les palpant, il découvre en eux une petite luminosité propre et des affinités particulières avec la terre, le ciel et l’eau et toutes les choses créées. (19-20)

For the poet, language is a structure of the external world. The speaker is in a situation in language; he is invested with words. They are prolongations of his meaning, his pincers, his antennae, his eyeglasses. He maneuvers them from within; he feels them as if they were his body; he is surrounded by a verbal body which he is hardly aware of and which extends his action upon the world. The poet is outside of language. He sees words inside out as if he did not share the human condition, and as if he were first meeting the word as a barrier as he comes toward men. Instead of first knowing things by their name, it seems that first he has a silent contact with them, since, turning toward that other species of thing which for him is the word, touching them, testing them, palping them, he discovers in them a slight luminosity of their own and particular affinities with the earth, the sky, the water, and all created things. (What is Literature? 13-14)

The employment of animalistic conceits is what concerns us here. Indeed, one is inclined not to view them as metaphors. Words as prolongements de ses sens are experience for the poet du dedans: “il les sent comme son corps.” Sartre ought to have omitted, of course, the comme, the “as if.” It is further noteworthy how the language of “reversibility” is here employed. But language for Sartre is not the reversibility of thought that Merleau-Ponty intends. Sartre puts the poet outside of the human condition,
but grants him or her direct access to the things themselves, in “silent contact,” without passing through language. Sartre doesn’t seem to have his ideation as clearly worked out as Merleau-Ponty has. Words are prolongations of the poet’s senses, but are also exempt, divorced, from the poet, who is outside of language. But, what is important for our purposes here is how this “silent contact” then finds in words, by touching them, “des affinités particulières avec la terre, le ciel et l’eau et toutes les choses créées.” For Merleau-Ponty, these affinities go one step further: they are part of the same flesh.

Of course we need to reckon, no matter how briefly here, what writing is for somebody like Sartre, and also as the attending notions pertain to the ideas of Merleau-Ponty, in order to return to the discussion of what writing is in Truismes. Truismes is a first person, quasi-journalistic account written by a narrator who is writing, if not in the state of a pig body, then in an in-between state of becoming-pig. This is announced from the beginning of the text:

Mais il faut que j’écrive ce livre sans plus tarder, parce que si on me retrouve dans l’état où je suis maintenant, personne ne voudra ni m’écouter ni me croire. Or tenir un stylo me donne de terribles crampes. Je manque aussi de lumière, je suis obligée de m’arrêter quand la nuit tombe, et j’écris très, très lentement. Je ne vous parle pas de la difficulté pour trouver ce cahier, ni de la boue, qui salit tout, qui dilue l’encre à peine sèche. (1)

But I must write this book without further delay, because if they find me in my present state, no one will listen to me or believe what I say. Simply holding a pen gives me terrible cramps. I haven’t enough light, either, so I have to stop at nightfall, and I write very, very slowly. I won’t tell you about the problems I had getting this notebook or about the mud, which dirties everything and dilutes ink that’s barely dry. (1)

It is important to observe how the state of her body bears both on her ability to write as well as on how her writing will be received. The pain her body feels as she
writes is also a factor. We’ve already remarked the role of pain and its threshold in becoming. We return to the discussion of pain here for how it figures prominently in the minor literature for Deleuze and Guattari insofar as it indicates a limit, a threshold, of language: “Language stops being representative in order to...move toward its extremities or its limits. The connotation of pain accompanies...metamorphosis” (23, italics, Deleuze and Guattari). The narrator frames the writing of her tale within the context of this pain; indeed, the story’s very telling is done within the context of the terrible cramps that holding a pen causes for her. Pain is an example of what Deleuze and Guattari refer to when they write of an intensive state. Its intensity is not necessarily entirely bound up with the degree of pain being felt; rather, its intensity has more to do with a becoming-animal. Metamorphosis of the body is a becoming-animal; so is metamorphosis of language itself that is experienced at limits such as those brought about by pain. In an echo of an earlier part of our discussion concerning imitation, we here cite Deleuze and Guattari, who write: “Metamorphosis is the contrary of metaphor...The animal does not speak ‘like’ a man but pulls from the language tonalities lacking signification; the words themselves are not ‘like’ the animals but in their own way climb about, bark and roam around, being properly linguistic dogs, insects, or mice” (22). One can add “pigs” to this rather Kafkaesque list. Language that explicitly denotes pain is quite often absent any concomitant exclamations in Truismes. But the imagery of pain abounds. The narrator constantly reports bleeding throughout the text. The unrelenting episodes of humiliation bespeak situations that must inflict psychological pain, even if they go unacknowledged by the narrator as such. Starvation, birthings that have the appearance of spontaneous abortions, severe allergic skin reactions, protuberances stuffed into orifices, repeated
near-encounters with death: any way you look at it, the narrator of Truismes exists at the limits.

These limits, in turn, are expressed in the limit state of becoming-pig. The link between form and content is here forged. The implications of such a connection are crucial for this study for it is the contention of this paper that the text itself of Truismes is a becoming-animal. It is animal writing, becoming. The text becomes animal. Its limits are achieved in what we can now understand as its literality; the text cannot be understood metaphorically precisely to the extent that language is the reversibility of the flesh. To do otherwise would be to relegate it to an ontological stasis. The intertwinings of the text’s becoming are pre-ontological. Here one dwells in the flesh that connects birds and pigs, text and body, dreams and language.

J’entendais, en haut des arbres, les plumes des moineaux se froisser dans leur sommeil précoce, leurs paupières battre soyeusement dans les derniers réflexes de la veille, et je sentais leurs rêves glisser sur ma peau avec les derniers rayons du couchant. Ça faisait des rêves d’oiseaux partout dans l’ombre tiède des arbres; et des rêves de pipistrelles partout dans le ciel, parce que les pipistrelles rêvent même éveillées. Ça m’émouvait tous ces rêves. (80)

I heard sparrows in the treetops, ruffling their feathers as they went early to bed, batting their eyelids silkily in a final reflex before sleep, and I felt their dreams glide across my skin with the last rays of the sunset. The dreams of birds were everywhere in the sky, because pipistrels dream even when awake. They were so moving, all these dreams. (76)

She feels the dreams of the birds. Exteriority enfolds interiority enfolds exteriority. The solitude of the recognition of her utter subsumption into the world, into the distances is an exclamation of her becoming-nature, of her becoming the collectivity in nature: “J’ai senti la solitude au creux de la poitrine, là, avec violence, avec terreur, avec jouissance” (80). (“I felt a violent, terrifying, delicious sense of solitude—all in the same moment”
A key characteristic of the minor literature that Deleuze and Guattari cite in their text on Kafka, the “collective enunciation” (17) is here felt in the richness of solitude that is wholly imbricated in the natural order. Such dreams heal. And the sick, the dying world that the narrator lives in needs healing; it needs to heal the wound that has forcibly separated bodies from minds, the physical aspect of the world from the mental:


In my dreams were the dreams of the birds, and the dream the dog had left for me. I was no longer so alone. I didn’t dream about blood anymore. I dreamed of ferns and damp earth. My body kept me warm. I was just fine. When the sun came up I felt the light run along my back and turn bright yellow in my head. (77)

The bright yellow in her head is the sun that Western thought has traditionally regarded as outside the head. The narrator feels it on her body and in her head. The divides, the wounds, are beginning to mend. The collective of everything is felt, intensively, in the solitude, in the singularity of becoming.

Merleau-Ponty notices something of a similar ilk. At the end of “The Intertwining—The Chiasm,” the essay of his that we’ve been engaging so far, he invokes Paul Valéry: “...as Valéry said, language is everything, since it is the voice of no one, since it is the very voice of the things, the waves, and the forests” (155). “Truismes,” or “truisms,” in English, signals banality, such as one finds in a tautology. The banality here, of course, is that language’s relationship to nature is one of, if not tautology, then a kind of enfolding. Such a claim hardly seems feasible given certain genealogies of
Marxist, formalist, structural, and even post-structural reckonings of language. And the banality of the *truisme* is in its claim to truth—to a truth that belongs to all the world and its beings. Further enriching the matter, is that a *truie* is a sow. The *truisme* at issue here shares in the *true* and its life. Truth and truisms are in the plain old flesh of the world. Indeed they are the world’s flesh and its reversibility. The term *truie* can also be deployed disparagingly to mean “femme grosse et malpropre; femme de mauvaise reputation.”⁹ A dirty, depraved, debauched woman. Darrieussecq’s text thus finds in its protagonist not only a debased, but also a summarily anti-humanist figure. She is not a man; she is not (ever fully) human. This implicit critique of humanism not only opens and animates radical potentialities in feminism; it also in a very real way rethinks it. The manifold valences of the term *truisme* thus themselves collide and combine throughout Darrieussecq’s text in order to dismantle Western Male Authority as well as to generate real, incarnate alternatives to it.

It’s worth remarking that in spite of the multiple and varied transformations of flesh that *Truismes’s* protagonist undergoes, the protagonist never ever ever becomes a man. She moves back and forth on a continuum of species, but never on one of gender. This is because to become-man, truly, is to submit; it is no longer to flee or to transform. In this way, Darrieussecq’s protagonist reveals a model for, and of, a kind of biosemiotic resistance. If *resistance* is not the right word, then a more appropriate word might be *refusal*. Hers is a kind of affirmative refusal that joins other bodies (beings, books, foods, foods, foods,

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⁹ http://www.cnrtl.fr/definition/truie
fleshes, and so on) in congregation, aggregation, and, when necessary, disaggregation in order to metamorphose. She gives us other ways of knowing—all feminine—along her continuum of transformations, throwing into relief how difference—in particular, sexual difference—is not reducible to a question of male-female dualism. Or, perhaps better, rather than valorize difference, what is at issue here is more so a question of differing. Simone de Beauvoir writes, “Woman is defined neither by her hormones nor by mysterious instincts, but by the way she grasps, through foreign consciousness, her body and her relation to the world” (761, emphasis added). A relation to the world that is contingent, in perpetual flux, necessarily creates “woman” accordingly. Beauvoir adds that “her (i.e., woman’s) destiny is not fixed in eternity,” which in the context that we are discussing reads not only as anti-teleological, but rather also as a kind of absolute and deterriorializing becoming. The “n molecular sexes” that, we’ll recall, Deleuze and Guattari find in girl becoming therefore evidence an ethics (as power to act) whose fundamental expression is in the unruled and unruly flesh. Affirmative refusal and transformation in this way guide the politics and the poetics of a new materialist response to hegemony.

But in order to more responsibly reckon such refusals and their transformations in a new materialist sense we must address the role of desire, which seems to be lurking behind many of the questions discussed so far. We’ll recall that at the beginning of this chapter, we ventured that both desire’s exhaustion and its disconcealment in a redeeming valence were at issue in Darrieussecq’s text. Questions concerning desire’s dynamic obtain in localized (the body), societal, and indeed global realms. Desire itself is revealed to be a kind of essential material whose control is most sought after by society.
Thus what is to follow here in the concluding movements of this chapter will be a reckoning of desire, society (and its organization), and biopolitical control.

To begin then toward our conclusion, let us consider, first, reproduction. Matters of reproduction (both sexual and non) are implicated in the production of desire in *Truismes*, as are how these bear on questions of societal control. A couple of quotations from Marx concerning production and reproduction will frame our discussion. In *Capital, Vol. I*, Marx writes:

> The conditions of production are at the same time the conditions of reproduction. No society can go on producing, in other words, no society can reproduce, unless it constantly reconverts a part of its products into means of production...All other circumstances remaining the same, the society can reproduce or maintain its wealth on the existing scale only by replacing the means of production which have been used up—i.e. the instruments of labor, the raw material and the auxiliary substances—with an equal quantity of new articles. (711)

The second passage, much shorter, reads: “If production has a capitalist form, so too will reproduction” (711).

In 1856-1857 Karl Marx\(^{10}\) pens *The German Ideology* in order to articulate what he’ll call a “materialist conception of history.” To do so he initiates a polemic with a group of intellectuals known as the Young Hegelians, whom he finds to valorize erroneously “conceptions, thoughts, ideas” as “products of consciousness” with an “independent existence” (149). The critique that Marx will go on to make in *The German Ideology*, in brief, is that the Young Hegelians do not ground their concepts in the actual workings of material reality. Marx wants to keep it real, if you will, by looking at actual

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\(^{10}\) *The German Ideology: Part I* is considered by many to have been co-authored by Marx and Friedrich Engels. Other observers such as Robert C. Tucker, however, remark that because of how *The German Ideology* develops Marx’s own “Theses on Feuerbach,” one may “infer that it was written by Marx” (Tucker, 146).
historical processes in order to determine how social reality operates rather than superimpose ideas pre-construed in the ether of abstraction. To this end he proposes to examine “real premises” from “real individuals” (149). Vital to Marx’s materialism is a thorough investigation of how human beings reproduce their material life, which necessarily requires a critique of how human beings organize this production. In a proto-existentialist gesture—existence preceding essence—Marx avers that what human beings produce—and how they produce it—determines what they are. As with Gramsci and the figure of the intellectual, it’s the actual necessary interactions with material reality and how those interactions appear to be organized that themselves determine what a being is. In another proto-existential passage later in the text, Marx argues against what would be platonic essences of living beings. He writes, “The ‘essence’ of the fish is its ‘existence’...the ‘essence’ of the freshwater fish is the water of a river” (168). The essence of the fish changes, of course, once the water is polluted by industry and the fish dies. A being’s medium (or mode) of existence—here, specifically, how it materially reproduces its life—is its essence.

Marx acknowledges, but ultimately doesn’t concern himself too much with, the role of biological reproduction in living beings. He is generally more interested in material reproduction, by which he means the organization of society in order to secure those material needs that allow it to replenish itself from one day to the next so that it can continue to operate. Food, shelter, clothing: these are the first material needs. The ways in which society organizes itself to ensure the continuous restoration of bodies forms for Marx the ground of material reproduction. Throughout The German Ideology Marx locates such societal organization in what he calls the “division of labour.” Important for
our purposes here, Marx observes that “division of labour…was originally…the division of labour in the sexual act” (158). Marx doesn’t explore the act of sexual reproduction beyond this; instead he turns to a critique of the division of labor in order to trace the historical development of distinct classes who perform different functions of labor within society (before ultimately arriving at a critique of private property, which for him is synonymous with divided labor). Nonetheless it is worth remarking the foundational role of the sexual act in the organization of society that Marx correctly, if somewhat offhandedly, observes. It is also worth remarking that for Marx, once labor is divided—that is to say, once individual human beings perform daily only the same occupational tasks—one’s labor becomes “an alien power opposed” (160) to that person. Once you are a mechanic or a baker or a computer programmer or a professor, your labor is alienated, by which we mean that it no longer belongs to you; you are required to sell it on the open marketplace. The person or group who purchases your labor is your employer. The price for which we all sell our labor, of course, is known as the wage or the salary.

In his 1970 essay, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” Louis Althusser takes up Marx’s question of societal reproduction and adds a new dimension to it. Althusser states, “The ultimate condition of production is…the reproduction of the conditions of production” (85). For Althusser, it isn’t simply that a society needs to reproduce itself; it needs to reproduce the conditions necessary for it to be able to reproduce itself. These conditions invariably are ideological. For Althusser, we’ll recall that ideology is not synonymous with political bias. Ideology is not partisanship. Rather, ideology is that which one comes to do reflexively, as a matter of second nature.
Ideology for Althusser is what today we might call “common sense.” As is well known, Althusser is critical of the educational system (as well as the military, the church, the family, mass communications, cultural production, and so on) for precisely this reason—namely, how education instructs its subjects to submit uncritically (or, perhaps better, pre-critically) to the rules of the established order. The established order that seeks to reproduce itself is, of course, that of the bourgeoisie (or investment class).

Bourgeois ideology, however, no longer tends toward the order that it once may have had. It now tends toward—and indeed outwardly professes—a certain orderlessness that it calls liberalism or the free market. Proponents of this ideology, however, don’t appreciate how they undermine the alleged freedoms of their doctrine: They say that markets are self-regulating; and in so saying they concede that there is an order at stake. Gramsci, of course, was among the first to point out that an absence of order is still a kind of order. In *The Prison Notebooks*, he avers that “laissez-faire” economic policy is a “form of State ‘regulation’ introduced and maintained by legislative and coercive means. It is a deliberate policy, conscious of its own ends…Consequently, *laissez-faire* liberalism is designed to change…the economic programme of the State itself—in other words the distribution of the national income” (160).

So, what we have here is a program of order masquerading as orderlessness supplanting a prior order. The question under consideration is to what extent this order is any longer one worthy of designation as societal. Here by “society” we mean—and these definitions are taken straight from *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary*—(1) “companionship,” (2) “a voluntary association of individuals for common ends,” (3) “an enduring and cooperating social group,” and, curiously enough, (4) “an interdependent
system of organisms or biological units” as in “a society of organs” or a “society of cells.” Let us at least provisionally say that to the extent that the qualifications of society as outlined here are attenuated, such attenuation indicates by definition a withering of society.

In *Truismes* the unnamed narrator’s tale begins with her looking for work, which, as we know, she is finally able to secure at what is politely called a *parfumerie* (a perfume shop) after the director of the firm has had his way with her sexually during her job interview. The power that this director has over her is indicative of a furthering of the Foucauldian genealogy we discussed at the beginning of this essay. Just as *letting live* became *making live*, now *making live* has become *making fuck*. Just as power that once sought to *materially* reproduce society realized that it had to reproduce the *ideological* conditions of its reproduction, so now power endeavors to control the organs of biological reproduction themselves. Rape is the narrator’s initiation into this power, as her work at the *parfumerie*—effectively that of a prostitute—bears witness. As such, we see in her the collapse of two distinct categories—production and reproduction—into one activity. Her labor, her productivity, is the sexual servicing of her firm’s clientele. And this activity brings with it the repeated risk of pregnancy. Just to be clear, the novel is not simply about how (predominantly) male power endeavors to control the female body—in and of itself this would not constitute a new thesis. The novel’s intervention has to do with both the conditions of this control as well as with what happens to the biological material of sexual reproduction. The conditions here are those of a dying planet, and thus the control over sex is without avail—the act of sexual reproduction in the novel is barren, in spite of the limitless ways and instances that the body is prodded and poked.
The narrator miscarries repeatedly and thus is unable to carry to term any of her pregnancies. In this context—a context, we’ll recall, in which there are “fewer and fewer babies”—unproductivity takes on a new valence. Unproductivity is the absence of biological reproductivity and thus the absence, or pending absence, of life itself. If the sought product of activity is life, then life has become capital.

The lesson here is not simply that capital needs life in order to reproduce itself; rather it is that capital has figured out ways of reproducing itself without reproducing society. It can now bypass society and go directly to life. Capital (and the attending processes of its own reproduction) no longer needs to worry about reproducing society because of its totalizing ideological inscription into “common sense.” Readers of Adorno and Horkheimer are also aware of such ideational mechanisms that institute unassailable regimes of knowledge. Let us recall that their critique of enlightenment\(^\text{11}\) revealed how enlightenment reduces all forms of knowledge to those of rational calculation. For our purposes here, it’s not just that all elements of life can be administered or controlled to the extent that they lend themselves to such rationalistic processes; it’s that these and only these modes of inquiry now orient one’s approach to all earthly materials.

In *Truismes*, the characters have all fully assimilated the ideational logic of post-societal dystopia—it is not for them to imagine a world beyond the one they inhabit. Even the figure of Edgar, a politician whose campaign slogan, “*Pour un monde sain*” (“For a Healthy World”), in purporting to imagine a different world, only more vehemently reaffirms the pieties of biopolitical control. After all, for a worker to be

productive, she must be healthy. But like all campaign promises, this one too cannot be fulfilled. The world, pushed beyond its limits, may be too sick to heal. And thus the biopolitical motif of encouraging health, which of course is also very much with us in our own contemporary world, is in the novel a vain gesture. The depressive commentary holds true in our actual society: our world is replete with legions (of images) of fit and productive Western bodies with gym memberships and Health Savings Accounts—bodies glorified spectacularly by the Culture Industry—yet these bodies live and work in a time of accelerating species extinction around the globe.\textsuperscript{12}

In spite of the grim dystopic imagery and the regimes of (post-)societal control that obtain, we’ve seen how movements of flesh, flight, and deterritorialization respond to (and refuse) orders of territorialization that have been generated in processes of becoming-male. They have done so by a kind of faithfulness to self that we discussed earlier in this essay. This self-faithfulness, we can now begin to see, is part and parcel of desire itself, thus revealing and asserting desire’s role—its processes and its expression—in most, if not all, of the concerns laid out here. If desire’s attempted capture by power (potestas) can be seen and codified in the directive to make fuck, then desire evades this capture in flesh that transforms and bodies that either flee (or exhaust themselves). Its transformative power is a potentia whose possibility is summoned by its relationality.

In Part Four of his \textit{Ethics}, Spinoza discusses desire, stating in Part Four’s Appendix that “All of our endeavours, i.e. desires, follow from the necessity of our nature in such a way that they can either be understood through that nature alone, as its

\textsuperscript{12} See study by Gerardo Ceballos, Paul R. Ehrlich, and Rodolfo Dirzo for the most current research on mass extinction (and its acceleration).
proximate cause or else in so far as we are a part of Nature, a part which cannot be conceived adequately through itself and apart from other individuals” (281, italics added).

His fourth appended statement is also worth citing here. It reads: “Our actions, that is, those desires which are defined by human power, i.e., by reason, are always good, but the rest of our desires can be both good and bad.”

It is the power that is within the human—indeed more precisely in Darrieussecq’s text, the anti-human—that is “a part of Nature” that affects the goodness or the badness of the action that follows. It is a power within a being that is for Spinoza “good.”

Darrieussecq’s protagonist’s transformations therefore are inherently good. They are not only efforts to escape colonizing tendencies of control upon the body; rather, they are a generative force of productive capabilities in and of themselves. Equally important for our purposes here is also that such desire “cannot be conceived adequately through itself and apart from other individuals.” Spinoza thus indicates how desire emerges in absolute relationality to other bodies. It is never wholly self-generating. What this means for Darrieussecq’s *Truismes* is that its protagonist’s desire not only emerges in relationship to other beings, but desire’s absence is the product of territorialization decreasing one’s power to act. What is “bad” here are diminished capabilities. One may still have bad desire, particularly if that desire hinders one’s or another’s ability to act. In the seventh appended statement, Spinoza adds (we excuse, in the gendered language of his day) the following:

> It cannot happen that man is not a part of Nature, and does not follow its common order. However, if he dwells among individuals which are such that they agree with the nature of man, by that very fact a man’s power of
acting is helped and fostered. But if, on the other hand, he lives among individuals which are such that they are far from agreeing with his nature, he will hardly be able to adapt himself to them without a great change in himself. (283)

*Without a great change in himself.* Some desire is good; some is bad. Change—especially considerable change—occurs when one is situated among the bad desire of others. The flight that *Truismes*’s nameless narrator thus experiences is at once affirmation and refusal. It is the absolute transformativity that takes place at the threshold of bad desire (i.e., pain). Adaptation, to refer to Spinoza’s term, is thereby transformation’s affirmation in the face of (possibly) diminishing capabilities.

If, as Spinoza says, the “desires…defined by human power, i.e., by reason, are always good…the rest…can be both good and bad,” it begs the question of whether bad desire is ever defined by a human power at all. Capital’s role is to prompt activity by insinuating itself into the materiality of desire. As Deleuze says in “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” the new capitalism “no longer buys raw materials and no longer sells…finished products…it buys finished products or assembles parts” (6). The “parts” being assembled are indeed the bodies of desire artificially maintained by the life support of society’s effort at control. Darrieussecq’s protagonist sells services, of course, of the sexual sort. Importantly, no matter how much she gives of herself, how much she labors, she is never free (or freed). Indeed she never has enough to meet even her most basic needs like food and rent. Deleuze is aware of this dynamic in (post-)societies of control: “Man is no longer man enclosed, but man in debt.”

What we see here is the adaptive nature of capitalism, too, and its ability not only to preserve itself, but to territorialize, to inscribe itself into the innermost areas of being.
Revealed is how capitalism is both a humanism and a post-humanism. It’s a humanism because of how it historically locates the center of its activities around the exploitation of human labor and activity. And, of course, capital is a humanism because of how it allies itself with rhetoric of progress, perfectibility, and rationality; indeed, humanism prides itself precisely on its role in creating civilization (and thus society). Capitalism is a post-humanism to the degree that it continues to find and refine non-human means of wealth extraction from other humans and non-humans alike. It so happens that Darrieussecq’s protagonist falls perfectly as one entity into the category, if you will, of “human and non-human alike.” Even the narratorial voice gives us every indication of the fluid positionality that roams between the two points of human and non-human: the human narrator is displaced, revealed to be (becoming) animal. A humanist format par excellence would assume unquestioningly that a human has written the document. Yet in this text, the assumption cedes to the emergence of the non-human, occasioning a shift that consciously decenters human prominence in thinking through the human-caused difficulties so plentiful in a dystopic world. The human (again, as Humanist and male) is thus removed not only from its claim to universalism, but in its claim to being able to contribute possible solutions to the problems that abound. As Braidotti writes in The Posthuman,

The human of Humanism…spells out a systematized standard of recognizability—of Sameness—by which all others can be assessed, regulated and allotted to a designated social location. The human is a normative convention, which does not make it inherently negative, just highly regulatory and hence instrumental to practices of exclusion and discrimination. The human stands for normality, normalcy and normativity. It functions by transposing a specific mode of being human into a generalized standard, which acquires transcendent values as the


human: from male to masculine and onto human as the universalized format of humanity. (26, italics original)

The post-humanism of *Truismes* marks precisely what Braidotti would call “a move beyond…lethal binaries” (37).

Desire is a material capable of moving beyond the lethal binaries, the dualisms, the dialectics only to the extent that it understands itself *not* as an effort to (re)territorialize the other, but rather as an affirmation to deterritorialize the self. This dynamic of a self exceeding itself as capability, as *ethic*, is the ethos of biopoetics, of life and all of its attending forces and relationalities ceaselessly moving beyond the capture of the biopolitical and its position as *major*. New materialist desire thus is definitively not about conquest, domination, or control. It is about loss of self and becoming other. Biopoetics is the affirmative process of life’s *making escape*. Of *devenir-fuite*. Of becoming-flight. Desire’s essence is in its relationality to others, as we saw in our discussion of Marx. However, a new materialist desire doesn’t simply posit, like existentialism and its forerunners, that existence preceding essence. Rather, new materialist desire understands *desire itself as essence*. And thus essence itself is self-othering, perpetually, in desire.

The post-societal, eminently humanist, and dystopic dynamic that we’ve thus far examined has, again, referents in recent history. One need not strain much to find active promotion of societal disintegration by ruling (major) forces. A world without society, a world of scattered, atomized individuals, is exactly what neoliberal thought has most encouraged from its outset. Margaret Thatcher once (now rather famously) said in an interview with *Woman’s Own* magazine that “there is no such thing” as society:
“I think we have gone through a period when too many children and people have been given to understand ‘I have a problem, it is the Government’s job to cope with it!’ or…‘I am homeless, the Government must house me!’ and so they are casting their problems on society and who is society? There is no such thing! There are individual men and women and…there are families and no government can do anything except through people and people look to themselves first.”

Thatcher of course is right precisely to the extent that her neoliberal project would prevail in the dismantling of society. Post-society (i.e., after society), there remains control, of course, as Deleuze said. However, it’s curious, above all, the degree of cruelty that Thatcher would go to by singling out children and the homeless in order to make her point that society doesn’t exist—curious as it bears on our discussion here for how she zeroes in on a kind of nomadic figure. She doesn’t bother in this interview with attacking labor and health rights (which themselves might have been an easier and more generalized site of disdain given her politics). Rather, it’s as if the most vulnerable, the most exposed, those who most require the protection, generosity, and solidarity that society might offer, point to the truest weakness of Thatcher’s position. And like any effective politician, Thatcher attacks weakness, perceived or otherwise, in what she considers to be her adversary. But why such fear, such scorn? Worry that the meek shall inherit the earth? A response in light of this chapter’s discussion suggests that Thatcher may be aware, and therefore harbor a kind of fear, of the potential that is available in absolute vulnerability. Vulnerability is perhaps the most profound (pre-)condition for community. Exposed vulnerability reveals the need for assemblages, community, new

13 http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106689
groupings, new recombinings of potential. And so what Thatcher does is direct her contempt directly toward the most delicate and tender site of possibility.

The knife has already plunged in up to the hilt. We are all vulnerable. And while many signs within Darrieussecq’s novel and within global society at large point to destructive futures—indeed the seeds of which are already within current global arrangements—there remain ways of thinking, relating, and becoming, which, if properly cared for, can regenerate potentials.
Chapter 2

New Materialist Violence and (Im)Possible Life: Virus, Heat, and Democratic Space in Carlos Saura’s *La Caza*

I. Begin with a Foucauldian Frame

Carlos Saura’s 1966 masterpiece *La caza* opens with shots of *hurones enjaulados*, caged ferrets poised with an attentiveness that strains beyond the confines of their box. These *hurones* will be deployed later in the film during a rabbit hunt in which they are released to enter the rabbit warrens in order to “ferret out”—or, if more successful, attack and maim—the creatures that are object of the hunt. In this opening shot, the sound of a tinkling bell placed around the necks of these caged ferrets rings with a sonic depth and insistence evocative of a chain gang, their shackles clanging/clamoring like those of prisoners being shepherded from one work site to another, or, if inside, from one cell to another. The ferrets in this first scene at various moments themselves stand, as a human might, on two legs, their sharp claws grasping the wire mesh that assures their captivity. The shot lasts only one minute and twenty-four seconds, but it powerfully frames omnipresent forces at work in the film—violences of potential and forces subtending all activities and interactions. The film announces itself as The Hunt, the assumption being that the chase is yet to come. But there is more than one hunt at stake here, more than one violence. Viewers of the film of course know that it ends with a violence of human characters shooting, after having decimated a field of leporid prey, each other. Violence works throughout this *obra maestra* in ways, as I will endeavor to show in this chapter,
that avail themselves of new materialist realities—of the possible, the biological, and the inter- (and intra-) subjective—in order to generate a thinking whose stakes are nothing short of democracy and sovereignty. Why would a film generally held to be an allegorical examination of Nationalist brutality inflicted by Franco upon Republican forces during the Spanish Civil War\(^{14}\) be of relevance to the question of democracy? Because of what Giorgio Agamben, in *Homo Sacer*, refers to as an “inner solidarity between democracy and totalitarianism” (10). So, let it suffice to say that the argument concerning violence that I will propose will not enter into a historical reading that examines analogous particularities of persecuted political groups in Francoist Spain\(^{15}\); instead, this chapter, through careful reading, will attempt to reckon with a much larger field of violence that the film gestures toward—a field beyond the exertions of intersubjective force in which one being seeks to impose its will upon another for the purpose of producing an order. Rather, such a field as I’m here proposing includes what we might provisionally call what Walter Benjamin refers to as the distinction between “mythic” and “divine” forms of violence. To the extent that a secular understanding of their conceptualization is available to the Western mind, I will employ them.

First, a brief refresher or summary (for those who have not seen it) of the principal characters of the film, along with their circumstances and dynamics of interaction. *La caza* tells the story of four men, three of whom—José, Paco, and Luis—

\(^{14}\) *La Guerra Civil española*, or Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), erupted after the Nationalists’ failed coup attempt led by Francisco Franco against the Republican government. The Republican side, generally leftist, was comprised of laborers, secularists, socialists, anarchists, communists, some members of the educated middle class, and fighters from the International Brigades. The Nationalist side consisted of conservatives, fascists, clergy, Falangists, monarchists, landowners, and military support from Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy.

\(^{15}\) See Guy Wood, “Stásis y peste en *La caza* de Carlos Saura.”
are former Nationalist soldiers who fought in the *Guerra Civil*. The fourth member of the party, Enrique (or Quique), is Paco’s brother-in-law. Quique is young, fresh-faced, untroubled. His innocence and wholesomeness offer a striking counterpoint to the bitter and repressed anger and sadness of the three older men. The older men are in different ways and to varying degrees all weathered, neurotic, and cynical. José has arranged the hunting excursion; his life is in crisis. He and his wife have separated and he now finds himself in considerable debt. To his peers’ incredulity, he has a young and, we’re led to believe, rather attractive girlfriend that he worries he won’t be able to hold onto. Luis, whose wife has also left him, is an alcoholic who is seen struggling from the beginning of the film to maintain an appearance of adaptation to the world. He escapes regularly into the fantasy world of pulp science fiction, which he is seen reading at various moments throughout the film. Paco is a vain\(^{16}\) and cunning homicidal fascist with Darwinist strong-over-weak politics that are abundantly evidenced during the film. Early in the film, he declares: “*La caza es como todo. El pez grande come el chico.*” (Hunting is like everything else. The big fish eats the little fish.)\(^{17}\)

The hunting trip will begin amicably enough with the four stopping at a bar for a drink before heading out to José’s land, where the hunt will take place. However, strains in the characters’ comportment are already showing. Luis heads in quickly to have a drink and, indeed, orders his second when the other three arrive. Paco apologizes for having invited Enrique, but justifies it by saying that it was necessary to do so in order to

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\(^{16}\) Sally Faulkner’s excellent essay, “Ageing and Coming of Age in Carlos Saura’s *La caza,*” pays particular attention to Paco’s vanity (along with that of the other characters) in various scenes that reveal a frustration with and denial of ageing among the hunting party.

\(^{17}\) Translations in this chapter are my own.
secure access to his father-in-law’s Jeep. In the bar, José is shown taking pills because of a stomach condition. He is Luis’s boss at work and expresses irritation with Luis when the latter wants to order a third cognac. José, we learn later in the film, has organized the trip for the purpose of asking Paco for money. In general, there is a dynamic of distrust between the three older men; as the film advances, old suspicions will reemerge and alliances among them will shift. At the farm resides the keeper, Juan, along with Juan’s mother and his niece. The mother is bed-ridden, infirm. The niece, Carmen, is an unkempt pre-teen who evinces the timid innocence and curiosity of a youth on the cusp of puberty.

To return to and continue our interrogation of the ferrets in the film’s opening sequence, it is not only significant that they are caged: within the cage they are separated by a solid wood partition. They are unable to see or interact with each other. They can look forward and, being confined by wire mesh, they can be seen. From the film’s start, the viewer occupies a kind of panoptic positionality vis-à-vis the caged animals. Thus in La caza, a kind of Foucauldian discipline is foretold in the figure of the caged ferrets. The ferrets quite literally, if we consider the apparatus of the film, do not know who is or will be viewing them. (To be clear, the panopticon-like dynamic initiating the film is not operating in such a way as to ensure compliant, docile ferret “subjectivity.” The cage itself accomplishes this.) What is important for our discussion here is the evocation of a dynamic of surveillance that depends in the first instance on partitioning.

In Discipline and Punish, Foucault’s chapter on panopticism recounts the practices and procedures for partitioning of a city during a time of plague. The following
measures were recommended, as described in a seventeenth century decree found in the *Archives militaires de Vincennes*:

- a strict spatial partitioning: the closing of the town and its outlying districts, a prohibition to leave the town on pain of death, the killing of *all stray animals*; the division of the town into distinct quarters, each governed by an intendant. Each street is placed under the authority of a syndic, who keeps it under surveillance."

(195, my italics)

Panopticism is an order of surveillance. And as a means to maximize the effects of surveillance, a town needed to be internally divided and then entirely closed off from the outside. No one but the intendants, the syndics, and other guards were allowed to move about the town; all others needed to remain in their place. “Inspection functions ceaselessly. The gaze is alert everywhere” (195). Plague is met with regulation. Foucault writes that the function of such order is “to sort out every possible confusion: that of the disease, which is transmitted when bodies are mixed together…” (197). In contrast to the carnival in which bodies mingled, identities were masked, and hierarchy was subverted, the plague was a time of strict regimentation, absolute observation, and legal enforcement. Plague and discipline go hand in hand. The leper gave rise to “rituals of exclusion” (198). As the plague generated “disciplinary projects,” it called for “multiple separations, individualizing distributions, an organization in depth of surveillance and control, an intensification and a ramification of power.”

Foucault’s analysis of the order imposed to control and contain plague underscores one curious measure: namely, that all stray animals be killed. *La caza*, in light of Foucault, begs the question of the significance of a surfeit of killing of animals (and, indeed, also human beings) such that one wonders about the role of plague in the film. On the most obvious level, plague appears in the affliction suffered by the rabbit
population that dwells in the arid Toledo landscape. The viewer quickly learns that many of the rabbits are infected with myxomatosis, a highly contagious and fatal viral disease that rabbits are particularly susceptible to. That the rabbits in the film are infected with such a deadly affliction cannot be regarded as incidental. Myxomatosis quickly takes hold of a rabbit’s physiology, causing fever, abundant skin tumors, and blindness. A rabbit thus blighted typically dies within 14 days of contracting the virus. Of interest for our purposes here is how the virus had been used to manage what were considered to be excessive rabbit populations in France in the 1950s. It has been estimated that around 90% of Continental Europe’s rabbit population was subsequently destroyed by this biological intervention. Spain’s rabbit population was no different.

At first, it should be noted, José somewhat curiously expresses doubt about the existence of myxomatosis. Juan has suggested that he is trapping rabbits in order to get rid of the sick ones, but José opines to himself in voice-over that Juan is most likely stealing rabbits from his land (to eat them, presumably). However, as they enter the hunting terrain during the first hunt, Cuca, the dog, discovers a rabbit body, dead from disease. All quickly realize that the presence of myxomatosis is indeed real; in this way, doubt of the virus is upended. José, it turns out, knows a bit about the history of myxomatosis, telling the others that it was introduced by a French doctor, “Devel o Dein.” The presence of the disease in the film operates on a biopolitical plane of

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18 The opening credits state: “Esta película ha sido realizada en una finca acotada para la caza del conejo en el término de Seseña (Toledo) y en el pueblo de Esquivias (Toledo).” (This film was shot on location at a rabbit hunting preserve in the district of Seseña [Toledo] and in the town of Esquivias [Toledo].)
20 The doctor to whom José refers in this scene is Dr. Paul-Félix Armand-Delille, who introduced the disease onto his own estate to eradicate a rabbit population in 1952. The first myxomatosis experimentations on rabbit populations took place, however, in Australia in 1938.
management of a population. Or, perhaps more precisely, we might even call this plane thanatopolitical to the extent that thanatopolitics is the administration, not of life, but of death because the disease has entered the rabbit population as a means of control. Thus there would seem to be two planes of power commingling in the film: (1.) Sovereign power, as seen in the outright taking of life; and (2.) Biopower, as evidenced in the regulatory control of a population and, at times, the disallowing of life to the point of death. I will have more to say on these two types of power below.

The analogy that I wish to draw here by discussing myxomatosis is not the obvious one of Darwinist, strong-over-weak politics in which, from the Falangist perspective, the stronger side prevailed over an enfeebled Republican side on account of the latter’s inherent weakness. Rather, I wish to suggest that a kind of disease state—infirm, wounded, vulnerable—is operant within the field of human action in the film (as it is within the rabbit population). Juan, the property’s keeper, is cojo (crippled) and walks with a limp. Paco despises him: “No soporto los tullidos. Me dan escalofríos.” (I can’t stand cripples. They give me the willies.) “Prefiero morirme antes de quedarme cojo o manco.” (I’d rather die than be without an arm or a leg.) Juan’s mother, who, when we see her is lying in bed, is also sick. Juan will later ask José for money so that he can buy medicine from her. (José, who is having financial difficulties, will refuse. Again, we should note, a biopolitical dynamic is at stake here precisely insofar as life will be disallowed to the point of death.) Above all, the Nationalist ex-soldiers present what can judiciously be called a kind of diseased psychology. Their ongoing distrust of one another and their paranoia in general reflect states of deep narcissism; indeed, the two, paranoia and narcissism, go hand in hand. After the first hunt (about which more later),
as the men repose beneath a tent, Luis in voice-over wonders to himself, “¿Y si todos tuviésemos la myxomatosis?” (And if we all had myxomatosis?) The use of the imperfect subjunctive here does not only indicate a hypothetical; it also indicates a kind of inquiry into the reality of a likely diseased state that the men might be in. “What if we all had myxomatosis?” could mean (1.) What if we all were to catch myxomatosis? and (2.) What if, unbeknownst to us, we all (already) had myxomatosis? Luis’s question thus strikes at the heart of the diseased reality that the men inhabit, but are practically incapable of realizing. Luis does not answer his own question. My provisional response, however, is that Luis is onto something. And it isn’t simply that the men are all debilitated by a kind of exogenous disease, but rather that the disease state is part of life itself. It is its own life; it is life.

To conclude these opening, primarily Foucauldian remarks concerning ferrets and rabbits that will frame our discussion of the film, towards the end of the film the ferrets are deployed by the hunters in order to drive subterranean rabbits out of their warrens. As the camera pans over several rabbit burrows, the men arrive. Juan takes a ferret out of its cage and, oddly, spits into its mouth. Paco turns in disgust and asks José if he is certain that there are no exits (“¿Seguro que no hay salidas, José?”), presumably referring to the rabbit burrows. The Foucauldian dynamic of surveillance remains at issue here. The ferrets can be surveilled when released to do their work on the hunters’ behalf, even should they disappear from sight, not only visually but also auditorily by the bells collared around their necks. The ferrets, in turn, act as agents who condemn and occasion death within a diseased rabbit population. There is no room for exclusion in this dynamic; there are no exits. All members of the population are equally sentenced. After
a ferret is released into the warren, Paco stares at Juan, who has his ear to the mouth of the burrow, and remarks to himself that the cripple looks like a ferret. ("El cojo tiene cara de hurón.") Inside the warren, the ferret seizes upon a rabbit, who emits a heart-rending shriek. It’s a scene of terrible animal-on-animal violence as the rabbit struggles to escape. Aware of the violence, a different, adjacent rabbit tries to flee. When it emerges outside the burrow, it is clear that this particular rabbit is diseased. José tells Enrique not to shoot it for this reason. ("No dispare. Es un conejo apestado.") But Enrique shoots anyway and misses. The rabbit, slinking away, takes a few more steps before Enrique’s next shot obliterates it. Meanwhile, the struggle between the ferret and the other rabbit continues in all of its wretched brutality. When this rabbit finally gets free and runs out of its burrow, closely pursued by the ferret, Paco shoots it, killing both the rabbit and seemingly wounding the ferret. José yells at Paco not to shoot anymore ("¡No tires! ¡No tires!"); but, Paco, taking aim directly at the ferret, shoots and kills it. The unsparing violence of the scene, the two animals twisting and twitching in agony, is so total and profound that it sinks the viewer into despair.

In the earlier hunt, which took place without the ferrets and whose violence is so relentlessly disturbing that I will not document it here, an even more exhaustive dynamic of exposure and vulnerability obtained. The prey are driven out by the hunters into a desolate, open terrain where, again, there is no room to hide. Given the arid terrain of the Toledo province, the field of the hunt is one of absolute visibility. Let it suffice to say that in this scene, which lasts about three and a half minutes, the massacre is, correspondingly, total. Such is the dynamic of panopticism, which is to say that the threat of violence that subtends it is real. Let us recall that for Jeremy Bentham’s
panopticon, visibility was entire in its effect, which was “to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (*Discipline and Punish* 201). All of the prisoners in the panopticon were separated from one another, a wall between them safeguarding against contagion—exchange, plotting, coalitions, communication, noise, violence. The principle of panopticism is that “power should be visible and unverifiable.” Again we see the importance of partitioning a population as a means of control. Exposing a population to total visibility while sectioning it into discrete units is a means to induce regulation of behavior. As Foucault states: “Visible: the inmate will constantly have before his eyes the tall outline of the central tower from which he is spied upon. Unverifiable: the inmate must never know whether he is being looked at any one moment; but he must be sure that he may always be so.”

The principle of power need not depend on a particular authority occupying the observational post. “Any individual, taken almost at random, can operate” (202) a panoptic arrangement. The relationship between bodies is wholly structural. Intent is irrelevant. The homogenous power induces a state of near universal compliance among its subjects, who, simply by being exposed to the field of visibility, assume the constraints of power and inscribe its relation into their own behaviors.

Again, the discussion of panopticism and docile bodies here is not intended to suggest that wild animals (rabbits and ferrets, in this case) are in a panoptic regime such that their rabbit and ferret subjectivity internalizes structures of power that render it complaint to that power’s demands. (Although, to be fair, in my experience with animals, domesticated and wild alike, it seems clear that they are capable of behaving
differently when they suspect that they are being watched by their human companions than when they believe they are not.) Rather, the discussion is intended to show how the film is fronting from the onset certain Foucauldian dynamics that are placed upon animal life in order to lead the viewer to consider how, by analogy, the hunting party itself might be unwittingly subject to forces that act through them. Indeed, two of the men, Luis and José, openly complain of being hemmed in by their respective circumstances, which involve money issues, divorce, and their pathologies. Surveillance engenders paranoia, which, as we have begun to see, is abundantly pronounced in the characters’ thoughts and dealings with one another. Neither is the viral presence peripheral, as we shall also see. It also contributes to, or indicates, a diseased and stifling historical and environmental “air” that overwhelms certain modes of existence.

As we’ve observed, the caged ferrets in the first scene of Saura’s film are prisoners, but in another context these very animals serve as wardens or guards. They safeguard compliance of other bodies, those of the rabbits, by rendering them docile through direct and indirect means, just as they themselves are caged and leashed. Likewise, José and Luis also are in many respects, if metaphorically so, caged, trapped in their respective circumstances. Their friend, Arturo, whom the hunting party discusses in the opening bar sequence is later revealed to have left the world by means of suicide. The appearance of a figure who has committed suicide can hardly be read as incidental. Suicide, in an important way, frames the hunters’ excursion. Not only does it loom in the minds of Luis, José, and Paco, it also haunts the larger ideational scope of the film itself. At issue, ultimately, is a process of group suicide in its unfolding. The stakes of a group killing itself, in turn, open onto a philosophical interrogation, as we shall see, of new
materialist realities and democratic potential. All of this, on account of totalizing structural pressures that bear down upon these men with palpable effects.

Thus to conclude the first phase of this chapter, Foucauldian biopolitics, as we’ve remarked, entails the administration of life—life’s control and its management. As such, one of the key apparatuses of which it makes use is surveillance. The dynamic of surveillance is the internalization of power’s always possible external gaze. (Christianity, of course, also works by a similar mechanism. God is always watching.) So how is it, then, that in a totalized field of operation something other than biopolitics is possible in the film? What would a biopoiesis be in a circumstance that envisions and projects hegemonic inescapability? It must necessarily find a line of escape; but how? And what might a line of escape look like in a (globally) totalized field? To answer these questions, we will at various points in this chapter make recourse to a theoretical examination of means and ends. In order to do so, the terms means and ends themselves will be stripped of any possible inherent intentionality, which is to say that this argument will advance by interrogating the stability of the two respective categories.

II. Unpredictability, Virus, and Death: Toward Thinking a New Kind of Material (Non-)Space

In his essay, “The Outlook for Intelligence,” Paul Valéry writes: “It may be said that everything we know, which is to say, everything we can do, has finally been turned against what we are” (137). Possible dialectical readings notwithstanding, the idea at work in the Valéry citation is that what one can do challenges what one is—indeed challenges what we collectively are, may want, or assume ourselves to be. At issue is,
one, the unpredictable nature of our abilities, particularly as regards their effects and, two, the malleable nature of what the human is. Valéry’s words gesture clearly toward a kind of inherent instability at the core of life as a human and maybe, as we’ll discuss below, of life itself. It’s a post-humanist idea that Valéry expresses. And to be clear, it’s a question of reversibility, not of dialectics, that is operant in s’opposer as indicated in the original French by the use of the reflexive and not the transitive. Ability doubles, folds back into dis-ability. Capacity generates incapacity.

One of Valéry’s primary interests in “Le bilan de l’intelligence” is a particular kind of intelligence—to wit, scientific—and how to account for the kinds of problems that attend it. In his “Unpredictability” essay, he writes that “our means of investigation and action have far outstripped our means of representation and understanding” (69). His essay is not reactionary; it is both academic and concerned. He focuses on what he regards as an underappreciated problematic involving the development of scientific knowledge. In doing so, he writes that any prediction we are able to make can only be, by the very nature of all prediction, more or less historical; it excludes, consequently, everything that is so new that our vocabulary must lack even the words to conjecture about it…Since, henceforth, we must deal with the new…our future is endowed with essential unpredictability. (70-71)

In this passage, Valéry asserts the rogue nature of intelligence, science, and technologies of all sorts. Included of course in any reckoning of technology must be technologies of politics or politics as technology, such as, say, biopolitics, which we which will continue to address in increasing depth. The other important notion that emerges in Valéry’s

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21 “On peut dire que tout ce que nous savons, c’est-à-dire tout ce que nous pouvons, a fini par s’opposer à ce que nous sommes” (14, italics original).
observation of unpredictability is the inherent inability of human intelligence to account for the new in any predictive capacity. Yet, somehow the new always appears. Indeed, all attempts to anticipate it reveal their congenital impotence. As such, the appearance of the new is itself also rogue. Unpredictability is, in fact, the defining feature of any rogue event, element, or condition.

The stakes for Valéry are quite high.Provocatively, he writes: “Unpredictability in every field is the result of the conquest of the whole of the present world by scientific power” (71). Here we are in the terrain of biopolitics, with its attempts by means of “scientific power” to control life—indeed an endeavor of “conquest of the whole world.” (Recall that in Saura’s La caza the “scientific powers” operant therein are manifold: the biological, in the form of a human-manipulated and accelerated disease called myxomatosis; the military, in the form of war instruments and their tactical implementation; and the political, which avails itself of a scientific power that is, in the last analysis, itself both biological and military.) What’s remarkable in the Valéry passage is that unpredictability appears as the result of rational scientific efforts to control it. Which is to say that efforts and energies marshalled precisely in order to mitigate, if not altogether eliminate, unpredictability yield a dynamic that is precisely the opposite of what it seeks. Control, for Valéry—particularly the control exercised by “scientific power”—actually generates greater degrees of the unpredictability that it wishes to eradicate.

The implication of an inhering dynamic of unpredictability substantially affects nothing less than life itself for Valéry: “Life has become, in short, the object of an experiment of which we can say only one thing—that it tends to estrange us more and
more from what we were, or what we think we are, and that it is leading us...we do not
know and can by no means imagine where” (71). He asks, “can the human mind master
what the human mind has made?” (138). The answer of course is no. At the heart of all
ttempts to master life lies the greater problem of mastering the unpredictable
consequences of attempts to master life. A dynamic of exponential complication, fallout,
and difficulty must necessarily ensue. Life is not only evasive when it comes to all
attempts to master it. But, because such attempts occur within life, they perforce embed
their own dynamic of self-dissolution and self-evasion.

A dynamic of self-dissolution is, in turn and in a fundamental way, one
concerning autoimmunity. A temporality of futurity is thus autoimmunological. A body
secretes its future, its possibilities, its antibodies, its otherness. Such processes of
dissolution are not so much a “boomerang effect,” after Aimé Césaire, which Césaire, at
points in Discourse on Colonialism, seems to comprehend as partaking of a dialectical
return of violence upon its historical perpetrator, but rather a kind of reversal, more so
after someone like Jean Baudrillard, in which a body’s tendencies and affects alter course
in an unforeseeable manner. By being absolutely unpredictable, life’s materiality
engenders reversals that denature whatever might be held to be its nature.
Autoimmunity, in this sense, is a kind of return to self as self-perpetuating, un-
anticipatable weirdness which has significance not only for a particular body, but also for
a body politic in its present and future iterations, as we shall explore below when we turn
to some relevant thinking by Jacques Derrida. To finish with Valéry, however, for the
poet-philosopher the future was once upon a time “a personal combination of more or
less documented imagining and whatever knowledge one might have of the present” (69).
The conservative nature of such a future required/would require/requires that one and all be in the future what they are now precisely to the degree that we define our being in the present. However, now the “absolute novelties” of any present moment that Valéry observes perpetually result in a “strange transformation of our notion of the future.” Accordingly, a new future or futures appears relentlessly, assuring us, in turn, of the absolute uncertainty of our own present understandings of ourselves.

Hannah Arendt takes inspiration from Valéry in her essay, “On Violence.” For Arendt, the question of violence has also to account for technology, whose fullest violent potential is manifest in war, in particular in the example of the kind which would avail itself of the nuclear bomb. The threat of nuclear war, Arendt argues, as violent potential comes to have deterrence as its goal. War, she argues, has lost its “effectiveness” (105). Victory is never a goal; rather, the maintenance of a state of retaliatory fear through violent potential is the goal. Thus we can see how a reconfiguration of means and ends quickly appears in Arendt’s thinking. Arendt acknowledges as much and I will direct further attention to the question of means and ends below. For now, suffice it to note that for Arendt, “the means used to achieve political goals are more often than not of greater relevance to the future world than the intended goals” (106). By availing herself of a line of thinking owing at least in part to Valéry (and also to Edmund Husserl), Arendt is fully, and correctly, aware that ends can never be accurately predicted. Moreover, “violence harbors within itself an…element of arbitrariness.” Violence leads to outcomes in no way foreseeable; the role of the aleatory can never be discounted. No matter how many

\[22\] See Husserl’s *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*. 
algorithms are written, how many situations are gamed, how many eventualities are analyzed in order to contain chance events, biopoetic irruptions will materialize. Such events by their very nature “interrupt routine processes and routine procedures” (109), revealing, in effect, a key dynamic inherent not only in the accident, but in all actions: to wit, all predictions are but “projections” of the present and its assumptions and methods; as such, they are subject to a kind of ongoing revision in order to accommodate the present. (And let us not forget that in our reading of Valéry this dynamic suggests in itself how little we are capable of understanding the present.) In this way aleatory events disrupt not only the present, however, but also all future predictions. The absolute contingency of both future and present is thus revealed by the rogue encounter. Thus there is nothing that is more real than the random event. By exceeding calculation, the unexpected exposes the non-reality that assessments of present and future harbor.

Which isn’t to say that violence as a means is purely random. As a means, it is typically deployed in the service of some aim. Nevertheless, what Arendt is signaling is the way that violence in its potential has become more “dubious and uncertain” (113). To this extent, as a means it partakes of the aleatory. Its outcomes, therefore, are unforeseeable. Seen from this perspective, violence can be understood as having arbitrariness itself as a constitutive element.

Arendt sees progress as heading toward violence because of the fact that technological developments emerge at speeds far greater than it takes for collective and individual intellects to apprehend them. Progress as an evaluative standard is thus incapable of providing any insight into its own apparatuses (political, technological, etc.), let alone into any possible consequences that may emerge from them. Indeed, one of the
most emblematic iterations attending progress—itself commonly held to be a trajectory toward ever-increasing freedom—has been Foucauldian biopolitics. Although Arendt doesn’t use Foucauldian language, she gestures at a problem similar to his in her critique of the modern bureaucracy. Bureaucracy for Arendt is best understood as “rule by Nobody” (137), because its power is so diffuse. She calls this type of rule “the most tyrannical of all” governmental systems, since adversaries and responsible parties alike are non-localizable. Arranged in this fashion, such systems have the aleatory woven into their fabric. She views the modern bureaucratic arrangement as essentially “chaotic” (138) precisely because of the non-location of power.

Arendt, of course, famously analyzed the non-localizability of bureaucratic power in *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. Eichmann had claimed that in executing unspeakable acts while serving in the Nazi regime he was simply doing his job by “following orders”—and indeed, so the argument went, was within the law in doing so. Thus one could not say that any evil acts were attributable to his agency since he was merely doing what was asked of him within a hierarchical and bureaucratic framework. If anything, according to Eichmann, what he was guilty of was (a mindless, if not altogether grotesquely callous) careerism.

Bureaucratic power itself shares a dynamic with the camp as a no-place. As the German philosopher Byung-Chul Han has recently noted in *Topology of Violence*, violence of the camp differs from traditional manifestations of violence precisely because the camp is a “non-place” (6). The camp is away from the center of town; it is at some liminal site beyond the habits of quotidian view. Analogously, Han’s argument claims that recent modernity’s expressions of violence are decidedly less “visible”: violence, he
claims “today…is shifting from the visible to the invisible” (vii). The camp is of interest because of how it shifts the historical localization of violence from the center to the periphery. This shift he calls a “topological transformation” (6) that has obfuscated violence’s display by shifting it outside of public view. Han refers to Agamben’s writing on the camp in *Homo Sacer* to argue that the death-dealing of the camp stands in contrast to Foucauldian biopolitics precisely to the degree that the camp does not intend to *make live*. To the contrary, the aims of the camp are genocidal. Distant from all public observation, the camp’s violence is, we know, bureaucratically muddled with diffuse, agentless power.

This brief discussion of the role of unpredictability, non-place, and no-body in violence leads us, inexorably, to Derrida and his writing on democracy in *Rogues*. For Derrida, there is a “semantic vacancy or indetermination at the very center of the concept of democracy” (24). The vacancy in turn is a generative force for history insofar as it occasions the movements of freedom and equality, which are bound in a ceaseless series of alternations. In spite of democracy’s precedents in antiquity, the concept itself houses and indeed is composed of “indetermination and indecidability (sic)” (25). Democracy has no preordained universality in any sense. And because of this quality, or lack thereof, its future is wholly undecidable. Yet, in spite of its undecidability, it is always *to come* (*à venir*). *Democracy to come*, it should be noted, does not, as it might imply given what is commonly understood in Derridean parlance, mean merely to suggest an infinite deferral. To the contrary, democracy’s futurity holds the “*hic et nunc* of urgency” (29, my italics). As such, *Democracy to come* constitutes a call for aggressive and unending
political critique (86). The critique, of course, can only be self-directed and, as such, involves autoimmunity.

Autoimmunity Derrida describes as ultimately “terrifying and suicidal” (18) precisely because of the return to self. The role of autoimmunity and how it may run amok emerges early in *Rogues* when Derrida discusses an election in Algeria (he does not say which) in which it was feared that the election results themselves would be such that they would effectively end democracy. Rather than see its population elect non-democratic candidates, the government decided not to hold elections. In effect, the state opted to end democracy rather than see it ended by a possible undesirable outcome. As an exercise of sovereignty, the state suspended democracy in order to immunize it from something else. This autoimmune dynamic is emblematic of what Derrida calls the suicidal potential of democracy.

In a similar spirit, on a micrological level Han’s thesis is that violence has become internalized by individuals as a result of manifold modern processes of self-exploitation and excess. This dynamic has emerged from what he calls a mode of “positivity”: modern violence emerges from “an excess of positivity, the accumulation of the positive, which manifests as overachievement, overproduction, overcommunication, hyperattention, and hyperactivity” (viii). Han says that such violence “evades immunological defense,” but on this point the German philosopher and I would seem to differ. Elsewhere, in *The Burnout Society*, Han in fact argues that the West has moved beyond the “immunological age” and is now in the “neuronal”—an age characterized at the individual level by “neurological illnesses such as depression, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), borderline personality disorder (BPD), and burnout
syndrome” (1). While provocative, such a claim—that we have moved beyond the autoimmunological and into the neuronal—seems far from plausible, particularly given the sheer ongoing prevalence of autoimmune disorders, which include afflictions ranging from common allergies to lupus, celiac disease to endometriosis, Type 1 diabetes to rheumatoid arthritis. The list is extensive. And while there is certainly room—conceptual, medical, political, philosophical—for the introduction of a new category or metaphor to describe an emerging type of societal affliction, it seems to me that it is absolutely not the case that we have passed wholesale from an immunological “epoch” to a neuronal one as Han would have us believe.23

Quite the contrary, as Derrida avers (and, to be fair, Han at times implies, even if he draws dubious conclusions) the immunological is still very much with us. He writes that democracy “has always been suicidal” (13). Such autoimmunological disorder, however, is the condition of its potential: “if there is a to-come for it, it is only on the condition of thinking life otherwise, life and the force of life (33, my italics). What does he mean by “life”? What he calls “pure actuality” would seem to be implicit in Derrida’s thinking of life. Early in Rogues, Derrida discusses Aristotle’s notion of the Prime Mover as “neither moving itself nor being itself moved,” yet setting “everything in motion, a motion of return to self, a circular motion” (15). The “pure actuality of the Prime mover” is “erogenous and thinkable…desirable…thought thinking thought.” It is

23 Christine Bichsel has remarked, rightly, that Han’s claim that the psychological afflictions of late modernity are “self-inflicted by a person’s consent to and participation in capitalist systems” is problematic both because of how it omits “disposition, illness, and biography” (558) as well as how it overlooks that the majority of the planet’s population actually suffers from “macrophysical” violence. In short, Han’s account seems to dismiss all but a kind of bourgeois subject who experiences no direct form of violence, but only the microphysical effects of internalized cultural demands to produce, acquire, and succeed in a hyper-capitalist marketplace.
“life that exceeds the life of human beings...constant, continuous, and unending” and, importantly, “impossible” for humans. The dynamic of desirability that we are discussing here includes both desire and being desired. “A taking pleasure in the self, a circular and specular autoaffection” which we must never sever from the political. Life, its force, its movement must mesh in the political for the pure actuality of any democratic movement to appear.

One must certainly admit that the dynamic of what Derrida calls “autoaffection” by some reckoning seems to have been corrupted, if not altogether perverted, in late configurations of capitalist society into what can only be called narcissism. Selfie culture, the ceaseless promotion of the self in order to capture and cultivate desirability, is evidence of how Western culture seeks to commandeer the pure actuality on which democracy would depend and direct it toward a kind of tyranny of the self. In this light, Han is correct in his thinking insofar as violence would seem to have lost its purchase altogether in an exterior entity and is now “auto-aggressive” (8). But what Han misses is the rogue nature of violence itself. Han systematizes it, announces a kind of naturalized presence in the contemporary order that he is bringing to light (even though it remains, for Han, invisible). Consequently, Han fails to account for violence’s unpredictability and its attending incessant reordering of what a human is. In many respects, Han sees violence as another kind of order.

So how are we to think autoaffection? By referring to what Derrida calls “space” or “spacing” (espacement) we arrive at a kind of structure that generates difference. 

Espacement is an interstitial non-place that makes autoaffection possible. Affection for oneself is here understandable as how the self divides itself in order to apprehend itself.
There can be no affection without difference. The space that emerges in order to produce affection is invisible and non-localizable; yet as such it is inherently the condition of possibility for any event. Espacement is what Derrida also calls khôra. Khôra has no essence; it is a space-generating interval. It is “the anachrony of being. It anachronizes being” (On the Name 94). As such it cannot be teleological. Khôra is “a matter of a structure and not of some essence…since the question or essence no longer has any meaning with regard to it. Not having an essence, how could the khôra be [se tiendrait-elle] beyond its name?” What khôra “is” is the key to its anachrony because it is neither being nor non-being. Indeed, to say that khôra neither is nor is not is itself insufficient.

Khôra seems to defy that ‘logic of noncontradiction of the philosophers’…that logic ‘of binarity, of the yes or no.’ Hence it might perhaps derive from that ‘logic other than the logic of the logos.’ The khôra, which is neither ‘sensible’ nor ‘intelligible,’ belongs to a ‘third genus’…One cannot even say of it that it is neither this nor that or that it is both this and that. It is not enough to recall that khôra names neither this nor that, or, that khôra says this and that. The difficulty declared by Timaeus is shown in a different way: at times the khôra appears to be neither this nor that, at times both this and that. (On the Name 89)

An “alternation between the logic of exclusion and that of participation,” khôra for Derrida gestures toward something beyond categorical opposition. It means “locality in general, spacing, interval,” “a spacing from ‘before’ the world” (Rogues xiv). As a space before any determination, khôra gives rise to “the coming of the event.” This no place that precedes place, which is “foreign to teleology” (xv), makes possible the event to come.

Our next step in this chapter will be to determine what precisely such an anachronistic no place “is,” or how it might appear, within Saura’s La caza. The Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset, in La caza y los toros, affirms a kind of no place that occurs
precisely in the act of hunting. In hunting, by taking “a small vacation from humanity” modern man “manages…to erase his historical evolution, to unfasten himself from the present and renew his original, primitive state” (90, 97, my translation). The hunter is “at one and the same time the man of today and the man from ten thousand years ago” (98, my translation). As Guy Wood has noted,

In effect, separated from civilization, the Saurian hunters (and their successors) seem to begin to give free rein to their basic and predatory instincts, to “fall into violent abuse and vengeance.” But their hunting duplicity revives a chaotic, primordial sociopolitical condition that at the same time represents present Spain. (my translation)

In addition to the timeless, parched landscape of the Toledo countryside, La caza takes place in an anachronistic site par excellence insofar as the cultural and technological backwaters of Francoist Spain are on full display in Saura’s film. The young niece, Carmen, marvels both at the radio and the photos in the provocative magazine, Drag, that the men take turns reading. That she should do so betrays her sheltered simplicity. José’s land itself is distant from, apparently, everything. When Enrique surveys the horizon with his binoculars, hardly any trace whatsoever of “civilization” appears. The farmhouse is dirty, dilapidated with no technological furnishings or amenities of any sort. Carmen, in fact, bathes outside in a tub next to the

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24 “unas vacaciones de humanidad”... “logra... anular toda la evolución histórica, desprenderse de la actualidad y renovar la situación primigenia” (90, 97). “...es, a la vez, el hombre de hoy y el de hace diez mil años.” (Ortega y Gasset 98)
donkey. The men bring “progress” to the site in the form of guns—as opposed to knives and traps—for the purpose of killing. The magazine and the radio, which throughout the course of the film only plays contemporary Spanish pop music, stand decidedly in contrast to a largely illiterate oral culture that persisted throughout millennia on the peninsula.

In the nearest small town in *La caza*, the inhabitants are rustic and tired, devoid of all apparatuses that would signal technological progress. They gather for the slaughter of a sheep as, one might imagine, people have done for millennia. This little town, which at one point Luis and Enrique drive to, is also trapped in a different sense in that it is walled, a feature that evokes not only an earlier epoch in which small communities built walls to protect themselves from external invaders both human and animal, but also brings to mind the Foucauldian necessity to contain a town during a time of plague. The dynamic of the wall, with its attending purposes and effects, is, of course, very much currently still with us as evidenced by the ongoing (and recently resurgent) reactionary movement in the United States to “Build That Wall” along the southern border with Mexico, the partitioned-off Spanish cities of Ceuta and Melilla within northern Morocco, and, of course, the infamous West Bank. Partitioned territories are both anachronistic as a form and decidedly time-specific in their particular situatedness. As places of national stronghold or fortification, they are also non-places insofar as they are peripheral, porous, contested, and violent.
Critics tend to read this anachronous dynamic in *La caza* as indicative of a kind of socio-political dissolution of the Francoist state.\(^{25}\) While I do not dispute this claim, my effort here is to seek to understand how such anachrony points to a deeper philosophical field that addresses a kind of negative space at the center of material violence as it pertains to life itself, particularly within an organizational configuration known as democracy (and also here a biological configuration culturally rendered as the “human”).\(^{26}\) The corruption of auto-affection displayed in this case typifies the absolutely rogue nature at the heart of such configurations. A kind of Derridean “circular motion” can be written over an entire culture. For example, the question of nation (American exceptionalism, “Spain is different,” etc.) invests itself wholly in a dynamic of self that promotes self to itself as a site of unique difference that is regulated into a unified sameness. The United States, as the preeminent standard of modern exception, traps itself in its except-ability as a stagnating form. Indeed the mechanisms of exception since, roughly speaking, 9-11 have extended their reach into sovereign (freighted as this word is) territories across the globe. That Spain is (now *was*) different once served to exoticize its relationship to Europe largely for the purpose of attracting European tourists—an image of Spain that itself was gladly codified by said Europeans who wanted to hold on to notions of the country as both a kind of retrograde ideal of a time-capsuled community as well as a distant otherness that on the other side of the Pyrenees was a mélange of Christian, Jewish, and Muslim North African cultures.

\(^{25}\) See Guy Wood.

\(^{26}\) To be clear, I am not making the claim that the Francoist state was itself democratic. Rather, I am analyzing, on a micrological level, how a dynamic within a group of presumed equals (politically, sociologically) in the figures of Paco, José, and Luis—each with equal say in a day’s outcome—generates a particular, new kind of difficulty at issue in the film.
Or, to address the question in light of the earlier discussion on technology, rhetoric, which, in the aforementioned examples, ostensibly served to crystallize an image of a body politic into a stable, coherent, self-renewing, and self-perpetuating image of identity, as technology is absolutely without ability to control its effects. Spain’s difference became its sameness within the European order, culminating as it did in the 11-M attacks—an event which put Spain at the vanguard of safeguarding the European borders from North African others deemed to be a threat to what Europe considers itself to be. In a similar fashion, American exceptionality became its non-exceptionality precisely to the extent that all “sovereign” nations are capable of suspending the logic of their democratic sovereignty. Again, what all of this leads to is precisely how the very nature of sovereignty itself is necessarily rogue. American exceptionalism is nothing if not rogue in its core. As Derrida succinctly puts it: “Every sovereign state is in fact virtually and a priori able to abuse its power…The use of state power is originally excessive and abusive” (156). One finds that there is “something of a rogue state in every state.”

The question, at bottom, remains one of autoimmunity. How does a body (politic) assimilate, or not, difference—its own internal difference, or that of an other, which, in a real sense, amounts to the same thing? As Derrida states in *Rogues*, autoimmunity is the “strange illogical logic by which a living being can spontaneously destroy, in an autonomous fashion, the very thing within it that is supposed to protect it against the other, to immunize it against the aggressive intrusion of the other” (123). Such recognition of autoimmunity is necessary in order to “situate the question of life and of the living being, of life and death, of life-death.” The pathology for Derrida is not
entirely unlike what Arendt observes in the developments of rational progress, extending as it does into the terrain of reason: a “sickness of reason” (Rogues 124) in which reason itself produces an “amnesic evil” (125). “Scientific reason, in its very progress, spontaneously produces the crisis” of forgetting the historical and subjective origin of what it produces (127). Reason “throws reason into crisis, in an autonomous and quasi-autoimmune fashion.” This perverse dynamic of autoimmunity “is located in the very structure of the present and of life” (my italics).

Autoimmunity, as a process of auto-affection, with a hiatus in its center leads us to another Derrida text, Speech and Phenomena (La Voix et le phénomène). For Derrida, in his analysis of Husserlian Erlebnis, or life experience, auto-affection emerges as key because of its temporal dynamic. Erlebnis is always present; it is presence. Interestingly, perhaps even counter-intuitively, presence is “the universal form of transcendental life” (54). I say counter-intuitive because one might be inclined to think of presence as a kind of immanence. Derrida, however, sees something different. He sees presence as transcendental because of its relationship to absence: “in my absence…before my birth and after my death, the present is (italics in original). Thus the relationship with “death…lurks in the determination of being as presence, ideality, the absolute possibility of repetition.” That “which is…is what may indefinitely be repeated in the identity of its presence” (6, italics original). The living present…(is)…the self-presence of transcendental life” (italics original). Auto-affection, in turn, involves self-presence. Now, again, just how is it transcendental? Derrida gestures toward ideality as a kind of ground for repetition in life. We’ve begun to establish that the role of death serves to illustrate that the world will go on in one’s absence. But, it seems to me that there is
something more profound in how Derrida understands voice vis-à-vis death that gives us a clearer indication of the kind of transcendental dynamic at work here and how it is involved in what may very well be a kind of immanence.

In *La caza* there’s a curious preponderance of voice-over monologues. I’m highlighting these as particular speech acts that involve a kind of listening to oneself that might easily—and according to the logic we’re outlining here, erroneously—be regarded as speech acts that do not involve transcendence. To name just a few: Paco groused to himself about the unbearable heat (“*Este calor insorportable.*”); Enrique says that a diseased rabbit doesn’t even look like an animal, but rather more like a monster (“*No parecía un conejo, ni siquiera un animal. Era como un monstro.*”); José thinks to himself that they’ve all changed, but Paco is completely different (“*Todos hemos cambiado; pero, Paco—Paco es otra persona.*”). Now, the presence of voice-over serves two functions in the film: (1.) it reveals thought shielded from a terrain of absolute visibility (see above) and (2.) it suggests a kind of opening in being that pertains to the overwhelming degree of death (slaughter, murder, dying of old age) in the film. This second point we will develop in what follows.

In Derrida, “hearing oneself speak” appears as a phenomenon in which there is no “external detour” through which one’s own language might pass (*Speech and Phenomena* 78). All looking, by contrast, would necessarily seem to immediately involve an outside precisely to the extent that what one looks at is on the outside of one’s seeing. However, “hearing oneself speak,” because of its relationship to temporality—specifically, the past—also involves a weird sort of detour. When one speaks, one folds the past into the present because of the temporal gap between one’s own speaking and hearing of oneself.
This dynamic indicates a kind of “difference…within the pure immanence of experience” (69, my italics). As Leonard Lawlor puts it, “in the very moment when silently I speak to myself there must be a minuscule hiatus differentiating me into hearer and speaker. There must be un écart that differentiates me from myself, un écart without which I would not be a hearer as well as a speaker” (129, italics original). This écart, this gap, obtains in the visual realm as well. As Derrida notes:

When I see myself, either because I gaze upon a limited region of my body or because it is reflected in a mirror, what is outside the sphere of ‘my own’ has already entered the field of auto-affection, with the result that it is no longer pure. In the experience of touching and being touched, the same thing happens. In both cases, the surface of my body, as something external, must begin by being exposed in the world. (78-79)

Indeed, speech and vision (along with touch) collapse into a certain kind of shared sensibility all implicated in this dynamic of exposure and self-othering: “Hearing oneself speak is not the inwardness of an inside that is closed in upon itself; it is the eye and the world within speech” (Speech and Phenomena 86). This “eye” of speech—like an eye of vision, for that matter—has a blindness to it, which is the gap of speech. The consequence for Derrida is that even philosophy itself is inherently self-othering: “philosophy lives in and from difference…it blinds itself to the same, which is not the identical” (148, italics original).

This gap, this écart, this space (or spacing), again, is khôra. As an “anachrony of being,” it is both the non-place of generative possibility (life) and, also, death. And at the same time, of course, it is neither. In keeping with the concern of the multiple iterations of myxomatosis present in the rabbit population in La caza, a viral component
is similarly at stake in Derrida’s work. (Myxomatosis, again, is a viral disease.) Derrida, in an interview, states:

all (that) I have done…is dominated by the thought of a virus, what could be called a parasitology, a virology…The virus is in part a parasite that destroys, that introduces disorder into communication. Even from the biological standpoint, this is what happens with a virus; it derails a mechanism of the communicational type…On the other hand, it is something that is neither living nor nonliving. (“The Spatial Arts” 12).

The virus, for Derrida, is disruptive. It interferes with or upsets communication (what Deleuze might call “flows”); it disrupts “destination”; it disrupts desire, strategy, commerce. In a different interview published as “The Rhetoric of Drugs,” Derrida states, while discussing AIDS, that “the virus (which belongs neither to life nor to death) may *always already* have broken into any ‘intersubjective’ space” (251). He refers to this as a “deconstructing structuration of the social bond, as social disconnection (déliaison) and even as the disconnection of the interruption, of the ‘without rapport’ that can constitute a rapport to the other in its alleged normality.” He adds: “The virus has no age” (254). It is anachronistic.

Since the virus is neither alive nor dead, it necessarily finds itself in the space of the undecidable. Distinction collapses. And when distinction collapses, so does the ability to decide among what are commonly held assumptions regarding oppositions. Indeed, the very nature of opposition is thrown into question with an entity such as a virus. This ambiguity brings to mind a passage from Deleuze’s *Difference and Repetition*, in which the philosopher writes:

Death does not appear in the objective model of an indifferent inanimate matter to which the living would ‘return’; it is present in the living in the form of a subjective and differenciated experience endowed with its prototype. It is…the empty form of time…death cannot be reduced to
negation, neither to the negative of opposition nor to the negative of limitation. It is neither the limitation imposed by matter upon mortal life, nor the opposition between matter and immortal life, which furnishes death with its prototype. Death is, rather, the last form of the problematic, the source of problems and questions, the sign of their persistence over and above every response, the ‘Where?’ and ‘When?’ which designate this (non)-being where every affirmation is nourished. (112)

“Where?” and “When?”, of course, indicate both non-place and anachrony. Death, as a no place, is both everywhere and nowhere. Foucault, too, would seem to have reached a similar understanding regarding death’s lack of ubiety. In *The Birth of the Clinic*, he writes:

Death…is multiple and dispersed in time: it is not that absolute privileged point at which time stops and moves back; like disease itself it has a teeming presence…gradually, here and there, each of the knots breaks, until organic life ceases, at least in its major forms, since long after the death of the individual, minuscule, partial deaths continue to dissociate the islets of life that still subsist. (142)

Foucault adds:

At the epistemological level, life is to be distinguished from the inorganic only at a superficial level…It is profoundly bound up with death, as to that which positively threatens to destroy its living force…But death is also that against which life, in daily practice, comes up against; in it, the living being resolves itself naturally: and disease loses its old status as an accident, and takes on the internal, constant, mobile dimension of the relation between life and death. It is not because he falls ill that man dies; fundamentally, it is because he may die that man falls ill. (155)

Disease, in turn, has “the figure of a great organic vegetation, which has its own forms of sprouting, its own ways of taking root” (153). Quite interestingly, Foucault remarks that disease is “spatialized in the organism” (my italics) in such a way that it takes on the “appearance of living processes”: “It is no longer an event or a nature imported from the outside; it is life undergoing modification in an inflected functioning.”
“Degeneration,” thus, “lies at the very principle of life” (The Birth of the Clinic 158). Death, as a necessity, is “bound up with life” and also with “the most general possibility of disease.” The blind spot of medical diagnosis emerges when medical practitioners mistake inherent degeneration as exogenous. Illness and disease instead must be understood as absolute singularities; understood as such, they deny the possibility of the violence of categorization. Foucault states that “only individual illnesses exist: not because the individual reacts upon his own illness, but because the action of the illness rightly unfolds in the form of individuality” (168-169). What this implies for Foucault is that modern medicine lacks an ability to see disease properly. Illness remains a perpetual blind spot for medicine because of how medicine generalizes. All manifestations of disease are unique, yet multiple. “Singular points” (159)—emphasis on the plural—of degeneration are part of the “order of life.” Disease, for the modern practitioner of medicine, is only diagnosable thanks to a certain “blurring” (168) of these points. Such blurring elides the “gap” (156), the blindness, that otherwise constitutes the singularity of all physiological degeneration and, by extension, the singularity of all death.

This brings us back to Derridean khôra. Again, khôra, or spacing, is a blindness of absolute unknowability. The gap comprehends death in the center of life—not something opposed to life, but part of life’s own movement. So, keeping in mind both our analysis of La caza as well as our discussion of certain relevant philosophical concepts, how are we to think this space? What might constitute its materiality? How can khôra be said to enter or be in the world? To begin to answer these questions, and to move toward a synthesis of the different lines of argumentation presented so far in this
chapter with an eye toward advancing an understanding of biopoiesis in a new materialist framework, I will make recourse to Deleuze’s *Cinema 2*.

III. Making the Gap Material

In *Cinema 2*, Deleuze develops his notion of the “time-image,” which he considers to be a kind of “readable” or “thinking” image (23). The time-image is of relevance here for how it offers a notion of a kind of living material by means of a temporal and semiotic compaction. Importantly for Deleuze, the cinematic time-image is not an image of duality, which is to say that it is not an image of mere representation that comprehends divergence of cinematic image from a referent apart from its appearance. The image in question therefore does not avail itself of a “simple distinction between the subjective and the objective, the real and the imaginary” (23); to the contrary, it is their indiscernibility that is operative. *Cinema 2* challenges the assumption that filmic expression is merely narratological and representational. Indeed, the work of the time-image shows how “linguistics is only a part of semiology” (25)—a distinction which necessarily unbinds the assumption that the semiological is limited to “word,” thereby extending the semiological into terrains such as sound and image. To this aim, Deleuze invokes the work of Charles Sanders Peirce, whose “strength, when he invented semiotics, was to conceive of signs on the basis of images and their combinations, not as a function of determinants which were already linguistic” (30).

Deleuze develops thinking of such combinations by exploring how the cinematic image is based on a kind of equation between matter and image. For Deleuze, *matière*
signalétique, or signaletic material, comprises all of the constituting material captured in the image. It includes “all kinds of modulation features, sensory (visual and sound), kinetic, intensive, affective, rhythmic, tonal, and even verbal (oral and written)” (29). For example, in La caza we can thus understand rabbits, ferrets, men, mountains, dirt, and so on—along with the sounds that issue synchronously from them—as signaletic material. Signaletic material is “a plastic mass, an a-signifying and a-syntaxic material, a material not formed linguistically even though it is not amorphous and is formed semiotically, aesthetically and pragmatically. It is a condition, anterior by right to what it conditions” (Deleuze 29). That signaletic material is a-signifying doesn’t mean that it is meaningless, but rather that it does not have its own inherent meaning. By the same token, its a-syntaxic quality refers to its lack of intrinsic meaningful arrangement. This is to say that it does not refer to some pre-existing thing. It is meaningful in a substantial, contingent sense—thus its plasticity. Because Deleuze’s semiology is one of immanence, it necessarily means that images do not refer to a transcendental meaning beyond their appearance. Instead, an image’s appearance has a meaning emerge in a compositional relation of constitutive parts. Such parts, remember, must include both the cinematic material as well as the physical material that the image contains. All of this indicates that, for Deleuze, a film by virtue of its time-images affects reality with and through its virtuality. As Roger Dawkins smartly understands it, “the sign, in embodying the signaletic material, would in fact be shaping the signaletic material and molding it into meaningful substance” (9). This would seem to suggest, in effect, that a kind of vital communication is at work in the dynamic of image vis-à-vis material. A time-image isn’t
simply reproducing a moment of the world; rather, it is entering into its temporality and affecting it.

The converse of such a dynamic, should it need to be stated, obtains as well (i.e., the world enters the time-image and affects it). I therefore want to propose that at issue is a kind of immunological question. In an absolute sense, signaletic material is a site of pure interface between virtual and real in which the two incorporate, in the fullest sense of the term, one another in order to produce meaning. Belonging to an immanent structure, signs, for Deleuze, express semiotic matter and all matter, in turn, expresses itself in the signaletic material conduit (the embodiment of the sign) to the image (qua sign). What makes the question immunological is the degree of essence-less auto-affectation that emerges in Derrida’s reckoning of khôra. A space beyond categorical opposition such as khôra in turn would seem to have certain affinities with what Deleuze articulates as signaletic material. Thus, if we are true in our understanding of immanence, there’s a kind of autoimmunity that appears to be operant that is not destructive. Signaletic material is autoimmunity as aggregational, vital, contingent, fluid, and amorphous precisely to the degree that it involves bodies within a system interacting with and affecting one another. An equation of spacing (espacement, khôra) with signaletic material therefore indicates a materiality of the impossible. Such impossibility is here to be understood as a kind of entry of absence into materiality as well as of materiality into absence. Thus the new materialist space that I’m outlining here is one in which khôra is less generative (impossible) mystery and more so generative (impossible) material substance: autoimmunity finds a kind of equilibrium in the process of emergent, vital, and contingent meaning in its material iterations.
Meaning’s impossibility is embedded in a kind of a-temporal temporality. Impossibility here needs to be understood as what Derrida, in *Rogues*, calls “impossibly possible” and “possibly possible” (30). Derrida draws on Nancy’s *The Experience of Freedom* in order to define this space as a freedom that “singularizes.” According to Nancy, the space in question is both a “breaking into the interior of the individual and of the community” (78). The “breaking into” spaces occurs in a temporal field of as yet unfulfilled freedom. That freedom does not exist indicates its impossibility; even so, it always remains *to come* and, as such, is an impossible possible. Democracy therefore remains, for Derrida, constitutively “aporetic”: “The ‘to come’ not only points to the promise but suggests that democracy will never exist, in the sense of a present existence—not because it will be deferred but because it will always remain aporetic in its structure” (86). The singularization of freedom that emerges in dynamics of autoimmunity and auto-affection is, again, anachronistic and, as such, situated in a non-place.

Now, lest we lose sight of the relevance of these Derridean ruminations on freedom, Saura’s *La caza* is precisely a film that endeavors to think through the impossibility of democracy. And what erupts repeatedly in the space of its thinking is violence. So, as I move toward concluding this chapter, I will attempt to integrate its various conceptual notions into a coherent synthesis that carefully returns to a contemplation of the film. In particular, I will return to our discussion on violence and its manifold forms in *La caza* as a means to advance our analysis. As it so happens, for Derrida, the question of violence is hardly incidental to notions of freedom and democracy (both present and to come). In *Rogues*, he states:
A new violence is being prepared and, in truth, has been unleashed for some time now, in a way that is more visibly suicidal or autoimmune than ever. This violence no longer has to do with world war or even with war, even less with some right to wage war...It is a matter, in essence, neither of classical, international war, that is, a war between nation-states, declared in accordance with old *jus europeanus*, nor of intranational civil war, nor even of what Schmitt called 'partisan war,' since even this latter, just like terrorism in its classical sense, resorted to violence or terror only with a view toward the liberation or foundation...of some nation-state community, some nation-state territory, in short, some sovereignty. (156)

It is important to remark that, in *La caza*, the Nationalist companions are fighting neither for a nation-state nor for liberation. *That* war has (had) already been fought. Thus, again, our analysis here simply cannot enter into a replay of the violence in *La caza* as a metaphor for the previous human vs. human political struggle known in Spain as *la Guerra Civil*. Rather the protagonists in the film are to be seen as enacting and developing a subsequent and unique violence that offers insight into what is ultimately a dynamic of biopoetic escapability. Their plight involves a movement both through and with the rogue exceptionalism of emerging forces. The vital materiality that will appear is one that navigates a distinction between what Lawlor, after Derrida, in *From Violence to Speaking Out* calls the “worst violence” and “fundamental violence” (15).

IV. Synthesis: (Im)Possible Violence—Heat and Virus

Thus to return to the question of violence at issue, let us recall that we are not interested in simply the historical repetition of violence as its own self-reproducing legacy. Such a reading—in its own right, correctly—comprehends beings as violent because they have had violence enacted upon them. It is no wonder, so the thinking goes,
that they reproduce or imitate what they have learned by forceful inscription into the flesh. Rather this chapter has been purposefully eschewing such a model on account of the somewhat facile assumption that supposes that if we could only break the cycle of violence, all violence would cease. There is little doubt that violence begets violence. But surely not all violences are the same.

Another type of violence on the historical spectrum is one that we might call a revolutionary violence for how it conceives of a need to overthrow violence with more violence. In this model, violence is contested, confronted by means of other exogenous raw force. And so where it may be that the first model observes a thoughtless reproduction of violence, the second aims at a consciousness that seeks to redress historical injustice through means inspired by a retaliatory principle. In the end, both models invariably comprehend violence as a material means toward consequence. In so doing, they both partake of a similar logic. The first involves an inward sublation or assimilation of the dynamic of violence that leads to its reproduction, the second an outward response that may or may not be interested in undoing violence altogether, but that nonetheless feels itself to be justified in its exercise because of its claim to redress historical inequality. Both models are dialectical. Violence overcomes its agents. It overcomes its subjects and its objects.

Benjamin, in his “Critique of Violence” essay, notes that, in commonly held understandings of means and ends, just ends are said to justify violent means; justified means are said to ensure just ends. He writes that “if violence is a means,” it implicitly calls for the question of whether violence, any violence, “is a means to a just or an unjust end” (236). Benjamin writes that this “criterion for criticizing it might seem immediately
available” (my italics). This position informs the argument of positive law, which seeks to “‘guarantee’ the justness of ends through the justification of means” (237). Natural law, he says, in turn attempts, “by the justness of the ends, to ‘justify’ the means.” Both natural law and positive law legitimate violence in this way. They each share a belief that violence has to be perceived and evaluated within a causal chain of means and ends. Benjamin, however, wants different criteria for the evaluation of each (just ends and just means). For the philosopher, what makes these justified (and justifying) violences similar is that they are “lawmaking” (241) or “law-preserving.” A violence that fulfills either of these criteria occupies the conceptual terrain of what Benjamin calls “mythic violence.” Mythic violence posits law; it puts forth boundaries. It threatens. It is bloody. Indeed, mythic violence is in many respects force for the sake of force. Force is its own law. Might is right.

An alternative to mythic violence is found in what Benjamin calls “divine violence” (249). (I’m here very mindfully calling divine violence an “alternative” to the mythic rather than a “counter,” or an “opposition” because of the expressed wish to avoid the theoretical pitfalls of dialectical overcoming that we’ve been outlining so far.) Quite unlike mythic violence, divine violence for Benjamin destroys law and dismantles boundaries. It may act with force—and even be lethal—but it does not shed blood. Where “mythic violence brings at once guilt and retribution, divine power only expiates.” If mythic violence is violence for the sake of violence, then divine violence is violence for the sake of life. Above all, it is not—and this is key—concerned with ends and so therefore does not enter into the logic of self-justification. By removing violence from its relationship to ends, it becomes available to a rethinking, a re-evaluation—one hopes
ethical as well as realistic—in which violence is disinterested in particular outcomes, yet at the same time is summarily interested in, or, to be more precise, dissatisfied with, the status quo. Rather than acting towards a determined goal, the violence at issue here is a kind of violence that might attend not acting. Such a violence, a violence of total cessation of operation, would be the general strike. Particular strikes of particular industries are permitted by the state because, in the way we’re outlining here, they enter into the logic of justification. Going further than the estrangement of already divided labor in any capitalist work setting, an employer introduces further violence into a work dynamic when he or she coerces workers to work without addressing worker concerns. Thus the violence of workers as a response to employers’ violence of coercion is justified in order to attain fulfillment of their particular demands in their industries, their places of employment, and so on. The general strike, on the other hand, presents a much more formidable case. Indeed, it is typically not allowed. Benjamin writes that “the state retains the right to declare that a simultaneous use of strikes in all industries is illegal” (240) primarily because it does not admit that specific reasons for each of the multiple strikes in question could be prevalent in every case. The state would therefore regard a general strike as revolutionary and thus as violent because implicit would be an attempt “to overthrow the legal system” that has granted the very possibility of a strike. What this means, in effect, is that passivity is itself a kind of violence because in the case of a general strike it constitutes a kind of extortion. Non-violence, in the case of the general strike, is therefore a kind of violence; however, Benjamin writes that it is the “only secure foundation” upon which one might critique violence.
The challenge for our purposes here that this violence presents, then, becomes how it might think, how it might inhabit, the uncertainty of not knowing neither where it is going nor what it is striving for. Such a task is what Benjamin calls a logic of “pure” or “unalloyed” means. Benjamin considers pure means to be nonviolent and cites language as an exemplar of how pure means functions. He calls language a “proper sphere of ‘understanding’” or “of human agreement that is nonviolent to the extent that it is wholly inaccessible to violence” (245). Provided that language is deployed in good faith—i.e., that lying is banned from its exercise—it necessarily omits violence. Benjamin does hedge when he acknowledges that such agreement is possible “to the extent” (my italics) that it is inaccessible to violence. But, to my thinking, this articulation seems insufficient, maybe even disingenuous. To what extent is anything inaccessible to violence, no matter how slight? What I wish to suggest here is that there exists a kind of violence of pure means that is different from violence for violence’s sake, which in itself, would seem to be an absurd and terrible proposition. Instead, there is in Saura’s film a kind of violence that is non-agential, non-subjective, and inter-objective. It is the violence of disease, which we’ve already discussed, and the violence of heat, which I will address in what follows.

To begin to understand the kind of violence at issue here, we have to reckon a bit further the vulnerability of life, mere life, as it is presented in La caza. As we’ve seen, management of a population animated by biological concerns falls squarely within the domain of biopolitics. According to the Foucauldian paradigm, with biopower we are no longer dealing with the control of legal subjects, but instead with living beings as such. Being excerpted from the territory of legal control opens up considerations of power and
its exercise beyond the dynamics of justified and justifying means and ends. The biopolitically managed body is disciplined in such a way as to be weakened so that control may be established over it. The presence of the ferrets and now the rabbits in the film—hardly incidental, as we’ve established—opens a reading in which all life, including, of course, the human, is reduced (or is it elevated?) or, shall we say, conforms, to the status of mere biological life. And even though the virus known as myxomatosis has been inserted into the rabbit population by an outside, the disease still operates within the field of life itself. Which is to say that, after our earlier discussion of Foucault and The Birth of the Clinic, it would be an error to suggest that because the rabbits were historically deliberately infected, the manifestation of their illness does not indicate an inherent presence of death within their population. To the contrary, the occasion of their illness simply brought forth the latent certainty of the death that was always already situated within their lives.

Mere life. Giorgio Agamben, who avails himself of Foucault’s work (along with, of course, a healthy dose of Benjamin, Heidegger, Arendt, and Schmitt) grounds much of his project in the distinction between bios (political life) and zoē (bare life). As Agamben shows, not all life is afforded protection by the law; it can be killed with impunity. This “bare life,” which, for the Romans, was a marginal existence, for Agamben has moved to the center of the Western political body. All life can be taken and is thereby reduced to the status of the camp, a term, as we’ve discussed, taken directly from the concentration camp. We are talking here not only about life in totalitarian regimes, but also in liberal democratic societies. (Recall that Agamben avers that there is an “inner solidarity between democracy and totalitarianism” [10]). All
bodies are bodies whose life can be taken with impunity because they are subject to what Agamben calls the exception, or the suspension of law in order to preserve law, similar to what we saw with Derrida in *Rogues*. In the sovereign logic of the exception, *any* life can be lawlessly taken in the name of the law, suspended or otherwise.

If mere life thus conceived—as bare life situated firmly within the camp—is at the center of all Western political articulations, then for Benjamin it is nonetheless a site of that divine violence that is a “pure power over all life for the sake of the living” (250). Benjamin states that “with mere life, the rule of law over the living ceases.” In an Agambenian sense, a negative valence attaches to such a notion precisely insofar as the suspension of law provides the condition for taking bare life. Such a dynamic is what Benjamin would call mythic violence’s “power over mere life for its own sake.” Benjamin, however, understands another significance of mere life as something that is inherently beyond law’s grasp. When mere life is subjected to divine violence, a “pure power over all life for the sake of the *living*” (my italics) emerges. This latter understanding amplifies the ways in which we might begin to understand violence by investing it with a positive significance.

In addition to something like the aforementioned general strike, we might also begin to understand divine violence in the light of what Benjamin calls the “educative power,” which, like divine violence, is defined by the “absence of all lawmaker.” A pedagogy of pure means, a learning without instrumentalization of knowledge. Learning endlessly without an end in mind. The violence here, we must recall, is bloodless. And so we enter an educative power that bloodlessly demolishes the violence of law, the mythical violence. Divine violence is situational; it delegitimized the power of
proscriptive law because it understands that, while laws may be good guidelines, no
definitive judgment may be derived from them. A “condemnation” based on a
“commandment” is “mistaken”; the commandment “exists not as a criterion of judgment,
but as a guideline for the actions of persons or communities.” This is a decidedly anti-
universalist position that mandates instead that endless thought be applied to all moments
requiring judgment. There is no “one size fits all” law and thus no proscriptive
determinations. What makes this discussion of particular interest for our aims here is
how it leads for Benjamin to a concluding gesture of what he calls “unalloyed violence”
(252) as a kind of revolutionary violence. Pure violence is violence that is outside the
law. We are not talking about the outlaw per se, whose violence remains in relation to
the law. But, rather, we are trying to think a kind of outside that is truly unconcerned
with law because it has no relation to it whatsoever, nor has it ever. As pure violence, it
would always have been and always be outside the law. Again, the challenge here is to
determine how such a violence might manifest itself.

Which brings us to the question of heat in *La caza*. The men in the hunting party
all understand violence and power as involving a contest of struggle between wills. “*Se
lucha de poder a poder,*” says José at one point, indicating a dialectical regard for how
powers engage one another: it’s a power to power struggle. This assessment of power,
of course, fits with a certain standardized view of power. The men think that power
entails a confrontation between opposing, discrete forces. But it turns out that power in
the film is something else, something with a mind, if you will, all of its own. And all are
trapped within its processes. Abundantly evidenced within the film is the overwhelming
presence of the *toledano* heat. “*Nos vamos a achicharrar como siga pegando el sol de*
esta manera,” says Paco at one point. (We’re going to roast with the sun hitting us like it’s doing.) During various moments both during the hunts and while underneath the tent, the men sweat profusely and wipe sweat from their brows. Juan cooks a hot lunch over a fire and serves it to the other men. Incredibly, José asks him for some hot peppers (even though, with his stomach condition, he admits that they never agree with him). Carmen reaches for the can of peppers, but it, too, is hot from the sun and burns her hands when she tries to pick it up. José announces, “Vaya día. Parece que va a arder la tierra.” (What a day. It feels as if the earth will burn.) There’s a kind of sexual heat at work in the film, too: the men read the sexually suggestive magazine Drag; Enrique flirts constantly with Carmen to the chagrin of Juan; Carmen at one point dances to music and Enrique joins her; José takes out a photo of his girlfriend for Paco to inspect. All of this mounting heat—hot day, hot lunch, hot peppers, hot bodies…Luis then quotes the book of Revelation (Chapter 8, Verse 7): “A third of the earth was burned up, a third of the trees were burned up, and all of the green grass was burned up” (my translation). After a stifling, sweaty siesta—a siesta in which, it should be noted, the camera has panned slowly and lasciviously over the men’s exposed bodies—José lights a cigarette and, while reflecting on how each of the men in the hunting party have changed, says, to himself in voice-over, “Nos estamos asando vivos aquí encerrados.” (We’re roasting alive here, all hemmed in.) As the tension in the film mounts, Luis begins to shoot at a seamstress mannequin—a headless torso with female form—at which point José and Paco quickly rise, irked by Luis’s gunshots. José then grabs Luis’s gun and strikes him toward the ground, where Luis then lies, bleeding. Enrique then builds a fire by burning the pages from the Drag magazine. The fire quickly spreads, lighting even the mannequin, which
is consumed. Dry shrubs and grasses burn as all the men (all but José, whose land it is and who remains seated, sulking—his request to Paco for money having been refused) spring into action, attempting to subdue the burning landscape. Smoke fills the encampment; the men cough and labor to breathe before collapsing exhausted.

The relationships between the men are by now beyond frayed. I’ll depict their state and what ensues here as expeditiously as possible. Paco, it is clear, hates everybody. Luis, who has never trusted Paco, now cannot stand José for having struck him. José already could barely tolerate Luis; now he is upset at Paco for having denied his request for financial assistance. In a last effort to salvage a bit more hunting, Luis gets into the Jeep to try to scare some rabbits out of hiding by driving through the terrain. Quique accompanies Luis and the Jeep, but does so on foot, ready to shoot. When a rabbit darts out, Quique shoots at it with his Luger and misses. He then calls to Paco to tell him that the rabbit is running toward him. José rises from behind some tall grasses, where he has been sulking alone. Paco shoots the rabbit; José shoots Paco, who dies instantly. Luis starts up the Jeep and drives at José while screaming “¡Mátame a mí. Dispárame a mí también!” (Kill me! Shoot me, too!) and driving towards him. José complies, but Luis does not immediately die. Luis then shoots José as the latter scrambles to crawl into one of the caves. Enrique, terrified, runs up the hill and away. His panting is the last thing we hear. Fin.

Jean Baudrillard, in The Agony of Power, provides an understanding of hegemonic power that knows no outside. Because of this absence of an exterior, resistance—resistance to power, to authority, to a sovereign—is, as the saying goes, futile. And because there is no outside, there are, by definition, no outs. Power cannot be
overcome, it cannot be dominated. All are complicit in its manifold expressions (tacit or explicit) of violence. Hegemonic power is, however, for Baudrillard capable of what he calls “abreaction.”27 A build-up of energies within a system reaches such a point that it eventually needs to let off steam, which it does, endogenously, through what Baudrillard calls “rogue events” (89). Singularities, viruses, terror: these are the effects of the system’s internal self-undoing, its overheating. In such a system, history is obsolete. Reason is obsolete. An adequate response to overwhelming, totalizing, hegemonic oppression can only emerge from the unpredictable, from a movement that outstrips the logics of containment, efficiency, management.

Saura’s film builds with extraordinary flourishes of violence that ultimately transcend actants. Ferret on rabbit, virus on rabbit, man on rabbit, man on ferret. Indeed it’s this last one, when Paco shoots the hunting guide Juan’s ferret, that seems to occasion a new, further escalation—an escalation that sets the stage for man on man violence. Soon after, José goes rogue and shoots Paco. All of the fragile stability that had painstakingly been maintained quickly disintegrates. Luis, as we’ve seen, charges at José with the Jeep, screaming for José to shoot him. José reluctantly obliges (even though his shot doesn’t at first kill Luis). Luis, blood-soaked, in turn shoots at José several times before finally killing him and then himself collapsing.

The violence here is both mythic and divine. Mythic, because of the blood that is shed; divine, in part, because someone, the young Enrique, survives and will subsequently, we are to believe, be transformed. But mostly the lesson of divine violence

27 As Edward Scheer has observed, the term “abreaction” comes from Freud’s paper “On the Psychical Mechanism of Hysterical Phenomena: Preliminary Communication.” The term meant for Freud a kind of cathartic dissipation or discharging of affect that had resulted from trauma.
is to be found in understanding the violence in its entirety as totality. The overwhelming presence of the heat in the film is our key. It’s as if the system itself were overheating, running amok, and killing itself. The violence thus is of an order that is weirdly less about violence for violence’s sake, but instead violence for the sake of life. That Enrique survives and runs away is testament to this. His is a rogue life that the logic of the death machine could not account for. The system, it would seem, has killed itself so that life might continue.

Questions of autoimmunity, auto-affection, and suicide are wholly implicated here. To think of a system’s self-inflicted violence as partaking of a suicidal dynamic would be insufficient if suicide were merely uncritically understood as taking of one’s own life, full stop. Rather, self-killing here appears to be after a kind of renewal. Enrique survives and flees. In the notes of his Germinal Life, commenting on Artaud’s essay on suicide entitled “Inquest,” Keith Ansell Pearson writes that

Artaud’s labors are directed towards a destratification of the body and the self. This is to work against the arbitrary inheritance of a certain ‘natural selection.’ Suicide becomes for Artaud a way of violently reconquering the self, of invading the organized body, freeing the self from the conditioned reflexes of the organs, so artificially selecting and designing the body and the self for a free existence. (235)

Pearson concludes his extended note by making his way to Hume’s essay on the subject, in which the Scottish Enlightenment philosopher wonders if there might be a kind of “prudence” and “courage” in self-eradication. While holding Hume in mind, Pearson writes: “The rational suicide does not simply devalue or negate life; on the contrary, it contains its own affirmation of it” (236). In the sense we’re discussing here, life enacts violence upon itself so that it might survive. The affirmation therefore is
autoimmunological precisely to the degree that the act seeks to gain systemic equilibrium and preserve vitality.

The heat throughout La caza is, in a real way, an expression of the world’s auto-affection. It is an anachronistic non-place that generates a singular event—in this case, a near-total violence. What Lawlor calls a “fundamental violence”—a term that he borrows from Derrida and his “Violence and Metaphysics” essay—is a violence that we will never be without; it can never be eliminated because it is a “violence irreducible in the fundamental structure of experience” (xi). Fundamental violence subtends the “worst violence”: “The worst violence is a total violence that aims to eliminate the ineliminable violence of experience, and therefore it aims to eliminate experience itself, which is…total apocalypse without remainder” (3). The worst violence is total suicide. It results when attempts to “repress…fundamental violence” occur.

With its apocalyptic ending, La caza offers an instance of the worst violence. (Again, there is, we should note here, one remainder: Enrique.) The fact that Luis, Paco, and José all regard each other with economic concerns in mind is of great interest to the question of violence at issue here. The characters regard each other as means to an end. Instrumentalization of one another exacerbates the problem of fundamental violence latent in all relations. Instead, what should be sought is an “unusable friendship” (224). Lawlor notes that, for Derrida, “an unusable friendship is a friendship beyond all utility, beyond all means-ends relation, beyond all market pricing, in short, beyond all economy.” By developing this Kantian demand, Lawlor situates his argument for

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28 Lawlor, after Derrida, also refers to fundamental violence as “transcendental violence.”
29 José wants money from Paco; Luis works for José; after José strikes Luis, Paco offers Luis a job.
mitigating violence not only in Derridean terrain, but also in Benjaminian. For Benjamin, in “Critique of Violence,” “courtesy, sympathy, peaceableness, trust” are preconditions for unalloyed means (which, again, Benjamin holds to be available in language). This is not to say that any of the thinkers at issue in the discussion view absolute non-violence as a possibility. Fundamental violence is always with us; the aim is to develop and sustain modes of engagement that eschew the worst violence.

The main characters in La caza are incapable of stepping outside of their dynamic of mutually destructive instrumentalization of one another. No hay salidas. As such, they are trapped in a dynamic in which nothing can get in nor escape. The psychotic degrees of mistrust and paranoia among José, Luis, and Paco ensure that they cannot truly let one another into the deep sorrows and dreams of their respective lives. When Luis tries reading a passage of imaginative science fiction to Paco, Paco looks at him with contempt. When José shares a photo of his new love interest with Paco, Paco compares the girl to one of the images in the Drag magazine. Luis’s alcoholism, which José judges with disgust, is itself a sign of his deep alienation, as is Paco’s urge to kill. They act with extraordinary inhospitality toward one another, which is precisely the opposite of what an “unusable friendship” would call for. To the contrary, something like unconditional hospitality30, letting others in unconditionally would serve to head off the worst violence. Instead, a perverse dynamic of being unable to leave and to remain persists.

The rabbits, of course, try as they might, are unable to flee either. All of their efforts to do so result in their deaths also. By exposing themselves, making their

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30 See Derrida, Of Hospitality.
vulnerability manifest (or visible), they enter into a terrain of absolute slaughter.
Thwarting a Deleuzian dynamic of flight—a dynamic which I developed at length in Chapter 1—does violence to the aspect of a new materialist biopoiesis that avails itself of escapability. It is the state of powerlessness, both for human and animal, that attends an enclosing limit. Their inability to move beyond their condition is the result of a failed porosity that forecloses the possibility of both an elsewhere and a different future.
Lawlor notes the deadliness of what he calls “unconditional impassage” (21). Such impassage, because it interrupts futurity, necessarily short-circuits gestures toward a democracy to come. The only response available for a system in which its actants find themselves in a no-place without a future is thus an abreaction of the gravest kind. The worst violence is autoimmunity run amok: it no longer lets the other in to be integrated, nor lets the other out to think the new thought.

Rosi Braidotti, in her essay, “The Politics of ‘Life Itself,’” writes: “‘Life’ can be a threatening force, which engenders new epidemics and environmental catastrophes, blurring the distinction between the natural and the cultural dimensions” (205). It is precisely such a blurring that has taken place in La caza. Politics, technology, and suicide are woven into a total presencing of heat, virus, and death. Bios and zoē thus are mutually implicated in ways necessary for thinking a new materialism. They are not merely separate realms in which one life is “qualified” and the other is “bare.” As a way to begin to think the intersection of these two categories, I’d like to invoke the example of the skeletal remains of the corpse that José presumably keeps under lock and key. It is weirdly a source of (not so) secret entertainment in that José values both the appearance of maintaining it secretly in its place as well as showing it to his friends. It is a kind of
invisibility that demands to be made visible. As a symbol, the corpse is a conquered body—a body that cannot resist, nor refuse, nor rebut. As such, it is an emblem of pure docility. It is for this reason that it has to be shown; it must be subjected to visibility. Even though, as a dead body, it must nominally be kept from view, exposing it affirms power over it. Indeed, such a dynamic certainly obtains; yet, at one and the same time, there’s something about a corpse that is decidedly outside of all control. Death is independent of all designs. Its presence evidences a becoming-imperceptible that José, try as he might, endeavors to maintain perceptible even though death in key respects is an absolute beyond.

Braidotti notes that zoē, likewise, is “independent of the will, the demands and expectations of the sovereign consciousness” (208). Zoē thus shares with death a kind of outside, a kind of uncontrollability that perpetually evades. One might be inclined to think of the rabbits as examples of zoē in La caza; but, I’m going to suggest that, as regards the rabbits, it is the presence of the virus myxomatosis itself that gives us the clearest indication of the kind of possibility that zoē offers. Just as the virus disrupts the health of the rabbit population, so zoē erupts into bios, intrudes upon it, revealing the death that is already latent. Yet, in its own way, zoē is also a vital presence that is not unlike divine violence. In the case of La caza, zoē commandeers the biopolitically charged space of the scorched hunting terrain; zoē, as a presence within the life of the world of José, Paco, and Luis, implodes that world while making its renewal possible. The implications for a democracy to come are profound: the narcissism that has captured the subjectivity of Paco, José, and Luis can now make way for, or reverse course toward, the auto-affection that autoimmunity (as porosity of borders) requires. Death, as a kind
of finitude that directs the self into narcissistic, harmful, short-sighted dynamics of self-preservation, can here yield to disinterested acceptance of larger concerns of vitality for its own sake. Democracy, in this sense, can only emerge once a retaliatory principle of violence is revealed as inherently narcissistic. Violence, as divine violence, is not interested in the particular individuals that it visits. To try to comprehend it as such is to deform one’s understanding of true senselessness by trying to make sense of it. Any affirmative politics must recognize both the necessity and the senselessness of the divine and the fundamental violence latent in zoē, in disease, in environmental catastrophe, in very, very, very hot days. Otherwise, democracy will remain impossible in the present and to come.
Chapter 3

Vulgar Materialism: The New Materialist Bodies of Sex and Shit in the Poetry of José Angel Valente and Fernando Merlo

I. Voice, Stone, Body: Materialist Poetics of the Infinite Sensible

Since its emergence in the early to middle twentieth century, structuralism has aimed to understand organically things as they appear in a system of relations. An object, in a structuralist reckoning, isn’t really an object because of these relations, which determine it, and thus signal an absence insofar as a structural entirety in itself cannot be perceived. Signs, for such thinkers as Ferdinand de Saussure and Roland Barthes, are understood as involving inherent separations (of signifier and signified) whose arbitrarily attained meanings compound into deferring semantic chains of significance. Ever since Jean Baudrillard, however, we have gained awareness of a kind of reality in which signs, in the structuralist sense, have now become wholly divorced from their referents. Baudrillard refers to this condition as “hyper-reality” or “ultra-reality”—a zone of virtuality in which reality itself, replaced by a veneer of an untethered arrangement of signs, ceases to appear. Signs that once indicated reality now gain their currency in endless and exclusive circulations of self-referentiality. The copy of the world comes to stand for the world itself to such an extent that Borges himself might have blushed. Indeed, one might argue that a Marxist rhetoric of alienation in some sense hardly obtains any longer on account of all having become unhinged, divested of that to which meaning once fastened itself: How can even language be said to be alienated if, after all, it is in
perfect harmony with its self-referentiality, oblivious to what it once stood for and, as such, uninterested in reality? The unsparing absoluteness of such a condition has relied upon technologies of various sorts to generate itself—indeed, its rationale is technological to such a degree that we can speak of its rationality as a kind that has conduced, and continues to lead, to human obsolescence. Instead of humans, computers now make decisions of consequence in matters pertaining to financial, military, and advertising industries based on their own self-evolving logic. In a curious inversion, a computer will now oftentimes ask a human user to prove that she herself is not a robot by having her perform such tasks as read nearly illegible texts, identify road signs, or indicate which images in a set have buildings.

In the hegemonic state of hyper-reality, signs can only affirm or project power, which itself as the truest referent sustains all exchange (linguistic, economic, or otherwise). Progress is now seemingly only evaluated by criteria that are financial or technological. The priests of economic orthodoxy continue to celebrate notions of growth in its infinite potential. As with neoliberalism, with hyperreality all has become liberated, which is to say that all is free to be exchanged on the market. And markets level all difference by subjecting all things—goods, people, words—to the calculated and calculating standard of exchangeability. To “liberate” (Baudrillard, *The Agony of Power*, 84) anything, to set it free, is to free it from its own mysteriousness, its own irreducibility, its own singularity. Invested as it is in the economic, hyperreality bears with it such a dynamic that becomes coterminous with luxury precisely to the (absolute) degree that opulence, in its appearance, is disconnected from all suffering, all precarity, all contingency.
The contemporary Italian philosopher Franco Berardi has, in certain respects, picked up where Baudrillard left off concerning “the implication of language in the financial economy” (Berardi, *On Poetry and Finance*, 16). Whereas Baudrillard took a critical view of the condition of all “liberated” materials in a hegemonic hyperreality, Berardi seeks ways to locate (or, perhaps better, restore) the emancipatory potential of “language and affects.” He worries that the “subsumption of language by the semiocapitalist cycle of production effectively freezes the affective potencies of language” (18). Availing himself of rhetoric derived from Marx’s notion of *real subsumption* in which, according to Negri, all societal relations and modes of exchange and communication come to be imbued with the logic of capital, Berardi writes, “The financialization of the economy is essentially to be seen as a process of the subsumption of the processes of communication and production by the linguistic machine. The economy has been invaded by *immaterial* semiotic flows and transformed into a process of linguistic exchange” (26, my emphasis).

One of the points of inquiry that is of interest here involves that which concerns the *material* and the *immaterial*. Whereas signs in a Baudrillardian, hyperrealistic order are certainly divested of a referent in the real, this is because, in effect, the real no longer exists. (Those who are not in hegemonic, capitalist, hyperreality are relegated to what Baudrillard calls the “infrareal” (52), a term for those who live in misery, statelessness, or other forms of exclusion from hyperreality.) Berardi has the concept of what he calls “parthenogenesis” in which “signs produce signs without any longer passing through the flesh” (17). (Parthenogenesis is a biological term that indicates how beings generate or reproduce without fertilization—in effect without intercourse with an other. Asexual
reproduction.) Baudrillard seems never to jettison the materiality of the sign—only its reality. Berardi, on the other hand, considers signs as having been stripped of their materiality precisely to the degree that they have been abstracted into the cognitive realm. By understanding precarity itself (which Baudrillard equates with the infrareal) as “pulverization of work,” that which was once linked to a place—i.e., work—has evaporated into “non-physical territory” (75). (Perhaps we need not remind ourselves that the bourgeoisie, the capitalist class par excellence, derived its name from its affiliation with the concrete, real place known as the bourg, or the city.) In this sense, the deterritorialization of labor into “social dust” (74) is evidence of its immateriality.

Poetry, for Berardi, once “foresaw the abandonment of referentiality and the automation of language” (20). Now, he avers, poetry can “start the process of reactivating the emotional body, and therefore of reactivating social solidarity, starting from the reactivation of the desiring force of enunciation. It can do so, he says, because it is the voice of language” (21, my italics). Berardi is aware of the dynamic of circulation and exchange that, for Baudrillard, reduces the sign to a uniform criterion. But, Berardi sees possibility where Baudrillard does not. Whereas the “functionality of the operational word implies a reduction of the act of enunciation to connective recombinability, poetry is the excess of sensuousness exploding into the circuitry of social communication.” Such sensuousness as located in the body is necessarily imbricated in the body of the other. Berardi writes, “As far as we know, access to language has been mediated by trust in the mother’s body. The relation between signifier and signified has always been guaranteed by the body of the mother, and therefore by the body of the other” (101). “Precariousness,” he says starts at “the point of disconnection
between language and the body” (102). His analysis extends to show, however, how “derefenentialization” (30) as global “hyperabstraction is liquidating both the living body of the planet and the social body” (112). As foil to ultra-pervasive hyperabstraction, Berardi puts forth poetry precisely for its “nonexchangeability” (139) on account of its inherent “excess” (140). To recompose the social body is to recompose bodily affectation through poetic language’s sensuality. Sensuality, in turn, relies on what Berardi calls “sensibility”: the bodily faculty in which beings “interpret signs that are not verbal nor can be made so” (144). The process here is one of slowing down, of involving the body in deliberate processes of “hypercomplex communication.” Such processes are short-circuited in the speeds of contemporary exchange. Aesthetics, in contrast, is quite literally “feeling”; as such, it involves contact between “the derma…(…the sensitive surface of our body-mind)” and the world. Poetry, as excess, is aesthetic contact in a “singular vibration of voice” (147), of “noncodified enunciation” (149). It is the “reopening of the indefinite” (158).

The twentieth-century Spaniard José Angel Valente is a poet of materiality whose verse engages the substantiality of materials such as the body, language, memory, and silence. His material poetics is deeply enmeshed in the physical stratum. In what follows, we will explore a kind of synesthetic co-corporeality of voice and stone. In La piedra y el centro (The stone and the Center), Valente, in addressing a particular performance dynamic of cante jondo,31 cites a popular copla:

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31 *Cante jondo*, literally translated as “deep song,” is a performance style of flamenco singing noteworthy for its emotional depth.
Fui la piedra y fui el centro
y me arrojaron al mar
y al cabo de largo tiempo
mi centro vine a encontrar. (15)

The *copla* would translate,\(^{32}\) inelegantly, as follows:

I was the stone and the center
and they threw me to the sea
and after a long time
I came to find my center.

This *copla* is of interest to Valente because of how it indicates an apparently impossible depth from which the voice of the flamenco singer, the *cantaor*, draws. “La voz misma del cantaor llega a la garganta de éste ¿desde qué no mensurable distancia?” (The very voice of the *cantaor* arrives at the throat from this, from whatever this immeasurable distance might be.) The voice of the song here is not merely an emanation, a flowing outward—although, to be clear, it is also this—but, insofar as it sings inwardly, a flowing towards interiority, “hacia lo más íntimo o adentrado de sí” (towards the most intimate or penetrating depth of itself), towards an ultimate straining, not only of throat—itself a site not only of expression (exteriorization), but also of ingestion (interiorization)—but also a straining of self until it reaches an apparent (outward and inward, we are to understand) unintelligibility (“hacia las más estrechas gargantas del alma puede parecer ininteligible”). When it does so, the poet notes, it arrives at what is called “*voz natural.*” Pushed to an uttermost, *voz natural*, or natural voice, becomes its own sense. It becomes a limit case of pure becoming in which the the *cantaor* sings from the voice toward

\(^{32}\) All translations in this chapter are my own.
interiority (“desde la voz hacia adentro” [16]). One hears a “voz que sube descendiendo, que dura milagrosamente suspendida sobre su punto de extinción” (a voice that rises while falling, that lasts, miraculously suspended over its own point of extinction).

I wish to suggest, briefly, at this juncture that an important moment—philosophical, ontological (as becoming, after Nietzsche, rather than being)—appears here in Valente’s thinking in which, in the transactions between bodily exteriorization and interiorization, nothing short of a kind of erasure of the Subject is at stake. As an alma, or soul, the sine qua non of Christian selfhood enters a curious process of self-eradication in its innermost expression. Valente develops his comparison of the limit-case interior depth of voice to its purchase in the material of stone by invoking the opening commentary of San Juan de la Cruz’s Canción 12 when he cites the Carmelite friar and mystic poet: “Como la piedra cuando se va más llegando a su centro” (Like the stone as it moves evermore toward its center). Stone here is movement (cuando se va más llegando: literally, as it goes away more so arriving at its center)—movement of the most impassive, the most immovable of materials. One reaches, one moves, with the immobility, toward the center. Stasis is revealed as both éxtasis (ekstasis) in its outward, centrifugal tendency as well as its opposite: an inward kind of ekstasis (in-stasis?) in which, after San Juan, union with God, the Absolute Other, is centripetal.

33 See Twilight of the Idols in which Nietzsche writes, “With the highest respect, I except the name of Heraclitus. When the rest of the philosophic folk rejected the testimony of the senses because they showed multiplicity and change, he rejected their testimony because they showed things as if they had permanence and unity. Heraclitus too did the senses an injustice. [ . . . ] But Heraclitus will remain eternally right with his assertion that being is an empty fiction” (TI “Reason” 2).

34 Valente erroneously attributes the commentary to Canción 11.
Thus at stake in Valente’s essay, as in San Juan’s Cántico, is fundamentally the erasure of the self through poetic movement radiating outward and converging inward (through voz natural as it pushes toward the unintelligibility of its own sense). A notion of the subject and subjectivity is in many respects at the center of the philosophical project undertaken by the philosopher Louis Althusser in an attempt to rethink a critical, Marxist positionality that does not rely on dialectics in order to think the workings of ideology. But Althusser, in his “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” essay, at first both does and does not do away with the category of the subject. Indeed he arrives at the conclusion that “there is no ideology except by the subject and for the subject” (115). Importantly for Althusser ideology exists “in a material ideological apparatus, prescribing material practices governed by a material ritual, which practices exist in the material actions of a subject” (emphasis added). This argument, of course, supports Althusser’s claim that “there is no practice except by and in ideology.” What will follow in his essay is his by now quite well known notion of interpellation. Ideology, and one’s always-already having been interpellated by it, is “eternal” (109). (Here I’m presenting ideology as an analogue to hegemony [of hyperreality] in Baudrillard and the subsumption of all relations by semiocapitalism in Berardi et al.)

Althusser acknowledges the necessity of a “subject-less” discourse, however, precisely insofar as he relies upon the category of the subject in order to produce his notion of ideology as eternal and totalizing. He writes: “Now it is this knowledge that we have to reach, if you will, while speaking in ideology, and from within ideology we have to outline a discourse which tries to break with ideology, in order to dare to be the beginning of a scientific (i.e. subject-less) discourse on ideology” (117). Ideology
interpellates, or hails, all of us always. It produces us perpetually as subjects before we can ever have a say. Yet, “ideology has no outside (for itself), but at the same time that it is nothing but outside (for science and reality).” I wish to suggest that ideology’s always being on an axis of interiority and exteriority likens it not only to the category of the subject, but also to subject-less-ness, which, again, Althusser equates with “scientific discourse.” We must be careful to point out that Althusser does not say “objective” discourse nor does he assert the need to arrive at “objectivity.” Such notions have no place in Althusser’s thinking. Rather, it is this subject-less-ness by the subject who is always in a state of perpetual passivity vis-à-vis ideology that is of interest. Althusser affirms that it is in the “relations” to the world that humans imagine where we find that which both constitutes and imposes human material actions and interaction in the world:

It is not their real conditions of existence, their real world, that ‘men’ ‘represent to themselves’ in ideology, but above all it is their relation to those conditions of existence which is represented to them there. It is this relation, which is at the center of every ideological, i.e., imaginary, representation of the real world. It is this relation that contains the ‘cause,’ which has to explain the imaginary distortion of the ideological representation of the real world. Or, rather, to leave aside the language of causality it is necessary to advance the thesis that it is the imaginary nature of this relation which underlies all the imaginary distortion that we can observe (if we do not live in its truth) in all ideology. (111)

Ideology doesn’t think the world as it is; rather, it thinks humans’ relation to the world and then calls this thinking the world as it is. And because it is both inside and outside, it not only is inherently constitutive of the subject, but also inherently indicative of the absolute fluidity or malleability of all subjectivity, which means, in turn, that the subject is subject not only to perpetual production but also to perpetual erasure.
Such erasure appears in a material, bodily depth able to be occasioned in the intensification of relations. At issue for us here is how such intensification occurs in poetic utterance, in bodily iteration, and in materiality. To return to Valente, so far we have shown how for the poet, the voice of song drives toward an utmost interiority of stone that is the radical erasure of self. Utterance is both creation and destruction of the subject. Valente’s poem, entitled “Materia,” offers a meditative exploration of perpetual subject-less-ness as well as a kind of restoration of community available in sensuous bodily encounter.

**Materia**

*Convertir la palabra en materia  
donde lo que quisiéramos decir no pueda  
penetrar más allá  
de lo que la materia nos diría  
si a ella, como a un vientre,  
delicado aplicásemos,  
desnudo, blanco vientre,  
delicado el oído para oír  
el mar, el indistinto  
rumor del mar, que más allá de ti,  
el no nombrado amor, te engendra siempre. (Entrada en materia 166-7)*

**Material**

To convert the word in material  
where that which we would like to say cannot penetrate beyond  
that which material would give us  
if to her, as to a belly,  
we should press delicately,  
naked, white belly,  
our ear, delicate, to hear  
the sea, the indistinct  
rumor of the sea, that, beyond you,  
the unnamed love, will engender you always.
In this poem by Valente we glimpse the animating, poetic concern that seeks to articulate and thus, provisionally, without design, to understand (and now, we can also say, reclaim) the dynamic of language in a sensuous, corporeal potentiality. The poem begins with the infinitive “convertir”\textsuperscript{35}. As an infinitive, the word is without mood, without either the claim of the indicative as historical or factual, or, importantly, a subjunctive desire or hope. The infinitive, as such, is unbound, a pure infinity. And it is this infinity—both as potential and as becoming—that the poet summons to engage, in transformative process, material. In so doing, its infinity, in a sense, becomes delimited; language necessarily limits itself to what material would or is able to say. We must listen to its body, to what it gives us in the encounter, as we press ear to flesh, as we touch with our ears the belly of the other. The synesthetic quality of the contact is not incidental. The confusion of the senses is the intensification of the sensorial. The body is heard in the touching of it emitting its endlessness—the rumors of the sea are its rumors and murmurs, speculations and mutterings, clearly announced possibilities and ones barely discernable. In this way infinity reappears as that which is and that which might be. The “unnamed love” is that which will not be defined and cannot be reduced. An infinity unto itself, its appearance in the name is forever qualified as provisional. The poem summons solidarity in the first person plural—the past subjunctive of “aplicásemos” itself indicating a kind of suggestion, if not a direct proposal for how we ought to comport ourselves before the raw corporeality of a body. Apostrophically, the poet addresses a second person—perhaps the reader, but more suggestively the unnamed

\textsuperscript{35} Semantically, of course, convertir means “to convert”; thus the language of the poem here is both grammatically and semantically open to absolute change or changeability.
love itself that is always engendered by the sea, perceptible through the belly, which is
the material, the materiality that speaks to us (“nos diría”). Material itself here is a kind
of corporeal third person, *as to a belly*. The “we” could be either inclusive or exclusive.
The intimacy of the poem—of pressing an ear delicately against a naked, white belly—
suggests an invitation to involvement, as does the confessional nature of a declared defeat
of utterance: “that which we would like to say cannot / penetrate…” In any case, the
poem reveals that the self will always be beyond the self by deploying a kind of chain of
signification that is troubled, hedged, contingent—as if the deferral itself were deferred.
The opening infinitive verb is followed by past subjunctives, conditionals, denials, *if*
statements, similes until the poem arrives at an indicative mood of verb whose subject is,
in the end, *rumor*. As such, the poem articulates an impossibility of speech generating
(engendering), by or through material (biological, sonic), the infinity of the unnamed love
(which of course has found its way into the material of language’s naming it unnamed).
Signs, in this reckoning, undo parthenogenesis by claiming the limit of abstraction—that
which is unnamed—and referring it, moving it through bodies of water and of sound and
of flesh in an encounter of pure exposure and vulnerability: naked. Apostrophe,
material, body, and infinity converge. “You,” as an unnamed love, are the unnamed love
that will generate yourself always.

II. Material Matters: Pharmacological Poetics of Passivity in José Angel
Valente

Poetic utterance in the sense that we’ve been outlining so far thus both creates and
erases the self—i.e., the subject—through committed engagement with the material
corporeality of bodies. Valente pursues his interrogation of such dynamics in what we can call a material poetics of passivity. Such a poetics values attentiveness and receptibility vis-à-vis material in ways that reveal both the radical instability of a body’s meaning as well as its potential for meaning’s infinite generation. In order to further our discussion let us consider the following poem by Valente:

\[
Hacerse el amor a sí mismo
\]
\[
delante de un espejo
\]
\[
y en el umbral de un tiempo
\]
\[
sin progresión posible,
\]
\[
mientras
\]
\[
se desprenden sin fin los amarillos
\]
\[
pétalos de la noche. (Material memoria 18)
\]

Making love to oneself
in front of a mirror
and at the threshold of a time (on the verge of a time)
without possible progression,
while
shedding endlessly the yellow
petals of the night.

Deceptively simple, this seemingly innocuous untitled poem by Valente, from his Material memoria collection of 1979, reveals, upon careful inspection, a well-considered and profound philosophical argument. I am calling this argument an effort at a new materialism for how it seeks to elaborate a materiality (or materialism) other than the merely dialectical, whose Hegelian foundations have tended largely to front dualistic models of opposition. Rather than reproduce that materialism’s dialectical inheritance, Valente, as we shall see, has offered a model of stillness rather than progress, indecision rather than decision, passivity rather than overcoming, polyvalence rather than mono- or di-valence.
Valente’s poem—sequentially second in the collection—initiates a contemplation of materiality by assuredly situating the reader in medias res, if you will, with an impersonal subject. The effect is one of suddenness; the reader is immediately, without preparation, inserted into a scene of carnal trance. The infinitive verb (hacerse) as such is not bounded by temporality, is not affected by mood. Thus we are not witnessing history—this is not narration with its attending judgments and positions; rather, we are partaking of an event. It is precisely in this transposition out of the historical and into the a-temporal, in this delocalization, that Valente shows how we can forge a new materialism. That it be situated in the realm of the flesh at its most vulnerable, its most exposed, bespeaks the reality. This is not a poetry of ideas about materiality to be imposed upon material. It is the reckoning of material—specifically here the biological material of the flesh—at its most fragile, most susceptible, and most mad.

The prime materiality we encounter in this poem comprehends material as self-loving, or, to put it differently, we can view love as that which binds and unbinds material—binding the self in the intensification of its unity and unbinding it in its emissions. Not only does this materiality emerge out of a dialogue with an earlier Spanish poem, it stands in a decidedly different light. Valente’s poem, with its image of “yellow petals,” effects a certain inversion or reworking of Lorca’s roses in “El Rey de Harlem,” a small part of which we excerpt here:

\begin{quote}
Las rosas huían por los filos
de las últimas curvas del aire,
y en los montones de azafrán
los niños machacaban pequeñas ardillas
con un rubor de frenesí manchado. (Poet in New York 18)
\end{quote}
Roses fled from the blades
of the last curves of air,
and in the heaps of saffron,
young boys smashed small squirrels
with a flush of stained frenzy.

In the violent context of Lorca’s poem—more on this in a moment—the image of the roses fleeing from blades floridly suggests drops of blood fresh from a knife’s edge, mid-air and immediately after the cut has been inflicted. A confluence of violence, shame, and lust not only figures in the redness of “rosas,” but also in the possessed and overwhelming “rubor” that stains both heaps of saffron as well as frenzy itself in this moment that is both still and instantaneously swift. Indeed, in certain respects the image’s stillness is a product of its swiftness, a testament to the surrealists’ consciousness of time’s texture. A radical deceleration of the image is the best way to apprehend the gesture’s speed and to recognize the violence of the blade’s effect. The metamorphosis of blood into roses is such that, because of the care and richness of the metaphor, it slows (if not altogether freezes) the image's severance from the blade while thought works to assimilate it fully. Such a process thus invites a lingering over the violence. Patience and fury collapse into a single poetic encounter, which embeds a bi-polar tension between these competing tendencies.

In Lorca’s poem, the patience of the image is deployed in order to safeguard a mood that bespeaks the violence of a race uprising and overthrowing its white oppressors. (As the poet says later on in the poem, “Es preciso matar al rubio vendedor de aguardiente”: We must kill the blond moonshine merchants.) It is a scene of power, of injurious force being exercised upon another with the vengeance of the historical consciousness of a relentlessly persecuted group. In keeping with the master/slave
dialectic, and beyond the claims of reparations, the figure of the King of Harlem intends a new order, not one in which reconciliation with the oppressor is diplomatically and peaceably sought, but rather one in which the oppressor is unsparingly eradicated. Group against group, the Hegelian King of Harlem will avenge history’s gravest offenses.

In contrast, we find in Valente’s poem a decidedly different scene: one announcing itself—again, ahistorically—as being of love and reflection. Reflection here vividly occurs on a physical, immediate level inasmuch as the poem’s sole actor stands in front of a mirror. (Or, if one is to insist that the reflection is mediated by the mirror itself, then it is so mediated by a medium of relatively minimal mediating effects.) The love here of course is of the self, which the poem very plainly announces. Yet, as such, it does not depict a site of shame. The poem however remains deeply personal, ushering its reader into the private stirrings of a desire without an object. One can infer a gaze—why else stand in front of a mirror?—of the self upon the self, but selflessly so. After all, the figure in the mirror does not inhabit the poem’s consciousness. Only the poem does. Thus the gaze cannot be narcissistic; instead it is communal, betraying a chain of looking worthy of Auguste Renoir’s *Le Déjeuner des canotiers*. In this image of one standing in front of a mirror, the chain of regard, however, concerns the subject of the poem, the poet, and the reader. The impersonal third person (*Hacerse el amor a sí mismo…*), rather than the personal second or first persons, ensures both a vital ambiguity as well as a continuity between the three onlookers implicated in the poem. Indeed, because the poem confronts the reader with such intimacy (impersonal as it may be), it is as if there were a second and a first persons, a *tú* and a *yo*. The poem, with extraordinary economy
and alacrity, becomes the reader’s mirror as the reader imagines a self in front of a mirror.

Thus it is a scene at once personal and impersonal, commencing with a suggestion of a voyeuristic gaze that quickly transforms into an honest reckoning of the self and its flesh. Indeed, we are less situated in a scene such as Renoir’s and much more so in one of Velázquez. In *Las Meninas* the viewer of the painting gradually proceeds from figure to figure within the portrait before coming to discern that she occupies the subject position of the king and queen themselves, who, as reflected in a mirror located at the painting’s vanishing point, refer to a point outside of the painting. In this progression of gaze, the viewer becomes the viewed, becomes the subject of the artist—who, we must remark, has inserted himself as artist painting the portrait being viewed into the work—and his attentions. In this circumstance, the self comes to regard (in the fullest sense of the word) itself as deeply involved in the other.

The flowers, too, in Valente’s poem stand in distinction to Lorca’s. Whereas the latter’s flowers are suffused with the vehemence of lust and the violence of blood’s deep red, the former’s evince the quotidian nonchalance of yellow. This color, with varying hues, evokes the color of vital fluids of another sort—semen, breast milk, honey—and as such intimates a loving peacefulness inhering in life’s necessary processes of transmittance. In this curious, private, singular tenderness, we encounter a strange concurrence of temporalities. For starters, there is the time of exuberance, of physical profusion—a temporality that is, to borrow from Wordsworth, too much with us, and soon, given the presence of both pending and ongoing climax taking place from the poem’s onset. In addition to this temporality, we find a time of deferral and prolongation
in the poem: “shedding endlessly the yellow / petals of the night” (“se desprenden sin fin los amarillos / pétalos de la noche”). Desire in this instance is such that it doesn’t entirely attain its object, doesn’t reach its goal, doesn’t ever quite achieve the finality of its fulfillment. The endlessness of never arriving, of the incomplete or imperfect, emerges as a profound reckoning of reality. A real real: at stake is a poetics that splices the joys and anguishes of creation and production into those of expenditure and waste. Imperfection is by definition that which is not complete. A politics emerges that underscores the infinite deferral of all perfection (aesthetic, biological, political). Politics can no longer satisfy itself with airs of progress toward utopia; instead it must dwell in a reckoning of materiality and its conditions—in a reality of politics as errant, contingent, and aleatory, not in a Realpolitik of purpose and force.

The poem, sententially speaking, is a fragment—a form, or perhaps better, a non-form, for which Valente is known to have had great affinity throughout his career. The poem fragment in question here is an adverbial clause in which simultaneous activities seemingly anticipate other action that would occur in a main clause. But such action never arrives, is never announced, because no main clause ever appears. While doing X and Y, Z happened. Here, we simply have the first part, the adverbial clause (While doing X and Y…), without the main clause (…Z). The main clause, we could say, is deferred infinitely, endlessly. As such, we can see how the fragment as form (or formlessness) forestalls decision and progression while preserving indecision and stasis as ekstasis. The fragment thus induces a like dynamic of hesitation and stillness at an impossible limit. In this particular poem we have an instance of form (or formlessness)
echoing content—the content of the poem communicating an absence of development in an impossibly stationary temporal location.

While certainly one could make a case that the poem avails itself of a Bergsonian distinction of temps and durée, my reading here is less concerned with psychological time and more so with the politics and ethics that attend the mere claim of endlessness. The lack of “possible progression” that the poem declares denotes, of course, a stasis that is amplified by how the poem’s (in)action situates itself “in the threshold” or “on the verge” “of a time / without possible progression” (“...en el umbral de un tiempo / sin progresion posible”). The lack of progression here is not, however, merely to be understood as an absence of temporal advancem; rather, it bespeaks a lack of ideational and creational advancement as well. As such, it indicates what Derrida has referred to as the undecidable, a state of indeterminacy that is necessary in order to arrive at justice or truth. In the first “fragment” of his “Cinco fragmentos para Antoni Tàpies” (“Five Fragments for Antoni Tàpies”), which are also found in the Material memoria collection, the poet develops a notion of “non-action” that operates in a strikingly similar spirit as the Derridean undecidable:

El estado de creación es igual al wu-wei en la práctica del Tao: estado de no acción, de no interferencia, de atención suprema a los movimientos del universo y a la respiración de la materia (41).

The creative state is like the wu-wei of Taoist practice: a state of non-action, of non-interference, of supreme attention to the movements of the universe and to material’s respiration.

The state of non-action (“estado de no acción”) is itself an indication of undecidability. For Derrida, undecidability is of importance because of how it confronts dualisms and dialectics in significant ways by revealing their problematic nature. Perhaps one of the
most well-known examples of this problematizing is Derrida’s analysis of the *pharmakon* in *Dissemination*. The *pharmakon* has an ambivalent nature in that it means both cure and poison. Derrida writes:

> If the *pharmakon* is “ambivalent,” it is because it constitutes the medium in which opposites are opposed, the movement and the play that links them among themselves, reverses them or makes one side cross over into the other (soul/body, good/evil, inside/outside, memory/forgetfulness, speech/writing, etc.).…The *pharmakon* is the movement, the locus, and the play: (the production of) difference. (*Dissemination* 127)

For Derrida, the undecidable status of the *pharmakon* points to the larger undecidability of philosophy (as in the case of Plato) as well as, indeed, all writing. So what, then, is a decision made in the context of undecidability—a context that necessarily pervades all decision? For Derrida a decision—any decision, but especially the just decision—is nothing short of madness itself. Invoking Kierkegaard, he writes:

> The instant of decision is a madness, says Kierkegaard. This is particularly true of the instant of the *just* decision that must rend time and defy dialectics. It is a madness; a madness because such decision is both hyper-active and suffered [*sur-active et subie*], it preserves something passive…as if the deciding one was free only by letting himself be affected by his own decision and as if it came to him from the other. (*Acts of Religion* 255)

Valente’s poem, as we have seen, is able to “rend time” by generating distinct, yet simultaneous, temporalities of attainment and deferral. It also fronts time’s “imperfection”—in the grammatical, political, and aesthetic senses of the word—which allows it to defy dialectics by producing a simultaneously static and ecstatic “indecision,” which itself is the precondition for any just “decision.” Such a decision, in Derridean parlance, “preserves something of the passive” by letting the decision come “from the other.” In Valente’s case, however, this “other” does not refer merely, if at all, to a
human being per se. Rather the “other” in question for Valente is material (or materiality) itself, which must be given space to reveal its own insight, thereby allowing the material itself to speak. Thus Valente shares Derrida’s valorization of the necessity of passivity that allows the other, in its own radical undecidability, to inform decision. He refers to this passivity as a state of “retraction,” akin to an aspect of an ontological feminine. Still in the first “fragment” of “Cinco fragmentos para Antoni Tàpies,” Valente writes:

\[ \text{Sólo en ese estado de retracción sobreviene la forma, no como algo impuesto a la materia, sino como epifanía natural de ésta (41).} \]

Only in this state of retraction does form survive, not as something imposed upon material, but rather as material’s natural epiphany.

As a point of reference so that we don’t lose sight of an important part of our discussion: in order to think along the lines of a new materialism, we can see the insights generated by Valente’s poem insofar as the poem engages raw corporeality of matter as inherently generative, even agential in its own right. Also, in keeping with our discussion of Braidotti in an earlier chapter (which we will not recapitulate here), we can affirm a regard of human life as zoē insofar as the scene of the poem is “naked” or “bare,” which in turn indicates its activity taking place outside of the realm of the political and instead as mere carnal materiality. In so doing, the poem fronts a kind of leisurely gratuitousness toward the biological and its drives that is outside of the realm of capitalist regimes of control in a way that is akin to how Braidotti refashions Agamben’s thinking on zoē by viewing its biological materiality as combinatory potential rather than site of absolute
subjection to political sovereignty. We can also say that Valente’s work seems to insist on matter’s inherent involvement with another through the reflective dynamic of its self-exploration. Finally, there is also a kind of implicit femininity in matter that the poet observes, which we will discuss in greater detail below.

To continue, the other primary reading of the poem, of course, would be one that accounts for the reflexive infinitive alternatively by understanding love itself as that which makes love to itself. This reading might be seen as less invested in the particular corporeality of a body and much more so in what is, grammatically and literally, the impersonal. Hacerse el amor a sí mismo: love makes itself (se hace) in making to itself what it is. But the impersonal need not necessarily exclude a body—indeed how could it? Such a reading, in any event, inclines even less toward stasis and more toward becoming. The infinity that emerges here is one that hews to a similar temporal logic as has been previously discussed. What differs, however, is the analysis of the yellow petals of the night. The inclination here would be to read night as night and the yellow petals that shed endlessly as indicators of light such as stars or even that light which persists on either side of night (after sunset or before daybreak). In this case, as light sheds endlessly into night’s infinite advance, ever greater darkness emerges.

The shedding of petals, much more literally so, in this second reading is also indicative of an undecided (and undecidable) love that dates back centuries in the Western tradition: Me quiere, no me quiere. She loves me, she loves me not. Once again the reader finds herself in the terrain of the undecidable, where Derrida continues to

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36 See Rosi Braidotti’s Nomadic Subjects.
37 “The Daisy Oracle” likely dates back to the Middle Ages. See Malcolm Jones’s The Secret Middle Ages.
be of insight, particularly when contemplating the relationship of undecidability to knowledge. For Derrida, all decisions require a step into the unknown and, as such, are not the product of knowledge, but the absolute submission to non-knowledge. This is why decisions are a madness: one simply doesn’t know how a decision will turn out.

Taking up the question of Abraham’s “decision” to kill his son, Derrida says that Abraham’s “nonknowledge doesn’t in any way suspend his own decision, which remains resolute” (The Gift of Death 77). He goes on to say about Abraham: “He decides, but his absolute decision is neither guided nor controlled by knowledge. Such, in fact, is the paradoxical condition of every decision: it cannot be deduced from a form of knowledge of which it would simply be the effect, conclusion, or explication” (77). Decidability, in turn, bears directly on the question of justice for Derrida, which is precisely where the question of politics emerges as one of vital importance. In his “Force of Law” essay, Derrida assails a dynamic in the determination of justice that holds that the “decision of the just…must follow a law [loi] or a prescription, a rule” (Acts of Religion 251). He is deeply suspicious of how justice in this model “simply consists of applying a rule, of enacting a program or effecting a calculation” (251) because of how such a paradigm avoids the difficulty of singularity. In other words, predetermined rules for handling similar, but ultimately uniquely different, cases such as those that we find, for example, in mandatory sentencing guidelines eschew the real work, the real thought, necessary for meting out a true notion of justice. In contrast, for Derrida true justice must always involve a fresh interpretation of the law, indeed as if the judge is confronting the law every time for the first time. Justice in this sense is not merely about conforming to a pre-established pattern, but also very much about thinking anew codified law in
relationship to ever-changing situations. “Each case is other, each decision is different and requires an absolutely unique interpretation, which no existing, coded rule can or ought to guarantee absolutely” (*Acts of Religion* 251). This is not to say that codified law can or should be jettisoned; indeed, the judge must exercise her judgment by referring to precedent. Herein lies the aporia, what Derrida views as occasioning the undecidable: one must hew to the law in order to diverge from it. What is imperative is that, in such a divergence, one forgo the logic of calculability.

(T)he undecidable is not merely the oscillation between two significations or two contradictory and very determinate rules, each equally imperative…The undecidable is not merely the oscillation or the tension between two decisions. Undecidable—this is the experience of that which, though foreign and heterogeneous to the order of the calculable and the rule, must [*devoir*] nonetheless—it is of *duty* [*devoir*] that one must speak—deliver itself over to the impossible decision while taking account of law and rules. A decision that would not go through the test and ordeal of the undecidable would not be a free decision; it would only be the programmable application of the continuous unfolding of a calculable process. (252, italics original)

The decision that emerges out of such a process can never be guaranteed. For if it were able to be guaranteed, it could only be so by having been submitted to a process of rationalization, of calculation. Thus the just decision always remains itself susceptible to injustice. Such a dynamic as this is what ultimately makes the just decision undecidable; or, in different Derridean parlance, the undecidable “haunts” (as trace) the just decision. Indeed, it haunts every decision by dismantling certainty. And because of the trace of the undecidable in all decision—the undecidable that subtends justice; indeed, is justice’s prerequisite—justice (or the ghost of it) ends up being possible in every decision. In this deconstructive sense, justice is infinite so long as at strives toward authentic reckoning of
the singular by passing through the non-calculable undecidable. And the very absence of
calculation for its procurement ensures its rendezvous with madness.

In light of this foray into Derrida’s thinking of undecidability, we can return to the
non-action at issue in Valente’s poetics. Just as undecidability for Derrida demands
rigorous, singular engagement in order to ensure the possibility of justice, so Valente’s
notion of non-action requires, we’ll recall, a “supreme attention” (“atención suprema”).
Valente’s poetics prescribe attentiveness to material (materiality) in order to ensure a just
(if infinite, even impossible) handling. The link here is unequivocally one that
definitively bonds ethics with aesthetics. That the poet would have his reader direct her
“supreme attention to the movements of the universe and to material’s respiration” (41)
bespeaks the importance of mindfulness toward singularity. Supreme attention cannot
determine in advance what it will say about material; it cannot impose upon material
material’s own utterance. To the contrary, supreme attention waits for material to speak.
Recall that such attention, for the poet, emerges in what he calls a “state of retraction” by
the artist so that “material’s natural epiphany” can emerge.

Silence, attention, power, and passivity furthermore appear here in a kind of
gendered iteration that the Latin root of material or materia holds: mater. An inhering
femininity would seem to be a substantial component of matter itself. Valente writes:

...en lo oscuro el centro es húmedo y de fuego: madre, matriz, materia:
stabat matrix: el latido de un pez antecede a la vida… (57).

…the in the darkness the center is humid and of fire: mother, matriz,
material: stabat matrix: the beating of a fish precedes life...

We will here turn to Derrida’s The Beast and the Sovereign (La bête et le souverain), a
collection of seminar lectures delivered at the École des hautes études en sciences
sociales (EHESS), in Paris, from the fall of 2001 to the spring of 2003. In the first session, Derrida begins simply by stating, “La...le” (19)—the French feminine and masculine definite articles. Feminine…masculine. These two articles of gender, la and le, will serve to frame in many respects his subsequent lectures. They immediately frame what follows the announcement of “La bête et le souverain” (19) (Indeed, he begins many, if not most, of these seminars by announcing plainly: “La bête et le souverain”—an utterance without verbs in which he deliberately underscores the gender of each word.): La bête is feminine and as such stands in distinction (I do not say contradiction) to the masculine sovereign. That the femininity of the beast is juxtaposed with the masculinity of the sovereign indicates its relationship to power. Derrida, of course, intends to mark the difference between the two terms (as well as their genders); but, in doing so, he also seeks to reveal their involvement with each other, their mutual implication.

The beast that Derrida immediately summons is the wolf (le loup). On s’avance à pas de loup. One moves stealthily, as a wolf. The French expression “à pas de loup” signifies both introduction as well as furtiveness. What’s noteworthy in both cases is the silence of the movement. Just as the wolf is able to silently approach its prey, so also can one find oneself inserted, imperceptibly, in a conversational theme without having discerned advance warning. It is the silence of speech that overtakes one in such instances. Derrida remarks as much: “c’est de parole silencieuse qu’il s’agit ici” (21). Silence, for Derrida, in this case has an almost hypnotic power—it’s as if it is a material unto itself. Regarding poetry, Valente remarks something similar in “Cinco fragmentos para Antoni Tapiès”:
Mucha poesía ha sentido la tentación del silencio. Porque el poema tiende por naturaleza al silencio. O lo contiene como materia natural. 

Poética: arte de la composición del silencio. Un poema no existe si no se oye, antes que su palabra, su silencio (42).

A lot of poetry has felt the temptation of (the) silence. Because the poem, in its nature, tends toward silence. Or, it contains it as a natural material. 

Poética: art of the composition of silence. A poem doesn’t exist unless its silence, before its word, is heard.

One must hear the poem’s silence, and listen to it attentively, in order for the poem to emerge. What appears before the poem, before its word, is what Valente, in his “Sobre la operación de las palabras sustanciales” essay calls antepalabra (before-word). The antepalabra’s significance is of great political import in an ambit of hyper-rationality and calculation on account of its power to de-instrumentalize language.

Palabra inicial o antepalabra, que no significa aún porque no es de su naturaleza el significar sino el manifestarse. Tal es el lugar de lo poético. 

Pues la palabra poética es la que desinstrumentaliza al lenguaje para hacerlo lugar de la manifestación. (63)

Initial word or before-word, that doesn’t yet signify because it is not in its nature to signify but rather to manifest itself. Such is the place of the poetic. Thus the poetic word is that which de-instrumentalizes language in order to make it a place of manifestation.

The notion that we’re moving towards here would seem to be one that suggests that if decision is madness—and what appears in the approach to a poem by attending to the material of its silence—it would be one that is inherently de-instrumentalizing. Indeed, the decision is madness for a subject in part because it is, in fact, material’s decision that cuts time into a before and after.

Material (materiality) is always its own radical presence. “Radical” (in English, Spanish, or French) carries the valence of the Latin radix, meaning “root”; radicalis thus means “having roots.” Material (materiality) is thus at its core (at its root) that which is
inhently and essentially formless, and is the possibility of all forms. Its radical presence is both its formless potential for form as well as the dissolution of form itself. (One is reminded of Wallace Stevens’s “The Auroras of Autumn,” where the poetdeclaims, “This is form gulping after formlessness.”) To come at the question from a different angle, we can say that materiality is not form. And because it is not form, it bears absolutely no relationship to the historical. Materiality is form’s potential and its undoing. It is not concrescence. Nor is it the end or goal of an activity. Materiality is entropy, rust, decay; it is also seed, metamorphosis, emergence. Materiality indeed does not simply have these qualities—it is and becomes these qualities. Its substantive is its adjective. (Or, perhaps better, its substantiality is its adjectivality.) Valente writes:

Presencia radical de la materia que llega a la forma, pero que es sobre todo formación: formas que se disuelven a sí mismas en la nostalgia originaria de lo informe, de lo que en rigor es indiferente al cambio y puede, por tanto, cambiarse en todo, ser raíz infinita de todas las formas posibles. (42)

The radical presence of material (materiality) that arrives at form, but is above all a process of formation: forms that dissolve into themselves in the first nostalgia of the formless, in what is, strictly speaking, indifferent to change and therefore can change itself into anything, can be the infinite root of all possible forms.

There’s something like the undecidable at work in this passage. Forms dissolving within themselves in the first nostalgia of the formless—this is what materiality, as formation, is. It is that which makes itself available to all possibility, to transformation into everything. Such a notion radically differs from an historical materialist account of form in which form appears as historical accretion. It is also, as it turns out, perfectly in keeping with Derrida’s notion of the pharmakon, which itself has no stable essence, and to which we’ll return our discussion. Derrida writes: “The ‘essence’ of the pharmakon lies in the way
in which, having no stable essence, no ‘proper’ characteristics, it is not, in any sense (metaphysical, physical, chemical, alchemical) of the word, a substance…It is rather the prior medium in which differentiation in general is produced” (Dissemination, 125-6). The pharmakon’s “prior medium” bears great resemblance to Valente’s antepalabra or to silence as a medium out of which indeterminate (or undetermined) material form might emerge. Since that which is “strictly speaking, indifferent to change…can, therefore, change into any and everything, can be the infinite root of all possible forms,” a real poetics of possibility—possibility being the event or non-event of continuous deferral—can emerge.

Or, rather than considering possibility as an endless chain of deferral, we might, after Derrida in Of Grammatology, contemplate a pharmakon or supplement as an endless chain of plenitude. Derrida, in his careful reading of Rousseau, states regarding the sign and the supplement that writing, as supplement, serves as an “addition” to which writing is “added…to make speech present when it is actually absent” (144). In this way, the supplement (writing) makes up for a lack (speech). Writing is supplement to the “deficiency and infirmity” of a speech that is absent. On the other hand the supplement might also not make up for a lack; rather, it may be an instance of pure addition. Derrida states: “The supplement adds itself, it is a surplus, a plenitude enriching another plenitude, the fullest measure of presence. It cumulates and accumulates presence” (italics original). The two significations of the supplement—of compensating for a lack and adding plenitude to plenitude—“cannot be separated” (145). Of each, “the inflexion varies from moment to moment. Each of the two significations is by turns effaced or
becomes discretely vague in the presence of the other.” Their only commonality is that the supplement is an “exterior addition.”

We have not lost sight of Valente’s poem with its endless, yellow petals. To such a concern, we can observe how Derrida seizes on Rousseau’s way of referring to onanism: “ce dangereux supplément” (150). That dangerous supplement. Self-gratification here makes up for the lack that is an absent person, which in Derrida’s contemplation of Rousseau might be either an absent lover or an absent mother. It “reassures” and is capable of mitigating lack, however, “only through that culpability traditionally attached to the practice, obliging children to assume the fault and to interiorize the threat of castration that accompanies it. Pleasure is thus lived as the irremediable loss of the vital substance, as exposure to madness and death” (150-151).

The supplement and the lack are inextricably bound. As a question of the imaginary, it operates as writing which itself is “dangerous to life” (151). Reason “is reasonable, if not reasoning” (148). So long as reason is not reasoning, which is to say that so long as it is not calculating or adding dangerously to a lack—a lack created when humankind “put out (its) eyes” after losing “the sense and the taste of true natural riches” and became “compelled to call in industry, to struggle, and to labor…at the risk of (its) life and at the expense of (its) health”—it is reasonable. Similarly, pleasure is thus produced “at the expense of…health, strength, and, sometimes…life” (151).

The dangerous supplement: “like the sign it bypasses the presence of the thing and the duration of being.” Further on, Derrida states:

Immediate experience of restitution because as experience, as consciousness or conscience, it dispenses with passage through the world. What is touching is touched, auto-affection gives itself as pure autarchy. 
If the presence that it then gives itself is the substitutive symbol of another presence, it has never been possible to desire that presence ‘in person’ before this play of substitution and this symbolic experience of auto-affection. The thing itself does not appear outside of the symbolic system that does not exist without the possibility of auto-affection. (153-154, italics original)

There is no fulfillment possible in sexual engagement with another without the lack of presence that allows one to imagine presence.

Thus, as we’ve seen, the supplement can break both ways; it bifurcates. It can (1.) replace a fault or a lack or (2.) be an addition to an already perpetual fullness. An endless chain of plenitude we might consider as being in keeping with a *biopoiesis* in a new materialist framework. If elsewhere I’ve articulated a key dynamic of *biopoiesis* to be escapability, then here I wish to add that a process of ongoing and absolute plenitude as supplementarity is a generative tendency of *biopoiesis*, as well, because it pertains to material in a new materialism. In keeping with this line of thought, one might be inclined to wonder how matter is even possible. Which is to say, why is there anything at all? Or, seeing as matter exists, is there a stable amount of matter in the universe? Or is such a quantity susceptible to change? Received lay notions of physics tell us that matter can neither be created nor destroyed; but twentieth-century advances in quantum mechanics confirmed that matter and energy are interchangeable.

Further advancements in theoretical physics have affirmed that matter is, in fact, destroyed when it collides with anti-matter. Going one step further, University of Michigan scientists and engineers have shown recently how, in a vacuum, during the collisions of matter and anti-matter it

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38 This is called the Law of Conservation of Mass; it is attributable to Antoine Lavoisier, 1785.
39 $e = mc^2$
40 This claim follows the theories of the quantum physicist Paul Dirac who published extensively in the mid 20C.
is possible “to create something out of nothing.” “In a strong electromagnetic field, this annihilation…can be the source of new particles,” says the research scientist John Nees.\footnote{See “Theoretical Physics Breakthrough: Generating Matter and Anti-Matter from the Vacuum.” https://phys.org/news/2010-12-theoretical-physics-breakthrough-antimatter-vacuum.html.}

The preceding brief and admittedly cursory synopsis of developments in the understanding of matter in theoretical physics is only intended to lend a certain scientific credibility to the philosophical notion of the supplement as we’re contemplating it here. To return to our larger point: things can and do emerge from silence and passivity. The work of poiesis is had in attending, with care, not only to material and its “natural epiphany,” but also to the absence that precedes and surrounds material, the absence that “bypasses the presence of the thing and the duration of being” as supplement.

The supplement can be dangerous; it can be poisonous. But it is also potentially curative. The philosopher Bernard Stiegler, in What Makes Life Worth Living: On Pharmacology, writes on the role of the pharmakon in serving life and livability. He raises concerns that I consider to be in keeping with a thinking of biopoiesis insofar as they seek to account for the role of biology vis-à-vis the pharmakon. One of the larger aims of Stiegler’s text is to articulate a notion he calls “transindividuation,” which, by means of engagement with the pharmakon as supplement is, in effect, a way of countering, or escaping, the stultifying effects of “proletarianization”—the dynamic that he views as taking place under current cultural regimes of techno-rationalization in the West. In Kantian terms, the struggle is to be had with culturally induced “minority.”

After Winnicott, Stiegler calls the pharmakon a “transitional object”\footnote{See Donald Winnicott, Playing and Reality, 1971.} (3), or at least capable of being one, because of how it lends itself to occasioning
transindividuation. The transitional object, as “beyond or beneath of both the exterior and the interior,” is something that both “holds between the mother and her child, and...(yet)...does not exist” (1). Think: teddy bear. It is an object that allows a mother to encounter her child; at the same time it is an object that facilitates, by standing in for the loved one, the child’s developing love for the mother. In this way, as a site or space of psychological transition mediating the growing relationship between the two parties, the transitional object constitutes both the mother and the child. On a larger (societal) scale, the pharmakon can serve as just such a transitional object insofar as it facilitates ongoing transitionality of a human throughout its life. However, if the objects in question are poisonous—for example, addictive, destructive, harmful—the transitional object is stultifying or noxious. In this sense, it ruptures, for Stiegler, belief in the world.

The pharmakon cum poison impedes desire, and desire is, for Stiegler, the motor of transformation, or transitionality. Desire in such a case finds itself “short-circuited” by the over-rationalization of reality, as seen in the “technologies of temporal measurement that characterize the industrial age of the pharmakon” (40). These short-circuits now run through all aspects of society and therefore lead to the aforementioned notion that Stiegler calls the “proletarianization” of human beings. Proletarianization is “social sterilization” (39); as such, it produces the Kantian condition known as minority. “Minority is inability to make use of one’s own understanding without direction from another”43 (17). For Stiegler, generalized proletarianization is “systemic stupidity” that destroys “the desiring projection of the imagination” (22, italics original). The poisonous

43 Kant, Immanuel. “An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment? (1784).”
pharmakon thus takes us “away from every question” and turns us “into those for whom there no longer are any questions—and thus into those about whom there are no questions” (110). The dynamic of “hyper-interruption” that the bad pharmakon induces (through technology, distraction, advertisement, social media, etc.) thus bars “the possibility of trans-forming” and of one’s “becoming into a future” (111).

A couple of points are worth mentioning regarding Stiegler vis-à-vis Valente. Of particular interest is the question of desire and its role in the curative potential of the pharmakon. “Circuits of transindividuation are always circuits of desire” (19), writes Stiegler. Transindividuation, in Deleuzean terms, is akin to becoming. It is occasioned, for Stiegler, by the pharmakon insofar as the pharmakon addresses and engages a kind of default lack [un défaut qu’il faut] in the individual thereby moving the individual into a (transitional) space of “co-individuation” (21). Desire in this case is part of a process of a self that “projects itself outside itself, beyond the self and into that which is never absolutely one’s own because it is, precisely, one’s other” (45, italics original).

Importantly, “such a projection is also a reflexivity: a pharmacological and phantasmatic mirror that no longer claims pure autonomy, but which, insofar as it treats and takes care of [soigné] itself, and through this takes care of the transitional space, always affirms the absolute infinitude of its object: its consistence—its promise” (45, italics original). The role of the pharmacological mirror (as reflexivity) is key for our discussion. Recall that in Valente’s poem the poet is “in front of a mirror / and at the threshold of a time.” A future is indicated in the poem (even if the poem’s present is simultaneously stalled—sin progresión posible—and moving, as the ongoing falling away of yellow petals suggests) by the poet’s being “at the threshold of a time.” This is, in certain respects, rather akin to
what Derrida refers to as “hauntology.” The intermediate space that appears in Valente’s poem indicates both possibility as well as its foreclosure. The future remains as presence, haunting the present. Yet absolute infinitude is affirmed, shedding endlessly. The poet is at the transitional space of desire. And what is able to occur in a space such as this is what Stiegler calls “deproletarianization.” Deproletarianization seeks to convert the toxic *pharmakon* of techno-industrial pharmacology into possibilities of a “new libidinal economy” (49). Such a reconfiguration must take place as a struggle against *negotium*. Thus *otium*, pleasure, desire will be what re-grammatizes—i.e., cures—bodies that have been proletarianized by the toxic *pharmakon* whose rationale is “the chronic obsolescence of objects destroying psychic transitional investments” (51). The libidinal economy that Stiegler calls for is one that, in contrast to a proletarianization attained by a “capturing of attentional fluxes” (52) by the exploitative measures of a *negotium* that pharmacologically leads to “chronic carelessness and negligence,” instead makes possible, through *otium* and a reorientation of the libidinal economy, “practices of care” (53) so that we might relearn how to live.

What Stiegler hails as the possibility “to re-enchant” (76) life must take place through an organology that Stiegler points out must not exclude the genital organs: “the level of psychosomatic organs and apparatus, including the genital organs” are subject, in a regime of poisonous pharmacology, to a type of “demoralization” that Stiegler qualifies as “apocalyptic” (104). Care for the “material of the drives,” (125) which ultimately supplies “dynamism to libidinal energy”(126), can serve as a foil to the short-circuiting of

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44 See Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx.*
attention that appears as “detriment of the libido itself” (125, italics original). Following prominent psychoanalytic thinkers such as Freud and Lacan⁴⁵, Stiegler notes the vital necessity of how “exclamation builds as discharge” (125), as exteriorization—be it a word, a work of art, a biologically reproductive encounter, or a slap in the face. Such exteriorization, to the extent that it avails itself of organology, is the *sine qua non* of transindividuation. The internalization of pharmacological technics at a “biological level” (126) and a “psychosomatic level” as currently configured are more prone, according to Stiegler, to “prevent exclamation” (127). He therefore proposes “to re-enchant the world” through the restoration of compromised libido by means of redirecting pharmacological investment away from the nihilism of consumerism and fiduciary calculation and instead toward infinity. Desire, for Stiegler, equates with infinity: “no existence is possible without infinity” (76, italics original). Baudrillard, in *The Ecstasy of Communication*, addresses a similar concern insofar as he identifies the feeling of a loss of existence that has asserted itself in the West. Baudrillard writes: “The uncertainty of existing, and consequently the obsession of proving our existence, prevail over desire that is strictly sexual” (31). He continues by later stating that sexuality has become “relegated to a position of secondary importance, to an already luxurious form of transcendence, of a waste of existence” (32). Sexuality is undergoing a “period of recession” (36), along with death, due to what Baudrillard understands as the excessive—the obscene—proliferation of images and image culture that themselves, because they do not breed organically, know neither death nor sex. Seduction has

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become lost because images no longer lend themselves to the “richness of the imagination” (41). The body has been reduced to a “division of surfaces” replete with artificial detail. For Stiegler, we must meet this reductive-ness of hyper-technical, digitized, rational, imagistic consumerism with a therapeutic desire invested in infinity. We must know, or relearn, how “to infinitize”—indeed, the question of the infinite is the question “par excellence of political economy” (78). Biological reproduction, as generation that is generative possibility, “constitutes the elementary basis of transindividuation” (129). Generation, engendering, genitors, genitalia, progeny: the gene of the genus is one that is going to find itself in a pharmacological dynamic of desire as “philia, eros, agape, charis” (78) that needs care, restoration, and reorientation toward immanent endlessness, toward infinity. Thus is the new materialist argument of biopoetics that we’re making. The biopoetical in this sense—poiesis imbricated in its organology—makes a case for a restoration of imagination and infinity precisely so that humans might find their way back, first, to existing, and then, second, to meaningful existence.

III. Broken to Perfection: Bodies of Waste in the Poetry of Fernando Merlo

The question of how to get to a meaningful existence, of course, requires further development. To this aim we will look at some of the poetry of the Spanish poet Fernando Merlo and examine his work with an eye toward the difficulty of meaningfulness. Merlo is known as one of the poetas malditos of Spain—a group of poets who took their title after the nineteenth-century French group of similar
designation. The adjective *maudit*, referring to poets, was first applied by the French novelist Alfred de Vigny, but came into greater currency after Paul Verlaine used the term to refer to a generation that included such figures as Rimbaud, Mallarmé, Corbière, and Verlaine himself. For Verlaine in France these nineteenth-century *poètes maudits* were dirty, poorly nourished, sickly, unlucky—in many respects, miserable. They were figures who lived on the margins of society. In Spain, the generation of poets that would come to be known as *los malditos* was decidedly anti-bourgeois and shared an economic and morally suspect lot similar to that of their French antecedents; if anything, they may have even added more vice and transgression to the term. Their generation appears primarily during the *Transición* and lasts until the end of the twentieth century. Aníbal Nuñez, Leopoldo Panero, and Fernando Merlo, to name a few, were among the last of this generation. Merlo’s collection of verse, *escatófago*, is a profound and transgressive meditation upon meaning and its materiality, particularly that of the obscene. It begins with a small poem in free verse entitled “Trofeos” that reads as follows:

*Trofeos*

*Porque yo soy poeta*
*incluso cagando*
*quiero dar, os doy,*
*una poca de mierda.*

*La demás para mí. (escatófago 39)*

*Trophies*

Because I am a poet

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*La Transición española* refers to the Spanish Transition to democracy that began with the death of Francisco Franco on November 20th, 1975 and lasted until October 28th, 1982, when the *Partido Socialista Obrero Español* (PSOE) won the general elections in Spain.
even when shitting
I want to give, I give you all,
a little bit of shit.

The rest is for me.

To initiate a poemario in such fashion is to frame expectations decisively, if—let us be clear—unexpectedly. Collections of poems tend to commence more modestly, often as if to signal, with caution or measure, a set of concerns that will be handled with care, precision, and, above all, literary decorum. Merlo, on the other hand, begins his collection with an aesthetic (or an-aesthetic) salvo not unlike what one might encounter in a Bukowski poem. It is an unapologetic, triumphant gesture, unos trofeos—or trophies—announced at the beginning, not at the end, as, presumably, having already been earned. With braggadocio, the poet declares that he cannot help but be a poet incluso cagando (even when shitting). He might just as easily have said, “Soy poeta / incluso durmiendo.” (I am a poet, even when sleeping.) But, he didn’t. And it is this movement, if you will, into the scatological, affirmed by the poet with such confidence (and, of course, irreverence), that interests us here.

Even when shitting, he’s a poet: as if to say that there is no alternative to his being. We are thus in the terrain of essences. What this poet will give—quiero dar, / os doy—is a little bit of shit. His poems—all that follow, we are to infer—will offer up una poca de mierda. Any poetic essence at issue involves, of course, necessarily giving and, as poiesis, more specifically involves making. In the admittedly challenging case of Merlo’s poetry, the material is that of digested, corporeal waste. The poet who, again, cannot be anything but, produces something he cannot, essentially, help but produce, which is also to say he writes verse. Verse, as shit, metaphorically might mean poetry of
inferior quality, doggerel. Perhaps more generously we might understand such a metaphor as one indicating difficulty or confrontation. The collection certainly partakes of these latter things. But such an interpretation will not be at the center of our inquiry here. Rather, of interest is how verse is a kind of *excretion* with a purchase in material reality, an extrusion of biology into the semiotic. The essential quality of *poiesis* as making is here expressed as making something that is not commonly understood as desirable. Thus, a weird, negative valence emerges as attending the poetic act. Making is giving. But what, precisely, is this giving, let alone this gift?

The poem’s concluding gesture, “*La demás para mí*” (The rest for myself) indicates a few possibilities worth interrogating. “*La demás para mí*” suggests something held back, perhaps willfully: the poet intends to keep a part of his product for himself. Or, perhaps this remaining quantity, this extra, owes itself to a kind of structure in which the poet cannot help but remain with a part of his product. Intention is unclear. Purpose, as well. Either possibility invokes the *escatófago* (the shit eater), to which the collection attributes its name. If what remains is for the poet, then the suggestion is that it will be for the poet’s use, to wit, for consumption. An unveiling of sorts seems to be operant here: the product of this poet’s effort is hardly a florid profusion or a fruit—both of which are commonplaces in Western letters. Rather than the bursting forth being one of aesthetic exuberance, it is instead that of a kind of base material substrate that supports poetic—indeed, all—creation itself: to wit, that of waste.

There are two primary attributes to waste. The first is its toxicity; fecal matter often contains (and attracts) pathogens. The second is its fecundity. The components of excrement (nitrogen, phosphorous, potassium, and so on) are key elements that support
the vitality and the reproductive potential of life. A certain paradox thus emerges: feces is precisely that which could not be processed and absorbed by the body; yet, the poet is proposing to keep part of it for himself. The escatófago is the person who will re-ingest the unabsorbed, unprocessed waste. By invoking escatología, the escatófago recalls the dual valence of the word in Spanish: scatological and eschatological. Thus what we have in the eponymous collection of poems is a contemplation about ends, finalities. Here, however, these ends are both the ends of days as well as those of the alimentary and digestive process. By submitting to the dual meaning of escatología that Merlo invites us to consider, purpose (or purposefulness) is foiled insofar as ends are reabsorbed in an act of recommencement of their digestive trajectory. Such final products, final strivings, are in this context to be understood as instances of a material reckoning with the real in which finality is unachievable; indeed, the road to it seems only to generate undesirable remains, waste, profane excess, and, as we shall see, death. Death and excess (and an excess of death): curiously, it is precisely in death and excess where a kind of solution seems to become possible for the poet. The next two poems, both of which are untitled, appear early in the collection and are illustrative:

(sin título)

Somos gusanos
de gusana madre.

Una gusanera en la garganta
y otra en la sangre.

(Merodean los gusanos
con un terrible olor a carne.) (escatófago 46)
We are worms of the worm mother.

A wormery in the throat and another in the blood.

The worms creep with the terrible odor of flesh.

The imagery here is that of death and fecundity—and an attending repugnance. As such, it is indicative of a terrible site of generation. The “olor,” or odor, is, of course, that of death—worms in and feeding upon the raw materiality of decaying matter. Somos gusanos / de gusana madre. We are worms of mother worm. The word “madre” merits particular attention on account of its etymology, which traces to the Latin mater, which itself, in turn, as we observed earlier, is the etymological origin of materia. We are beings of a prime material and thus our utterances—una gusanera en la garganta—are accordingly those which issue from this death. Death in our bodies, in our blood, is necessarily a transformative condition. It is one of absolute and inevitable terror, destabilizing all identity (or revealing identity’s inherent instability) as it presents itself as seemingly something other than that which is steady, knowable, human. We are not humans, the poet says, we are worms feeding on the raw materiality of death which sustains us. And our speech, in so consuming, is above all that which generates death. Words and flesh are of maggots and worms.

Worms, of course, transform matter—decaying or otherwise—into something else: namely, castings. This next untitled poem announces a further step in the transformative process:
(sin título)

Tengo rotas la voz y la esperanza,  
el corazón con óxido y gangrena,  
la soledad me planta su manzana  
como si fuese la señora y dueña

de mi nombre. Mi verso tiene entrañas  
de juventud dormida, de calderas  
donde los hierros recocidos cantan  
su podrida canción de sangre y piedra.

Y a los hombres les temo aunque los amo  
y es tan grande mi lucha contra el miedo  
que los golpeo y beso a cada paso.

Este es mi dios, un dios que suda fuego,  
que pide mientras besa golpeando,  
una muestra de que aún no estamos muertos. (escatófago 40)

(untitled)

My voice and hope are broken,  
my heart, gangrenous and oxidized,  
solitude plants its core in me  
as if I were la señora and la dueña

of my name. My verse has guts  
of sleepy youth, of hips  
where burning irons sing  
their rotten song of stone and blood.

And, although I love them, I fear men  
and my fight against this fear is so great  
that I beat them and kiss them at each step.

This is my god, a god that sweats fire,  
that asks, while kissing and beating,  
for a sign that we are not yet dead.

The poem is a sonnet, which, we should observe, is a poetic form typically  
reserved for expressions of love. Yet, at first blush, this poem’s theme seems to be one of
a desolate desperation at the gangrenous, rotten state at the core of the poet’s vitality.

Both his voice and his hope are broken, an abject solitude installed at the core of his being. A curious act of auto-naming appears in the first quatrain in which the poet’s solitude and hopelessness are conditioned by the imperfect subjunctive as if s/he were la señora and la dueña. In this gesture, the author’s masculinity is conflated with the poet’s hypothetically invited femininity. A deliberate gender con-fusion appears in order to exert a claim to self-naming. S/he experiences solitude in such a way that a kind authority over the self as gendered and the self as named becomes possible. S/he is “la señora y dueña / de mi nombre.” The significance of such an act is such that it undermines the realities (political and otherwise) of having been named by another. Auto-naming in this sense only appears as possible once the self has been broken:

“…rotas la voz y la esperanza / el corazón con óxido y gangrena.” A self thus reduced to a self beyond a received name is a self that, although it doesn’t happen in this poem, can only be made again in newness by becoming other.

His/her song may be impaired; nonetheless, it offers a kind of hope. It has entrañas—guts, entrails, insides—of a sleeping youthfulness that appears before the sonnet’s turn. The hopelessness of the first quatrain and the intimation of hope in the second then give way at the volta to a development in which the poet’s solitude is converted into a visceral engagement with others whom s/he both fears and loves.47 The tension of the sonnet’s resolution is that between violence and love. In the depicted heat of “kissing and beating” the men that the poet fears, the final tercet avails itself of an

47 The word hombres in the poem can be read to mean both “men” and “humans.”
image of transpiration and transformation: *un dios que suda fuego*. A god that sweats fire. The god appears as a synesthetic entity that exudes fire through liquid means. The transformation is elemental. The poet’s search for an indication of renewal, however, looks merely for “a sign that we are not yet dead.”

S/he recognizes that the larger struggle is not only against his/her fellow human beings, but also against fear—fear of other humans, of death, and, therefore, of fear itself. A fear and a fight against the death that is in life—a life that breaks hope, that breaks voice. Confronted with death and its excess (death as excess), a secular salvation emerges. Beyond an existential gesture where a hero confronts nihilism—indeed, is heroic *in spite* of nihilism—the hero here appears by entering into struggle with the very material that generates nihilism as a possible response. The task, the ethical injunction, is not to turn away from the disagreeable, the repugnant, the terrifying—but to consume their manifest iterations whole.

An analysis of the poem “Dientes abiertos a la noche” further explores this logic:

**Dientes abiertos a la noche**

*Cuando el miedo se cambia en amargura,*
*y no entendemos si el camino es agua,*
*hielo crispado, o una nube absurda*  
*recorriendo los mares de la calma.*

*Cuando solo palpita y se desnuda*  
*el corazón, en un danzar de llama,*  
*y la verdad, oculta por la duda,*  
*descansa en un rincón asesinada.*

*Entonces, y otras veces, cuando sale*  
*la mentira descalza sonriendo*  
*y canta victoriosa por las calles,*  
*siento en mí un enorme cementerio,*
Teeth Open to the Night

When fear changes into bitterness
and we don’t understand if the path is water,
brITTLE ICE, or an absurd cloud
running over seas of calm.

When the heart all alone beats
and reveals itself, naked, in a dance of fire
and the truth, hidden by doubt
rests, murdered, in a corner.

Then, and other times, when the lie
steps out barefoot smiling
and sings victorious through the streets,

I feel within myself an enormous cemetery,
and the immense wave of evils
overrunning the living and the dead.

In this poem, fear has turned to bitterness, *amargura*, and the material of the
world is in an unsure, ever-changing state. (And the path, life’s path, is so unstable such
that the poet wonders if it is one of a liquid, solid, or gaseous state.) But, the title frames
the difficulty by insisting upon an openness, a state of availability toward uncertainty,
darkness, doubt: *Dientes abiertos a la noche*. A mouth, its teeth open to the night. Truth
itself, hidden by doubt, has been assassinated and the lie is dancing victorious through the
streets. The poet accordingly feels, interiorizes (“*siento en mí*”) the immensity of ills, of
evils, overwhelming both the living and the dead. The giant cemetery on the inside of his
being, however, is not merely a reflection of the existential emptiness that the poet
observes; rather, it is the consequence of having profoundly reckoned, of having
consumed, the evils that wash over all up to and including the already dead. Death and
rot are the only things worth consuming because they’re the only things that are real. El escatófago tiene sus dientes abiertos a la noche; the escatófago has his teeth poised for, and open to, the night. If truth is dead (“asesinada”), then its only remnant, its only trace, is death itself. Reminiscent of Juan Ramón Jiménez’s “¿Cómo, muerte, tener miedo?”, Merlo’s poem shows how death is a confrontation with the real. A few verses from Jiménez’s poem are worth recalling and are as follows:

¿Cómo, muerte, tener miedo? ¿No estás aquí conmigo trabajando?
¿No te toco en mis ojos; no me dices que no sabes de nada...?
...¿No gozas, conmigo, todo?...
¿No me estás aguantando, muerte, de pie, la vida? (Libros de poesía 880)

What, death, fear you? Are you not here with me working? Do I not touch you in my eyes; do you not tell me that you don’t know anything? Do you not enjoy, with me, everything?... Are you not holding up, death, on its feet, my life?

Death, here seen in Jiménez’s poem as well as in the Merlo poems discussed so far, is not only an encounter with the real, but it is also a kind of material itself, something that sustains life, a condition thereof. For Merlo, the escatófago engages this confrontation with death in order to ingest, internalize, assimilate. And what is the materiality of death? The poet locates it precisely in rot, in rust, in shit—in the decomposition of the material world itself.
If death is the only (unusually enough, knowable) truth, then it would seem that we’ve entered an upside-down world, *el mundo al revés*. We’re also in the world of the simulacrum, where that which announces itself as real is inherently a lie. All of the adornments, the embellishments, of the world are, in fact, nothing more than proof of its falsity. Truth is not only in doubt, but it *is* doubt itself. As doubt, truth is the fallen state, the remainder. (If only Descartes had pursued the logic of his *cogito* just a little bit further!)

So, what are we talking about? How can shit-eating, death-imbibing, rot-ingesting offer any response to the difficulty of a false world? The answer is in knowing: *saber*, *sapere*. *Saber* indicates both knowing and tasting. (Transitively, it means “to know”; intransitively, “to taste of.”) It would seem, thus, that for the poet a fuller knowledge than that of mere abstraction is clearly at stake. Instead, to know we must taste; we must fully confront the material waste—rot, decay, filth, death, excess—suffuse in (our) existence. In this way, an acute and vital realism emerges in the poet’s work. A keen reckoning that (1.) comprehends the repulsive nature of our teleological machinations and (2.) converts ends into means, converts toxicity into fecundity.

In another early (and also untitled) poem—the entirety of which I will not present here—from the *escatófago* collection, the poet effects a kind of identification with death:

*(sin título)*

*No es possible dormir*
*cuando la noche, presentida*
*en el fondo de las venas,*
*agarra en las paredes sus tentáculos*
*y no te deja oír ni tan siquiera*
*el silencio.*
Es triste una boca cerrada…
(...)
Hay que gritar, amigo, y gritar tanto que el grito petrificado de los muertos sea igual al tuyo.
Entonces todos juntos, como una enorme masa de carneros, non lanzaremos contra el mal.

Y venceremos. (escatófago 42)

(untitled)

It is not possible to sleep when the night, premonitioned, in the depth of veins sinks its tentacles in the walls and won’t allow you even to hear silence.

It is sad, a closed mouth…
(...)
One must scream, friend, and scream so much that the petrified scream of the dead might be equal to your own.

Then all of us together, like an enormous mass of sheep, will throw ourselves against evil.

And we will win.

Here the poet, in the figure of the night, intimates death. Indeed, he predicts it, intuits it. The Spanish word presentida is more telling, more illustrative, however. He “pre-feels” it. Death is already in him in his depths, in his blood, overwhelming silence with its claims. Its shout is his shout; its reality, his. One must shout such that the petrified cry of the dead is one’s own. Thus for the poet, the claim is that only once we have fully internalized death—another word for which might be contingency—will we “win.” One
cannot help but be reminded of the previously-discussed poem “Trofeos”—itself an exact symbol of winning, let us not forget—and how the trophies both attend and frame what gives and what is given in the handling of the scatological.

As concerns discussion of Merlo’s poems we shall conclude by turning to another early poem from the escatófago collection entitled “Aclaraciones.”

\textit{Aclaraciones}

\emph{todo tiene un significado}
\emph{todo ha sido meticulosamente}
\emph{preparado para la gran hora}
\emph{todo está roto a la perfección} (escatófago 72)

\textbf{Clarifications}

everything has a meaning
everything has been meticulously prepared for the grand hour
everything is broken to perfection

A few things bear commenting. That these are “aclaraciones” stands, given as they are to the clarity of light, in stark contrast to the imagery of night and death and rot and sadness in the earlier poems. These clarifications illuminate the stakes of the poetic work so far, which is to say, above all, that in contrast to the nihilism that death seems to occasion in the Western mind, the poet finds that it is its materiality—and therefore the materiality of everything in the sense that we’re discussing it here—that has meaning. Such meaning, in its transformative state, its ingestions and excrescences, augurs the grand appearance, \textit{la gran hora}. The grand hour, of course, is the death knell; here a stoic preparation of death’s imminence and immanence (its impending proximity and its inhering quality) is the ethical work that poet outlines. Meaning, the production of it, is a
death; it is death. Precisely in this way, everything—voice, body, hope, life, love—is already “broken to perfection.”

IV. Coda: Subject-less-ness as Subject to Materiality

Now, to tie up loose ends. At stake in our work in this chapter has been a contemplation of the concept of the Subject. We began some of this work in previous chapters as well; but a bit more work remains to be done here, particularly as regards a more thorough reckoning of Althusser. Therefore, to return to Althusser, let us recall that at stake in his “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” essay is, of course, what Althusser terms a “descriptive” (93) account of how ideology hails or determines subjects (thereby producing subjectivity). We won’t here restate an account of how subjectivity emerges according to Althusser. We will only say in brief that the subject is called by power and, in responding to the call, reveals the condition of having “always already” been a subject to power—what we noted earlier as *interpellation*. Rather, what is of interest to us at this point is Althusser’s thoughts on subject-less-ness and its relationship to passivity. In a discussion of an example of ideology, the philosopher observes the dynamic of naming in “The Christian Religious Ideology”: “every individual is called by his name, in the passive sense, it is never he who provides his own name” (120). A kind of pessimism would thus seem to emerge in Althusser insofar as one finds oneself in ideology before ever even having had a chance (let alone the ability) to respond to it. Thus, in interpellation, a kind of fundamental passivity is taken advantage of by ideology at the beginning of our lives in the moment that we are named. And the mechanism of
this hailing and its effects never cease. Interpellation is therefore a kind of eternal violence that creates the subject who is born into the world in a state of absolute vulnerability. The pure, absolute docility of the newborn is claimed by power, whose imposition upon the subject-less body in turn endlessly produces the subject.

A unique notion of what we’ll call meaningless-ness appears as a consequence of Althusser’s work. Althusser is very clear that ideology is that which announces itself as the way things are, which is to say that it doesn’t announce itself at all. Things are as they are because that’s how they are. This is the essence of ideology. But we can discern it precisely in its obviousness:

It is indeed a peculiarity of ideology that it imposes (without appearing to do so, since these are ‘obviousnesses’) obviousnesses as obviousnesses, which we cannot fail to recognize and before which we have the inevitable and natural reaction of crying out (aloud or in the ‘still, small voice of conscience’): ‘That’s obvious! That’s right! That’s true!’ (116)

The trick to recognizing ideology is to recognize what’s obvious as obvious.

Ideology “has no history”; it is “endowed with a structure” (108). Its “structure and functioning are immutable.” Ideology for Althusser is a non-historical entity that is always with us as a condition of our existence: Drawing an analogy with Freud’s claim that the subconscious is eternal, Althusser writes: “Ideology is eternal” (109). Which is to say, in effect, that the way things are presents itself as eternal truth. All truth therefore that insists upon its truth is, by definition, ideological. The significance of this claim rests on its absolute undermining of all truth. As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, ideologically interpellated subjects cannot know reality; they can only represent to themselves their relations to it, which they create in ideology. All knowing as representational consequently is inherently false. But, as we will return to discuss in a
moment, relations to the world occur through materiality. These relations are therefore malleable and provisional. The politics that emerges is one of radical contingency. Without the certainty of truth—or, put differently, with the awareness that there is no truth within ideology—a politics of pure doubt, of hesitation, of deliberation (of the undecidable, we might say) would seem to appear as the only possibility of a truth outside ideology.

Now, Althusser goes on to claim that “ideology has a material existence” (112). It exists “in an apparatus, and its practice, or practices” (113), which is to say that they (the apparatus and the practices) are not merely ideational. Importantly, Althusser concedes that this material existence is “rooted in the last instance in ‘physical’ matter” (113). Thus, at one and the same time, he seems to suggest that we make imaginary relations material in ideology through practice, but that there is also a material substrate that supports the appearance of ideology in the first place.

So, is a stone outside of ideology? On the one hand, Althusser might, if asked, seem to all too quickly suggest that it is not. He writes, somewhat famously, that “ideology has no outside” (119, italics original), which is often somewhat hastily taken to mean that there is no outside of ideology, period. But, the rest of the sentence from which the quoted passage is taken reveals a much more nuanced claim: “…ideology has no outside (for itself), but at the same time that it is nothing but outside (for science and reality)” (italics original). I understand this to mean that within the space of imaginary human relations to the world as obvious obviousnesses, all is ideological. But, as we can see, ideology has no outside for itself, which seems to admit another kind of obviousness: only that which is ideological is within ideology. (Admittedly, this is still a lot.) For
“science and reality” ideology is “nothing but outside”—of ideology, one presumes.

Now, again, what is important for Althusser is that science and reality be “descriptive”—not interpretative. Indeed, Althusser quickly discredits “different types of interpretation” (110) precisely because of how interpretation conduces to “imaginary transposition of…real conditions of existence.” The description of anything, not the interpretation of it, is the basis for a “transitional” (92) step to any real theory for Althusser. It will then, of course, have to go “beyond the form of ‘description’” in order to become theory. But its claim on reality will rest precisely on its having successfully distinguished between description and interpretation in order to do so.

The preceding discussion places us again in Valente territory. There is a poetics of passivity at stake insofar as description is more of a piece with letting material speak than a hermeneutic approach that, for example, would allow (or require) history or religion or politics to inform the account of whatever is in question. The structuralist frame that we announced at the onset of this chapter indicates the absolute contingency of material itself. A stone might not—indeed, in keeping with our discussion, will not—say the same thing twice. Neither will a poem nor a person, even if the words written or uttered are identical to previous iterations. What’s important here is that whatever material is at hand be viewed in a field of shifting and contingent appearance and not “ideologically,” which is to say not submitted to a regime of overdetermination by “the way things are.” To return to our discussion of Stiegler, to do the latter would be to short-circuit the transitional potential of the material as pharmakon. This is the terrain (both real and conceptual) that can occasion the new.
The new is precisely not the next bright, shiny technological distraction that appears as the next logical, or obvious, step of progress or development. Much like Stiegler in his concern about the hyper-interruption of individual transformation produced by the poisonous *pharmakon*, Walter Benjamin, in *The Arcades Project*, referred to the new commodities on display at “World exhibitions” as a “glitter of distractions” (18). In so doing, he described an emerging condition of “pure reaction” by a public that was less and less able to contemplate anything at all the more objects as commodities appeared for their “entertainment” value. (He called these objects “*divertissements*.”) Rather, the new as we are discussing it here is the foil of the obvious because it is unobvious. Therefore, if the truth, as ideology, is inherently false (and thus, I’m suggesting, meaningless in a profound sense), then truth must be sought elsewhere. It must be sought and found in the unobvious: that which is radically particular, unique, singular. It can be had in the opinion that diverges from all others, but only insofar as it emerges in a passive and faithful regard of its material as heretofore discussed. In contrast, the narrative that all can relate to—that all can *identify* with—bears the stamp of falsity precisely because of its obviousness. The unobvious, as such, may therefore likely always be available to scorn—political, social, aesthetic—because of the way it announces itself as *not* “the way things are.” But, try stroking the cat’s fur backwards. You’ll see that *they kind of like it*. Seek out the unrelatable; think your way into it. These are the stakes of the new materialism that we’ve been discussing throughout these chapters.

To the extent that one steps outside of ideology, one not only encounters the truly new, one also steps outside of ideological subjection. Which is to say that one steps, if only momentarily, into the space of subject-less-ness. This is, of course, an extremely
uncertain space. It is uncertain not only because of its potential encounter with the new, but also because of how it is completely unfastened from the way things are. And ending the way things are, in turn, is itself in many respects precisely what apocalypse is. To return to Stiegler, if for the French philosopher, the apocalyptic is the condition of “demoralization” that attends a poisonous pharmacology, then Merlo wants to take this demoralization, this toxicity, and recognize—indeed, ingest—it for the rotten knowledge that it can provide. The scatological and the eschatological coincide for the poeta maldito in a visceral material reckoning that confronts the fear that attends contingency, that attends uncertainty. By entering into a struggle with the very material that generates nihilism, the poet engages a dynamic akin to the meaninglessness of truth as it appears in Althusser’s essay. Both Althusser and Merlo seem to arrive at a similar solution. For the Spanish maldito, confrontation with the material reality of death and all of its accompanying types of repugnance is a step into the uncertain, subject-less space of contingency because death—by definition, the eradication of the subject—is the only true truth available to the poet in un mundo al revés. Likewise, for Althusser, by stepping outside of the assurances of ideology and its certitude, one becomes open to a possible encounter with the new. In both instances new meaning is generated out of the meaninglessness that had once (and perpetually) announced itself as the only site of meaning (life as living, for Merlo; ideology, for Althusser).

The eradication of the subject, which is to say the perpetual creation of a subject-less subject, thus emerges in our discussion as the response to power most available that will reformulate relations to the material world. Let it be clear that, by “eradication of the subject,” we refer to the subject in ideology interpellated by power. The call here then is
for the arrival of a subject-less subject whose subjectivity can enter into the reality of absolute contingency in order to meet the ethical demand of whatever political, economic, environmental—to name only a few—concern that appears anew. It is a call for transitionality in the sense that Stiegler described: to enter the re-enchantment potential of material through an organology that cares for the drives. The obscene plays a crucial role here precisely because it appears *ob-scene*. In Latin, *ob-* means “away from”: the ob-scene is that which takes place away from the scene, away from where collective attention focuses its gaze. The poems by Valente and Merlo that we have analyzed in this chapter were selected not for their obscene nature in the quotidian sense, but instead for their obscene nature in a literal, etymological sense. They have offered us an occasion to contemplate that which occurs away from the normalizations of narrative, ideology, sameness, and certainty by entering into an uninterrupted intimacy with organs of discharge. In so doing, they have provided examples of the transitional power of singular engagement with raw biological, physiological, and corporeal materiality.
Conclusion

Chapter 3’s title had good fun with its invocation of “vulgar materialism.” It did so for the obvious reason that the chapter took up a kind of corporeal experience that might make the more modest among us blush. It also, by implication, set its sights—at least partially—on what has been historically considered to be vulgar materialism.

Vulgar materialism—more commonly known as vulgar Marxism—with an etymological root in the Latin vulgus, meaning “common people,” has been susceptible to accusations of disinterest in culture and the arts. Our rethinking of materialism here, as new materialism, while engaging the vulgar at times, by no means shares in this disinterest. So first let us define what vulgar Marxism is. In general, as Marta Harnecker clearly states, vulgar Marxism strains “to deduce directly from economy all the phenomena produced at the juridico-political level and ideological level” (33). The question of vulgar Marxism thus ultimately involves notions of base and superstructure. In vulgar Marxist parlance, the material dynamics of labor and its conditions (base) determine power structures, politics, culture, art, and intellectual consciousness (superstructure). Vulgar Marxism can also be referred to as economism, or belief in the primacy of economic causes. Now, this point is of particular interest because Althusser inverts the vulgar Marxist paradigm by affirming, in the reproduction of social relations, the primacy of superstructure. In response to the question “how is the reproduction of the relations of production secured?” he writes: “it is secured by the legal-political and ideological superstructure” (100, italics original).

At stake, of course, in Althusser’s “ideological superstructure” is the mechanism of interpellation and how it operates by ensuring that one is always already in ideology
(because ideology has no outside). What undergirds the claim, however, we will recall, is the imaginary nature of the relations that people represent to themselves. Since, in our development of new materialist biopoiesis, we have relied upon Althusser’s thinking in his “Ideology and the State” essay, it is worth asking if biopoetics (and thus biopoetical poetry, novels, film, etc.) as we’ve been articulating it here is vulnerable to a critique of not really offering a kind of new materialist product because, in the last analysis, it remains in the realm of the imaginary. To such an assertion, I will remain with Althusser in responding.

Althusser was very aware of how his notion of an imaginary relation could be critiqued as insufficient precisely because abstractions, it could be argued, are not real—and therefore not material. To refute any claim that Althusser’s thinking of knowledge (science) remained imaginary and immaterial, he argued, in an essay entitled “Scientific Practice and Materialism,” the following:

The greater the progress the science makes, the more its raw material tends towards the concrete, which is simply a result of the combination of the multiple abstractions or knowledge constituting it. Marx put it this way: science does not proceed, as everyday ideology supposes, from the ‘concrete to the abstract,’ from empirically existing objects to their truth (contained in them from all eternity, so that it is enough to extract it). On the contrary, science proceeds from the abstract to the concrete; it gradually refines abstraction, the existing abstractions, moving from ideological abstractions to the abstractions of technical practical knowledge and, ultimately, scientific abstractions, and, after exactly
combining them, to a definite abstraction bearing on a concrete object. This definite abstraction thus becomes the concrete knowledge of a concrete object. It must be said that the majority of philosophers and even scientists are unaware of this fundamental materialist truth; yet, without it, it is impossible to understand what occurs in scientific practice. (101, italics original)

All science as knowledge, then, is subject to this dynamic of progression from the “abstract to the concrete.” Thus Althusser’s own intellec­tion on ideology is not imaginary, but material specifically because it goes through the process of refining abstraction. Such refinement is not limited to the so-called “scientific” realm of knowledge. Indeed, for Althusser, it concerns economics and politics, particularly as found in the real relations of production. The scientific practitioner needs to be aware, if she is not already, that “research is engaged in an impressive adventure which is…largely determined from without, by the demands of production and the imperatives of class struggle” (102). Indeed the difficulty that Althusser addresses is how the scientific investigative process, of “scientific production,” is a “process without a subject” insofar as it must comply with the order of a “complex process that transcends him.” All “scientific problems” are not generated out of mere individual consideration; rather, they emerge from an “international scientific community” whose work, again, is determined by the class struggle and its imperatives. Thus, for Althusser, any knowledge that, as it advances and specializes, moves from abstraction to concretion is inherently political because politics “commands the development of science and knowledge.”
That Althusser cites the importance of the role of the class struggle in the production—and thus the concretion—of knowledge places us within the terrain of vulgar materialism and its historical concerns. So on this topic let us turn the screw once more. Fredric Jameson, as may be known, had a somewhat fraught relationship with vulgar materialism/Marxism. Jameson was very aware of “the abandonment of the very category of class…especially on the Left” (92). According to him, the denunciation of “‘vulgar materialist’ Marxisms” (104) indeed made its way into the majority of Marxisms in order to avoid the appearance of reductionism to simple orthodoxy. To this development, Jameson responds by saying that “class is not at all this simple-minded and unmixed concept in the first place…but rather something a good deal more complex” (93). Indeed, it involves questions of inferiority, of hegemonic superiority, of “gender, race and ethnicity,” and so on. Class, for Jameson, is an “ongoing social reality and an active component of the social imaginary” (94). He therefore sees no reason to abandon the category. Jameson writes: “Only a few of the wiser Marxisms have reintegrated this exorcism of a vulgar Marxism into their very structure as a way of thinking and a strategy all at once” (105).

Jameson is, of course, his own kind of utopian. In an interview with Xudong Zhang, he acknowledges in certain thinkers like Schelling among others a “source of a certain Marxism” that is able to reposition Marxism in such a way that allows it “to escape from the narrowly economic stuff and…extend Marxism to…(a)…poetic vision of how the world could be and how humans could live in it” (373). It is in this way that we can see that Jameson is able to fend off a charge of philistinism by straddling strands of Marxism that allow him to think about art, culture, poetry, intellectual life and so on.
precisely by, at one and the same time, not abandoning the class consideration of vulgar materialism and thinking it alongside Marxisms that seek to move beyond mere economism. In Jameson’s compromise, we can find a certain affinity with new materialism as we have been discussing it throughout this dissertation. To put it more concisely, if a new materialism might disavow a base-superstructure model insofar as it eschews deterministic models of thought as found in general notions of vulgar materialism, then it can also find, through a rethinking of classical vulgar Marxism, sources of possibility—poetic, cultural, living.

And why might it be important for a new materialism to care about disavowal of models of thought that support vulgar notions of economic determinism? To answer this question we will return to our notion of biopoiesis. Causally speaking, it is our position here that biopoetics precedes biopolitics. If we view structure as a form—perhaps comprised as an assemblage of forms—then, given what we know from Monod, an object’s teleonomy appears by chance. This point affirms, of course, that the aleatory subtends form and structure. It (the aleatory) is their precondition, which is to say that if we understand the biopolitical as not merely management of form, but as formal management of form, then biopoiesis is a precondition of the biopolitical precisely to the degree that it produces its own attempt at constraint (also by chance). Chance as we are contemplating it here is itself a kind of ontological material that does not disappear with the appearance of form or structure. It remains, inhering such that life’s forms are always subject to it so that they might evolve. This evolutionary dynamic—of form emerging by chance, then negotiating its way through a field of chance—supplies the new, as life
form, until it reaches a state of equilibrium with its surroundings in a way that stabilizes said form until, by chance, a disequilibrium appears thereby perpetuating the process.

Biopolitics obviously puts constraints on formal expression as we’re discussing it here. In so doing, it contributes to the appearance of new form. But there must be limits. In some instances, such as we’ve so far considered, the limit is the stabilization of form. This would seem to beg the question: Is the biopolitical impulse an expression of death? As constraint, biopolitics strikes me as worth considering this way. At least to the extent that possibility is foreclosed, it most certainly is. In other words, biopolitics, as management of life, aims at management of life’s substrate, which is chance, and so therefore biopolitics concerns itself with the management of chance. We have to consider the reality that biopolitics either can “prevail” in its efforts or that it is implicated in biopoetics in such a way that, as having emerged from it, it is bound to it.

Let us now return to Foucault. Recall that the old version of sovereignty for Foucault was comprehended in the ability to take life and let live. Biopolitics, in turn, emerged as the power to make live and let die. Biopoetics complicates this development even further. In a sense, biopoetics refuses making live. By this, we mean that the biopoetic dynamic of life lives in spite of making live. Which is to say that it (biopoetic life) will always find ways of living other than how biopolitics seeks to make it live. That said, biopoetics is also a way of making die. It is a making die insofar as biopoetic life sheds those elements of itself that render it susceptible to absolute control. Here biopoetics as escapability and contingency essentially exceeds itself; its self-othering is inherently a self-losing-self. In this way, we can call it a making die in the service of life.
Which brings us back to Benjamin. Recall that in Chapter 2 we deployed Benjamin’s concept of “mythic” and “divine” violence in order to read and think the role and lessons of violence in Carlos Saura’s *La caza*. Mythic violence, for Benjamin, posits law and puts forth boundaries. Divine violence, in turn, destroys law and dismantles boundaries. Mythic violence brings “guilt and retribution”; divine power “expiates.” Divine violence, unconcerned as it is with ends, is violence for the sake of life. It is the violence of not doing what you’re told, of not submitting to the claim of force as harbored in and by mythic violence; it is the violence, we might recall, of the general strike. But the strike is not the equivalent of stasis. As a kind of violence, the general strike occasions change and movement. Stasis is what force seeks as force, for mythic violence expresses itself for its own sake. In this light, biopolitics, as *making live*, insists on a rigidity of life as a selfsame formal and structural arrangement regardless of the ongoing appearances of environmental (surrounding) disequilibrium brought about by inevitable and ceaseless change.

Just so we’re clear, biopolitics is not expressly about the sheer bloodletting force of mythic violence. Rather, biopolitics *makes live* through a slow bleed of vitality—often in many cases masquerading as enjoining one to health (about which more below). Rather than force as a singular, injurious blow to a body, biopolitics exerts continual, applied social and legal force upon a body in order to bend it into compliance, if not conformity. But, the threat of the one is just as real as the other: mythic violence and biopolitics partake of the same mortal commination. With mythic violence, the mortality is instantaneous; with biopolitics it is referred. In the biopolitical regime, if one does not
submit to it—a dynamic that presumes its threat—one is disenfranchised, banished, made irrelevant. In this way, life’s existence is menaced by biopolitical pressure.

In cases of social and commercial promotion of health, we might say that making live begins partially to coincide with letting live. By this we mean that, ever persistent, biopolitics acknowledges (and therefore tries to manage) the old, remaining sovereign tendency to let live in its attempt to co-opt it with the installation of demands to live better or live well. The biopolitical management currently in effect in such practices as replacing workplace desks where one once sat with standing desks (where one now stands), constant cultural calls to eat “organic,” Fitbit, lowering one’s health insurance premiums with gym membership, charging tobacco users higher premiums, workplace wellness programs that encourage employees to lose weight, and so on—all of these developments reflect not only biopolitical strategies to make live, but also anxieties about how to let one live. The tension at issue here is how biopolitics, in its drive to discipline a body, occasions a kind of evasiveness precisely because letting live, as biopoetic, is always ultimately beyond biopolitical containment. People drink, smoke, drive too fast, stay up too late, and eat junk food in a very real way as response to, and even in spite of, the biopolitical demand. Thus, the letting live in the sense that we’re describing it here—i.e., how biopolitics tries to ensure letting live according to a set of rational, statistical criteria—reveals life’s always provisional, always contingent self-sovereignty as divine violence that moves life beyond the claims of biopolitics, of mythic violence. Perverse, but understandable, the biopoetic impulse to ignore the demand of living well summons participation in the aleatory precisely because it escapes determining prescriptions and proscriptions on behavior.
There are yet other ways in which we can see how, when biopolitics makes live, it encounters a letting live that it cannot ultimately contain, but, not to be deterred, still tries to do so. Certain kinds of efforts aimed at promoting multi-culturalism and identity politics present a kind of letting live that, on the one hand, ostensibly aims to create dynamics of acceptance that allow for a recognition (or, often, a “celebration”) of difference, but on the other, serves to “divide and conquer” by creating new markets for new groups, thereby further insinuating all into regimes of population management through submission to economic forces. As Adorno and Horkheimer say in their essay, “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception”: “something is provided for everyone so that no one can escape” (97). A perversion of a notion of inclusivity, biopolitics carries with it the internal tension of population division that is necessary so that one and all can be contained. Biopoetics, however, reveals that something still remains beyond the grasp of biopolitics. Even within totalizing, hegemonic orders, unanticipated divergences appear. In social configurations, people engage in useless activities: they juggle, they loiter, they walk on tightropes, they climb trees. Such diversions are the social analogue of biopoiesis; indeed, they are a kind of expression of it. And law and culture are troubled by them as evidenced by such things as laws against loitering and a kind of cultural irritation often directed toward purposeless activity in general.

In his “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” essay, Althusser, citing Pascal, writes, “‘Kneel down, move your lips in prayer, and you will believe’” (114). This gesture occasions an inversion of the ideology of belief, which commonly holds that it is belief that induces the practice of prayer—not the other way around. Althusser’s
intervention, via Pascal, is to show instead how bodily practice gives rise to thought. In so saying, Althusser gives us an insight into possible implications of such practices as non-purposeful activity or a general strike. In such gestures as these a kind of refusal becomes operant that may invite the appearance of possibility. Take, for example, the Occupy Wall Street movement, which was noteworthy in its refusal to make any explicit demands; in this sense it redoubled its refusal of the capitalist economy determined by Wall Street by refusing to meet it on any terms. In this regard, and in the real materialist practice of doing nothing, the movement was incomprehensible to many observers: what, one would hear argued, is a movement without a list of specific changes that it wants to see happen? This incomprehensibility, however, revealed precisely an indication of ideology at work insofar as ideology is what makes the world comprehensible. The movement also somewhat interestingly invited a kind of absolute democracy insofar as no single person could make the claim that her personal desire for the Occupy Wall Street movement had been discounted. By not committing to a particular demand or a particular set of demands, the movement made available alternative possibilities while at the same time not entering into a negotiation that would necessarily render any demand relatively powerless by submitting it to the bargaining authority of power. In short, it was the refusal of the structure of power—refusal itself an alternative—and not acquiescence to power’s terms in order to meet a demand, which took hold as summarily disruptive and thereby played a crucial role in the movement’s success. In its deviation from the codified economic order, Occupy emerged as its own kind of encounter, its own abrupt and contingent swerve into and away from things as they are. It was an event of possibility.
Purposeless and purposeful activity are equally subject to encounters with the aleatory no matter how the biopolitical impulse to structure it out of existence might try. Althusser, in *Philosophy of the Encounter*, visits Epicurus’s notion of atoms falling freely before the formation of the world. Regarding this atomic falling, he importantly states: “They still are” (168). The free-fall of atoms did not cease just because our world (indeed, it would be, all worlds) emerged by an aleatory swerve of atoms. At issue is that the situation, in its absolute exposure to and manifestation of possibility, remains a material condition of the world. Because non-formed worlds remain as possibilities alongside that which has taken form, the condition of possibility suffuses our world. This means, in effect, that non-meaning is a kind of fundamental substrate to our world. Indeed, it is not only the case that meaning has emerged from non-meaning; it is also the case that non-meaning persists with us in our world. Althusser writes: “The non-anteriority of Meaning is one of Epicurus’ basic theses” (169). According to Althusser, it is debatable where the concept of the *clinamen* originates; what’s important is that it, as a notion, appears. Althusser relies upon Lucretius and Epicurus to develop his own thinking on the “infinitesimal swerve” (169, italics original) known as the *clinamen*. In a passage that is highly evocative of Monod, Althusser writes:

In order for swerve to give rise to an encounter from which a world is born, that encounter must last; it must be, not a ‘brief encounter’, but a lasting encounter, which then becomes the basis for all reality, all necessity, all Meaning and all reason. But the encounter can also not last; then there is no world. What is more, it is clear that the encounter creates nothing of the reality of the world, which is nothing but agglomerated
atoms, but *that it confers their reality upon the atoms themselves*, which, without swerve and encounter, would be nothing but *abstract* elements, lacking all consistency and existence. So much so that we can say that the *atoms’ very existence is due to nothing but the swerve and the encounter* prior to which they led only a phantom existence. (italics original)

This sounds an awful lot like Monod’s carefully articulated notion of teleonomy, which, we’ll recall, diverges from teleology insofar as teleology is an ideologically imposed notion of a preordained outcome whereas teleonomy, an entity’s biologically acquired structure of purpose, appears by chance after the appearance of genetic invariance. We can understand Monod’s concept of “invariance” as conceptually akin to Althusser’s notion of the above-cited “lasting encounter.” We can also remark how, with Monod’s notion of teleonomy, the life-form, which does not have a pre-ordained structure, cannot be called life until it appears by chance. The appearance of life, for Monod, confers life’s reality just as how, for Althusser, the encounter of the atoms confers reality upon them. And in so conferring, meaning and necessity appear:

The world may be called *the accomplished fact [fait accompli]* in which, once the fact has been accomplished, is established the reign of Reason, Meaning, Necessity and End [Fin]. But *the accomplishment of the fact* is just a pure effect of contingency, since it depends on the aleatory encounter of the atoms due to the swerve of the clinamen. (169-170)

That the world emerges as accomplished fact does nothing to suggest its inevitability, its having been pre-ordained or predetermined. The same therefore goes for life; its appearance in this regard is also a “pure effect of contingency.” Such a notion throws
into relief the absolutely inherent strangeness of the world and of life—indeed, of everything. How humans have normalized “the way things are” as a kind of natural unavoidability is thus itself a kind of ideological transposition of teleology upon contingency that provides an ontologically unreal, and therefore false, assurance about human purpose in the universe. Indeed, not only is how we arrived at “the way things are” contingent, but moreover there is no guarantee of anything ever staying the way it is. This casts the very notion of law itself of any sort into doubt. According to Althusser, nothing guarantees that the reality of the accomplished fact is the guarantee of its durability. Quite the opposite is true: every accomplished fact...is only a provisional encounter, and since every encounter is provisional even when it lasts, there is not eternity in the ‘laws’ of any world... (174, italics original)

The primacy of the aleatory—and its subsequent, but hardly inevitable—encounter ensures very little. The effects of the encounter are equally unsusceptible to predetermination. Althusser writes:

Every encounter is aleatory, not only in its origins (nothing ever guarantees an encounter), but also in its effects. In other words, every encounter might not have taken place, although it did take place; but its possible nonexistence sheds light on the meaning of its aleatory being. And every encounter is aleatory in its effects, in that nothing in the elements of the encounter prefigures, before the actual encounter, the contours and determinations of the being that will emerge from it. (193)
It is only once a certain, but contingent reality “takes hold” that something like “laws” can appear. But such laws themselves are merely the effect of stability, of repetition.

From this there follow very important consequences as to the meaning of the word ‘law’. It will be granted that no law presides over the encounter in which things take hold. But, it will be objected, once the encounter has ‘taken hold’—that is, once the stable figure of the world, of the only existing world (for the advent of the given world obviously excludes all the other possible combinations), has been constituted—we have to do with a stable world in which events, in their succession [suite], obey ‘laws’. (194-195)

For additional support of our argument concerning the contingency of laws, let us briefly turn our attention to the American pragmatist philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, whose thinking on the question of law is of significance to our discussion here. Peirce was an intellectual of extraordinary ability, formation, and range who wrote on topics including mathematics, logic, physics, chemistry, economics, and semiotics and who spent a thirty-two-yearlong career with the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey surveying land and measuring gravity. In a passage in his “Design and Chance”\(^\text{48}\) essay, Peirce questions the laws of physics; he writes, “Why are the laws…of mechanics as they are and not otherwise?” (218). His response is that “as we go back into the indefinite past not merely special laws but law itself is found to be less and less determinate” (218-219).

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\(^{48}\) See *The Essential Peirce, Vol. I.*
The reality of chance was of great interest to Peirce, who contemplated it extensively in his writings on “tychism” (definable as “the doctrine that account must be taken of the element of chance in reasoning or explanation of the universe”⁴⁹ or as “proposition that absolute chance is operative in the cosmos,”⁵⁰ from the Greek τυχή, meaning “chance” or “fortune”). Tychism, which Peirce does not consider emblematic of his entire philosophy,⁵¹ is put forth by Peirce as a way of refuting determinism. In his essay, “The Mechanical Philosophy,” he argues against “the common belief that every single fact in the universe is precisely determined by law” (28). To do so, he engages the atomistic thought of the ancients, first noting that for Democritus “mechanical constraint” was “the sole principle of action.” He then compares Democritus to Epicurus, in whom he saw a revision of atomistic theory, by now familiar to readers of this dissertation, in which he “found himself obliged to suppose that atoms swerve from their courses by spontaneous chance.” In his essay, “Habit,”⁵² what emerges is Peirce’s theorization of what he calls “regularity,” “regular law,” “uniformity,” or “uniform distribution” as “a mere consequence of fortuitous distribution” (310-311). In other words, physical law appears out of a regularity (or “habit”) that is itself the product of chance and that remains susceptible to it.

Thus in Peirce we have the reality of the contingent nature of physical law (“laws…of mechanics”), with law itself having been the product of chance that, having

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⁴⁹ https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/tychism
⁵⁰ https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/tychism
⁵¹ See Peirce’s essay, “The Logic of Continuity,” in which he states his objection “to having my metaphysical system as a whole called Tychism” (138). Instead, he prefers it be called “Synechism, because it rests on the study of continuity” (Collected Papers, Vol. VI).
⁵² See Peirce, Collected Papers, Vol. VII.
coalesced into regularity, becomes perceived as eternal and immutable. But we must here add, that such perception—indeed all perception—is suspect. In his writings on the history of science,53 he writes that a scientist’s “experience can never result in absolute certainty, exactitude, necessity, or universality” (24). Elsewhere, Peirce questions the absolute reliability of all scientific observation, arguing that efforts to demonstrate a fixed law of nature inevitably encounter deviations from it. In the “Habit” essay, he writes: “It must be that just as when we attempt to verify any law of nature our observations show irregular departures from law owing to our errors, so there are in the very facts themselves absolutely fortuitous departures from law…” (308-309). All of this again affirms that to say that any law, natural or otherwise, is absolute is to consider it partially, i.e., separate from its deviations.

So if physically, biologically, chemically, mathematically there are no preordained laws, then, on a fundamental level, it is a kind of nonsense to think of legality as eternal. In other words, the contingency of human laws—laws ranging from the Ten Commandments to recent Supreme Court decisions and beyond—appear as a kind of “effect” of contingency whose eternity can never be absolutely guaranteed. For, if the law of gravity itself is simply the effect of a kind of stability that has “taken hold,” then how can human laws be said to be any more eternal? Eternity, we should note, is not the same as necessity, which itself, we should then remark, ought to be understood as a kind of “effect,” to put it into Althusserian terms. And so if human laws are insufficient as natural guarantors for thinking about life, and therefore for thinking about ensuring or

53 Peirce, Collected papers, Vol. I.
protecting its survival, it then becomes incumbent to underscore the importance of thinking about the politics of life as deliberate human productions, which means, in effect, to think about life, its being, and its survival, as a question of political rights.

In Chapter 2 of this dissertation we discussed, by way of Agamben, the problem of how not all life is afforded protection by the law and therefore, as bare life, can be killed with impunity. We also saw how the concentration camp, according to Agamben, has installed itself as a model for the contemporary biopolitical moment in an indication of how all life can be taken, according to a dynamic of exception, in order to preserve law. Since we are discussing Monod and the appearance, by chance, of biological life, it is worth considering here how DNA is itself like a kind of bare life—that is to say, how it is unprotected politically.

Following Agamben’s distinction between zoē and bios in Homo Sacer—zoē being “the simple fact of living common to all living beings (animals, men, or gods)” (1) and bios54 being “the form or way of living proper to an individual or group”—we can imagine biopoiesis as partially sharing in the spirit of the definition of the former55 so that we may distinguish biopoiesis from a biopolitical categorization, which involves the strategies of managing ways of living, i.e., bios. (We, of course, will not rely on or elaborate a term such as zoopolitics56 in order to service such a distinction.) Another kind

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54 Derrida, in The Beast and the Sovereign, Volume I, takes Agamben to task for a muddled distinction between zoē and bios insofar as Agamben invokes Aristotle’s zoon politikon, in which, Derrida observes, zoē, as political, is life that is therefore “qualified and not bare” (327).
55 Here we must observe Agamben’s restriction of his notion of “all living beings” to include only “animals, men, or gods.”
56 In any event, Agamben doesn’t seem to develop much of a notion of zoopolitics, particularly as we are thinking our concept of biopoiesis here. Of note, too, if one were to consider using the term zoopolitics, would be the historical prejudice of zoē toward animal life.
of category of life appears; for Agamben, in *Means without End*, this category is “forms-of-life” (3). Agamben writes:

> A life that cannot be separated from its form is a life for which what is at stake in its way of living is living itself. What does this formulation mean? It defines a life—human life—in which the single ways, acts, and processes of living are never simply *facts* but always and above all *possibilities* of life, always and above all power. (4, italics original)

As we can be see, Agamben quickly singles out the human as the form of life that embodies *possibilities*. However, given the ways that we here have been discussing life biopoetically, it would be a curious—indeed, erroneous—position to take if we were to privilege the human form as that which “above all” (my italics) houses possibility. Agamben centers on the human to the exclusion of all other forms of life. In so privileging the human, Agamben’s thinking works to discount as “forms” other life forms—bacteriological, phytological, virological, chemical, etc.—altogether.

Acknowledgement of all life forms, however, is fundamental to our notion of *biopoiesis*. *Biopoiesis*, for us, as an expression of the contingency that pertains to all life, embodies possibilities. Simply because Agamben rejects life forms outside of the human as qualifying as “forms of life,” does not mean that we have to do the same—or will. And so in this way, DNA, as a chemical material of life, deserves placement squarely within a thinking of life that is to warrant political consideration, which means that it deserves to be thought of in terms of political rights.

> It is therefore time to seriously theorize questions like whether or not DNA—and, for that matter, *any* life form—has (or should have) rights. To glimpse a barometer of
how culture is currently thinking this concern, one can see in a thorough, preliminary (but not exhaustive) internet search of precisely this question that it yields only discussion about whether an individual possesses rights of ownership over DNA or whether or not one has the right to privacy over one’s own DNA. Such formulations reveal the absolute instability of the category of the subject to the degree that, biopoetically speaking, a teleonomic structure that has emerged as the product of an assemblage of a genetic multiplicity assumes, or believes it can assume, priority over its constituent parts. By thinking about the question of DNA rights as one of human ownership of DNA, teleology replaces teleonomy in a maneuver of ideological sleight of hand by misapprehending the teleonomic structure of life as a final cause. In effect, the question of “ownership” of one’s DNA inverts the chain of causality. In a biopoetic framework as we’ve been discussing here, humans cannot own DNA because, if anything, DNA “owns” humans. DNA has ontological priority over humans; without DNA, there is no human. The anthropocentric fallacy would have us believe that humans, through copulation, transmit their DNA in order to reproduce themselves; but it seems to be much more the case that DNA produces humans so that it can reproduce itself. Which isn’t to say that human rights, in and of themselves, are unimportant. It is to say, however, that another order of recognition of life that acknowledges the role of life’s materials and activities is necessary in order to think its care and survival—and therefore its rights.
Bibliography


