

VIRAL ETHICS: MEDIA, ECOLOGY, DEBT

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Viral Ethics: Media, Ecology, Debt

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This dissertation charts the manifold ways in which contemporary ethics has divided humans from other forms of life. It offers an alternative to anthropocentricity through an ethics of virality. Utilizing the image, architecture, and dissemination of the virus as a model, it explores a vibrant ontological borderlands human-oriented ethics has abandoned. Where humanist ethics seeks purity, individuality, and normativity, viral ethics opts for infection, entanglement, and weakness. Though the discipline of animal studies has critiqued dominant discourses of taxonomy, consciousness, and ability, those studies often fail to move beyond our closest animal brethren. This work, instead, foregrounds the virus as a being which both straddles the scientific divide between life and non-life and revels in radical difference, espousing a form of ethics that embraces dissimilarity over resemblance. Thus, when life becomes a stand-in for human and vice versa, anything that falls outside the parameters of human has no ethical recourse to justice. To explode the dynamic of humanist ethics is to reorient being and politics towards a more expansive notion of life. To accomplish this, the first chapter defines viral ethics in its relations to assemblages of affect, debt, and capacity. The second chapter addresses embodiment and the various ways that interiority and exteriority are mobilized to reaffirm normative notions of being. The third chapter looks to the overlaps between organic and digital territories, interrogating the biopolitical architecture of viral objects. Lastly, the final chapter traces the division between human and animal and the division between life and death as mutually constitutive undertakings.

## Acknowledgements

In the beginning, a dissertation seems an almost insurmountable task. You are charged with conjuring long-form research ostensibly from the ether, all across several years besieged by teaching responsibilities, supplementary labor, and the harsh realities of everyday life. As a work on entanglement it should be known that it has only been through the gracious help of others that any of this could have been accomplished. Along the way I have had the privilege and good fortune to work with some of the most innovative and insightful scholars working in the academic world today. It is largely through their inspiration and assistance that the project was able to come to fruition.

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***Introduction:***  
**Anti-Economicus**

In 1995 the first complete cellular genome sequences of *Mycoplasma genitalium* were reported. Mycoplasmas, very tiny bacteria, are believed to be among the smallest (and simplest) cells capable of autonomous growth (and therefore an obvious candidate for nascent DNA mapping projects).<sup>1</sup> Because of its relative simplicity, a similar organism, *Mycoplasma mycoides*, was selected by a group of geneticists as a framework to artificially synthesize life at its least complicated.<sup>2</sup> The latest iteration of the successfully created artificial organism, named JCVI – syn 3.0, has just 473 protein coding genes. For comparison the human genome project estimates that humans have about 30,000.<sup>3</sup> As those who worked on JCVI articulated, “If a gene could be removed without disrupting the cell's ability to live, grow and reproduce, it was deemed nonessential.”<sup>4</sup> By seemingly reducing life to its most rudimentary these synthetic biologists were aiming to find the fundamental architecture of life, to be able to “design and build synthetic organisms on demand.”<sup>5</sup> Dan Gibson, a biologist with the institute, elaborates, stating, “We believe that these cells would be a very useful chassis for many industrial applications, from medicine to biochemicals, biofuels, nutrition and agriculture.”<sup>6</sup> The corporate underwriting of JCVI (and synthetic biology as a discipline) is further echoed in *its very genetic structure*, in which additional DNA has been

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<sup>1</sup> “The Minimal Gene Complement of *Mycoplasma genitalium*” *Science* vol. 270 (20 October 1995)

<sup>2</sup> Efficiency is, apparently, an aspiration not only for human economics, but for the manipulation/synthesis of life itself. Efficiency is, apparently, an aspiration not only for human economics, but for the manipulation/synthesis of life itself.

Rae Ellen Bichell, “Scientists Build A Live, No-Frills Cell That Could Have A Big Future”

<http://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2016/03/24/471307905/scientists-build-live-no-frills-cell-that-could-have-a-big-future>

<sup>3</sup> “The Human Genome Project FAQ” April 14, 2003. <https://www.genome.gov/11006943/human-genome-project-completion-frequently-asked-questions/>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

inserted by the geneticists to identify the organism as synthetic, four “watermark sequences.”<sup>7</sup> This genetic branding delineates the genetic inscription of intellectual property rights over a new form of life. As if unable to resist flaunting their unabashed connection between capital and the management/constitution of life, JCVI also is encoded with three quotes: “To live, to err, to fall, to triumph, to recreate life out of life” - James Joyce; “See things not as they are, but as they might be” a quote from the book *American Prometheus* about Robert Oppenheimer; and “What I cannot build, I cannot understand.” – Richard Feynman.<sup>8</sup> As these quotes indicate, the hubris of capital and humanism collide unmercifully in JCVI.

In 2010, as a result of the first successful synthesis of JCVI –syn, the Presidential Commission for the Study of Bioethical Issues released its first report, *New Directions: The Ethics of Synthetic Biology and Emerging Technologies*.<sup>9</sup> Chaired by University of Pennsylvania President and political scientist Amy Gutmann, the study intended to look at the contemporary state of bioethics, in particular the ethics of synthesizing artificial life. Gutmann’s appointment as head of the committee is intriguing to me, however, because of a piece of work she contributed to in 1999, her curious introduction to J.M. Coetzee’s *The Lives of Animals*. Gutmann’s preface reads like a stoically neutral debate primer, a vignette that extols the virtues of liberal disagreement over the importance of the moral issues themselves. She says of Coetzee’s work, “The story leaves us with a vivid sense of conflict among morally serious people over the mistreatment of animals and the apparently

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<sup>7</sup> Roy D. Sleator, “The Story of Mycoplasma mycoides JCVI-syn1.0” *Bioengineered Bugs* Jul/Aug 2010 229-230. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3026460/>

<sup>8</sup> “First Self-Replicating Synthetic Bacterial Cell” Press Release May 20, 2010. <http://www.jcvi.org/cms/press/press-releases/full-text/article/first-self-replicating-synthetic-bacterial-cell-constructed-by-j-craig-venter-institute-researcher/home/>

<sup>9</sup> Amy Gutmann, “The Ethics of Synthetic Biology: Guiding Principles for Emerging Technologies,” *Hastings Center Report* 41, no. 4 (2011): 17-22. [http://bioethics.gov/sites/default/files/PCSB-Synthetic-Biology-Report-12.16.10\\_0.pdf](http://bioethics.gov/sites/default/files/PCSB-Synthetic-Biology-Report-12.16.10_0.pdf)

correlative conflict over analogizing that treatment to the most heinous crimes committed among human beings themselves.”<sup>10</sup> Gutmann’s ethics is further evidenced in her treatment of the text’s other commentators: literary theorist Marjorie Garber, philosopher Peter Singer, religious scholar Wendy Doniger, and primatologist Barbara Smuts. Each falls into the trap that Elizabeth Costello, the fictional writer mirroring Coetzee in his Tanner Lecture, sets. By obsessing over Costello’s comments linking the heinous atrocities continually committed against animals to the holocaust, their arguments, each in differing ways, act only to aggrandize human exceptionalism at the expense of an accelerating genocide. Garber valorizes literature in-itself, Singer quantifies human life as objectively valuable, Doniger excuses violence in the name of religious tradition, and Smuts individualizes animals as unique and person-like.<sup>11</sup> Gutmann’s adherence to being “morally serious” abandons any semblance of philosophy as feeling; her position at the intersections of biology, literature, politics, and ethics makes her an interesting case study. As part of a series on “human values” from Princeton what more could one expect?

The presidential report on bioethics reads similarly, identifying “five ethical principles relevant to considering the social implications of emerging technologies: (1) public beneficence, (2) responsible stewardship, (3) intellectual freedom and responsibility, (4) democratic deliberation, and (5) justice and fairness.”<sup>12</sup> The report doesn’t contain a single mention of any ethical problems in the treatment of non-human life: nothing on laboratory testing, capitalist exploitation of beings-made object, or the moral problems inherent to creation. But why would it? If ethics is the domain of life, as this report argues, it only

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<sup>10</sup> J.M. Coetzee, ed. Amy Gutmann, *The Lives of Animals*, Princeton University Press, 1999, 8.

<sup>11</sup> Could there seriously be a worse combination of people commenting on one of the most pressing ethical issues of our time, each talking only about themselves. Singer is especially heinous for reasons I go into later in the chapter.

<sup>12</sup> “New Directions: The Ethics of Synthetic Biology and Emerging Technologies” *Presidential Commission for the Study of Bioethical Issues* December 2010. P, 4.

[http://bioethics.gov/sites/default/files/PCSBI-Synthetic-Biology-Report-12.16.10\\_0.pdf](http://bioethics.gov/sites/default/files/PCSBI-Synthetic-Biology-Report-12.16.10_0.pdf)

applies to human life. In fact, the report concludes that JCVI *is not* even a true synthesis of artificially created life. It categorizes JCVI instead as the beginning of a long genetic pathway. It states, “It is an indisputable fact that the human-made genome was inserted into an already living cell. The genome that was synthesized was also a variant of the genome of an already existing species. The feat therefore does not constitute the creation of life, the likelihood of which still remains remote for the foreseeable future.”<sup>13</sup> In this, the human manipulation of already-extant life is made inconsequential. It is only the effects of synthetic biology on human life that are important.

Two years after the first successful synthesis of JCVI, Jennifer Doudna, working with fellow researcher Emmanuelle Charpentier at the University of California, published a paper on the gene-editing tool Crispr-Cas9.<sup>14</sup> Also in 2012, Feng Zhang, a molecular biologist at the Broad Institute of MIT was similarly working on Crispr-Cas9<sup>15</sup> It was Zhang and MIT, however, who through an accelerated patent application, were awarded the patent for Crispr. The financial implications of who “owns” Crispr are astounding, with a potential windfall of billions of dollars going to the institution who wins out in the ongoing patent dispute.<sup>16</sup> Crispr, or Clustered Regularly Interspaced Short Palindromic Repeats, is a process that allows biologists to ‘cut and paste’ genes with remarkable efficiency. It also allows for “the ability to target and study particular DNA sequences in the vast expanse of a genome.”<sup>17</sup> Since 2012 there has been an explosion of Crispr related research exploring everything from

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Amy Maxmen, “The Genesis Engine” *Wired*, August 2015. <http://www.wired.com/2015/07/crispr-dna-editing-2/>

Michael Specter, “The Gene Hackers” *The New Yorker*, November 16, 2015. <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/11/16/the-gene-hackers>

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.wired.com/2015/07/crispr-dna-editing-2/>

<sup>16</sup> Alessandra Potenza, “Who owns CRISPR?” *The Verge*, December 6, 2016. <http://www.theverge.com/2016/12/6/13857674/crispr-gene-editing-patent-dispute-berkeley-broad-mit-jennifer-doudna-feng-zhang>

<sup>17</sup> Heidi Ledford, “CRISPR: gene editing is just the beginning” *Nature*, March 7, 2016. <http://www.nature.com/news/crispr-gene-editing-is-just-the-beginning-1.19510>

Huntington's disease, to curtailing mosquito populations, to bringing back the woolly mammoth from extinction.<sup>18</sup> Like JCVI, the ethics of gene manipulation has been a topic of conversation amongst biologists and the public at large with much of the language concerning only the impact on humans. As one *Wired* article about Crispr asserts, "The truth is, most of what scientists want to do with Crispr is not controversial."<sup>19</sup> The article then goes on to describe one such "uncontroversial" experiment in which, "with less than \$100, an ordinary arachnologist can snip the wing gene out of a spider embryo and see what happens when that spider matures."<sup>20</sup> More paragons of "ethics" which Crispr has been utilized for include: a 1,000 organ-per-year pig farm (set to break ground in North Carolina in 2017) for xenotransplantation, "a team at MIT...[using] Crispr-Cas9 to create, in just weeks, mice that inevitably get liver cancer", and hypoallergenic (yet undoubtedly torture-induced) eggs.<sup>21</sup>

While JCVI presents us with a supposedly synthetic constitution of life (or at least something approaching it), Crispr showcases some of the most cutting-edge technological advancements in gene articulation and manipulation. Both, however, engender serious ethical questions around the parameters of life. In the quest to find the very minimum requirements for life, I believe JCVI puts forth an incredibly skewed vision of what *constitutes* life. By articulating a particular blueprint of "fundamental" genes we actively produce a

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<sup>18</sup> <http://www.wired.com/2015/07/crispr-dna-editing-2/>

<sup>19</sup> Amy Maxmen, "The Genesis Gene" *Wired* <http://www.wired.com/2015/07/crispr-dna-editing-2/>

<sup>20</sup> Amy Maxmen, "The Genesis Gene" *Wired* <http://www.wired.com/2015/07/crispr-dna-editing-2/>

<sup>21</sup> It was unfathomably hard for me to write this sentence, mostly due to the fact that I had to read about the monsters doing these things. The sheer lack of moral attentiveness to exploitation and suffering is mind-boggling. But here are the citations:

Amy Maxmen, "The Genesis Gene" *Wired* <http://www.wired.com/2015/07/crispr-dna-editing-2/>

Sara Reardon, "New life for pig-to-human transplants" *Nature* Nov 10, 2015

<http://www.nature.com/news/new-life-for-pig-to-human-transplants-1.18768>

Sara Reardon, "Welcome to the Crispr Zoo" *Nature* March 9, 2016 <http://www.nature.com/news/welcome-to-the-crispr-zoo-1.19537>

A literary analog can also be seen in the incredibly prescient *Oryx and Crake* by Margaret Atwood, in which genetic manipulation becomes a staple of future society.



normative conception of what life means. If “live, grow, reproduce” form the essence of life, what is to be said about forms of life which do not (or choose not to) reproduce? What are its boundaries? Similarly, with regards to Crispr, what does genetic manipulation teach us about material conceptions of selfhood, specifically around questions of purity and usefulness? I believe both JCVI and Crispr highlight the mutually constitutive relationship between contemporary ethics and human life. Ethics, as it predominantly operates, is of, by, and for the human, albeit disguised in a language of democracy, capacity, consciousness, and otherwise. JCVI, then, is only novel in that it makes hyper-visible the everyday machinery that constructs life as we have come to know it.

It may seem strange then, at this point, that I turn to Adam Smith as a means of accessing the significance of JCVI, Crispr, and their larger ethical implications. In his 1776 work, *The Wealth of Nations*, Smith aimed to naturalize what he described as the human propensity to “truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another.”<sup>22</sup> He sought to demonstrate that economics (out of which, according to Smith, the division of labor, an indicator of economic progress, read: white-male-European superiority, was borne) was one of the “original principles in human nature...the necessary consequence of the faculties of reason and speech.”<sup>23</sup> To do so, he employed a tactic seminal to humanist philosophy, human exceptionalism. Smith (rather ironically to me) juxtaposed the *individualist* affects of (other) animals against those of a “mutually beneficial” calculating human labor.<sup>24</sup> He writes,

Each animal is still *obliged* to support and defend itself, separately and independently, and derives no sort of advantage from that variety of talents with which nature has distinguished its fellows. Among men, on the contrary, the most dissimilar geniuses are *of use to* one another; the different produces of their respective talents, by the general disposition to truck, barter, and exchange, being brought, as it were, into a

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<sup>22</sup> Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, 1776, p. 25.

<sup>23</sup> Smith, 25.

<sup>24</sup> Mutually beneficial is one of my favorite philosophical phrases because it almost never actually is.

common stock, where every man may purchase whatever part of the produce of other men's talents he has occasion for.<sup>25</sup> Notice that Smith opposes obligation to use value, a careful erasure of moral impetus in the reduction of human labor to what someone else will exchange for it. He sums up his natural economics succinctly with a carefully diluted maxim, "Give me that which I want, and you shall have this which you want."<sup>26</sup> To Smith, the human world is always an economic one in that the foundational moments of civilization (or to Smith that which separates humans from other animals) are borne out of exchange. He means to demonstrate the numerous good(s) that accompany man's economic origins and concurrent economic trajectory (the wealth of some nations and not others). In doing so, Smith follows a similar ontological path to many other humanist philosophers, highlighting human exceptionalism at the expense of their "lessers" (read: species, gender, race, etc.) who for a multitude of reasons could not (or didn't deserve) access to those scarce 'objects' of nascent capitalism, foremost amongst those being life.

Michel Foucault makes this apparent in *The Order of Things*, arguing, "What makes economics possible, and necessary, then, is a perpetual and fundamental situation of scarcity...It is no longer in the interplay of representation that economics finds its principle, but near that perilous region where life is in confrontation with death."<sup>27</sup> He continues,

*Homo oeconomicus* is not the human being who represents his own needs to himself, and the objects capable of satisfying them; he is the human being who spends, wears out, and wastes his life in evading the imminence of death. He is a finite being...Economics has rested, in a more or less explicit fashion, upon an anthropology that attempts to assign concrete forms to finitude.<sup>28</sup> It is therefore the arrival of the finitude of life, alongside human being and economic man, out of which a furious series of boundary makings (human-animal, life-death, animate-

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<sup>25</sup> *Emphasis Mine.* Smith 30.

<sup>26</sup> Smith, 26.

<sup>27</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, Routledge, 2005, p. 279.

<sup>28</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, Routledge, 2005, p. 280.

inanimate) emerged. The consequences of this transition to scarcity (in all its forms) are manifold, but each hinges on a delineation of a specifically human impression of time. As Foucault expounds, “From Smith onward, the time of economics... was to be the interior time of an organic structure which grows in accordance with its own necessity and develops in accordance with autochthonous laws – the time of capital and production.”<sup>29</sup> This is a kind of time that helped conjure human subjectivity as a bounded enterprise of life and death, which one was *obligated* to protect. The time of capital thereby announced a very particular ethics of debt.

My intention is not to argue that debt isn’t a dominant frame of ethical interaction, but rather the opposite. By charting the myriad societal functions of indebtedness/responsibility I search for an ethical configuration that doesn’t shout out its egalitarianism, all while reproducing injustice. I don’t understand debt only in its own purely economic terms, however. Instead, to me, debt is everywhere: it emerges from our shame/guilt about our complicities in injustice; through those recognitions of mistreatment and violence that are allowed to or are about to happen; as affect in anticipation of future judgment; in its cruel optimism as that thing that promises justice, but all the while underwrites its antithesis. If Smith is exchange in cold affectless calculation, however, Friedrich Nietzsche gives us affect morality. His work is one way we can approach the violence of debt morality. His accounts of the historical processes that made pure calculation a paragon of ethics, those genealogies of moral knowledge, are fundamental to overthrowing them. Nietzsche saw the power of ‘objectivity’ as a means of denying the ethical power of those affective agitations (shame/guilt) that accompanied acts of great violence.<sup>30</sup> Humans are often encouraged to see the righteousness of responsibility; it is seldom heralded as self-

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<sup>29</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, Routledge, 2005, p. 245.

<sup>30</sup> See in particular: *The Genealogy of Morals*.

interest or exchange, but of being-for something else. The realm of the non-, un-, or in-human, however, is excluded altogether. The contemporary ethics of responsibility, of which debt plays a decisive role, therefore, is of, by, and for the 'autonomous' human. Selfishness, however, as a product of history, not immanence, can only retain its power in an ecological system under which a sovereign individual self is the supreme object of ethics. Viral ethics offers an alternative, entanglement.

The problematics of responsibility and equality as ethical dogma are also apparent in the work of Emmanuel Levinas. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas argues that "Western philosophy has most often been an ontology: a reduction of the other to the same by interposition of a middle and neutral term that ensures the comprehension of being."<sup>31</sup> Levinas sees this as a violence of traditional philosophy, an unwillingness to reconcile with the other. Because of this, Levinas argues for an ethics as first philosophy, always already preceding any other relation. He continues,

If ontology—the comprehension, the embracing of Being—is impossible, it is not because every definition of Being already presupposes the knowledge of Being, as Pascal had said and Heidegger refutes in the first pages of *Being and Time*; it is because the comprehension of Being in general cannot dominate the relationship with the Other. The latter relationship commands the first. I cannot disentangle myself from society with the Other, even when I consider the Being of the existent he is.<sup>32</sup>

Levinas demonstrates this particular ethics through a discussion of the face. He charges, "the approach to the face is the most basic mode of responsibility...The face is not in front of me...but above me; it is the other before death, looking through and exposing death."<sup>33</sup>

Therefore, the prerequisite for a Levinasian ethics, is otherness, manifest through the face, as recognition of the possibility for death and *the contract of responsibility* implicit therein. But as

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<sup>31</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 43.

<sup>32</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 47.

<sup>33</sup> Emmanuel Levinas and Richard Kearney, "Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas," in *Face to Face with Levinas*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 1986)23-24.

Levinas argues, the animal, converse to death, is in-effect faceless, outside of the realm of responsibility. While death signals the infinity and the totality of otherness to Levinas, the animal is simply a touchstone, an avatar to reaffirm the very basis of the ethical relation, humanity as life. The animal other, then, to Levinas and similar humanist ethicists is always *for* the human, a one-way relation assuring the uniqueness of responsibility *as human*.<sup>34</sup> As Levinas charges, “Alterity is possible only starting from me...Rather than constituting a total with this other as with an object, thought consists in speaking.”<sup>35</sup> It is important to note, then, that it is not only those affects, actions, and intentions that cause animals harm that must be addressed, but rather, also, the very system of humanist ethics of responsibility emanating from the I. To Levinas, ethics is not only an affirmation of humanity, but the very basis of life.

Thus, in *The Gift of Death*, Jacques Derrida cites Levinas’s definition of “the first phenomenon of death as ‘responselessness.’”<sup>36</sup> This responselessness of death, and in fact the very possibility of responselessness, signals a *responsibility* for the other. Levinas says, “I am responsible for the other in that he is *mortal*. The death of the other therein lies the foremost death.”<sup>37</sup> To Levinas, the capacity for loss (in this case of the possibility of continued life) is the ethical prerequisite for responsibility to the other (this is also the means through which one comes “to be,” as in Levinas’s eyes ethics is the engine of ontology). More than this, the mortality of another inaugurates your *absolute duty* to them manifest in a mutual capacity to live and to die. The Levinasian ethical contract, therefore, relies on: an ability to see yourself in an other (human), a clear distinction between life and death, and a concept of responsibility fundamentally reliant on debt. Each of these lines of inquiry,

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<sup>34</sup> Uniqueness has an intriguing connection to scarcity. If each of us are singular entities

<sup>35</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 40.

<sup>36</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 47.

<sup>37</sup> Levinas, *God, Death and Time*, 43. (Emphasis Mine)

however, only charts a concept of indebted ontology towards sameness, never attempting to access an ethics outside of exchange.

The mere acceptance of lived interaction as not being conceived in pure calculation certainly is no revelation. We are not unfeeling automatons, even the most wanton, cruel, and neoliberal among us. Affect permeates and sculpts all interaction. Just as crucial, however, we cannot simply collapse a totalizing ideal of affect as the cure-all for encounter. As Lauren Berlant is constantly forced to remind us, politics (which is always affective) is wielded just as heinously *as an economic undertaking in its own right*. The Trump presidency is one such piece of evidence of this monstrous normalizing assemblage. And yet, as Berlant claims, far too much “opposition” to Trump is couched in the rhetoric of how dangerous emotion can be, as in, “If x had an ounce of decency, x would deliver justice.’ Such bad math, so emotional.”<sup>38</sup> Berlant continues, “But politics is always emotional. It is a scene where structural antagonisms — genuinely conflicting interests — are described in rhetoric that intensifies fantasy.”<sup>39</sup> Ethics too is never an escape from affect, but its orientation, intensification, and accumulation at specific interpersonal sites. A humanist ethics, which largely emerged from the enlightenment in one strain, viral ethics is another.

I argue that human-as-life is the ontological result of being, forcibly extracted through an economic mode of debt-based-ethics. If responsibility is the foundation of one kind of ethical encounter (which in most ethics it is), I will show how that interaction is built on exchange. This is manifest in the language of ethics itself, in what we owe to those we interact with, our debts to another. All parties being equal, exchange isn’t such a bad system

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<sup>38</sup> Lauren Berlant, “Trump, or Political Emotions” *The New Inquiry* August 5, 2016.  
<http://thenewinquiry.com/features/trump-or-political-emotions/>

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

of ethics.<sup>40</sup> However, as we well know, rarely, if ever, are two interlocutors ever of equal standing. This is doubly true in encounters with non-human beings. Take the practice of domestication, of livestock or pets, for example.<sup>41</sup> Such a relationship is the result of a long cultivated *and hierarchical* dependence, in which domesticated animals are bred (a violence of forcibly introduced life), their continued survival reliant on human accountability. Similarly, scientific breakthroughs like Crispr and JCVI represent iterations of indebted-life, brought into existence and ‘cared for’ by human beings. To truly be alive, under this regime, is to perform the role of a creditor. Life as it is currently conceived, is a state-of-being entirely of the human, built on a multimedial, embodied, and epistemological framework of entitlement a la Adam Smith’s benevolent *homo economicus*.

In mobilizing a viral ethics, I look for an alternative that is not transactory; a concept of life that is not a gift, but a contagion. To do so, requires a few philosophical realignments around ethics that a viral perspective lend itself to. First, there is a need to reconceptualize the scope, scale, and geometry of ethics as it currently operates. An easy example would concern the level of responsibility afforded human life as opposed to that of bacteria, atomic material, or otherwise distant entities to human perception. Second, the dominant structure of ethics relies on simplistic notions of interiority/exteriority that privilege particular topographies at the expense of others. The normative human body has come to be understood as the de facto boundary of ethics, an undertaking which has solidified both its structural coherence and the “threat” of its being compromised. Third, networks of

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<sup>40</sup> This is the main problem with David Graeber’s work, *Debt: The First 5000 Years*, wherein he sees debt as problematic only in its inability to be repaid. He continues, “Debt is a very specific thing, and it arises from very specific situations. It first requires a relationship between two people who do not consider each other fundamentally different sorts of being, who are at least potential equals, who are equals in those ways that are really important, and who are not currently in a state of equality-but for whom there is some way to set matters straight.” (120)

<sup>41</sup> Gary L. Francione and Anna E. Charlton, “The Case Against Pets,” September 8, 2016. *Aeon* <https://aeon.co/essays/why-keeping-a-pet-is-fundamentally-unethical>

power/desire, both ‘organic’ and ‘digital,’ play a crucial role in the reification of anthropocentric notions of life. If, as McLuhan said, “the medium is the message,” the assembled networks that constitute life have profound ethical implications. And lastly, I want to orient a viral ethics around the concept of entanglement, highlighting the relationship between life, death, and ethics. The last chapter culminates with a question that drives this entire dissertation, whether ethics requires life and if so, what an alternative concept of life itself feel like. The search for vibrant entangled being is the catalyst for viral ethics, as well as its logical endpoint.

To be more precise, viral ethics is the contextual recognition/mobilization of encounters of radical difference. It seeks a porous *inertial* definition of life, in which trajectories of being (not teleological) seek, to the best of their ability, towards the preservation of all life.<sup>42</sup> So what then does this mean in terms of justice? If responsibility, as a debt-based model of ethics, seeks to exact an equivalence, as in a recognition of identarian similarity (the face) or time served to pay for the crime, (a mathematical justice in which the benefactor is the state, the law, capital, e.g., a squaring of accounts and decidedly not the victim), *viral ethics pursues no compensation*, it simply opts out of those systems of transaction built on usury, penalty, and obligation. Instead, it configures *entanglement* as an affective ethical alternative to the economics of responsibility and debt. While a responsibility-based model organizes ethics through identity, separability, and hierarchy, entanglement seeks the opposite. Entanglement revels in sociality, transience, and difference. The difference is manifest in an ecological structure of being that is political, but not static. Thus, while

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<sup>42</sup> But against the consequentialism of Utilitarianism, this would not be a calculation of the greater good, but an immanent sensory ethics. Need to further explain this, but it relies on each interlocutor’s capacity for doing and being harmed (intent is also a factor perhaps?). A series of (hopefully) illustrative examples: rock collides with rock, man kicks rock, man steps on spider, man kicks dog, man kicks man, man kicks child. The ethicality of each situation shouldn’t rely on taxonomic distance or social convention, but capacity for cognizance of what one does and the ability to suffer. This isn’t just applicable in direct ethical encounters, but indirect as well.



responsibility hinges on an autonomous human subject to which one owes something, entanglement highlights the contextual, yet always already inseparability, of being(s). Therefore, a flower can *rely on* a bee for the proliferation of its pollen, but they exist as part of the same ecological assemblage, act/are towards mutual benefit, *and* each makes no moral claim to being owed anything. This, as I mentioned previously, is in part a problem of language, in which ethics is all-too-often discussed as an economic matter of debt, obligation, responsibility, etc., rather than a non-economic relationality of beings.<sup>43</sup> It is also, however, a problem of architecture, representation, and affect. To posit a viral ethics isn't to say that an economic mode of ethical encounter isn't 'real' or even that isn't the dominant way many humans conceive of morality. Instead it is an argument about the hegemony of anthropocentric ethics, that economics (a truly human science) is not the only, and certainly not the most just, ethical hermeneutic.<sup>44</sup>

The first chapter, thus, defines viral ethics in its relations to assemblages of affect, debt, and capacity. It begins the work of viral ethics by asking several questions. How different bodies are implicated and mobilized in a given system of ethics, how to explore the embodied humanist dialectic opposing life and non-life through the concept of weakness, how to address the relationships between bodies in terms of their capacity; the ethical implications of withdrawnness and sociality. The second chapter is also architectural in how it addresses embodiment and the various ways that interiority and exteriority are mobilized

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<sup>43</sup> This is an ontological problem as well. We will see in chapter 3 a projection of economic morality into the very origins of life, with Richard Dawkins' selfish gene.

<sup>44</sup> One might say at this point, that bees and flowers and viruses are all well and fine, but human beings are different. This kind of argument usually hinges on the more expansive capabilities of humans for speech, morality, consciousness, sociality, etc. (I will spend a great deal of time in this dissertation discussing the question of capacity) But for argument's sake let's transpose our ethical scenario into the human world. Disability rights activists/scholars have long contended that contribution should not be a measure of life's worth. Is it the ability to 'produce' that makes one worthy of ethical consideration? Reliance is a fundamental attribute of life, human, or otherwise.

Only the self can be selfish. Selflessness is only extant in the absence of a self.

to reaffirm normative notions of being and a series of ethical boundary makings between human and animal, self and environment, and life and death. The third chapter looks to the overlaps between organic and digital territories, interrogating the biopolitical architecture of viral objects. In doing so it seeks to evidence the relevance of memetics to contemporary ethical thought, positing that communicative flows of circulation and repetition are integral to the reification of human as life. The final chapter traces the division between human and animal and the division between life and death as mutually constitutive undertakings. It charts entanglement as an ethical hermeneutic with incredible potential to resist the arresting effects of deconstruction whilst not succumbing to essentialism or stasis.

## *Chapter 1*

### **Affect Ethics: On Debt, Interdependence, and Capacity**

It is the inefficiency of the fit between the affect system and the cognitive system—and between either of these and the drive system—that enables learning, development, continuity, differentiation. Freedom, play, affordance, meaning itself derive from the wealth of mutually nontransparent possibilities for being wrong about an object—and, implicatively, about oneself.

—Eve Sedgwick | “Shame in the Cybernetic Fold”

The ‘unrecognizable’...is the beginning of ethics, of the Law, and not of the human. So long as there is recognizability...ethics is dormant.

—Jacques Derrida | *The Beast and the Sovereign* (108)

It is only within the human world that nature's cyclical movement manifests itself as growth and decay. Like birth and death, they, too, are not natural occurrences, properly speaking; they have no place in the unceasing, indefatigable cycle in which the whole household of nature swings perpetually.

—Hannah Arendt | *The Human Condition*

Viruses straddle the definition of life.

—George Rice

To approach the ethical boundary between life and non-life requires a series of major recalibrations. If JCVI represents a contemporary limit of synthetic life, what is to be said about a being even smaller, as in nanometer-sized, electron microscope small?<sup>45</sup> This is the realm of the virus. As a 2008 *Scientific American* article argues, “viruses today are thought of as being in a gray area between living and nonliving.”<sup>46</sup> The article goes on to define the parameters of life as “an ability to replicate...in a state bounded by birth and death...[and] a degree of biochemical autonomy, carrying on the metabolic activities that produce the

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<sup>45</sup> <http://learn.genetics.utah.edu/content/cells/scale/>

<sup>46</sup> Luis P. Villarreal, “Are Viruses Alive?” *Scientific American* August 8, 2008.  
<http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/are-viruses-alive-2004/>

molecules and energy needed to sustain the organism.”<sup>47</sup> This definition is strikingly in line with what the JCVI researchers sought as the baseline for their organism. Viruses, however, are thought of in the scientific community as outside the parameters of life, because they “parasitize essentially all biomolecular aspects of life.”<sup>48</sup> The virus is seen as not autonomous and therefore not definitively “alive.”<sup>49</sup> Yet, viruses do evolve, so to speak, they adapt to their environments, they replicate, and some even have the ability to alter the actions of their hosts.<sup>50</sup> What, then, is the place of the virus? What exactly is the importance of placing the virus in the realm of the living or the non-living? I open with this very brief discussion of the virus because of the very liminal space it occupies within scientific thought (which will provide a great deal of source material for my dissertation) and my interest in exploring that borderlands.

To me, the discourse of the virus is also germane to animal studies. It allows us to recognize not only the importance of what we term life (a question both ethical and political), but also the hierarchies within so-called life. It provides crucial insights into the contemporary figurations of what life means, and can be utilized as a lens for examining the larger questions that this dissertation will propose; namely the place of life/non-life/death in ethics, the role of various media in formulating those ethical norms, and what (in terms of both scale and content) are the boundaries of ethical critique. With that said, though animal studies has in recent years come to much greater prominence in academia, there still remains a dearth of study on critical issues of and around the non-human, particularly in the field of ethics. It is my intent in this dissertation to highlight how two seemingly disparate critical

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Autonomy is a crucial aspect in the constitution of lives that matter, whilst somewhat strangely sociality is also highlighted as a means of differentiating humans from other forms of (non)life. s

<sup>50</sup> Hoover, K.; Grove, M.; Gardner, M.; Hughes, D. P.; McNeil, J.; Slavicek, J. (2011). "A Gene for an Extended Phenotype". *Science* **333** (6048): 1401.

engagements are deeply interwoven; the question of death and the question of non-human life. In effect, then, my project is to demonstrate how the human/non-human and the life/death divides are entangled, and to attempt to construct an ethics cognizant of that enmeshing.

On August 25, 2016 a study on viral infection by the U.S. Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases was published in the journal *Cell Host & Microbe*.<sup>51</sup> The study found that the Guaico Culex virus has a mechanism of infection radically different than any other currently documented viruses.<sup>52</sup> Guaico Culex has the unique ability to exist as 5 sets of separate genetic material. For infection to occur, four of these genes must find their way into a host. In describing the strangeness of the virus, Edward Holmes, a virologist at the University of Sydney, makes an anthropomorphic analogy, stating, “If you compare it to the human body, it's like a person would have their legs, trunk and arms all in different places...then all the pieces come together in some way to work as one single virus. *I don't think anything else in nature moves this way.*”<sup>53</sup> Beyond figuring Guaico Culex in its alien relation to human embodiment, Holmes highlights the “abnormality” of its movement. It is not only the structure of Guaico Culex that scientists find intriguing, but the entire constellation of affects around its being, including bodily comportment, arrangement, and interaction. It is, therefore, the aggregate of these affects, as well as their entanglement with humanity that governs their contemporary ethical delineation. Taking cues from Guaico Culex presents an intriguing alternative in questioning the structure and scale of being, one not predicated on a

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<sup>51</sup> Jason T. Ladner, “A Multicomponent Animal Virus Isolated from Mosquitoes,” *Cell Host & Microbe*, August 25, 2016.

<sup>52</sup> Michaelleen Doucleff, “New Virus Breaks The Rules Of Infection,” *NPR*, August 25, 2016. [http://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2016/08/25/491261766/new-virus-breaks-the-rules-of-infection?utm\\_campaign=storyshare&utm\\_source=twitter.com&utm\\_medium=social](http://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2016/08/25/491261766/new-virus-breaks-the-rules-of-infection?utm_campaign=storyshare&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_medium=social)

<sup>53</sup> Emphasis mine.

Michaelleen Doucleff, “New Virus Breaks The Rules Of Infection,” *NPR*, August 25, 2016. [http://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2016/08/25/491261766/new-virus-breaks-the-rules-of-infection?utm\\_campaign=storyshare&utm\\_source=twitter.com&utm\\_medium=social](http://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2016/08/25/491261766/new-virus-breaks-the-rules-of-infection?utm_campaign=storyshare&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_medium=social)

distinct totality in action, but dispersed and vulnerable. While Crispr enacts a cut-up and reconfigured whole, *Culex* evidences an immanent partiality to infection, animacy, and being.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, philosopher Rene Descartes was also intrigued by the phenomenon of movement. Much of his early work attempted to theorize mechanical processes of the universe. Descartes argued that the visible universe was “a single physical system in which all its operations, from the formation of planets and the transmission of light from the sun, to the physiological processes of human and nonhuman animal bodies, can be explained through the mechanism of matter arranged into shapes and structures and moving according to three laws of motion.”<sup>54</sup> Though he would eventually move towards a less empirical metaphysics for which he is widely known today, Descartes’ initial work on physics remained throughout his philosophical career. It was directly through this work on mechanistic physics that his ideas of mind/body dualism and the sanctity of the rational would emerge. If human bodies, to Descartes, are merely complex machines operated by a rational being/mind, then their senses, comportment, and feeling offer nothing revelatory. Against the Aristotelian tradition of the inherent qualities of substances, the Cartesian world is accessed through the mind. To locate truth, according to Descartes, one would necessarily have to withdraw the mind from the senses. Importantly, Cartesian dualism not only proclaimed the mind as the fundamental unit of ontology, as in “I think therefore I am,” but of ethics as well, as the locus of the soul.

In mechanizing the concept of living thing, Descartes did not deny the distinction between living and nonliving, but he did redraw the line between ensouled and unensouled beings. In his view, among earthly beings only humans have souls. He thus equated soul with mind: souls account for intellection and volition, including conscious sensory experiences, conscious experience of images, and consciously experienced memories. Descartes regarded nonhuman animals as machines, devoid of mind and consciousness, and hence lacking in sentience.”

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<sup>54</sup> <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/descartes/>

That which moves, to Descartes, might in some sense be alive, but absent a soul/consciousness it had no place in the realm of ethical responsibility. Thus, the scale of life, to Descartes, and of any ethics that emanated therefrom, was bound to the human.

Against the enlightenment humanisms of Descartes, Bruno Latour, in his work “Gabriel Tarde and the End of the Social,” looks to Tarde’s *Monadologie et sociologie* as inspiration to question the scalar properties of being. Latour locates the monad, which arising from Leibniz, finds its sociality in Tarde. Latour contends that the monad is “the stuff out of which the universe is built. But it is a strange stuff, since monads are not only material entities: they are ‘possessed’ by faith and desire...monads lead to a thoroughly reductionist version of metaphysics, since the small always holds the key to the understanding of the large.”<sup>55</sup> What Latour is saying by way of Tarde needs a bit of unpacking. First, monads are neither purely material nor metaphysical, they never exist solely in themselves and therefore are subject to an array of fundamental transformations. Second, Latour uses the term possession purposefully, arguing that all too often philosophy has collapsed the perpetual transmutation of things into identity, asking what something is rather than *what is has*. Third, when Latour cites the Tarde’s ‘reductionist’ version of metaphysics, he is not being dismissive; he is reorienting the phenomenological dimensions of complexity. To this he claims, “The big is never more than the simplification of *one* element of the small.”<sup>56</sup> It is from the biases of our anthropocentric vantage that *human* societies seem specific or exceptional because, as Latour puts it, “first, we see them from the inside and,

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<sup>55</sup> Bruno Latour, “Gabriel Tarde and the End of the Social,” *The Social in Question: New Bearings in History and the Social Sciences*, ed. Patrick Joyce. Routledge, 2002, p. 119.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid 127.

second, that they are composed of few elements compared to any of the other societies we grasp only from the outside.”<sup>57</sup>

Latour goes further, espousing the lush sociality of all things, not just human beings, denying the Heideggerian imperative toward the withdrawn, unknowable, essence of objects. He urges,

Abstain from the ridiculous solution to say that things exist in themselves but that you cannot know them. Either you talk or you remain silent. But you cannot possibly speak and say that the things you speak about are not in some ways similar to you: they express through you a sort of difference that has *you*, the speaker, as one of their proprietors. What looks like an impossibility with the philosophy of identity, offers no difficulty with the philosophy of ‘alteration’. Possession is another way of talking about translation.<sup>58</sup>

Latour is onto something crucial here. Against a static philosophy of identity, he charts the social unfolding of an ethics of possession, one that wields difference even in its similarity. Unlike ownership, a social relation of power in which a subject defines an object through its mastery, Latour’s possession confronts entanglement without laying claims to certainty. We constantly possess (and are possessed by) things, people, ideas, or otherwise. Reality is a phenomenological apprehension defined by how we translate those possessions, the geometry we undertake in service of ethics, politics, and ontology. The shape of possession is therefore fundamental to its application. Is it circular, arrowed, rhizomatic, linear, planar, or singular? We arrive at one structure of ethical possession through the parasite.

Michel Serres writes that to parasite means “to eat next to.”<sup>59</sup> Parasitism functions foremost, therefore, as proximity, not destruction as in its colloquial understanding. I will continually return to Serres’ concept of parasitism in the following chapters, both in its function as Derridean form of gift economy and hospitality, as well as its topographical importance to an ethics of consumption. For now, however, I introduce the parasite as a

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid 122.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid 133.

<sup>59</sup> Serres 7.



means to access the primary themes of the chapter towards explicating viral ethics: geometry, substance, and capacity. Proximity plays a crucial role in each. I will show how an incessant insistence on autonomy has poisoned the ethical possibilities of entangled life, how (dis)ability has become a stand-in for (failed)being, and how humanist campaigns (no matter their intention) reproduce injustice. To these ends, Serres further argues that “We [humans] parasite each other and live amidst parasites. Which is more or less a way of saying that they constitute our environment. We live in the black box called the collective; we live by it, on it, and in it.”<sup>60</sup> As the introduction to his work *The Parasite* states, “For Serres, the parasite is the primordial, one-way, and irreversible relation that is the base of human institutions and disciplines: society, economy, and work; human sciences and hard sciences; religion and history.”<sup>61</sup> My alternative is more hopeful, albeit less humane.<sup>62</sup> I do not wish to collapse all relation into parasitism, but instead propose its surprising ethical possibility.

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<sup>60</sup> Michel Serres, *Parasite*, 10.

<sup>61</sup> Michel Serres, *Parasite*, x.

<sup>62</sup> That is, less obsessed with fulfilling human-as-good, than tearing down individuality itself and seeing the ethical possibilities in tearing down the human.



Figure 1: Jewel Wasp

### On Parasitism

In charting parasitism and hospitality, Michel Serres has posited that the symbol of human relation is the arrow. Serres states, “the relation denoted by a single arrow is irreversible, just takes its place in the world. Man is a louse for other men. Thus man is a host for other men. The flow goes one way, never the other. I call this semiconduction, this valve, this single arrow, this relation without a reversal of direction, ‘parasitic.’”<sup>63</sup> This one-way flow is predicated not only on the influence of time, as Derrida illustrates in *Given Time*, but also on a philosophical obsession with causality and responsibility. Justice has often been a calculation of cause and effect. This, if/then - input/output approach to ethics seems sensical primarily because of its attachment to the ethical mode of responsibility. A thing happens and it is deemed to be just or unjust through two questions, who did it and to whom. Justice, at the present moment then, is frighteningly reliant on fixed identity, and how

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<sup>63</sup> Serres 5.

that identity is predicated on a perceived attachment to life. This is true of both the material, as in: I kick a rock and because it is a rock there is no injustice, and of the abstract, as in: reading *Harry Potter* might have led me to believe I can do magic, but it is not responsible when I can't because it is not an ethical subject (though maybe JK Rowling is). To this end might we imagine similar scenarios involving comets, global warming, microbes, and jellyfish? Beyond even these questions, however, what might an alternative geometry of ethics look like when not predicated on easily discernible individuals?

And so it is with these questions in mind that I turn to the jewel wasp. The jewel wasp (*fig 1*) is by all accounts a curious creature. Its iridescent exterior is a captivating metallic ombre of blues and greens, dimpled and hard. Despite its unique aesthetic, it is the method by which the jewel wasp reproduces that many find so remarkable. Upon finding a suitable cockroach host, it dives down at its victim's thorax stinging with powerful venom that paralyzes the host. Once it has been sufficiently incapacitated, the wasp exacts a much more precise attack, this time seeking out the brain of the cockroach, and injecting its venom at very specific sites. This second assault unleashes a curious response in the cockroach; it begins to almost manically groom itself.<sup>64</sup> At this point, the venom takes full effect and the cockroach has seemingly lost all ability to control itself. In doing so, the wasp has rewired "certain neurons so they are less active and responsive, leading to the roach's sudden lack of fear and willingness to be buried and eaten alive."<sup>65</sup> The wasp has effectively disarmed the cockroach's ability to protect itself, providing a docile, safe, and nutrient-rich site for its offspring to grow. The jewel wasp is only one of about 130 species in its genus, in which, "All have a macabre life cycle: as adults, they feed like other wasps and bees, but as larvae,

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<sup>64</sup> I think there is something to be said here about purity and expectations of cleanliness, which is more fleshed out in the section on weakness, parasitism, and their ethical imperatives.

<sup>65</sup> Christie Wilcox, "How a Wasp Turns Cockroaches into Zombies," *Scientific American*, August 1, 2016. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-a-wasp-turns-cockroaches-into-zombies/>

they must feed off other animals. They're not quite independent, not quite parasites—they're parasite-ish, or as scientists call them, parasitoids."<sup>66</sup> The parasitoid is an intriguing taxonomical concept, straddling the supposed boundary between, as the article indicates, independence and parasitism. It also raises another question. What is the ethical dynamic between wasp and cockroach? It would be hard (from a human perspective) to see either as particularly privileged, but certainly the wasp has an upper hand in their relationship, it uses the cockroach to its own ends, killing it in the process of its own reproduction. The jewel wasp (like the virus) isn't a paragon of morality to be emulated, but neither is it a *de facto* example of injustice. No life exists outside of violence, but it is our ability to mediate those violences that is integral to an ethics. Exploding the concept of independence is one step in the right direction towards justice.

A *Scientific American* article on the wonders of the jewel wasp, indicative of the dominant scientific understanding of parasitism, implies that it is parasitic because it lacks independence in utilizing another creature for reproduction. But what living thing, if any, is independent? Michel Serres writes that a parasite's "relation with a host presupposes a permanent or semi-permanent contact with him; such is the case for the louse, the tapeworm...Not only living *on* but also living *in*—by him, with him, and in him."<sup>67</sup> Seemingly, then, human beings are no different than parasites. They exhibit the same "parasitic" tendencies of living through another; living on, in meat and dairy consumption and living in, in a range of hides, leathers, and animal byproducts that "house." These are just the most obvious *material* means through which human beings also fit the traditional delineation of parasite, however. Human beings also *psychically* invest in other living things.

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<sup>66</sup> Christie Wilcox, "How a Wasp Turns Cockroaches into Zombies," *Scientific American*, August 1, 2016. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-a-wasp-turns-cockroaches-into-zombies/>

<sup>67</sup> Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, 6.

Domesticated pets, as one example, provide affective affirmation of our status as good, caring, people, but this was a forced proposition. In making them reliant on us, who is the parasite in this scenario?

My intention here is to reorient the concept of what constitutes a parasite, as well as the moral baggage affixed to it. I cannot view parasitism simply as the lack of independent life because the concept itself is a fiction. All life under that definition is parasitic. Instead I offer an interpretation of parasitism (especially in its intersections with virality) in which a parasite is an entangled, communal, subject of *ethical weakness*. Weakness is negatively characterized alongside dependence and both are delineated as morally lackluster attributes. Parasitism thus becomes a charge waylaid against those beings whose contributions to their given ecosystem are obviated. Welfare recipients, those with various disabilities, leeches, weeds, the homeless, rats, each is marked by their reliance on others, their lack of autonomy and therefore of value.<sup>68</sup> Viruses are also popularly heralded as parasites. The reliance of viruses on “true” forms of life to exist and replicate is often wielded as a quality of them being outside the parameters of life. A new study, however, looking at the structure of viral protein folds indicates that there is a shared evolutionary history of viruses and other organisms.<sup>69</sup> This has given a number of scientists cause to classify viruses as living organisms, though it is still somewhat contentious.<sup>70</sup> Whether or not the virus is defined as alive or not, however, is not the primary mission of this work. The biological delineation of life, a system of classification that orders along lines of similarity, *in praxis* does nothing to assuage those injustices enacted in the name of humanity (though at times it does help to

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<sup>68</sup> Debt keeps popping up everywhere lately in this dissertation. The association of human parasites with “unclean” animal ones is not lost on me, as well, though that is very well worn territory.

<sup>69</sup> Arshan Nasir and Gustavo Caetano-Anollés, A phylogenomic data-driven exploration of viral origins and evolution *Science Advances* 25 Sep 2015: Vol. 1, no. 8.

<sup>70</sup> Luis P. Villareal, “Are Viruses Alive?” *Scientific American* August 8, 2008.  
<http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/are-viruses-alive-2004/>

exacerbate them). Life, in its ethical dimensions, is often defined only through its relation to the human. In relying on life to exist, the parasite evidences the ‘worst’ of the human, indebted. Such a shared genetic/evolutionary history, however, reminds us of the debts all beings carry. If proximity to the human has characterized an ethical advantage (e.g., the more normatively human something is the more capacity it has and therefore the more rights we afford it) what are those forms of being most distant to humanity? In their dissimilarity what can we glean about the ethical dimensions of life?

### **Against Flatness**

Followers of object oriented ontology, hereafter referred to as “OOO,” will already be familiar with the recalibration of ontological/phenomenological thought towards all forms of being, “living” or otherwise. Following the work of scholars such as Heidegger and Whitehead, OOO proposes a flat approach to ontology. This school of thought, supposedly cognizant of hierarchies of power, has Ian Bogost remarking, “all beings equally exist, *yet they do not exist equally*.”<sup>71</sup> OOO, or speculative realism as it is sometimes called, therefore, solves the ontological problem of the boundaries of life by obliterating the concept altogether. In doing so, Bogost stops short of proposing an *ethics* of all being(s), going so far as to say, “Object ethics, it would seem, can only ever be theorized once-removed, phenomenally.”<sup>72</sup> Bogost posits the impossibility of such an ethics that doesn’t devolve into correlationism in saying, “An object enters an ethical relation when it attempts to reconcile the sensual qualities of another object vis-à-vis the former’s withdrawn reality. Perhaps counter-

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<sup>71</sup> Ian Bogost, “Materialisms: The Stuff of Things is Many”, at Ian Bogost—Video Game Theory, Criticism, Design, February 21, 2010, <http://www.bogost.com/blog/materialisms.shtml>.

<sup>72</sup> Ian Bogost, “THE LEGUME, THE PISTON, AND THE BEARDED MAN”, [http://www.bogost.com/writing/the\\_legume\\_the\\_piston\\_and\\_the.shtml](http://www.bogost.com/writing/the_legume_the_piston_and_the.shtml)

intuitively, ethics is a self-centered practice, a means of sense-making necessitated by the inherent withdrawal of objects.”<sup>73</sup>

Parsing out what Bogost is saying here requires a bit of foreknowledge from a contemporary of Bogost, Graham Harman. Harman, through the work of Latour/Husserl, argues that two fundamental types/qualities of objects exist. The first, real objects, are withdrawn, these objects cannot be reduced to my/their conception of them/selves. As Harman states, “A real object meets only the shadow of another, thereby allowing effects to proceed *asymmetrically* in one direction alone...Real objects exist ‘whether we like it or not’”<sup>74</sup> The second object type, sensual or intentional objects, come into being only through an encounter with a real object. Harman, once again, argues, “*Intentional objects* [are not] capable of mental life of any sort, since they exist only as passive figments encountered by something real...[continuing] We have immediate access to the sensual object from the moment we intent it, since that is all it takes for a sensual object to exist.”<sup>75</sup> Harman, here, means to democratize the being of objects, by which he means all things corporeal or incorporeal (paper clips, bonobos, hallucinations, *The Simpsons*, Marxism, etc.) and argue against a consciousness-based idealism a-la Kant. To Harman, this is an act of *de-anthropocentricity*, in which the privilege of reality making isn’t simply confined to the human cogito, but available to all things. And yet this is a kind of being only in-itself, devoid of ethics.

Returning to Bogost, then, there are two possible impediments to an OOO ethics in his work. The first, in Bogost’s definition of ethics, is that it is a speculative sense making of an object’s withdrawnness. To Bogost, precisely because it is impossible to know the essence

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid. Bogost here is mobilizing the work of Quentin Meillassoux who argues against the idea that the world doesn’t exist without human perception of it. He attributes Kant’s Copernican Revolution as a major contributor.

<sup>74</sup> Harman, *Prince of Networks*, 147,195.

<sup>75</sup> Crucial here is that objects can have real and sensual qualities and that they don’t have to strictly be one or the other. Harman, *Prince of Networks*, 213, 203.

of an object (because it is withdrawn even to the object itself) any ethics of inter-object relations is simply an occupation, our own faulty concept of them. Bogost, glossing Harman continues, “things recede into inaccessible, private depths. When objects interact, they do so not from these depths, but across their surfaces, in their sensual qualities. When fire burns cotton, it takes part only in the cotton’s flammability, not in its other properties, or in its real essence, which withdraws interminably.”<sup>76</sup> The withdrawn essence of the object, to Bogost, makes speculation on those qualities a fraught endeavor. The second impediment to speculative ethics (a supplement to the first) according to OOO is the problem of correlationism. As Harman argues, “There cannot be real things-in-themselves lodged outside the human mind, because if we are thinking about them then we are *thinking* about them, and hence they are no longer independent of thought.”<sup>77</sup> Slavoj Zizek, however, re-orientes another OOO scholar, Levi Bryant and his mobilization of withdrawal, asking,

Does ooo not emphasize that an organism is doubly limited: objects that affect it are inaccessible in their transcendent core, plus the very interpretive frame which constrains the approach to objects is inaccessible as such? It is not only that there are aspects of objects that I do not see, I also do not see what I do not see; that is, I am unaware of the very limit that separates what I can see from what I cannot see:<sup>78</sup> Zizek’s answer to Bryant is to cite the Lacanian Real as, “not the In-itself of objects beyond our perceptive reach, it resides *in the very “subjective excess” which distorts our access to reality.*”<sup>79</sup>

Both Zizek and Bryant, however, miss the mark from opposite sides. While Bryant (and speculative realism as a whole) theorize the withdrawal of objects to the detriment of their entanglement, Zizek’s humanist psychoanalysis highlights an imperceptibility immanent to autonomous subjectivity, you can’t see all *because you are*.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Ian Bogost, “THE LEGUME, THE PISTON, AND THE BEARDED MAN”, [http://www.bogost.com/writing/the\\_legume\\_the\\_piston\\_and\\_the.shtml](http://www.bogost.com/writing/the_legume_the_piston_and_the.shtml)

<sup>77</sup> Harman, *Prince of Networks*, 163.

<sup>78</sup> Slavoj Zizek <http://mariborchan.si/text/articles/slavoj-zizek/objects-objects-everywhere/>

<sup>79</sup> Slavoj Zizek <http://mariborchan.si/text/articles/slavoj-zizek/objects-objects-everywhere/>

<sup>80</sup> This part is important in opening a space that aligns with neither speculative realism’s abandonment of life and humanism’s imperialism of it, but probably needs to be fine tuned a bit.



And herein lies the problem of and solution to OOO and its relation to ethics. While Harman and Bogost decry the impossibility of knowledge of the essence of interactive being as impediment to ethics, I see this as the possibility of ethics. *Absolute knowledge is the foreclosure of ethics not its possibility.* Returning to Harman's example of the fire and the cotton, it is true that, to the human observer, the fire can only access a part of the cotton, its flammability (one point of access among others *that we can see*), but does this mean that there can be no ethical interaction? Is the cotton's flammability not a means of interlocution? One could speculate that the cotton plant in-itself has a will to continue being a cotton plant. We might call this inertia or *conatus* (after Spinoza).<sup>81</sup> When confronted by fire, cotton recedes. Even the aura of the fire is often enough to destroy the cotton, the radiant heat withering away plant matter. There is, then, a violent and observable consequence to the fire's interaction with the cotton, one that results in a conversion from cotton to ash.<sup>82</sup> We can (safely?) speculate that the cotton doesn't desire its own destruction, as in all likelihood it did nothing to incite the fire and could do nothing to stop it. More than this, why must the perspective of OOO always be of the individual? Does the burning cotton plant, not represent just one entity's destruction of another, but the creation of an entirely new becoming object? It is therefore through assessing an entangled array of affects that we can access, not the absolute truth of a cotton/fire assemblage, but one of its ethical possibilities. The work of scholars like Deleuze and Guattari, Brian Massumi, and Elizabeth Grosz demonstrate the ineffectiveness/irreality of 'essences,' opting instead to mobilize affect as an ever-changing ethical hermeneutic.

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<sup>81</sup> Reference here to Spinoza and his *Ethics*, what is to be said about the inertia of life? It would be wrong to live forever? What about the trajectory of ideas? Ethical impediments. Spinoza also uses the term *conatus* "Each thing as far as it can by its own power strives to persevere in its being. E3p6

<sup>82</sup> Which is itself just an observation across a miniscule amount of time, what are the lasting effects of burned cotton, a forest fire that might have reduced the cotton plant to cinders, but also eventually provides a rejuvenation of that ecosystem. What does it mean to do ethics not just in the present, but across a number of space/time perspectives, something that Tim Morton's *Hyperobjects* presents us with.

As an mechanism of entanglement, “affect arises in the midst of *in-between-ness*: in the capacities to act and be acted upon.”<sup>83</sup> Affect is thus the lived experience and theoretical foundation for viral ethics. OOO is a logical endpoint in the centuries long project of enlightenment, privileging unitary selfhood above all else, just proscribing its application to all things, not simply humans. OOO is the realm of posthumanist libertarianism, in which all things are free to be, just without the support of any social apparatus. Instead, I argue that it is those bridges between objects, entities, and ideas that define them and make possible an ethics, not some kind of forever-inaccessible withdrawnness. As Spinoza opined in his *Ethics*, “No one has yet determined what the body can do.”<sup>84</sup> It is the mechanisms of mediation, the apparatus of entanglement, that define potential and our ethical relations to it. We should unabashedly explore the borderlands of the between.

Another critical insight might be found in the work of Bruno Latour. While engaging in an impromptu experiment during a conference, Latour asked its participants to write down an antonym for ‘body.’ Among the more intriguing responses he received were the terms ‘unaffected’ and ‘death.’ He gleaned from this, “If the opposite of being a body is dead [and] there is no life apart from the body... [then] to have a body is to learn to be affected, meaning 'effectuated,' moved, put into motion by other entities, humans or nonhumans. If you are not engaged in this learning, you become insensitive, dumb, you drop dead”<sup>85</sup> Embodiment, to Latour, is equivalent to a particular definition of *life as affect*, whereby animacy of some sort is what differentiates you from the dead. He continues, “The body is thus not a provisional residence of something superior – an immortal soul, the universal or

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<sup>83</sup> Gregory J Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, “An Inventory of Shimmers” *The Affect Theory Reader* Duke University Press, 2010. p. 1.

<sup>84</sup> Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*, Dutton, New York, 1959, 87.

<sup>85</sup> Bruno Latour, “How to Talk About the Body? The Normative Dimensions of Science Studies,” *Body & Society*, Vol. 10 (2-3), 2004, p. 205.

thought – but what leaves a dynamic trajectory by which we learn to register and become sensitive to what the world is made of.”<sup>86</sup> Latour, here is espousing a materialist concept of life, in which a body’s interaction with and relationality to another, its entanglement, gives it life. He elaborates, calling the body, “*an interface that becomes more and more describable as it learns to be affected by more and more elements...*”<sup>87</sup> what leaves a dynamic trajectory by which we learn to register and become sensitive to what the world is made of.”<sup>87</sup> Against the speculative realists, Latour gives us an affective foundation for embodiment and by extension, of life.

To evidence these claims, Latour constructs a radically different model of subject-object relations (from the enlightenment tradition of Descartes, etc.). Here Latour cites an example of what Whitehead has called the bifurcation of nature, which, “has transformed the grand question of the relations between nature and mind into the petty form of the interaction between the human body and mind.”<sup>88</sup> Whitehead rejects those dualist accounts that afford substantive difference to objective material sense on one level and subjective interpretation on another. Latour explains (in a very Levinasian way) through a metaphor of a “face-to-face meeting between a subjective mind speaking in words about a world out there...forcing us to imagine no other relation but that of a zero-sum game between representations in the mind and reality in the world.”<sup>89</sup> Instead, he posits a multiplicity of bodies in constant relation coming to life (and ethical possibility) in their sociability.

It is not that one cannot do ethics across a wide ontological range, the liminal vantage of the viral should demonstrate this, it is, however, more important that the ethical

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<sup>86</sup> Bruno Latour, “How to Talk About the Body? The Normative Dimensions of Science Studies,” *Body & Society*, Vol. 10 (2-3), 2004, p. 206.

<sup>87</sup> Bruno Latour, “How to Talk About the Body? The Normative Dimensions of Science Studies,” *Body & Society*, Vol. 10 (2-3), 2004, p. 206.

<sup>88</sup> Alfred Whitehead, *The Concept of Nature*, 1919, p. 27.

<sup>89</sup> Which relies on a subject-object epistemological logic of truth and falsehood, rather than Bruno Latour, “How to Talk About the Body? The Normative Dimensions of Science Studies,” *Body & Society*, Vol. 10 (2-3), 2004, p. 213.

(and therefore ontological) stakes are much higher depending on the interlocutors. Can there be an ethical interaction between a rock and another rock, sure. Does it matter much? No. And so, the very framework on which Bogost makes his stand against a flat ethics (Heideggerian withdrawal) makes irrelevant the flatness of being. If being is universal, yet irreconcilably withdrawn, what are the stakes of any encounter, on any scale? *OOO performs nihilism masquerading in equality*. By refusing to speculate on the possibilities for cross-being encounter, Bogost goes full on in the other direction,

No matter what we may feel about eating or abstaining from meat, appeals to feeling and suffering exemplify the correlationist conceit: the assumption that the rights any thing should have are the same ones we believe we should have; that living things more like us are more important than those less like us; and that life itself is an existence of greater *worth* than inanimacy.<sup>90</sup>

In Bogost's world, we are an infinite number of lonely nihilists, never truly accessing anything about each other, because how could we, or why should we? But just as disconcerting, is the means through which Bogost collapses being into species taxonomy. Humans are this way, bees another, and tire irons another. Bogost has to elide ethics, because to imagine a democracy of objects is to disregard the misery that accompanies much of them. *He has to, because he disregards feeling as in any way constitutive to being*.

This is the ultimate importance of an ethical inquiry. The struggle of OOO to grasp the inside (withdrawn essence) rather than the outside (sensual qualities) of an object is not an oppositional problem, but a conceptual one.<sup>91</sup> The very notion of diametrically opposed insides and outsides (which I confront in chapter 2) is problematic. The sensual qualities of experience are not extraneous, but fundamental to both ethics and ontology. Feeling and speculation don't preclude the possibility of ethics as it is the very unknowability of things

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<sup>90</sup> I just noticed his use of the word worth, and will in a subsequent revision of this chapter pepper in much more discussion on the importance of debt.

Ian Bogost, "The Legume, the Piston, and the Bearded Man" November 27, 2009.  
[http://bogost.com/writing/the\\_legume\\_the\\_piston\\_and\\_the/](http://bogost.com/writing/the_legume_the_piston_and_the/)

<sup>91</sup> See chapter 2 and topography.

that makes ethics possible. One might ask how we are to know our speculations are ethical? By attending to capacity, ecology, and aesthetics we make our best effort. With respect to Bogost's work, then, this study (obviously) breaks with speculative realism's ideas on the limits of ethical inquiry and instead suggests the possibility for a speculative approach to viral ethics. I argue that ethics is a question of ontology (and ontology of ethics), that they are not separable philosophical modes, but inextricably linked. Mobilizing the entity, image, and mediated ecologies of the virus I put forth an ethics in which the human is merely one possible ethical interlocutor. This dissertation will retain the universality of being that OOO calls for, but instead rejects responsibility to *and from* life in its myriad forms as the overarching goal of a speculative (or viral) ethics. It takes its theoretical cues from a diverse assemblage of affect-as-life, in which entanglement prefigures debt towards an ethics of mutual constitution.

## **Life**

If I find the biological definition of life unsatisfying for its normative qualities (reproductivity/self-sufficiency) and speculative realism wholly devoid of life and lacking in its approach to ethics, then two major questions arise. First, how am I defining life? And second, how does the ethics that I am deploying (viral ethics) intersect with that conception of life? These two questions are crucial not only from an abstract philosophical standpoint, but because of the very real implications an ethics can engender. From #BlackLivesMatter to gene-splicing to factory farming and beyond, there are distinct benefits in claiming access to life (as well as serious repercussions for lack of access). I define life as an affective and embodied locus of vital/vibrant, potential. Life need not be organic, but it must be animated, affect, and be affected. Viral ethics, therefore, is both the form and function of life from an alternative vantage, positioned not singularly or statically, but multiple and animated. It

highlights the important differences between being and life (temporally, politically) even in their messy overlap. Viral ethics acknowledges the universality of being, *but ascribes ethical importance to life* in all its temporal (before-life, life, and after-life/death) and ontological (organic, digital, abstract) states.<sup>92</sup> Furthermore, viral ethics is contextual and local. It does not advocate a universal doctrine for ethical action, but instead (out of a genealogy of disability rights scholarship) figures the importance of capacity. This means, for example, that though we can approach encounters with factory farm chickens and factory farm migrant workers from viral ethics vantages, there are fundamental differences in how each should be performed.<sup>93</sup> The same might be said of an ethical relationship between a honeybee and a dandelion, as viral ethics does not presuppose human interlocution. The virus, here, is an example *par excellence* in its approach to radical difference. Such an ethics should be ever mutating, parasitic and weak, never resting on its laurels.

Viral ethics, therefore, is also an affective approach to the question of life. It relies not on identarian mechanisms of hierarchical differentiation (to aggregate groups of similar traits against one another) to constitute being, but alternatively claims that being arises from encounters of radical otherness. *We are*, because we are entangled in another, in many others, in a perpetual state-of-flux. *We are alive*, because we are affected in ways beyond those that can be physically observed. To these dictums, being is communal and mutually arrives with the ethical. Being is not flat, but lumpy. There is a diversity, abundance, and difference of being, and as such viral ethics (an ethics of care) dictates that cognizance of

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<sup>92</sup> These states are more a practical hermeneutic rather than steadfast (obviously) and individuated. As we will see life and after-life can exist at once. More than this, a temporally wonky constitution of life rubs up against some particularly prickly ethical questions that have typically been validated through assertions of self-hood and autonomy. What does a feminist ethics of abortion, consent, etc. that does not reinscribe the individualizing pathos of capital look like? Both a theory and praxis of entanglement?

<sup>93</sup> This point relies on a kind of Deleuzian ethics in which there can be no reduction to a singular entity and (therefore) that an ethical relation is never simply between two things, but a product of overlapping systems/assemblages.

need/capacity/ability, in addition to structures of power that figure those indices, are fundamental attributes in the performance of the good. Viral ethics takes its cues, therefore, from a genealogy of radical queer/crip activism, which advocates not for equality (which is itself unequal and unjust) but justice.<sup>94</sup> Each of the four chapters wrestles with the extant ethical systems of anthropocentricity and attempts to provide an alternative pathway towards a viral ethics. To accomplish this viral ethics must be: radical, speculative, and performative.

As Eugene Thacker has argued, “If philosophy begins in a certain perplexity towards the world, then perhaps this perplexity is resolved in life. However, in philosophy (as in the world . . .), ‘life’ is never a simple affair.”<sup>95</sup> Life has been defined by philosophy in a number of ways. The Aristotelian tradition cites its substantive animacy, an inertia Aristotle called *entelechy*. Marx and Engels defined life in terms of labor production, arguing, “As individuals express their life, so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with their production, both with *what* they produce and *how* they produce.”<sup>96</sup> Deleuze argued for the self-constitution of life, or as Thacker describes, “life as that which organizes and self-organizes, which disperses and is itself pervasive—life as organizational and topological, at once omnipresent and yet immaterial.”<sup>97</sup> Aside from Deleuze, however, each of these philosophical approaches affixes life with human qualities. It is one ambition of this dissertation (that will be evidenced throughout its corpus) to put forth a substitute delineation of life, one that is not strictly limited to human being.

I have documented in the introduction how Michel Foucault, in *The Order of Things*, traces the origins of ‘man’ in its accompaniment of finite life. Prior to Foucault, however,

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<sup>94</sup> And also tantamount to a preservation of extant systems of violence and oppression. Which is why I think justice I think will feature prominently in this chapter.

<sup>95</sup> Eugene Thacker, *After Life*, University of Chicago Press, 2010., p. ix.

<sup>96</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, 1977, 42.

<sup>97</sup> Eugene Thacker, *After Life*, 160.

Hannah Arendt was also writing about the constitution of human life in her work *The Human Condition*. In it, Arendt details the differences between work, labor, and action, and their relation to freedom, beginning, “unlike *working*, whose end has come when the object is finished, ready to be added to the common world of things, *laboring* always moves in the same circle, which is prescribed by the biological process of the living organism and the end of its “toil and trouble” comes only with the death of this organism.”<sup>98</sup> In this definition, Arendt argues (against Marx) that labor is a means of biological subsistence *inherent to all living beings*, even referring to it as *animal laborans*.<sup>99</sup> Thus, labor is part and parcel to a state-of-being affixed to the space/time of life, an endless repetition of those necessities, which characterize what it means to be “alive.” Against this, she states that work is strictly the domain of human beings, “the activity which corresponds to the unnaturalness of human existence, which is not embedded in, and whose mortality is not compensated by, the species' ever-recurring life-cycle.”<sup>100</sup> To Arendt, labor represents a base kind of life (mere-life), while work is that artifice which demonstrates the world-making capabilities unique to human beings. There is, however, to Arendt, a third categorization, that of action, “the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter... this plurality is specifically *the condition...of all political life*.”<sup>101</sup> This *vita activa*, is the emergence of freedom in life, a social politics that unlike work or labor, is not a self-contained means to an end, but the very form of possibility, a beginning.

To Arendt “To act, in its most general sense, means to take initiative, to begin...to set something in motion. Because they are *initium*, newcomers and beginners by virtue of

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<sup>98</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, University of Chicago Press, 1958, p. 98.

<sup>99</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*.

<sup>100</sup> Tom Morton writes on the continued use of “nature” as a means of differentiating objects from their human counterparts. To Morton, the idea of the natural isn’t just an ontological fabrication, but is also detrimental to any ethics/politics.

Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 7.

<sup>101</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 7.



birth, men take initiative, are prompted into action.”<sup>102</sup> Therefore it is the anti-teleological capacity of human beings, to Arendt, to act, that hierarchicalizes an ideal freedom of being. She writes,

All three activities and their corresponding conditions are intimately connected with the most general condition of human existence: birth and death, natality and mortality. Labor assures not only individual survival, but the life of the species. Work and its product, the human artifact, bestow a measure of permanence and durability upon the futility of mortal life and the fleeting character of human time. Action, in so far as it engages in founding and preserving political bodies, creates the condition for remembrance, that is, for history.<sup>103</sup>

In Arendt, therefore, we see several means through which human life is made exceptional in its relations to animal others. Each of Arendt’s hierarchical positions relies on a subset of capacities extended or denied to particular interlocutors. Labor is equated to survival, work to consciousness (particularly of one’s ability to die), and action to creation (or a life beyond one’s own physical life manifest in history/memory. In formulating this conception of freedom, Arendt gives us a startlingly clear blueprint through which human exceptionalism is proliferated. In both Arendt and Foucault we are reminded of the ties between human being and history. While Arendt sees this as a liberatory possibility for freedom, however, Foucault’s historicity aims to denaturalize “man” against liberation.

But is the project of historicization that Foucault wields enough to destroy the human? Has ‘knowing’ man is a product of history done anything to alleviate the concomitant violences that the boundaries of humanity have engendered? As Eve Sedgwick has remarked, “theory has become almost simply coextensive with the claim (you can’t say it often enough), *it’s not natural*”<sup>104</sup> Rather than articulate all the ways in which humanity is constructed in opposition to nature, therefore, I aim to heed Sedgwick’s call for something else. Timothy Morton (from an alternative vantage) calls for something similar, to let go of

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<sup>102</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 177.

<sup>103</sup> Arendt 8-9.

<sup>104</sup> Eve Sedgwick, “Shame in the Cybernetic Fold” 15.

the “concept of a single, solid, present-at-hand thing ‘over there’ called Nature.”<sup>105</sup> To do so, would be to not only alleviate the violences of naturalizing human actions, but to espy how the very concept of the natural poisons the well of ethics in its exceptionalism and divisiveness. While I believe Arendt errs in her categorizations of essentialized hierarchical capacity, her framework of embodied action (and its relation to the state of life) is incredibly useful in evidencing a more Latourian entangled ethics.

### **Creation and Repetition**

On July 5, 1996 there was a particularly memorable attempt at bringing life into being. At a lab in Edinburgh, Scotland a sheep named Dolly, was born. This marked the first time in human history that a mammal was successfully cloned. The news set off a wave of media coverage that has since questioned the ethics of cloning, highlighting a once-relegated-to-science-fiction capacity for ‘playing god.’<sup>106</sup> As the researchers involved indicate, “The initial aim of the research was to use an animal’s milk production system as a factory of sorts, manufacturing proteins to treat human diseases.”<sup>107</sup> Thus, the novelty of an emergent technology obfuscated the tired ends it was directed at, the exploitation of animals in affirmation of human life. Beyond this, however, the creation of Dolly represents a further manifestation of the human right to delineate life. This is a power that has characterized the biological sciences since their inception, represented in the sea change that Nietzsche documented in his work *The Gay Science*. Creation (perhaps a synonym to Arendt’s action) is one prototypical trait in the replication of human exceptionalism. Synthesizing Dolly, however, created more than just the sheep herself, it also aided in its own self-reflexive

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<sup>105</sup> Timothy Morton, “About” <http://ecologywithouthnature.blogspot.com/p/about.html>

<sup>106</sup> Dawn Field, “We’re Playing God,” *The Huffington Post*, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/dawn-field/gene-editing-summit\\_b\\_8690910.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/dawn-field/gene-editing-summit_b_8690910.html)

<sup>107</sup> Karen Weintraub, “20 Years after Dolly the Sheep Led the Way—Where Is Cloning Now?” *Scientific American*, July 5, 2016. <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/20-years-after-dolly-the-sheep-led-the-way-where-is-cloning-now/>

ethical justification.<sup>108</sup> The act of creation, first envisioned through god, then through science, here seeks to succeed in: conjuring potency/vigor/strength (be it cognitive, social, historical, ontological, or otherwise), defining the human as that which (due to its strength in these fields) can create; arranging itself against which is weak (object/parasite).<sup>109</sup>

This isn't to say that cloning is not without opposition. Much of the resistance, however, seems to come from the public's uncomfortable relation with *consuming* gene edited/cloned products.<sup>110</sup> These things serve as both: uncomfortable reminders of the always already human interference in affecting/constituting animal populations and the hypervisibility of every miserable step of the process.<sup>111</sup> It is enough of an issue that the FDA has seen fit to quell public distrust of cloning, stating, "Clones may allow farmers to *upgrade the quality* of their herds by providing more copies of their best animals—those with naturally occurring desirable traits, such as resistance to disease, high milk production, or quality meat production. These animal clones are then used for conventional breeding, and their sexually reproduced offspring become the food-producing animals."<sup>112</sup> Though generationally once removed, the children of cloned animals are still (in many consumer's eyes) tainted by the artifice of their arrival, an impurity that showcases the human-driven project of life becoming economic object. The aura of authenticity in the pastoral/primordial/natural scene of "necessary" animal exploitation is shattered in its dual

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<sup>108</sup> Foucault, writing on the repressive hypothesis, states that it effectively carried its own epistemological justification. Freud's theorizations of the mind's inability to bear witness to particularly troubling events, created a dominant psychoanalytic framework of archetypes to which the mind's inability to bear witness to particularly troubling events was ascribed. The oedipal reigned supreme. This is the power of discourse to Foucault, the means through which it is given power not only in textbooks and classrooms, but the means by which particular truths become self-evident, common-sensical.

<sup>109</sup> The sexualized/gender elements of both the dominant frames of what justice looks like and my own oppositional ethical justification for weakness are apparent to me, but will have to be expanded in a later draft.

<sup>110</sup> "Are We Eating Cloned Meat?" *Scientific American*, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/are-we-eating-cloned-meat/>

<sup>111</sup> And the violences they are predicated on.

<sup>112</sup> *My emphasis*. "Animal Cloning and Food Safety" January 15, 2008. <http://www.fda.gov/ForConsumers/ConsumerUpdates/ucm148768.htm>

technicity. Cloning makes obvious the project of humanist ethics, implicit in animals as becoming economic objects for human consumption. As Ian Wilmut, one of the scientists involved in the creation of Dolly has said, “the idea of cloning a pet is ‘stupid,’ adding, ‘The only possible use that I can sort of vaguely think of is if you have a particular valuable dog.’”<sup>113</sup> Wilmut makes plain the heinous undertones of contemporary humanist ethics, in which ethics becomes a set of distinct economic values incentivized by monetary or identarian gain.

I am also reminded here of Jean Baudrillard. Cloning might remind people that the meals they eat everyday are a purposeful unnatural violence inflicted on animals, but it also gestures to the instability of human self-sufficiency, the irreality of human exceptionalism. Baudrillard speculated that those purposefully fantastical imitations of things, Disneyland, Las Vegas, etc. disguised the very irreality of the places they depicted, the ‘real’ New York, New York, the ‘real’ America.<sup>114</sup> Does cloning depict a hyperreality of the same order, as a synthetic composition of life that makes more real its ‘natural’ counterpart? In these things, Arendt’s “action” is actualized; the ability to delineate what or what doesn’t constitute reality is the ultimate conjuration of strength. It is the apotheosis of life. To be deficient or weak, as in the parasite, therefore, is to be on the wrong side of the ontological balance sheet, to only owe; penurious, indebted. An answer, then, might be a wholehearted embrace of weakness, to define ethics outside of moral calculus and to espouse a concept of life that is vibrant, but not indebted.

Alexander Galloway writes of Francois Laruelle, “If the political derives its power from the provisional confrontations of ‘this’ or ‘that’ particularity, the ethical revels in the

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<sup>113</sup> Karen Weintraub, “20 Years after Dolly the Sheep Led the Way—Where Is Cloning Now?” *Scientific American*, July 5, 2016. <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/20-years-after-dolly-the-sheep-led-the-way-where-is-cloning-now/>

<sup>114</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, Stanford, 1988.

weak and finite, adhering to ‘the something’ as an axiomatic principle.”<sup>115</sup> By weakness Laruelle does not mean an opposition to strength (though that is certainly one direction I explore), but instead an embodiment counter to traditional subjectivity. Laruelle’s non-philosophy indicates both an evacuation of the Hegelian dialectic of two and the contemporary univocity of Deleuzian being towards an embrace of the weak non-subject.<sup>116</sup> To Laruelle, philosophical misapprehensions of appearance/presence, in which the two terms have become unnecessarily conflated with one another, has engendered deleterious ethical results. As Galloway asserts, presence need not even be visible. In fact the alternative might be preferable, “Indeed, in a world in which informatic capture predominates, in which technologies of identification and profiling have saturated both the commercial sector, via genetics and information technology, and the government sector, via data mining or drone surveillance, it would make sense for presence to lodge itself ever more intimately within the cloak of invisibility.”<sup>117</sup> The connection between presence and weakness isn’t only apparent in technology, however. It is also manifest in our constructions of life itself. In myriad ways (legal, social, ethical, linguistic, biological, etc.) life has been wielded in its relation to the human. Even some in the post-humanities wield cybernetics, digitalia, hybridity, etc., as means of conflating human with life. While the cyborg seemingly held the promise for a hybrid future, what it has delivered instead is an even more robust humanism, in which the

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<sup>115</sup> Alexander Galloway, *Laruelle: Against the Digital*. University of Minnesota, 2014, p. 190.

<sup>116</sup> The multiple in Deleuze is just an instantiation of the one, the infinity of *being*. As Alexander Galloway explains,

So although Laruelle and Deleuze both reference the one, they have almost nothing similar to say about it. The main difference is that Deleuze’s one is ultimately not differentiated from Being. Rather for Deleuze, a good materialist, the oneness of the one is expressed in all the multiple permutations of Being. Whereas for Laruelle it is impossible for the one to “appear” or even be “voiced” across all the multiplicities of being because the one would then have to be “in” Being, and thus would cease being in itself. In other words, the one is not the one by virtue of having been realized in Being. So although they share an equal interest in immanence, Laruelle considers Deleuze too timid, accusing him of not being immanent enough” (6).

<sup>117</sup> Alexander Galloway, *Laruelle: Against the Digital*. University of Minnesota, 2014, p. 189.

human has absorbed the machine (which was never a totem of liberation anyway). There is a need instead for a revolution that re-circuits hierarchy through a destruction of the human. Let us make it unexceptional, banal, a humanness evacuated of humanity. To do so would necessitate first recognizing that appearance is the digitized counterpart to the uncertainty of weak presence. Ethics appears in full alignment with humanism because of the decisive mediations that have shaped it that way. In Chapter 4 I explore the significance of quantum entanglement and superposition, but Laruelle does something similar. He argues that to be ethical ultimately means a *withdrawal from decision*. As Galloway explains,

To be ethical means to metastasize the real. As metastasis, the ethical means to think and act in terms of the total possibility space of the real. Never a question of deciding, dividing, or demonstrating one's allegiances, the ethical requires a recognition of the total, finite space of being as it pertains simultaneously and in parallel. The ethical is never a question of position, never a question of drawing a line in the sand, never a digitization. Rather, the threshold of the ethical is transgressed precisely at the moment when all positions merge into equality with themselves, and all lines are erased by the rising winds.<sup>118</sup>

In this mode, presence is potential. It is the emergence of ethical possibilities that might spring forth from any given system. If this is the case, then how potential is defined is crucial to the instantiation of any given ethics.

## Capacity

In Athens, Georgia stands a peculiar white oak. By all appearances it seems a perfectly normal tree. It is of average height (though its forbearer was said to be quite substantial) and, as white oaks are common to the area, it is not particularly exotic looking.<sup>119</sup> What makes this specific tree so remarkable, however, is not its appearance, but its social standing. In 1890 the *Athens Weekly Banner* cited a deed made by William H. Jackson, the owner of the property on which the tree lived and who supposedly held the tree in great affection, which afforded

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<sup>118</sup> Alexander Galloway, *Laruelle: Against the Digital*. University of Minnesota, 2014, p. 188.

<sup>119</sup> Lucian Lamar Knight, *A Standard History of Georgia and Georgians, Volume 3*. Lewis Publishing, 1917, p. 1446.

the white oak “possession of itself and of the land within eight feet of it on all sides.”<sup>120</sup>

Though felled by a storm in 1946, a new tree was planted from an acorn of its predecessor and it still stands today.<sup>121</sup> The Tree That Owns Itself, (Or more accurately The Son of the Tree That Owns Itself) as it is currently known, serves as a mildly famous landmark in Athens, a kind of mythical legal oddity.<sup>122</sup>

As you might have already guessed, the tree does not actually own itself, at least not in any legally sound way. The decree made by William Jackson in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century has no basis in jurisprudence, either at the time it was made or today, as “Georgia common law, like that of all other states, does not recognize the capacity of trees to hold property, since plants, like nonhuman animals, have the legal status of things and thus lack the right to have rights.”<sup>123</sup> Instead, the tree relies on a social bargain the community has made; it retains its ‘independence’ probably as long as it holds some value for the community. In a sense, this is true not only of trees, but of all beings, humans included. It might be nice to imagine the law as a space of equal standing, but as the 2008 housing crisis, unending cases of police brutality, and a media milieu in active support of rape culture (to name just a few from the microcosmos of the (U.S.) human world...) seemingly indicate, that argument is tenuous at best and, if we’re being honest, more likely downright prevaricated. The Tree That Owns Itself does raise an important series of questions for the purposes of this project, however. First, it demonstrates the social fabric through which the law is upheld. Regardless of the letter of the law, it is incumbent on those in a given ecological assemblage to actively

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<sup>120</sup> Lucian Lamar Knight, *A Standard History of Georgia and Georgians, Volume 3*. Lewis Publishing, 1917, p. 1446. Here is some of what Mr. Jackson had to say of his beloved tree which now emblazons a plaque next to the tree: “For and in consideration of the great love I bear this tree and the great desire I have for its protection, for all time, I convey entire possession of itself and all land within eight feet of the tree on all sides” (Taylor)

<sup>121</sup> Astra Taylor, “Who Speaks for the Trees,” *The Baffler*, 2016.

<http://thebaffler.com/salvos/speaks-trees-astra-taylor>

<sup>122</sup> Interesting gendering?

<sup>123</sup> Astra Taylor, “Who Speaks for the Trees,” *The Baffler*, 2016.

<http://thebaffler.com/salvos/speaks-trees-astra-taylor>

perpetuate it. Without repetition it loses its power. And secondly, *The Tree* emphasizes the role of capacity in a system of ethics that doesn't necessarily take 'human being' as its ideological prerequisite. *The Tree That Owns Itself* brings us back to Latour, to possession and its standoffish relation to ownership. What is the relationship between ownership and being in that ethics? Or, how do we define capacity in its relation to justice? How does capacity expose the hypocrisies of value and reliance?

One convincing line of reasoning comes from the field of disability studies. As prominent disability studies scholar Alison Kafer notes, disability has all-too-often been conceptualized as a medical problem, which "frames atypical bodies and minds as deviant, pathological, and defective."<sup>124</sup> This medical model of disability rests on the production of the disabled individual as significantly less valuable than their "normal" counterpart. If the quantitative valuation of life seems overly utilitarian (and unabashedly biopolitical) it should. Self-pronounced ethicist Peter Singer has made that exact claim in a 2009 *New York Times* article about the scarcity of health care resources, arguing, "we might conclude that restoring to nondisabled life two people who would otherwise be quadriplegics is equivalent in value to saving the life of one person, provided the life expectancies of all involved are similar."<sup>125</sup> Putting aside the obvious problems with how one might actually go about quantifying the value of life, Singer makes apparent the supposed "deficiency" of disabled life, to him a roughly 2-to-1 relation. Singer frames his argument as a utilitarian approach to personal well-being (while providing no actual data from disabled people), but actually only solidifies Kafer's point about one's productive value (itself a very subjective set of metrics) to society being a measure of the care one should be entitled to.

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<sup>124</sup> Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 2013, p. 5.

<sup>125</sup> Peter Singer, "Why We Must Ration Health Care," *New York Times*, July 15, 2009.  
[http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/19/magazine/19healthcare-t.html?pagewanted=4&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/19/magazine/19healthcare-t.html?pagewanted=4&_r=0)



Singer's biopolitics exercises a pathological definition of ethics, opposing those partial or diseased bodies against the supposedly normative and productive members of society. To Singer, responsibility emerges from personal contribution. In this mode, capacity is figured as an economic measure, both in terms of its ability to be made quantifiable and as the concomitant delineation of value to those deemed capable. To be capable, under Singer's definition, is to be autonomous, and therefore to have access to a quality of life he deems appropriate.<sup>126</sup> Again, even in the hands of an avowed animal rights activist, debt crops up as the primary mechanism through which ethics should function. It is important to note that Singer's animal rights dogma emerges from utilitarianism. While he collapses the boundary between humans and other animals in highlighting their mutual capacity to suffer, any system in which the greater good is a quantifiable known masks the violence of those steps taken to achieve that good.<sup>127</sup> In doing so, Singer upholds the values of his ideological predecessor Jeremy Bentham, whose maxim, "Each to count for one and none for more than one" formulates a system of ethical equality. The problem with equality as a standard for ethics, most obviously, is that it presumes (and then dictates) equality amongst things.

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<sup>126</sup> Jessica Chasmar, "Princeton bioethics professor faces calls for resignation over infanticide support" *The Washington Times*, June 16, 2015. <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2015/jun/16/peter-singer-princeton-bioethics-professor-faces-c/>

<sup>127</sup> THIS ASSHOLE EVEN DESCRIBES HIMSELF AS A FLEXIBLE VEGAN. [https://www.reddit.com/r/IAmA/comments/3w9n40/an\\_ama\\_with\\_peter\\_singer\\_author\\_of\\_animal/](https://www.reddit.com/r/IAmA/comments/3w9n40/an_ama_with_peter_singer_author_of_animal/)

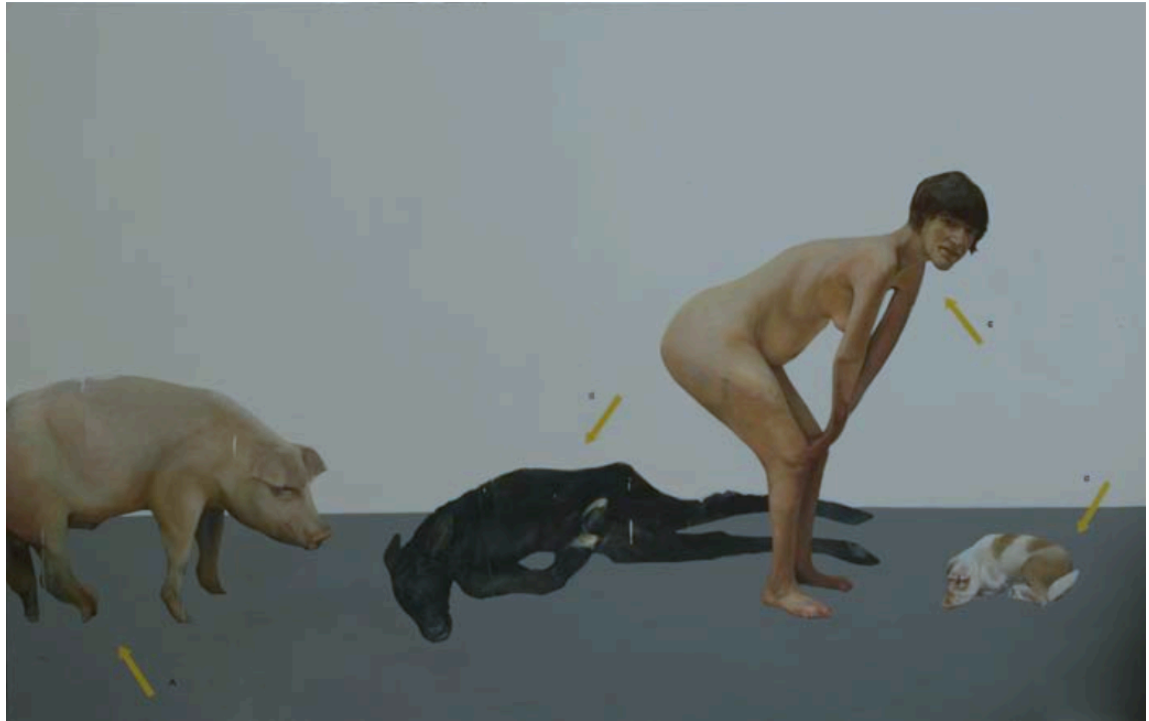


Figure 2: Animals With Arthrogryposis, oil on canvas, 2009, 72" x 108". Painting by Sunaura Taylor.

Another bridge between disability and animal rights feminisms emerges from the work of Sunaura Taylor. Taylor, who is vegan and has arthrogryposis, writes of an encounter at an art event she was invited to on the ethics of eating meat, recalling, "The inaccessibility of the space framed my words that night and led me to focus on the ways in which animal oppression and disability oppression are made invisible by being rendered as simply natural: steers are served for dinner and disabled people wait downstairs." The impossibility of Taylor's full participation, the art portion took place on an inaccessible floor of the building so she was made to wait downstairs as the non-vegan meals were made, underscores how capacity is often prefigured. She writes, "For many disabled individuals, the importance of upholding a certain politeness at the dinner table is far overshadowed by something else—

upholding our right to *be* at the dinner table, even if we make others uncomfortable.”<sup>128</sup> In Taylor’s case, the uncomfotability, manifest through both the architecture of the space and the actions of her fellow attendees, which barred her full participation in the event was due to her physical presence. As she describes, “In my life I have been compared to many animals. I have been told I walk like a monkey, eat like a dog, have hands like a lobster, and generally resemble a chicken or penguin.”<sup>129</sup> Taylor does not dismiss these comparisons, as she says some of them are true, but instead attacks the exclusionary and exceptionalizing projects that they underwrite. To Taylor, “Questions about normalcy and nature, value and efficiency, interdependence and vulnerability” are fundamental to a symbiotic ethical-politics of disability and animal rights.<sup>130</sup>

Interdependence, normalcy, and ‘excess’ love are also explored by Diane Beers in her work, *For the Prevention of Cruelty: The History and Legacy of Animal Rights in the United States*. Beers’ text documents the work of early-20<sup>th</sup> Century neurologist Charles L. Dana, who coined the term ‘zoophilpsychosis’ to describe an affliction of a “psychotic love of animals.”<sup>131</sup> Dana believed that an inability to adapt to the “stress and complexities of modern life,” particularly among women, led to an irrational and pathological affiliation with animals. Describing one ‘case’ of a 40-year-old woman with a lifelong love of cats (and no children), he suggested that only gynecological surgery could fix her “perversion of instinct.”<sup>132</sup> Not only have interdependence and care been figured as antithetical to ‘real’ ethics, they have done so through a misogynist politics, shaping the ethical as a domain of

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<sup>128</sup> Sunaura Taylor, “Vegans, Freaks, and Animals: Towards and New Table Fellowship,” *American Quarterly* p. 760, 763.

<sup>129</sup> Sunaura Taylor, “Beasts of Burden: Disability Studies and Animal Rights,” *Qui Parle*, Vol. 19, No. 2., p. 191.

<sup>130</sup> Sunaura Taylor, “Vegans, Freaks, and Animals: Towards and New Table Fellowship,” *American Quarterly* p. 761.

<sup>131</sup> Diane Beers, *For the Prevention of Cruelty: The History and Legacy of Animal Rights Activism in the United States*, Ohio University Press, 2006, p. 129.

<sup>132</sup> Charles L. Dana, “The Zoophil-Psychosis: A Modern Malady,” *Medical Record* 75 (March 6, 1909): 381-383.

independence, masculinity, and charity. Singer and Dana chart an ethics of normalcy, in which deviance of affect, mobility, and cognition, are medicalized then summarily prescribed violent solutions. Like Sunaura Taylor's experience at the Headlands Center for the Arts, those who do not conform to ideal forms of embodiment, ideology, or cognitive ability are made to wait, their access shunted off, their identities articulated for them. This is the problem of capacity as it currently circulates; it all too often functions as an individuated, normative, locus of being.

To have a mutative concept of ethics is to be able to rapidly redefine the ethics of a given situation, to express encounter in terms of becoming potential, not static capacity. We can glean from the Greek root of *path*, therefore, the alternative possibilities in its dual meaning. Path means both feeling and disease. While to be pathological is to embody in some way a particular disease, carrying with it all of the negative baggage of impurity and ailment, it also means a shared sense of feeling.<sup>133</sup> Empathy is often heralded as the de facto moral realization of mutual sentiment, an affective expression of the capacity to align with another. Lori Gruen in her work *Entangled Empathy* writes that a tradition of feminist care can be invaluable in approaching animal ethics specifically.<sup>134</sup> But empathy often falls short when only addressing its first root, feeling, without attending to its second, disease. It is the very mediated, repetitive, and circulatory aspects of those sentiments that I am keen on exploring. A parasitic or viral ethics unabashedly revels in its debt, its incapacity, and its weakness in flux. It figures each of these qualities as potential, not deficiency.

## Infection and Performance

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<sup>133</sup> "pathological, adj. and n.". OED Online. September 2016. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com.proxy.libraries.rutgers.edu/view/Entry/138800?redirectedFrom=pathological> (accessed October 13, 2016).

<sup>134</sup> As this work only very recently came out, my familiarity with it is somewhat limited. Given the content, however, it seems to very much align with a lot of what this dissertation argues.

In San Francisco in 2008, artist Caitlin Berrigan invited members of her audience to puncture their fingers with sterile lancets, drawing their own blood into small cups of water.<sup>135</sup> Part of a performance piece she titled *Life Cycle of a Common Weed*, the blood, including Berrigan's, was pooled and used to fertilize pots of live dandelions. It was via a, "growing fatigue with the militancy used to address human-viral encounters" that Berrigan, who has the blood-borne hepatitis C virus, conceived of the work. She opted for dandelions in particular, because of their status as a pest/weed, with supposedly no use value; a fact counter to the inherent medicinal properties of the plant, one being a treatment for hepatitis C. It is this mutual accord, the "ubiquitous, weedy quality of the hepatitis C virus" which led Berrigan to believe that "hepatitis C could perhaps serve as a model for being-with microbes once their outbreak narratives have cooled into complacency."<sup>136</sup> By offering her own blood as a source of nutrition for the dandelion, Berrigan suggests a symbiotic, rather than destructive, relation to not only the plant itself, but also our notions of negativity surrounding infection. She calls this a "gesture of reciprocity."<sup>137</sup> As Berrigan explains, "*LCCW* engages the relational aspects of biopolitics by giving rise to anxieties about the containment of bodies, fluids, and infections, even as these fears may have little to do with actual dangers."<sup>138</sup> Thus, Berrigan succeeds in not only revealing the performative aspects of ethical encounter, but also provides a pathway for undermining their normalization.

Berrigan's performance of viral reciprocity is intriguing in its relation to the means by which hepatitis C itself infects. A video from pharmaceutical company Novartis, which has made several forays into Hepatitis C treatments, demonstrates a highly stylized means through which the virus infects liver cells. We are invited to watch as the hepatitis C virus

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<sup>135</sup> *The Multispecies Salon*, ed. Eben Kirksey.

<sup>136</sup> Caitlin Berrigan, "The Life Cycle of a Common Weed," *WSQ* Vol. 40, No 1&2., p. 101.

<sup>137</sup> Caitlin Berrigan, "The Life Cycle of a Common Weed," *WSQ* Vol. 40, No 1&2., p. 101.

<sup>138</sup> Caitlin Berrigan, "The Life Cycle of a Common Weed," *WSQ* Vol. 40, No 1&2., p. 105.

finds a vulnerable liver cell, enters it, uses it to make copies of itself, and its replicants exit the cell in search of more targets. At the micro-level that the video recreates, the miniature assaults on individual cell autonomy are made threatening. It is not only the permeation of bodily integrity that makes the virus so fearsome, but in being given its perspective we see its reconfiguration of the typical mechanisms of exchange, a re-circuited power dynamic that rejects the ethical compact of responsibility. In its appearance, or invisibility more appropriately, and its action, hepatitis C does not pay heed to the rigged system we have envisioned to instill order. Its incessant replication offends. More than this, it exposes the biases of a responsibility-reliant ethics, that absent a trajectory towards sameness, only violence can exist. What use are citizenship, rights, and the law to viral beings whose ethical mode is radical difference and not similarity? Virality, therefore, hotwires our traditional notions of power, exacting ethics not out of strength, masculinity, dominance, or coercion, but weakness, parasitism, and subservience. Without that which it relies on, the virus ceases to be. It is forever entangled.

Perhaps not so obviously (but seriously I hope it is obvious), I am *not* advocating for each and every one of us to go out and seek someone very different from ourselves, stab them, climb inside their body, replicate ourselves and move on. Viral ethics is not a proscriptive dogma that unilaterally charts a path towards the ethical. The absurdity of the example should highlight the specificity with which viral ethics intends to operate. Legal scholar Martha Nussbaum asks, “What is each person able to do and to be?”<sup>139</sup> Her work includes lovely descriptions of the physical realities of being a person, of having a body “soft and porous, receptive of fluid and sticky, womanlike in its oozy sliminess.” She believes that dread of these phenomena creates a threat to civic life. “What I am calling for,” she writes, is

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<sup>139</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach*, Harvard University Press, 2011, p. 18.

“a society of citizens who admit that they are needy and vulnerable.”<sup>140</sup> I think that is a good starting point. Beyond figuring capacity solely in its relation to the self, we need to apprehend it in all its knotty, messy, tangledness. Who we are is defined largely by what we have access to, in terms of genetics, wealth, and otherwise.

Capacity is also constantly figured in its relation to the law, in particular, to the social contract of citizenship. Philosopher John Rawls envisioned the autonomous subject as that which can be responsible and to which we should be responsible. Martha Nussbaum describes his position as one “in which rational people get together for mutual advantage, deciding to leave the state of nature and to govern themselves by law.”<sup>141</sup> This of course presumes an egalitarian “state of nature” in which everyone’s ability to contribute, their capacity to do so, is equal. Such an imagined world is ignorant to “consideration[s] of physical asymmetry between men and woman, let alone between the disabled and the able-bodied, or between humans and nonhumans.”<sup>142</sup> Sunaura Taylor once again presents an alternative perspective, valuing “not self-sufficiency but self-determination, not independence but interdependence, not functional separateness but personal connection.”<sup>143</sup> I believe we should heed Taylor’s suggestions in seeking out an ethical relation to life, perpetually fine-tuning our encounters with the world.

## **Cruel Optimism**

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<sup>140</sup> Rachel Aviv, “The Philosopher of Feelings,” *The New Yorker*, July 25, 2016.

<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/07/25/martha-nussbaums-moral-philosophies>

<sup>141</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership*, Harvard University Press, 2006. p. 3.

<sup>142</sup> Sunaura Taylor, “Beasts of Burden: Disability Studies and Animal Rights,” *Qui Parle*, Vol 19. No 2, p. 198.

<sup>143</sup> Sunaura Taylor, “Beasts of Burden: Disability Studies and Animal Rights,” *Qui Parle*, Vol 19. No 2, p. 197.

Ludwig Wittgenstein writes, “To imagine a language means to imagine a form of life.”<sup>144</sup> The sociability of language (and thus of life) in Wittgenstein indicates to him a radical anti-essentialism inherent to being in the world. Above all Wittgenstein’s life/language is *contextual*, and in this, embodiment (either in the linguistic or “lived” sense) in all its forms is sensory. He asks, “What gives us *so much as the idea* that living beings, things, can feel?”<sup>145</sup> Wittgenstein posits that feeling emerges out of a mutual capacity for suffering, an ability to empathize precisely because of our behavioral similarity to one another. He stops short of extending this outside the realm of human-being, however, stating, “only of a living human being and what resembles (behaves like) a living human being can one say: it has sensations; it sees; is blind; hears; is deaf; is conscious or unconscious.”<sup>146</sup> To illustrate this, he alternatively provides an example of a stone. He says, “Look at a stone and imagine it having sensations... How could one so much as get the idea of ascribing a *sensation* to a *thing*?”<sup>147</sup> It is both from the human vantage, an inability to realistically imagine a stone feeling anything, and the stone’s, its inability to *have* the capacity for feeling, from which Wittgenstein’s humanism emanates. Wittgenstein’s famous remark, therefore, “If a lion could talk we could not understand him,” is an extension of this line of reasoning. First, to Wittgenstein, lions and stones do not talk. They are merely things that we may or may not project complex ideas onto. Second, even if by some mystical means they could talk we would not have access to the meaning behind what they are saying.<sup>148</sup> The question of capacity for Wittgenstein is one of strict species boundaries. Might we instead imagine contextual, shared sensations across

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<sup>144</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Basil Blackwell, 1958, p. 8.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>146</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Basil Blackwell, 1958, p. 97.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>148</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Basil Blackwell, 1958, p. 223.



the varied spectrum of life? If we cannot understand what the lion is saying, can we intuit what it is feeling?

It is also telling that in a time when those traditionally denied political agency are gaining traction, speculative realism has also emerged in an effort to purge the world of its ghastly obsession with subjectivity. If essences are extant, but withdrawn we can forever speculate on them, absent a politics or an ethics. Being loses its meaning without these things. It is boasting and vacuous, quantified yet devoid of substance. If OOO asks what makes bodies/minds more unique than objects, one site of pushback comes from a long lineage of those made object. As Judith Halberstam notes,

If women and racialized bodies have all too often been rendered as “things” in the marketplace of commodity capitalism, and if a lot of the work on Object Oriented Philosophy leaves the status of the human unmarked even when rejecting it in favor of the object and relations between objects then surely we need a queer and or feminist OO philosophy in order to address the politics of the object.<sup>149</sup>

If as Eve Sedgwick argues, via Silvan Tomkins, “any affect may have any object,” those affects/objects we have privileged are the result of an at times purposeful systemic compartmentalization. The speculations OOO, geneticists, and humanist ethicists have made/are continuing to make, emanate from a yearning to demarcate the future on their own terms, to either revel in the ethical void of nihilism, or hermetically seal humanity off from the rest of the living world. I reject both. The answer cannot be to abandon speculation. As Sedgwick says, “Freedom, play, affordance, meaning itself derive from the wealth of mutually nontransparent possibilities for being wrong about an object—and, implicatively, about oneself.”<sup>150</sup> Speculation is a necessity of a just ethics, it cannot exist

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<sup>149</sup> Judith Halberstam, “Re: [-empyre-] Meillassoux / Harman,” June 14, 2012. <http://www.mail-archive.com/empyre@lists.cofa.unsw.edu.au/msg04261.html>

<sup>150</sup> Eve Sedgwick, “Shame in the Cybernetic Fold” 14.

without the possibility of error. Viral ethics attempts Sedgwick's clarion call for "a political vision of difference that might resist both binary homogenization and infinitizing trivialization."<sup>151</sup>

What, then, is the stranglehold that ideals of independence and equality have on our capacity-laden systems of ethics? Lauren Berlant contends, "Cruel optimism names a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility. [It] is the condition of maintaining an attachment to a problematic object *in advance* of its loss."<sup>152</sup> Furthermore, it "contributes to the attrition of the very thriving that is supposed to be made possible in the work of attachment in the first place"<sup>153</sup> Cruel optimism, therefore, represents a cluster of promises alongside a thing, both the attraction of its normativity, banality, and habituation and the costs therein. This is the connection to debt unrealized, a loss of the human announced in its very arrival. It is, therefore, not only death that troubles the normative boundaries of humanity, or which plagues the neat lines of cognition, sociability, and intelligence, but life. While death constitutes a return to sameness, a deindividualization that strips humanity of all that supposedly makes it remarkable, the cruel latency of life is the threat of its interdependent banality. To be dependent is to possibly cede some personal autonomy, the threat of being made unexceptional.

And yet, being unexceptional does not mean abandoning that which is unique or vibrant. It means espousing and embracing anti-hierarchical difference. Out of this we must seek an ethics not of capacity, but of potential. While capacity houses what is possible in this very moment, potential illuminates a constellation of possibilities unbound by species boundary or linear time. Potential is what the speculative draws its possibilities from. It

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<sup>151</sup> Eve Sedgwick, "Shame in the Cybernetic Fold" 15.

<sup>152</sup> Laurent Berlant, "Cruel Optimism" *Differences* Vol. 17, No. 5., 21.

<sup>153</sup> Laurent Berlant, "Cruel Optimism" *Differences* Vol. 17, No. 5., 21.

(speculation) is not an infinite outlay of things that could happen, but the contextual ethics out of which an assemblage of things (ecology) can accomplish a mutual good. The virus demonstrates this rather well. It is always hopelessly entangled in another, without its connections it ceases to exist. We are also the same, even if we don't readily acknowledge it. While the virus seeks out radical difference, the viral trends toward sameness, each, however, is temporally fleeting. This model of ethics is an assumption of a constantly mutating, yet synthesized relation of things, a phenomenology sutured to Spinozan/Deleuzian joy or harmony. It is crucial to not take each as total being, but like Guaico Culex let those ethical parts possess us and abandon the rest.

## *Chapter 2*

### **Eating the Other: Enjoyment, Parasitism, and Topography**

Queer orientations are those that put within reach bodies that have been made unreachable by the lines of conventional genealogy.

—Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*

He wants to be hungry all the time: he chooses to be starved, to be longing, rather than belonging.

—Lauren Berlant, “Starved,” in *After Sex: On Writing Since Queer Theory*

Hunger, a poet once said, is the most important thing we know, the first lesson we learn. But hunger can be easily quieted down, easily satiated. There is another force, a different type of hunger, an unquenchable thirst that cannot be extinguished. Its very existence is what defines us, what makes us human. That force is love.

—Abraham Setrakian | *The Strain*

You don’t need a stomach to eat. Though this is a chapter entitled, “Eating the Other,” it doesn’t really address food, at least not in any straightforward sense. Often, non-academic texts relating to animal ethics (and to a lesser extent the discipline of animal studies) have centralized the direct consumption of animal products by humans as the central violence to be attacked.<sup>154</sup> Instead, I refer in this chapter, to a multidirectional conception of “eating,” in which humans, animals, and viruses, consume one another. For me, eating is a way to access a much more intriguing concept, consumption. Who consumes who, or rather, who consumes what? What precisely is consumption? One of the more prevalent explanations comes from Marxist thought, the being-made-product through transaction under capital. Another is psychoanalytic, the incorporation of a thing (either material or abstract) as a symbol in relation to loss. In each case, however, material and psychoanalytic, consumption is a one-way process. It flows from an object through the field

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<sup>154</sup> Which is of course *part* of the problem. A long list of texts that I will get to at some point, but, Foer’s *Eating Animals* will serve as a placeholder until I actually get to this.

of the human. With these dominant methodologies in mind, this study diverges from their rigid fixation with the human and instead offers an alternative perspective on consumption that is neither strictly Marxian nor Freudian. Instead, I look to Deleuze and Guattari, Karen Barad, and Sara Ahmed and their collectively de-individualized and non-anthropocentric approaches to consumption, or as I will mainly refer to it in this text, the topographical. For the purposes of this study, topography is the arrangement of features across a given territory. When eating is topological and topographical the boundaries between inside and outside are themselves made relevant as both constructed and constantly changing boundaries and productive ideals with profound ethical implications.

In thinking this way, I hope to elucidate the topographical implications of human imposed classification, especially how normative being is run-through with particular notions of interiority/exteriority, as well as any subsequent implications for any ethics beyond the human. Media theorist Jussi Parikka has said, “Whilst the body and the subject have had a fair amount of analysis in relation to post-Fordist capitalism, we also need thorough analyses of the nature of the object in distributed networks. The viral object is one that is found across various fields, from mathematics to biology, and on to technological platforms and conceptual analysis.”<sup>155</sup> The virus perforates, incorporates, transmutes, and realigns the limits of the normative self. Its entangled existence evidences not only the instability of ontological boundaries, but provides a hermeneutic blueprint for an ethics. This chapter will mobilize the viral not just in its relation to the human, but as an object with numerous entanglements.<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> Jussi Parikka, “Contagion and Repetition: On the Viral Logic of Network Culture” *Ephemera*, 290.

<sup>156</sup> Though Parikka’s analysis centralizes the virus in a dense field of ‘post-Fordist capitalism,’ this chapter is not limited to a critique of neoliberal consumption ‘metaphorized’ in the virus, but instead aims to engage with the virus in numerous ways in order to put forth a speculative and entangled ethics.

“How Ebola Emerged Out of the Jungle” is an *ABC News* article from July 2014, though its contents aren’t unlike coverage of previous viral outbreaks.<sup>157</sup> The article cites the consumption of fruit bats and other “bush meats” as the likely source of transmission between animals and humans, in line with the CDC’s “Transmission” factsheet.<sup>158</sup> Around the same time a *Washington Post* article also cited Ebola (manifest through the consumption of meat) as a means of connection, a conduit between animal and human. The article states,

...as it has been during past Ebola outbreaks, bush meat is once again suspected to have been the bridge that caused the deadly disease to go from the animal world to the human one. All it takes is a single transmission event from animal to human — handling an uncooked bat with the virus, for example — to create an epidemic.<sup>159</sup>

Melissa White argues, “Viruses, especially those that move across species boundaries,

insistently reveal the fundamental interdependency and vulnerability of all lives and thus

illuminate the very conditions upon which (affective) politics unfold today.”<sup>160</sup> The

vulnerability of cross species contamination, via the virus, therefore, represents both a

fissure in the stability of human as distinct from animal and the possibility for species

catastrophe in the event of such a breakdown in the form of the viral epidemic. This was the

fear that was “actualized” during the last major world health crises, H1N1, or “swine flu”

and Influenza A virus subtype H5N1 commonly referred to as “bird flu.” Richard Preston’s

novel *The Hot Zone* presents a similar viral menace. He writes,

The Marburg virus was a traveler: it could jump species; it could break through the lines that separate one species from another, and when it jumped into another species, it had a potential to devastate the species. It did not know boundaries. It did

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<sup>157</sup> Only two and a half years ago at this point, these articles seem positively antiquated when confronting the latest ‘threats’ to contemporary life. (Jan 2, 2017)

<sup>158</sup> Meghan Keneally, “How Ebola Emerged Out of the Jungle” Jul 28, 2014  
<http://abcnews.go.com/Health/ebola-emerged-jungle-photos/story?id=24740453>

“Transmission”. CDC. 17 October 2014. Retrieved 13 November 2014.

<sup>159</sup><http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/08/05/why-west-africans-keep-hunting-and-eating-bush-meat-despite-ebola-concerns/>

<sup>160</sup>Melissa Autumn White” Viral/Species/Crossing: Border Panics and Zoonotic Vulnerabilities”  
*WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly*, Volume 40, Numbers 1 & 2, Spring/Summer 2012, pp. 117-137 (Article)

not know what humans are; or perhaps it knew only too well what humans are: it knew that humans are meat.<sup>161</sup> For each of these diseases it is the virus' ability to mutate and move freely between humans and animals that identifies them as significant risks. But, in addition to the interspecies mobility of the virus are its effects on the human body, which elicit a voracious anxiety.<sup>162</sup> Stephen Dougherty contends,

...more radically, the virally infected body attests to its susceptibility to total collapse into an "outside" that no longer functions to demarcate the condition of possibility for the "inside." The killer virus genre thus presents a world where the boundary between the human as a biological entity and what lies outside it is profoundly unstable, so that man as a subject threatens to fall back into the object world- and more specifically, as we shall see, the animal world-that surrounds him.<sup>163</sup> The threat that Dougherty recognizes in the works of Preston and others in the killer virus genre is the reduction of man to objecthood, to meat. In this way, it is the virus itself that is the agent of destruction, a medium with the capacity to undermine bodily integrity. It is not only the deleterious effects on human totality that the virus makes so troubling, but a reversal of the process of consumption as well. Viruses eat human beings in a way that only humans are supposed to be capable.<sup>164</sup> In doing so, the virus not only poses the threat of death, but the more heinous reduction of "human" to thingness.

Also in 2014, another virus was sweeping across the U.S., though to much less media coverage than Ebola received. PEDv, or Porcine Epidemic Diarrhea virus killed more than 7 million piglets between April 2013 and June 2014 and rapidly spread across U.S. hog

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<sup>161</sup> Richard Preston, *The Hot Zone*, 139.

<sup>162</sup> Being made meat, somewhat ironically, seems to elicit some anxiety amongst folks.

<sup>163</sup> Stephen Dougherty, "The Biopolitics of the Killer Virus Novel," *Cultural Critique*, No. 48 (Spring, 2001),

<sup>164</sup> I'm thinking here about cannibalism (lol) and its status as taboo to Freud. Its 'prohibition' coincides with the concomitant distance of 'civilization' that Freud is so keen to evidence. That instead of not eating the body of another human as an act of reverence for the communal human body, under psychoanalysis it becomes a 'loss' of an animalistic past that needs to be overcome, making it seem a widespread practice amongst humans and animals, when in reality it is both rare and/or a last resort.

farms.<sup>165</sup> The disease, which has remained confined to pig populations and not humans, has been talked about namely in economic terms, with quips like “If you’re bringing home the bacon, you may have noticed a price tag inching upward.”<sup>166</sup> Disregarding the immense loss of life, effectively chalked up as a burden on the U.S. consumer, the PEDv outbreak exists in the article only as a possible danger to human enjoyment, not selfhood. For this reason, PEDv has been wielded by these media sources more as an economic problem than an existential one. In stark contrast to Ebola, the impossibility (at this time) of its spread to humans also makes PEDv no threat to human exceptionality. In fact, the language of the article reinforces the always already object-status of pork.<sup>167</sup> It ends in saying, “economists predict that farmers will reduce the size of their herds this year to minimize costs should PEDv infect their operations. Consumers can also expect pork prices, which now average almost \$4 a pound, to continue to rise during the second half of 2014.”<sup>168</sup> This process of making animal into object dovetails with what Nicole Shukin refers to as rendering. She says rendering “signifies both the mimetic act of making a copy, that is, reproducing or interpreting an object...*and* the industrial boiling down and recycling of animal remains.”<sup>169</sup> PEDv, following Shukin’s logic, is the consequence of such renderings, in which a

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<sup>165</sup> “As Pig Virus Spreads, The Price Of Pork Continues To Rise,” Abbie Swanson, June 27, 2014. <http://www.npr.org/blogs/thesalt/2014/06/27/325529915/as-pig-virus-spreads-the-price-of-pork-continues-to-rise>

<sup>166</sup> “As Pig Virus Spreads, The Price Of Pork Continues To Rise,” Abbie Swanson, June 27, 2014. <http://www.npr.org/blogs/thesalt/2014/06/27/325529915/as-pig-virus-spreads-the-price-of-pork-continues-to-rise>

<sup>167</sup> The use of the terms: pork, beef, veal, etc. are already a dissociation of animal from life, a pig is a creature that thinks, and acts, (and contrary to what most people think) feels, pork is simply an always been dead slab of meat, an object to be consumed for human pleasure.

<sup>168</sup> Pork, the already object, is *affected* only in its commodity value. This foreclosure of history, the erasure of pig as being, is one mode of trauma worth investigating.

“As Pig Virus Spreads, The Price Of Pork Continues To Rise,” Abbie Swanson, June 27, 2014. <http://www.npr.org/blogs/thesalt/2014/06/27/325529915/as-pig-virus-spreads-the-price-of-pork-continues-to-rise>

<sup>169</sup> Nicole Shukin, *Animal Capital: Rendering Life in Biopolitical Times*, 20.



population is excessively bred, enclosed, and fed to itself, leading to a viral epidemic, yet reproduced as a problem of object relations, not of life. As Shukin says, “the double sense of *rendering*...provides an apt rubric for beginning to more concretely historicize animal capital’s modes of production.”<sup>170</sup>

I begin this chapter with these two stories of viral outbreak, one affecting piglets in U.S. factory farms and the other a transnational “threat” to humans, both as a means to think critically about real world human-animal-viral interaction in multiple ways and to mobilize the viral as an ethical hermeneutic. While African peoples are chastised for eating bush meats, (and “spreading” the disease overseas) there exists no similar level of mainstream media outrage against U.S. meat, dairy, and egg industries.<sup>171</sup> This is a logic that extends to fictional accounts of viral infection as well, with scholar Stephen Dougherty noting, “In the phantasmagoria of the killer virus novel, saving the human from the code will ultimately demand the recuperation of an all-too-serviceable colonial-racist logic: the white West affirms its humanity by denying the full humanity of the nonwhites who most viscerally embody the threat of viral contagion.”<sup>172</sup> Though the viral is often coopted by colonialist logic, it does not only exist as metaphor. As an economic and psychoanalytic phenomenon, the virus is made threatening on both fronts, a subaltern bogeyman that invigorates the humanizing projects of each field. It is important, then, to think about the virus not as a

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<sup>170</sup> Nicole Shukin, *Animal Capital: Rendering Life in Biopolitical Times*, 20.

<sup>171</sup> Sarah Kliff and Julia Belluz, “What we know about the first Ebola patient diagnosed in the US” October 8, 2014 <http://www.vox.com/2014/9/30/6875365/ebola-in-the-us>

Just look at the contrast between Ebola prevention <http://www.cdc.gov/vhf/ebola/pdf/bushmeat-and-ebola.pdf> and salmonella prevention (which kills 380 people per year) <http://www.cdc.gov/salmonella/general/prevention.html>

<sup>172</sup> Stephen Dougherty, “The Biopolitics of the Killer Virus Novel,” *Cultural Critique*, No. 48 (Spring, 2001), 5.

discrete or objective identity, but as multiplicitous assemblage, as medium, message, and being, always in re/formulation.

This chapter, therefore, is a *topographical* one. It is concerned not so much with straightforward measurements or statistics about viral epidemiology, nor with a geometrical analysis aligning human and animal, making them “equal,” but instead with exploring the viral limn, the medial justice that a viral perspective makes possible. As Jussi Parikka has said, “contagions were not just diseases in the ordinary sense of the word but exhibited key traits of a cultural logic deterritorialized far beyond biological bodies.” Seemingly, then, it would be wise to heed Tom Conley, who in his introduction to Gilles Deleuze’s work *The Fold* states, “If organic life cannot be easily demarcated from inorganic matter, it behooves the subject to look at all matter from a different angle.”<sup>173</sup> To me, nowhere is that border between life and non-life fuzzier than in that which is viral. What better place to look than from a viral perspective?

Thus, as I progress further into the chapter several things should become evident (though they may not necessarily be explicitly outlined): first, the consumption (meant in multiple ways) of *life* is central to creating a divide between human and animal (and therefore perpetuating violence on an immense scale), second, the association of non-Western peoples with animals has historically (and contemporarily) been used to racialize and hierarchicalize *intra-human relations* (an important thing to keep in mind, yet not the central thrust of this chapter), and third, crucial to understanding both of these processes is a multimodal conception of virality in both its zoologic and medial senses. Moreover, it is the

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<sup>173</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold*, (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1993), xiv

entanglement of consumption and enjoyment (in the Levinasian sense) that proves germane to both how the divide between human and everything else is generated, and the means to exploding that dominant framework. As a work that explicitly seeks out a “viral ethics,” this chapter in particular will locate the historical, medial, material, and metaphorical importance of the virus in its relation to consumption and alterity.

I feel it important here to further clarify what exactly I mean when I use the word consumption. The answer is (of course) manifold. Through the figure of the virus I will be discussing: the importance of what bodies (human, animal, literary, viral etc.) consume and the role/problematics of Levinasian enjoyment, the relation of consumption to contemporary machinations of capital, a recalibration of the problematic approach of psychoanalysis to encryption and loss, and the entangled capture of contemporary media. Each “eating” is never wholly independent, however, and overlap between the different modes of consumption is crucial to my mobilization of it. What is vital to this chapter, however, is the connection between consumption, territory, and ethics.

### **Aesthetics & Enjoyment**

Levinas says in *Totality and Infinity*, “Enjoyment is not a psychological state among others, the affective tonality of empiricist psychology, but the very pulsation of the I.”<sup>174</sup> Selfhood, however, is not an *a priori* fact, but preceded in Levinas’s figuration, by a relation to the other. As Levinas asserts, “One becomes a subject of being not by assuming being but in enjoying happiness, by the interiorization of enjoyment which is also an exaltation, an ‘above being.’”<sup>175</sup> This makes possible Levinas’s ethics as first philosophy, not an ethics

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<sup>174</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 113.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

emanating from being, but the very thing that both supersedes and makes being possible. In elaborating further on enjoyment Levinas states that “nourishment, as a means of invigoration, is the transmutation of the other into the same, which is the essence of enjoyment; an energy that is other, recognized as other, recognized...as sustaining the very act that is directed upon it becomes, in enjoyment, my own energy, my strength, me. All enjoyment is in this sense alimentation.”<sup>176</sup> To Levinas, to enjoy is to consume the other (not the absolute other worthy of ethical responsibility) and in doing so constitute it as a part of my self. This is (to Levinas) a kind of responsible destruction, with no call of the other to be heeded. Levinas says,

In enjoyment I am absolutely for myself. Egoist without reference to the Other, I am alone without solitude, innocently egoist and alone. Not against the Others, not ‘as for me...’—but entirely deaf to the Other, outside of all communication and all refusal to communicate—without ears, like a hungry stomach<sup>177</sup>

To enjoy, in the Levinasian sense, is to erase all other sensoria outside of the stomach, to enjoy is to *be* a stomach. Levinasian ethics, then, is as much of the stomach as it is of the face.

To Levinas, enjoyment is quite similar to a simplistic notion of parasitism that the virus is often charged with. Just look at this monologue from *The Matrix*, in which Agent Smith, a cybernetic being, berates his captive Morpheus,

I'd like to share a revelation that I've had during my time here. It came to me when I tried to classify your species and I realized that you're not actually mammals. Every mammal on this planet instinctively develops a natural equilibrium with the surrounding environment but you humans do not. You move to an area and you multiply and multiply until every natural resource is consumed and the only way you can survive is to spread to another area. There is another organism on this planet that follows the same pattern. Do you know what it is? A virus. Human beings are a disease, a cancer of this planet. You're a plague and we are the cure.<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, translated by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 111.

<sup>177</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 134.

<sup>178</sup> *The Matrix*, (1999)

The accusation of parasitism is ironic in the film, given the harnessing of human life by the AI as fuel, but this precisely gets at the paradox of ‘the parasite’ in its colloquial understanding. As Steven Brown writes, “human relations form a parasitic chain which interrupts or parasitizes other kinds of relations...as in animal husbandry or agriculture; but then those relations are in turn disrupted by the arrival of the ‘third,’ the ‘uninvited guest’ or ‘new arrival’ who...‘engineers a kind of difference by intercepting relations.’”<sup>179</sup> Brown is alerting us, not so much to the qualitative biases of what we term the parasite, but the *systemic* qualities of parasitism. He continues, “The ‘third man’ is the space that is automatically required to make communication possible – ‘a third exists before the other ... I have to go through the middle before reaching the end. There is always a mediate, a middle, and an intermediary’”<sup>180</sup> The third is that which makes any communication possible.<sup>181</sup> The parasite, as we will see, is not an identity, it is not the guest that successfully leeches off of the host, but the relation itself, the medium. In much the same manner, this dissertation examines the relation of the virus to the *viral*.

Ethical responsibility enters into the equation when that being of/as enjoyment (which is always a human person) encounters that which it cannot *consume*, the face. Levinas says, “To manifest oneself as a face is to impose oneself above and beyond the manifested and purely phenomenal form, to present oneself in a mode irreducible to manifestation, the very straightforwardness of the face to face, without the intermediary of any image, in one's

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<sup>179</sup> Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, xv.

<sup>180</sup> Steven Brown, “In praise of the parasite: the dark organizational theory of Michel Serres” *INFORMÁTICA NA EDUCAÇÃO: teoria & prática*, Porto Alegre, v. 16, n. 1, jan./jul. 2013, 87.

<sup>181</sup> Both Deleuze and Levinas also discuss the importance of the third, for Levinas it is the neighbor (as stand in for an extrapolation of the face-to-face ethical relation to a wider scale, and emblematic of a necessary transcendence in Levinasian ethics) for Deleuze...

nudity, that is, in one's destitution and hunger.”<sup>182</sup> The face wields the very inequality of the relation between self and Other, commanding responsibility to itself, through itself. So the ethical relation for Levinas is always a face-to-face one, inured through a closeness of subject and other, their shared humanity. This is a humanity that *hungers*.<sup>183</sup> He says, “the proximity of the Other is not simply close to me in space, or close like a parent, but he approaches me essentially insofar as I feel myself—insofar as I am—responsible for him.”<sup>184</sup> To Levinas the necessity of response/responsibility is a burden placed on the self by the other; a hostage taking predicated entirely on a shared classification, a hungry stomach and a face. It is as much the emphasis that Levinas places on responsibility, then, that I take umbrage with, as well as the narrow parameters he outlines in defining it and limited terrain on which he decides to mobilize it. To constrain responsibility, and by extension any kind of Levinasian ethics to the face is to do an incredible violence to that which is faceless.<sup>185</sup>

We can see (pictured below) in the sculpture work of Brooklyn based artist Kate Clark an extension of the problematic elements of a Levinasian ethics. In the piece, *Untitled (Black bear)*, Clark has taken actual animal hides, taxidermied, and replaced the actual animal faces with human-like ones. In her artist statement Clark says, “When encountering my sculptures, the viewer is faced with a lifelike fusion of human and animal that investigates which characteristics separate us within the animal kingdom, and more importantly, which

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<sup>182</sup> What is more difficult to tackle in Levinas is the presence of the third party. If a Levinasian ethics is reliant on a relationship between subject and other (a dyad I would obviously oppose), then any ethics beyond two people requires the presence of an ‘other-other’ watching the subject face-to-face with the other. This is one critique that Žižek has of Levinasian ethics and its approach to justice, law, politics. Slavoj Žižek, “Smashing the Neighbor’s Face,” <http://www.lacan.com/zizsmash.htm#1x> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 200.

<sup>183</sup> Once again the importance of the stomach to Levinas.

<sup>184</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, translated by Richard Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 97.

<sup>185</sup> Not to mention that which is stomachless!

unite us.”<sup>186</sup> She continues, “The viewer has an intimate relationship with the face and then identifies with the animal, acknowledging the animalistic inheritance within the human condition.”<sup>187</sup> Clark endeavors to humanize her animal subjects, to chart a trajectory from animal to human; a hybrid linkage that collapses both space and time. In doing so, however, Clark accentuates the face as that which distinguishes the human (very much in line with Levinas) and ironically further divides human from animal in her fusion of them. Clark’s intimation of the viewer’s intimacy with her sculptures is predicated on a violent amalgamation of *actual* animal skins with artificially constructed human faces. But what is the most interesting to me about Clark’s work (as well as the most horrifying) is her performance of an erasure endemic to Levinasian ethics. In order to mount the human face on the animal bodies, Clark (or whichever taxidermist she works with) must actually remove the face of the animal, a literal reenactment of the symbolic violence inherent to the separation of human from animal.



Figure 3: Kate Clark, *Untitled (Black bear)*, bear hide, foam, clay, pins, thread, rubber eyes, 27 x 42 x 16 inches, 2008, <http://www.kateclark.com/sculpture1.html>

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<sup>186</sup> Kate Clark, “Artist Statement,” <http://www.kateclark.com/artiststatement.html>

<sup>187</sup> Kate Clark, “Artist Statement,” <http://www.kateclark.com/artiststatement.html>



Figure 4: *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1978)



Figure 5: *The Thing* (1982)

More than this, these are figures that are meant by Clark to be enjoyed, with her adding that her sculptures “are not monstrous, they are approachable, natural, calm, innocent, dignified.”<sup>188</sup> This is in stark contrast to the intent of images such as those from *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* and *The Thing*, in which the placement of a human face on an alien/animal body is meant to invoke horror rather than affinity. What’s more, is the consumption of these images by a viewing public, whereby the violence of irresponsibility to the animal is effaced en masse. In returning to the language of Levinas, in particular to the nudity and hunger of the face, Clark’s sculptures demonstrate just how integral consumption is to such an ethics. If Clark’s work constitutes a full-scale erasure of the animal from the ethical realm via Levinas, we might seek out an alternative; something akin to Deleuze’s object of fundamental encounter, “an object that forces us to think; something that challenges our habitual being in the world.”<sup>189</sup> Such a thing would be cognizant of the perpetual consumptive traumas discursively reenacted in support of the human/non-human divide, but would offer another perspective. Such a thing would be viral.

<sup>188</sup> Clark’s figures (as well as the others shown) are reminiscent of those classical/fantasy creatures that amalgamate humans and various animals to aggregate their “inherent” traits into one body/entity. I haven’t yet decided whether it is worth exploring given the focus of this dissertation on virality and not human/animal hybridity. Kate Clark, “Artist Statement,” <http://www.kateclark.com/artiststatement.html>

<sup>189</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1994) “What is Philosophy?” New York, Colombia University Press., 139.





Figure 6: Francis Bacon, Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion, c.1944



Figure 7: Francis Bacon, Three Studies for a Crucifixion, March 1962, Oil with sand on canvas, three panels, 78 x 57", Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

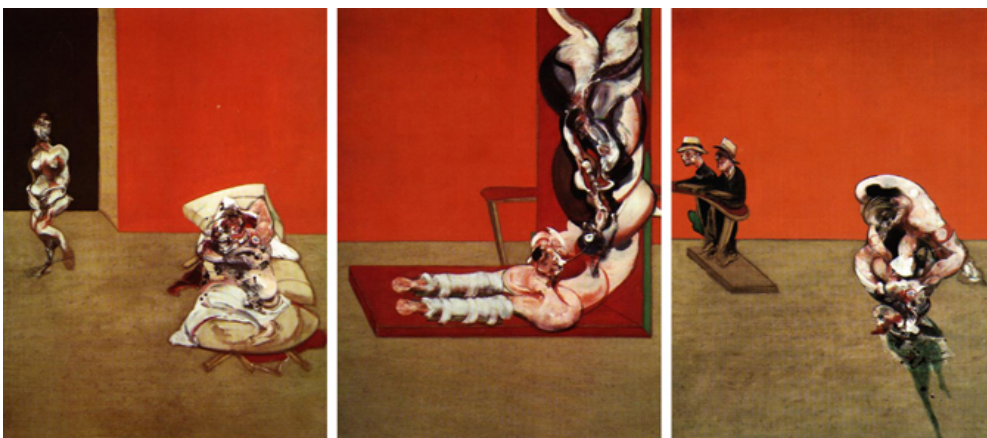


Figure 8: Francis Bacon, Crucifixion, 1965, Oil on canvas, each panel 197.2 x 147 cm, Staatsgalerie Moderner Kunst, Munich.

The 20<sup>th</sup> Century artist Francis Bacon, I believe, offers a viral alternative to the faciality of Clark and Levinas. In particular, Bacon's series of "Crucifixion" triptychs

demonstrate a violent facelessness indicative of a series of indiscernibilities of being. As

Gilles Deleuze notes,

Bacon is a painter of heads, not faces, and there is a great difference between the two. For the face is a structured, spatial organization that conceals the head, whereas the head is dependent upon the body, even if it is the point of the body, its culmination. It is not that the head lacks spirit; but it is a spirit in bodily form, a corporeal and vital breath, an animal spirit. It is the animal spirit of man: a pig-spirit, a buffalo-spirit, a dog-spirit, a bat-spirit .... Bacon thus pursues a very peculiar project as a portrait painter: *to dismantle the face*.

Bacon's work, therefore, de-humanizes the subjects of his portraiture. The ethical

implication of which is to deny the face its power as either portrait archetype or as inaugural

role in the delineation of Levinasian ethical responsibility. The facelessness of Bacon's

portraits, however, does not indicate lifelessness, but rather accentuates their fleshy vitality.

If the crucifixion of Christ is the teleological culmination of the human fall from grace,

Bacon's crucifixions are a resurrection of a visceral, embodied life, the everyday violences of

being. Bacon's figures live because they are meat. It is these tensions and violences

immanent to and between life/death, spirit/body, and human/animal his work so candidly

explores.



*Figure 9:* Francis Bacon, *Figure with Meat*, 1954, Oil on canvas, 129.9 x 121.9 cm. Art Institute of Chicago

It is tempting to view the crucifixion triptychs as hybrid figures, an intersectional meeting place of subjectivities. To do so, however, would be to reify each identity and ideology as static, stable, and independent, rather than what Deleuze would call their indiscernibility. Bacon's figures are not hybrids because they are never solidly situated. Bacon's "Figure with Meat" is a perfect example of this. A cleaved and disemboweled cow carcass hangs as morose angel wings behind an ethereal suited figure. The blurred technique of each element of the painting: the face that isn't quite a face, the carcass that recedes to nothingness, the dark slaughterhouse-like background, is a recognition of a fundamental incompleteness to being, not out of lack, but perpetual transience. The horrors of being are not only in states of exception, as Agamben might argue about that intersectional place

where geography and ontology collide in the *homo sacer*. But neither is becoming solely a placeholder for immanent suffering. Instead, the fuzzy amalgams we construct are mechanisms of potential, for both creative explorations of the good, as well as suffering. As Deleuze argues of Bacon's work, "the man who suffers is a beast, the beast that suffers is a man. This is the reality of becoming."<sup>190</sup> If the dark background to Bacon's "Figure with Meat" is meant to evoke a slaughterhouse, then it does so to cite the most basic attribute of life, *potential*. In this, the slaughterhouse is a place of death, for both human and animal, but what is death if not merely a possibility immanent to life? Moreover, Bacon's slaughterhouse is also a space that showcases the messiness of those boundaries we hold most sacred. Between life and death and between human and animal is never a clear line of demarcation, but an indistinct aesthetic that is both beautiful and horrific.

Bacon explores more than just his figures indiscernibility, however. These are entities that are not just ethereal, but often turned completely inside out. *Figures 4, 5 and 6* contain bodies that are both amalgam and dissection. In part, Bacon's opened bodies are, as previously mentioned, an indication of their vitality, a means to oppose the life force potential of meat against that which can't be seen, the soul. Several of Bacon's figures are not just opened up, they are completely inverted. Bacon's inversions, then, enact one of the core principles of viral ethics, a willingness to collapse interiority and exteriority. If perforation, contamination, and infection are anathema to the normative body, the viral body embraces the introduction of radical difference. Its willingness for affinity across lines of demarcation signals a form of enjoyment that emerges not from a hierarchical above-ness, like Levinas, but through partial sacrifice of that which is supposed to be most dear, the individuated self.

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<sup>190</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, Continuum 2003, 25





Figure 10: Keith Haring, “Ignorance = Fear, Silence =Death”, 1989.

Artist Keith Haring alternatively echoes the viral relation to configurations of interiority/exteriority in Bacon’s work. In 1989, Haring, using the language and symbolism of New York based AIDS activist group ACT UP, created his work “Ignorance = Fear, Silence =Death” for the organization.<sup>191</sup> The image, depicting three anthropomorphic bodies enacting ‘see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil’ was one of several that targeted the lack of response to the epidemic by both the local New York government and the Reagan/Bush administrations. Haring, who had been diagnosed with HIV in 1988, has each of his figures emblazoned with X’s over their midsections. While Haring’s figures are certainly human-like, they have no faces (most figures throughout Haring’s work do not). Beyond a kind of faceless ethics that Haring is depicting, however, it is the resistant virality of ACT UP that I am most interested in exploring.<sup>192</sup> Not only does Haring’s work reconceptualize a

<sup>191</sup> This chapter’s primary discussion concerns the connection between virality and consumption/eating. Chapter 3 will engage further with medicalization/biopolitics of the virus and will certainly feature a more comprehensive discussion of virality and HIV/AIDS.

<sup>192</sup> I want to emphasize here that I am not interested in obfuscating the horrific and deadly effects of the AIDS virus that continue to this day. Instead I am highlighting the ways in which ACT UP and others mobilized an

subversive take on enjoyment, it also connects virality, ethics, and debt through an embodied aesthetic.<sup>193</sup>

Importantly, ACT UP's first major action was on Wall St. in March of 1987 where activists targeted a pharmaceutical company charging exorbitant prices for their new retroviral drug.<sup>194</sup> Thus, the protest was a focal point of several subversive viral vectors: those with HIV protesting, the act of protest itself, and the unaffordable drug as object of protest. ACT UP made explicit the entanglement of economy, health, and ethics and wielded a subversive form of virality against those structures of power profiting off of its proliferation. As Julian Gill-Peterson notes, "ACT UP's activist inheritance goes beyond a politics of representation in order to counter technologies of state power, financial capitalism, and the police."<sup>195</sup> This connection between contagion and capital, quite literally demonstrated by ACT-UP in 1987, is further elucidated by Susan Sontag. Sontag says,

Early capitalism assumes the necessity of regulated spending, saving, accounting, discipline—an economy that depends on the rational limitation of desire. TB is described in images that sum up the negative behavior of nineteenth-century homo economicus: consumption; wasting; squandering of vitality. Advanced capitalism requires expansion, speculation, the creation of new needs (the problem of satisfaction and dissatisfaction); buying on credit; mobility—an economy that depends on the irrational indulgence of desire. Cancer is described in images that sum up the negative behavior of twentieth-century homo economicus: abnormal growth; repression of energy, that is, refusal to consume or spend.<sup>196</sup>

Sontag metaphorizes illness as endemic to the proliferation of capital, both in its early and late stages. She continues, in her 1989 work, *AIDS and its Metaphors*, that the "catastrophe of

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alternative kind of virality in order to combat the responselessness of: government, health care, the population writ large, to a disease ravaging queer communities. To me this is an intriguing subversion.

<sup>193</sup> One late consideration I have here is about the racial politics not only of ACT UP, but of subversive politics in general. If one aim of viral ethics is to obliterate the face of normative ethics, I believe it can succeed in not sacrificing problematics of race, gender, sexuality, etc. under the guise of posthumanity, but instead demonstrate the mechanisms of faceless ethics that aren't postracial. To renounce the superiority of the face is not to decry it as useless, but instead to deny its totalizing power.

<sup>194</sup> Julian Gill-Peterson, "Haunting the Queer Spaces of AIDS: Remembering ACT UP/New York and an Ethics for an Endemic," *GLQ*, 284.

<sup>195</sup> Julian Gill-Peterson, "Haunting the Queer Spaces of AIDS: Remembering ACT UP/New York and an Ethics for an Endemic," *GLQ*, 288.

<sup>196</sup> Susan Sontag (2002) *Illness as Metaphor and Aids and Its Metaphors*. London: Penguin, 64–65.

AIDS suggests the immediate *necessity* of limitation, of constraint for the body and for consciousness,” essentially, “watch your appetites.”<sup>197</sup>

For Sontag, then, the AIDS virus became a stand-in and platform for an entire regime of limitation politics, in terms of national economic policy, policing of morality, and computer usage.<sup>198</sup> In fact, as she notes, “The culture of consumption may actually be stimulated by the warnings to consumers of all kinds of goods and services to be more cautious, more selfish. For these anxieties will require the further replication of goods and services.”<sup>199</sup> To combat these dictums, without becoming coopted by the viral appetite of capital would be to increase consumption of those instruments that aimed to constrain, to infect the power structures themselves. If, as Sontag contends, that which does not embody the new attributes of Post-Fordist capital is cancerous, embrace your toxicity. Jussi Parikka’s work in particular is instructive here. He writes, “we can regard the viral as a specific mode of action, as a logic of contagion and repetition that can be used for questioning issues of assemblages of the object and the complex ontology of contemporary capitalist culture.”<sup>200</sup> For Parikka, unlike Sontag, the viral isn’t simply a metaphor for the workings of post-Fordist capital, but an object in and of itself, a “logic [that] can be seen to apply both to distribution of ‘goods’ (such as commercial products and consumer objects) as well as ‘bads’ (such as computer viruses, terrorists or bird flu.)”<sup>201</sup> How those objects gain moral standing, however, is through a socio-cultural delineation of humanist ethics.

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<sup>197</sup> Susan Sontag (1989) *Aids and Its Metaphors*, 78.

<sup>198</sup> Of particular interest is the incredible overlap between medicalized “safety measures” and those concerning computer safety. Several that Sontag notes, “Computer users are advised to regard each new piece of software as a ‘potential carrier’ of a virus. ‘Never put a disk in your computer without verifying its source.’ Susan Sontag (1989) *Aids and Its Metaphors*, 79.

<sup>199</sup> Susan Sontag (1989) *Aids and Its Metaphors*, 79-80.

<sup>200</sup> Jussi Parikka, “Contagion and Repetition: On the Viral Logic of Network Culture” *Ephemera*, 288.

<sup>201</sup> Jussi Parikka, “Contagion and Repetition: On the Viral Logic of Network Culture” *Ephemera*, 288.

In reconfiguring Levinas's concept of enjoyment and employing a viral alternative we can marshal anxieties over human totality in the service of the good. This is, not only to recognize the horror of being eaten, of being made the same in Levinasian parlance, but perhaps an unease about the very pleasure of eating. In this, we are presented with both the negative horrors of an unintelligibility of self, but also more mundane epistemological sites, perhaps those exposing the ways in which everyday selfhood is made manifest through the violence of consumption. One example is in the traumatic violence of eating animals, whereby, being is made food through the stomach. Absent the ethical imperative of the face, empathy is unshackled from the realm of the human, free to be established amongst all life. To limit consumption and its traumatic effects to the stomach, however, is to reinstate the very incorporative mechanisms of human exceptionalism that Levinas instills. To this, Levinas argues, "Being is exteriority: the very exercise of its being consists in exteriority, and no thought could better obey being than by allowing itself to be dominated by this exteriority. Exteriority is true not in a lateral view apperceiving it in its opposition to interiority; it is true in a face to face that is no longer entirely vision, but goes further than vision."<sup>202</sup> Levinas' face-to-face relation, however, relies on a forced perspective of exteriority that while not made opposite to interior is made apposite to it. If being only comes into being through a radical exteriority of species being dependent on such an ethics, then a new ontic topography is needed, one turned inside out.

### **Intruders**

Against the humanist architecture of Levinas, Sara Ahmed writes "The starting point for orientation is the point from which the world unfolds: the 'here' of the body, and the 'where' of its dwelling. Given this, orientations are about the intimacy of bodies and their

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<sup>202</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 290.



dwelling places.”<sup>203</sup> Ahmed’s intervention is to highlight the importance of unfolding as a contextual and embodied event. It is not only that our experiences are informed by an intersection of me and place, but rather, the means through which both the world and I come into being in any given moment is the product of a constellation of objects and ideas unfolding at once. In this, orientation is a matter of *affective* occupation, both object and ‘I’ handling one another, entangled. A viral ethics cognizant of Ahmed’s phenomenology must be precise in the questions it asks, taking into consideration: what is within reach, how/why it is within reach, and the affective baggage reach-as-access carries. Ahmed frames this in terms of whiteness. She says, “Our talk about whiteness is read as a sign of ingratitude, of failing to be grateful for the hospitality we have received by virtue of our arrival. It is this very structural position of being the guest, or the stranger, the one who receives hospitality, which keeps us in certain places, even when you move up.”<sup>204</sup> In effect, the tendrils of whiteness purposefully unfold in such a way that Ahmed is made to play the parasite. As we will see, to make someone or something parasitic is a powerful tool of humanist ethics, as it acts to both dehumanize *and* to affectively array a normative inside/outside.

Parasite arises from the Greek *parasitos*, ‘beside the grain’...“originally something positive, a fellow guest, someone sharing the food.”<sup>205</sup> The terminology of parasitism today has numerous meanings: utilized in relation to human-human interaction (as in hospitality), the medium through which information passes (*para*-to one side | *site*-location), noise or static as interruption of a message, a thermal exciter, or zoologically, as an organism that

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<sup>203</sup> Sara Ahmed, “A Phenomenology of Whiteness,” *Feminist Theory* vol 8(2) 2007, p. 151.

<sup>204</sup> Sara Ahmed, “A Phenomenology of Whiteness,” *Feminist Theory* vol 8(2) 2007, p. 164.

<sup>205</sup> *Deconstruction and Criticism*, 221. Seabury Press, New York, 1979.

takes without giving as it infects a host.<sup>206</sup> It is these manifold tensions, especially the host as both eater and eaten as limn between inside/outside that I am keen on exploring. Michel Serres also talks about this archaic meaning of parasite. He says, “to parasite means to eat next to.” To Serres, the relation between the parasite and the parasited entities is social. He states, “Gifted in some fashion, the one eating next to, soon eating at the expense of, always eats the same thing, the host...The host is not prey for he offers and continues to give...Would you say that the mother’s breast is the child’s prey? It is more or less the child’s home.”<sup>207</sup> Thus, to Serres as to Ahmed, the parasitic is a question of orientation, relation, and dwelling. More than this, parasitism is not limited to the animal world, but is a systemic tripartite relation of guest/host/parasite across species and media.<sup>208</sup> By framing parasitism as a condition of space, time, and material exchange Serres offers the parasite as a medial hermeneutic, an interruption like noise that makes possible the flow of vital energy. Thus, the parasite interrupts (and thereby provides the potential for) the assembly of an ethics between things, it is the part of the system which gives it meaning, he calls it a semiconductor. But Serres goes further, he argues

This noise, this particular noise, straight-ens out the meaning [*redresse le sens*] and makes it circulate in one direction [*sens*]. The sender is not troubled by the parasite, though the receiver is. Thus the second example appears. Suddenly the system is oriented. Suddenly the system starts to decline. Suddenly the system has a meaning. That noise is a straightener, filtering a meaning, creating a meaning. We now see why

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<sup>206</sup> “System Seminar: Michel Serres’ *The Parasite*” <https://abstractgeology.wordpress.com/2013/05/06/system-seminar-michel-serres-the-parasite/>

<sup>207</sup> Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, 7. Serres’ definition is echoed by the *OED* in “a person who lives at the expense of another...a person who obtains the hospitality or patronage of the wealthy or powerful by obsequiousness and flattery” and “a person permitted to eat at the table of a public official, or at the feast following a sacrifice.” The importance of food/sacrifice is of the most interest to me as should become evident in the following pages.

<sup>208</sup>

the system moves and where it is going. If you introduce an impurity in a crystal, you will have produced a transistor. A semiconductor.<sup>209</sup> The parasite as semiconductor *is not what disorients, but that which orients*. Parasitism is embodied systemic legibility. Such a legibility can unfold (to marshal Ahmed's vernacular) in service of hierarchy (such as whiteness) or just subversion (ACT UP) as like any media the parasite is a technological tool through which ethics comes into being.

In a later passage of his work, Serres is "questioned" by a parasitologist friend on the validity of the human as parasite, for as he says, "every parasitic animal lives, eats, and multiplies within the body of its host." For Serres' friend a parasite can only be known as such because of its residence *within* another being; there is a necessity for interiority. To this parasitologist, the parasite is a spatial entity (either next to or within its host) rather than a multimodal one that also relies on its host in some way (most often for food, but also possibly reproduction as in the case of the xenomorphs in *Alien*). Serres replies with a list of human cultural practices that demonstrate the complex possibilities of interiority. He says, "Men in clothing live within the animals they devoured. And the same thing for plants. We are parasites; thus we clothe ourselves."<sup>210</sup> Serres tells us something intriguing. The interiority that characterizes the parasite, the guest/host relation, is itself a matter of assembly, it need not be a literal manifestation.

And so as Carey Wolfe notes, in his introduction to *The Parasite*, noise is yet another "unsuspecting meaning of the French word *parasite*...static or interference...[which] complicates the central model of 'translation.'"<sup>211</sup> To Serres noise is that which "disrupts the

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<sup>209</sup> Serres, 185.

<sup>210</sup> Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, 10.

<sup>211</sup> Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, xiii

momentarily structured (but always already reversible) relations” between host and guest, which (as is indicated by their similarity in French *hôte*) share their own proximity:

The host the guest: the same word; he gives and receives...He is the object as well, for in the exchange of the word we cannot see where the exchange of the thing is. An invariable term through the transfer of the gift. It might be dangerous not to decide who is the host and who is the guest, who gives and who receives, who is the parasite and who is the *table d'hôte*, who has the gift and who has the loss, and where hostility begins within hospitality.<sup>212</sup>

It is true, then, that host and guest are always entangled. For if noise is that parasitic relation which “upsets equilibrium, making it deviate...[so that] the introduction of a parasite in the system immediately provokes a difference, a disequilibrium” then noise is both the precondition for the host/guest relation *and* the means of its undoing.<sup>213</sup> Noise is the interruption that catalyzes hospitality as such, *and* noise is the parasite-cum-host-cum-guest. In essence, host/guest is merely the unnatural dialectic enforced on a multiplicitous and temporary relation. The parasite is the white noise, the in-betweenness that makes the message, the identity, comprehensible. This is remarkably evident in the movie *Alien*, as the parasitic xenomorphs (indirectly aided by an android crewmember) obfuscate the very parasitism of the human crew of the *Nostromo*, who are only in this particular region of space to harvest precious natural resources. Moreover, not only are the xenomorphs depicted as a kind of vicious insectine plague, they have been genetically altered by their own superior beings, the Mala’kak, or “Space Jockeys.” The danger that *Alien* envisions, therefore, is a familiar one in science fiction, that of the dire consequences of *human* (or humanoid as in the case of the Mala’kak) progress.

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<sup>212</sup> Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, xiv, 15.

<sup>213</sup> Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, 182.

But *Alien* also gives us more. In one of the movie's most iconic scenes, the crew of a commercial space vessel sits around a table eating and drinking. One of the crew, Executive Officer Kane, played by John Hurt, has just emerged from unconsciousness after being attacked by an alien creature that had latched onto his face. The camera sits at table level, observing the crewmembers as they eat and converse, when Kane begins coughing as if choking. He begins to convulse, screaming incomprehensibly, before his midsection explodes with a splatter of blood, and a creature (different in appearance to the one which attached to his face previously) peers up at the remaining crew from within Kane before scuttling away. The scene, as one of its writers Dan O'Bannon articulates, is the climax of a movie about "alien interspecies rape."<sup>214</sup> The alien emerging from Kane's body, therefore, is both a violent birthing, as well as an interruption of the typical process of consumption. To limit an analysis of *Alien* to its dimensions of phallic representation, however, is in my mind to be blindingly two-dimensional. It is not only the presence of the xenomorph as interruption that is crucial, but its depiction as parasitic contagion of human wholeness as well.

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<sup>214</sup> and rather problematically, later in the documentary the filmmakers go on to talk about the phallic (and hermaphroditic) imagery of the alien, and the ways in which a perceived "homosexual" interspecies rape would unsettle male moviegoers.

*Alien Quadrilogy*. Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2003. Film.



Figure 11 : Kane's Stomach (*Alien*, 1979)

What many find unsettling about the film is its depiction of the human body being permeated. The bounded-ness of the self is ruptured (both figuratively and literally) when the creature emerges from Kane. The obvious presence of the abject aside, it is also important to note the backdrop to the “chestbursting” scene, a meal amongst crewmembers. While one reading of the scene is of the human, most often the consumer, becoming the consumed, I believe there is more at work here as well. *Alien* depicts the actualization of a human anxiety over bodily integrity, made material in the parasite. It gives us a violent on-screen permeation of the boundary between inside/outside.<sup>215</sup> The xenomorphic parasite

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<sup>215</sup> And yet this is not a revelation, queer and feminist theory has long ago exposed the patriarchal and heteronormative anxiety over being ‘penetrated,’ as well as the discursive construction of a phallic hierarchy.

antagonists of *Alien* demonstrate that the body (human or alien) is itself a site of mediation, one that is often violently contested. This is a lesson that feminist/queer theory has argued for some time.<sup>216</sup> A viral ethics, therefore, is always a medial one, not rooted in any particular body or bodies, because the body isn't a stable entity in either time or space. The body is always in transformation.

This parasitic mode of interior/exterior (host/guest) is somewhat reconfigured in John Carpenter's 1982 movie, *The Thing*. In the opening scene a spacecraft enters the earth's atmosphere and the scene cuts to a vast Antarctic landscape, a helicopter in the distance. A dog runs in front of the helicopter as a passenger opens fire with a rifle, each successive flyby proving unsuccessful in the man's attempts to shoot the dog. The dog finds its way to a U.S. national science institute station into the safety of a kennel and the helicopter is 'accidentally' destroyed by its Norwegian passengers. What the inhabitants of the station don't know is that the dog has been "infected" and will soon spread that infection throughout their ranks. Unlike the xenomorph parasite, however, "the thing" cannot simply be visually identified as such. After an initial reconfiguration of the host body, it takes on the exact appearance of its host. While the xenomorph in *Alien* exploits the human body as a vessel, disposing of it once finished, "the thing" literally becomes that body. Importantly, the thing *only exists in its parasitism*, it has no form (that we are made aware of) outside of its host. The horror that *The Thing* presents, then, is a tripartite loss of Self. First, is the invasion of one's body by a foreign entity, the guest that "takes over" the home of the host and really

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that accompanies it. The addition I am trying to put forth is that such notions of interior/exterior do violence both to and beyond the human simultaneously.

<sup>216</sup> See Elizabeth Grosz's *Volatile Bodies* and about a billion others!

wrecks the place. Second, is the seeming complete lack of motivation (beyond replication for replication's sake) that "the thing" dis/embodies. And lastly, is the inability to distinguish that which is human from "the thing." Once transformed there is no visible differentiation of infected from uninfected. The crewmembers eventually devise a blood test, in which a superheated piece of metal is applied to a sample of each member's blood. While the "normal" blood merely sizzles innocently, the infected blood recoils at the introduction of the heat, seemingly indicating a kind of molecular sentence. What is ironic about "the thing," then, is that it really isn't any "thing" at all. It has no discrete identity of its own. Like Serres' parasite, the thing is always entangled in something else.

The "thing" seems akin, to what Lacan calls this the 'lamella,' or that which is "the libido, qua pure life instinct, that is to say, immortal life, irrepressible life, life that has need of no organ, simplified, indestructible life. It is precisely what is subtracted from the living being by virtue of the fact that it is subject to the cycle of sexed reproduction."<sup>217</sup> For Lacan, sexed reproduction and death imply and make one another necessary. He says that because of this, "the relation to the Other is precisely that which, for us, brings out what is represented by the lamella--not sexed polarity...but the relation between the living subject and that which he loses by having to pass, for his reproduction, through the sexual cycle."<sup>218</sup> As Žižek tells us, "lamella does not exist, it insists: it is unreal, an entity of pure semblance, a multiplicity of appearances which seem to envelop a central void – its status is purely

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<sup>217</sup> Lacan, J., *The Seminar, Book XI, The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, p. 198.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid., 199.



fantasmatic”<sup>219</sup> He continues, “it is something extra-flat that all of a sudden flies off and envelops your face; with infinite plasticity, it can morph itself into a multitude of shapes; in it, pure evil animality overlaps with machinic blind insistence. The “alien” is effectively libido as pure life, indestructible and immortal.”<sup>220</sup>

The alien’s form of life is (just, merely, simply) life, life as such: it is not so much a particular species as the essence of what it means to be a species, to be a creature, a natural being – it is Nature incarnate or sublimed, a nightmare embodiment of the natural realm understood as utterly subordinate to, utterly exhausted by, the twinned Darwinian drives to survive and reproduce.<sup>221</sup>

The dangers of “pure life” then mirror those of the parasite that Serres discusses. It is the existence of the possibility of death to Lacan that makes possible the relation of the subject to the Other (similarly to Levinas) and therefore an ethics.<sup>222</sup> But, the alien (or parasitic) presences in both *The Thing* and *Alien*, representing the lamella, or immortal/pure-life, exclude those very beings from both any ethical relation *and paradoxically* life. This isn’t solely symptomatic of film, but manifest in scientific literature on the virus.<sup>223</sup> Adding to this Lacan even cites the virus itself, “Organisms that reproduce themselves in a non-sexual way — bacteria’s, viruses, prions, and today clones as well — can in principle live forever, because their reproduction comes down to a replication. In these cases, death is purely accidental and not inevitable as such.”<sup>224</sup> But this, to me, is making an incredible assumption, not only about the exceptionality of human life, but also about the human constructed

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<sup>219</sup> Žižek, S., TROUBLES WITH THE REAL: LACAN AS A VIEWER OF *ALIEN*, <http://www.lacan.com/essays/?p=180>, November 20, 2014.

<sup>220</sup> Žižek, S., TROUBLES WITH THE REAL: LACAN AS A VIEWER OF *ALIEN*, <http://www.lacan.com/essays/?p=180>, November 20, 2014.

<sup>221</sup> Stephen Mulhall, *On Film*, London: Routledge 2001, p. 19.

<sup>222</sup> The necessity of life and the possibility for “otherness” as preconditions of an ethical relation will take up a significant portion of both Chapter 1’s discussion of “viral ethics” and Chapter 4’s treatment of death and spectrality.

<sup>223</sup> Most notably is the question of whether viruses should be considered alive.

<http://scienceline.ucsb.edu/getkey.php?key=3316>

<sup>224</sup> <http://nosubject.com/index.php?title=Lamella>

parameters of life articulating exactly what constitutes death. We hear an echo of Lacan in the FX series *The Strain*, in which the main character Ephram Goodweather, a CDC official investigating a possible outbreak says, “A virus exists only to find a carrier and reproduce. That’s all it does. It has no political views, no religious beliefs, no cultural hang-ups...no concept of time or geography.”<sup>225</sup> The presentation of the lamella, either explicitly via Lacan or otherwise, then, demonstrates a truly myopic examination of life, in which the other becomes an amalgam and a reduction to be consumed, an *hommelette* as Lacan would say. It is the very (perceived) selfhood of the subject that marks this differentiation. Man exists only for man in Lacan’s figuration, whereas both the xenomorph and the thing require a host.

In contrast, W.J.T. Mitchell says that things are “no longer passively waiting for a concept, theory, or sovereign subject to arrange them in ordered ranks of objecthood. ‘The Thing’ rears its head—a rough beast or sci-fi monster, a repressed returnee, an obdurate materiality, a stumbling block, and an object lesson.”<sup>226</sup> As Mitchell argues, the “thing” cannot be so easily repressed, it also has virality to it, a parasitism in which that which is objectified inevitably returns. Mitchell mobilizes Freud in his materialist conjecture on the ontic trajectories of things, but I am keen on interrogating the works of Abraham and Torok. Through exploding their concept of the crypt I believe we can further demonstrate the role of consumption in preserving the human as exception. To consume anything, it must seemingly first be reduced, simplified, made into a thing. This is true of ideas and entities. Eating, then, seems to be a curious alchemy of thingness, in which something is

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<sup>225</sup> “Night Zero,” *The Strain*, FX. 2014.

<sup>226</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 112.

turned into some -"thing." Understanding becomes akin to draining the life from something, it has to be killed to be understood, it is sacrificial, it is psychoanalytic.

## Crypts

In *The Wolf Man's Magic Word* Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok affix to Freud's concept of melancholia their idea of the crypt, in which a lost, but incorporated object, is sealed off via a fantasy that negates that loss and preserves the status quo. In the crypt, as in melancholia, there is an inability to master the object. It is incorporated, but not accepted as lost and properly mourned (introjection). Thus the loss is contained, but could emerge at any time. As Derrida says in his introduction to *The Wolf Man's Magic Word*, "No crypt presents itself. The grounds...are so disposed as to disguise and to hide: something, always a body in some way. But also to disguise the act of hiding and to hide the disguise: the crypt hides as it holds."<sup>227</sup> The psychoanalytic crypt, then, is both a tomb and a cipher, "a kind of 'false unconscious,' an 'artificial' unconscious lodged like a prosthesis, a graft in the heart of an organ, within the *divided self*" that is "*built by violence*."<sup>228</sup> The crypt, as a product of loss, is inaugurated by a trauma, which constructs the crypt as a means of self-preservation. Derrida continues, "I pretend to keep the dead alive, intact, *safe (save) inside me*, but it is only in order to refuse...to love the dead as a living part of me, dead *save in me* through the process of introjection, as happens in so-called normal mourning."<sup>229</sup> Derrida's insight here is a crucial one, in that, both mourning and melancholia (in Freudian terms) or introjection and incorporation (via the crypt in Abraham and Torok's formulation) enact an architectural

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<sup>227</sup> Abraham and Torok, *The Wolf Man's Magic Word*, xiv.

<sup>228</sup> Abraham and Torok, *The Wolf Man's Magic Word*, xiii, xv.

<sup>229</sup> Abraham and Torok, *The Wolf Man's Magic Word*, xvi.

violence to the other. In this, the lost object is always for me, whether it is entombed/encrypted or not. And yet the *topographical* implications of encryption are also manifold. Psychoanalysis as a discipline, as Deleuze and Guattari have famously noted, collapses desire (especially loss) into the negative netherworlds of lack and representation; feedback loops that inevitably trace back to an imporous self. The crypt of Abraham and Torok, then, is not only a mechanism of producing repressed desire, but also a means of replicating the self *en masse* as a *de facto* material manifestation of the individual. In this, all means of treatment, cure, or care flow through a singular body and all means of social irruption are inoculated against. Read alongside the crypt, Levinas' concept of enjoyment has the appearance of an opposite affect, but in fact mobilizes a similar viral trajectory; aggrandize the self, seal it, and enjoy.

Importantly to Abraham and Torok, however, the crypt is not simply a grave, it is both haunted by death and *labyrinthine*. But while psychoanalysis offers a geography that inevitably flows back to the self in an effort to anticipate attacks on sovereignty, Gilles Deleuze cites the entangled figure of the fold. In his treatment of the Baroque, Deleuze says that it “endlessly produces folds...[and] differentiates its folds in two ways...along two infinities, as if infinity were composed of two stages or floors: the pleats of matter and the folds in the soul.”<sup>230</sup> Critiquing the Cartesian separation of soul from body, which asserted that “the real distinction between parts ensured separability,” Deleuze via Leibniz, instead says there is always “a correspondence and even a communication between the two levels,

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<sup>230</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold*, (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1993), 3.

between the two labyrinths.”<sup>231</sup> If the crypt (see also: Freudian loss and Lacanian lack) is a container of being that denies its debts, affinities, and entanglements, not only to its self, but to its various ecologies, the viral is a medium of perforation and assembly that revels in interconnectivity and interdependence.

*The Strain*, Guillermo Del Toro’s FX television show based on his novel trilogy of the same name, is an especially robust meeting place of virus and crypt. In the midst of a possible viral outbreak on a grounded jet early in the series, Dr. Ephraim Goodweather discovers a mysterious piece of cargo, an immense coffin.<sup>232</sup> The intricately carved box is filled to the brim with soil, but the CDC investigators find little else. It is only later in the episode that we discover the true contents of the coffin and the source of the epidemic, the catalyst for the rest of the season, a large hooded creature. As the series progresses we find out more about the creature and the epidemic it has unleashed on New York. Called “the Master,” the creature has within itself scores of small worm-like parasites that are injected into its victims. Once infected, the victims begin to come apart, transforming into vampiric creatures that thirst for human blood and spread the disease.

The central thrust of *The Strain* is an anxiety over the contamination of humanity. What makes the virus so insidious, as Abraham Setrakian, a holocaust survivor turned pawnshop owner/vampire hunter asserts, is that it corrupts that which makes one human, love. He says, “Love cannot be explained, a beacon that guides us back home. Love feeds on

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<sup>231</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold*, (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1993), 4.

<sup>232</sup> Given the discussion of interiority/exteriority I have had/will have, I spent an inordinate amount of time deciding between, “in *The Strain*” and “on *The Strain*” Interestingly, the difference seemingly comes down to the medium itself; “in” for the novelization and “on” for the televisual depiction “on screen.” I keep thinking there may be something more to this.

us and we feed on it...our grace...our downfall.”<sup>233</sup> Those infected by the virus literally return home to those they love in order to consume them. In this way, *The Strain* highlights the violence of love, hyperbolizing the selfishness with which human beings love one another in an almost parasitic way. It seems to be no coincidence then that the newly formed vampires return home, the normalized locale of familial hospitality. At one point in the show, Ephram’s ex-wife, in an argument with her current boyfriend, says to him “you are a guest...this is my home,” only hours before he is infected and will return to do the same to her.<sup>234</sup>

*The Strain* gives us numerous examples of human parasitism, but they always seem to be rooted in the *corrupting* influence of the virus, a perversion of human totality. And what of the crypt? What are its connections to the viral/parasitic? Derrida says in *For*s, “Up to now we have recognized the crypt as (1) a certain organization of places...designed to lead *astray* and (2) a topographical arrangement made to keep (conserve-hidden) the *living dead*.”<sup>235</sup> Derrida is reiterating the crypt as a labyrinthine space, making the traumas it holds not readily accessible or “readable,” as well as being a place of forced stasis for the lost object. But here Derrida also introduces his third notion of the crypt, “to cipher, a symbolic or semiotic operation that consists of manipulating a secret code, which is something one can never do alone.”<sup>236</sup> Likewise Jussi Parikka argues, “Viruses and the viral logic are cultivated in such a manner that the exponential mathematical logic of the viral is used as a powerful model of calculation and distribution.”<sup>237</sup> In *The Strain*, the virus becomes the convenient medium making material and accessible the complex anxieties of toxic human being. People

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<sup>233</sup> “Night Zero,” *The Strain*, FX, 2014.

<sup>234</sup> *The Strain*

<sup>235</sup> Jacques Derrida, *For*s, xxxvi.

<sup>236</sup> Jacques Derrida, *For*s, xxxvi.

<sup>237</sup> Jussi Parikka, “Contagion and Repetition: On the Viral Logic of Network Culture” *Ephemera*, 289.

are devouring one another because an external invader has fundamentally altered them from a state of pure being. But all of this presupposes an idyllic, uncontaminated, form of existence that is and of itself fraudulent. Thus, it is not only a question of interrogating the content of a particular external presence as a means to ethics (viruses, migrants, sexual penetration, etc.), but that the dialectic of internal/external itself must be assailed before any real justice can be enacted. Virality alone is not enough, then, because it can and has been utilized as a medium to reinforce the hermetic binary, coopted through calculation *and* anxiety.

Derrida is unwilling (as Abraham and Torok are) to limit the crypt to the realm of the verbal, instead articulating a number of limitations to this approach. He argues there is a paradox in the originary metaphor of orality that structures the pure verbosity of trauma, the mouth is itself “on the borderline between outside and inside...*first* a silent spot in the body...and only ‘speaks’ through supplementarity.”<sup>238</sup> If encryption is the preservation of the lost object through its exclusion, then both the fantasy of keeping that object “alive” in the crypt and any straightforward attempt to decipher it are doomed. Therefore, seeking out the “magic word” so-to-speak that Abraham and Torok put forward in their text would only ever provide an incomplete access to trauma, especially if we are dealing with an entity that doesn’t speak or has been denied speech (as in the cases of: those who have returned in *The Strain*, the larval victims of endo-parasitoid wasps, or Kate Clark’s figures).

The troubling ethical implications of loss-induced boundary makings are thus made plain in the fantasy of incorporation. This fantasy,

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<sup>238</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Forx*, xxxviii. This too has a whole genealogy of support in trauma studies, particularly in the notion of the inexpressibility of the traumatic event. (Caruth, etc.)

involves eating the object...in order *not* to introject it, in order to vomit it in a way, into the inside...The metaphor is taken *literally* in order to refuse its introjective effectiveness...[If] incorporation could be said to resemble, paradoxically enough, an act of vomiting to the inside, then, on the other hand a successful necrophagy in which the dead would be assimilated...would be a 'preventative measure of anti-incorporation'<sup>239</sup>

To Derrida, "digestion" of a lost object, an analogy for verbal encryption, results in the acceptance of that lost object as lost through the "normal" process of mourning, which is itself "a form of idealization," a violence.<sup>240</sup> He says, "No one will ever have asked the dead person how he would have preferred to be eaten: Everything is organized in order that he *remain* a missing person in both cases, having vanished, as *other*, from the operation, whether it be mourning *or* melancholy. Departed, nowhere to be found."<sup>241</sup> *The crypt is not only a mechanism of relation to loss, but a container for being.* Here we finally arrive at the convergence of topography, individualization, and ethics. Humanism, via Freud, Levinas, or otherwise, is an architectural project as much as an ideological one, sculpting its own material realities in service of itself. Faciality, encryption, and enjoyment, in their disregard for entanglement, engender an all-consuming ethics willing to sacrifice anything for the sake of preserving human totality, in life or death.

Even loss, under the strictures of psychoanalysis, is marshaled for the project of the normative human self. We mourn, other animals don't. We die, other animals have never lived, so how could they? The capacity for (and privilege of) complex feeling is thus made self-evident by the institutions of the 'humanities' that emerged from the enlightenment, biology, psychology, economics, etc. Levinas is no different, he figures enjoyment in its relation to alterity, as, that which I enjoy cannot be Other, because to be Other is to not be

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<sup>239</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Forx*, xxxviii

<sup>240</sup> Ibid.

<sup>241</sup> Ibid.



consumed. But to speak of consumption only in terms of enjoyment or incorporation, is to anthropomorphize and individualize relations that aren't necessarily limited to humans or individuals. Thus, the stomach becomes a synecdochal site of Levinasian enjoyment and traumatic encryption for Abraham and Torok. It is the part (organ) that makes the whole (human-self) stable precisely by redirecting all related affects through it. The stomach is an infrastructure, both material and discursive, a viaduct constructed to direct flows of information, affect, and embodiment to the human. Therefore, to enact a viral ethics, in which trauma/responsibility are not beholden solely to humanity, one must look beyond the mouth and the stomach to produce alternative pathways, waypoints, and destinations. If an ethical dilemma of any interaction with loss is how to properly mourn, then viral ethics suggests a mourning that is not withdrawn and impenetrable, but social and entwined.

A viral ethics approach *to loss* is also a relation entangled in another, in many others, in which the normative topography of incorporation via Freud and Abraham and Torok is exploded. The virus is both inside and outside an object, leaving a phantasmic residue in its wake that highlights the multiplicitous affects of trauma, not simply the Oedipal or humanist ones. If, as Derrida has asserted, the relation to the Other, manifested through loss is always a haunting violence, what better medium than the virus to assess that relation? To be perfectly clear (I hope), I am mobilizing the virus as *both* metaphor for the violence of humanist ethics (e.g, humanist mourning) and as a material embodiment with the power to subvert those orientations.

### **Inside/Out: Performing Topography**

One of the most influential topographies of being comes from Rene Descartes' notion of the cogito and its privileged access to the external world, a metaphysical claim which presupposes his most well known maxim, "I think, therefore I am." Implicit in Descartes' thinking is a fundamental onto-epistemological divide between internal and external realms; the mind as wholly separate (and superior) domain bounded from the body and the external world-at-large. Descartes' strict demarcation has had a prolonged philosophical impact. As Joseph Rouse argues, "The presumption that we can know what we mean, or what our verbal performances say, more readily than we can know the objects those sayings are about is a Cartesian legacy...[of] direct and privileged access to the contents of our thoughts that we lack towards the "external" world."<sup>242</sup> Psychoanalysis articulates something similar. It suggests a privileged interior world (the unconscious) as the only means through which truth, identity, and ethics can be accessed. To counter these dualist traditions (and their ethical inadequacies) performance theory has expounded some relevant interventions: mind and body are not opposing or discrete entities, but inextricably linked; the self is itself a socially constructed, temporary, partial, and embodied entity; and the divide between external and internal worlds is an illusory, yet useful mechanism of individuation.<sup>243</sup> What each of these arguments makes clear, however, is a *performative* constitution of entangledness of being. Karen Barad's work, articulates another dimension to performance, its materiality. Barad calls her approach agential realism,

an epistemological and ontological framework that...takes as its central concerns the nature of materiality, the relationship between the material and the discursive, the

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<sup>242</sup> Joseph Rouse 1996. *Engaging Science: How to Understand Its Practices Philosophically*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press. 209.

<sup>243</sup> See Foucault, Butler, and performance studies as a genre.

nature of 'nature' and of 'culture' and the relationship between them, the nature of agency, and the effects of boundary, including the nature of exclusions that accompany boundary projects.<sup>244</sup>

To Barad agential realism is a theoretical understanding of the encounter of objects, their composition via entanglement, and the mechanisms of classification that emerge from those relations. Put simply, it is a performative junction of ethics, ontology, and epistemology.

If Barad argues for the relevance of materiality, embodiment, and performance, to ethical encounters, recalling Sara Ahmed is particularly useful. She writes, "the nearness of certain objects is an effect of the work the body does, and the work the body does is what makes certain objects near."<sup>245</sup> It is thus from the meeting place of bodies and objects, the encounter, which mutation, sensation, and affect emerge. Ahmed calls this the interpretive work of phenomenology. She states,

Phenomenology hence shows how objects and others have already left their impressions on the skin surface. The tactile object is what is near me, or what is within my reach. In being touched, the object does not 'stand apart;' it is felt 'by' the skin and even 'on' the skin. In other words, we perceive the object as an object, as something that 'has' integrity, and is 'in' space, only by haunting that very space; that is by co-inhabiting ; space that is the boundary between the co-inhabitants of space does not hold. *The skin connects, as well as contains.*<sup>246</sup>

What Ahmed is elucidating, is a medial understanding of embodied being in the world, a series of transformative becomings that materialize out of proximity. Importantly, Ahmed notes that this is a question of access, whereby we are repeatedly oriented towards particular objects (and away from others) as a means of solidifying affective regimes through repetition and familiarization. Thus, *habituation is also an apparatus of inhabitation*. You dwell inside that has been made familiar to you. Ahmed uses gender as an example, which, "could thus be described as a bodily orientation, a way in which bodies get directed by their actions over

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<sup>244</sup> Barad, Karen (1998). "Getting real: technoscientific practices and the materialization of reality". *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*. Indiana University Press. **10** (2): 89.

<sup>245</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 52.

<sup>246</sup> My emphasis. Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 54.

time.”<sup>247</sup> And those surfaces of sensory experience, like skin, the mouth, or the stomach, “connect as well as contain” as Ahmed argues; they become mediated surfaces which can be oriented, interfaced, and contained in any number of ways. So where is the ethics? Ahmed contends that queer orientations are fleeting moments, which defy dominant forms of habituation; bodies take on new shapes when they defy the straight lines of normative orientation. I argue that a similarly productive venture would include the mutation of bodies, not only bent, but turned inside out, a kind of alien topography which resists the impulse for impermeability.

Thus far, I have spoken primarily of the human “side” of things, engaged in a cartography of anthropocentricity. I have done this for two reasons: first, to provide an extant theoretical framework to speculate from and second, as a way to evidence the anthropocentricity of contemporary psychoanalytic/ethical thought. Going forward, the question, in my mind, becomes how one might speculate on the productive capabilities of performing viral ethics? To do so I look to the biological virus itself. Viruses are classified both by their structure and size, a particle containing RNA/DNA genome which is single or double stranded, linear, circular, or segmented and 16-300nm in size, and by what they “do.”<sup>248</sup> According to *Molecular Virology*,

Viruses do not reproduce by division, such as bacteria, yeasts or other cells, but they replicate in the living cells that they infect. In them, they develop their genomic activity and produce the components from which they are made. They encode neither their own protein synthesis machinery (ribosomes) nor energy-generating

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<sup>247</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 60.

<sup>248</sup> Within the family of viruses a classification system is based on:

1. The nature of the genome (RNA or DNA) and the form in which it is present, i.e. as a single or a double strand, in positive or negative sense, linear or circular, segmented or continuous; also the arrangement of genes on the nucleic acid is important for the definition of individual families.
2. The symmetry form of the capsids.
3. The presence of an envelope.
4. The size of the virion.
5. The site of viral replication within the cell (cytoplasm or nucleus).

*Molecular Virology*, (2013 ed.), 26.

metabolic pathways. Therefore, viruses are intracellular parasites. They are able to re-route and modify the course of cellular processes for the optimal execution of their own reproduction.<sup>249</sup>

One of the most important aspects of what constitutes the viral, then, seems to be what

Wilson Smith calls, “obligate cell parasitism.”<sup>250</sup> In this, the virus must consume in order to

replicate, performing both inside a “host” cell. The virus is reliant on its host even as it feeds

upon, or even destroys it. Unlike bacteria, which reproduce by division, by splitting

themselves in two, the virus is wholly reliant on another for its propagation.<sup>251</sup> As *Molecular*

*Virology* states,

Depending on the virus type, the infection can have different consequences for the host cell:

- 1.It is destroyed and dies.
- 2.It survives, but continuously produces small numbers of viruses and is chronically (persistently) infected.
- 3.It survives and the viral genome remains in a latent state without producing infectious particles.
4. It is immortalized, thus gaining the capability of unlimited cell division, a process that can be associated with malignant transformation into a tumour cell.<sup>252</sup>

The virus, then, is both medium and possibility; it wields not only the ability to destroy, but

to transform, even making possible the immortality of its host cell (though this is a

cancerous transformation, an alteration towards infinite replication).<sup>253</sup> The virus is thus, in a

word, potential. It embodies entanglement, inversion, and liminality.

Once again, *The Strain* is instructive. Through the viral infection that has afflicted

New York City human beings are being “transformed” into vampires. They are a kind of

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<sup>249</sup> *Molecular Virology*, (2013 ed.), 17.

<sup>250</sup> He continues in saying, “Although individual virus particles survive for variable periods in extracellular environments, species survival is wholly dependent upon intracellular replication and hence upon recurrent cycles of association with some higher host organism.” *Mechanisms of Virus Infection*, (1963), 11.

<sup>251</sup> I think there is definitely something here about division of the self vs. reliance on the other, but not quite sure how to flesh that out yet.

<sup>252</sup> *Molecular Virology*, (2013 ed.), 26.

<sup>253</sup> This is one reason why the discussion on parasitism via Serres was necessary, to make more problematic the simplistic equation of virus with parasite.

living-dead that thirst for “live” human blood, particularly the blood of those they loved.

Derrida says in “Fors,”

“The dead object must remain dead, must be kept in his place as dead; this must always be verifiable. He must not come back, not bring back with him the trauma of loss. He must pledge, on his own, warmly, to occupy his place as dead...He must thus engage himself alive. That presupposes a contract: unilateral...The crypt is perhaps itself that contract with the dead.”<sup>254</sup>

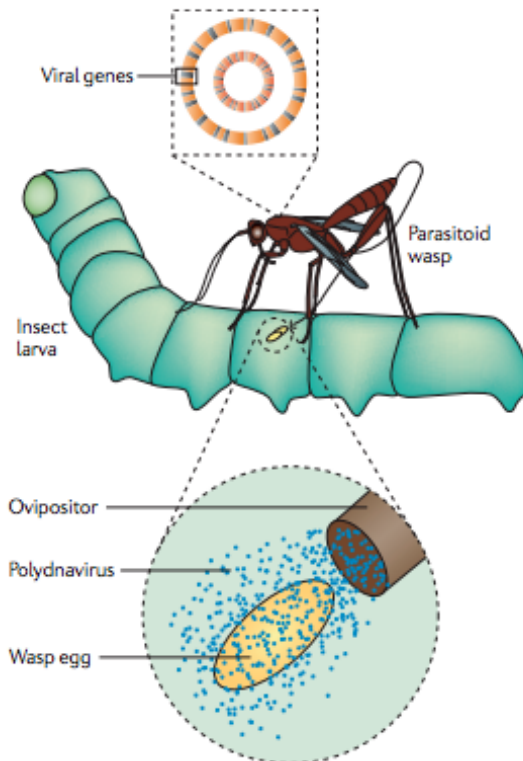
Thus, the normative process of mourning (introjection as Abraham and Freud detail it) as always already corrupted (as I have detailed before) is inverted in *The Strain*. The virus highlights the very imbalance of power implicit in our relation to the dead *and* actively attempts to subvert them. This is why numerous times in the show (as well as in pretty much every story of vampire/zombie/monster infection) in the short window of time between infection and “transformation,” while one is still human, that person often begs for death. Jim Kent, a CDC official who had previously betrayed his boss Ephram Goodweather, becomes infected by one of the worms. After a successful attempt to cut one out of his face the others discover that Kent has hundreds crawling under his skin on his back and there is no chance of saving him. He asks to be shot before he transforms, but Eph is unwilling to allow it (because he still seems human at this point).<sup>255</sup> In facing the *undead*, however, Eph and the others in *The Strain*, are merely confronting loss and subsequently eliminating it. It is important to remember that the parasites of *The Strain* are beholden to The Master, who can control any person who has been infected. This is certainly no liberatory state-of-being, no escape from a power over un/death. Instead, the infected (in juxtaposition to Jim who is killed before transformation) trade one master for another. My point here has not been to

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<sup>254</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Fors,” xxxviii.

<sup>255</sup> This period of time between infection and “transformation” is also very intriguing to me, as it seems to disrupt any idea of human totality, which is itself a fiction. The infection has at this point spread, throughout Jim’s body, but his demeanor is not like the undead yet, he doesn’t ‘thirst’ for blood and is practically the same as before, but now, “everyone knows.”

herald virality, in *The Strain* or otherwise, as some mechanism of escape from power, but instead to highlight the ethical possibilities of looking beyond the human.



**Figure 1 | The relationship between polydnaviruses, wasps and caterpillars.** Many parasitoid wasps lay their eggs inside a living insect larva. When a female wasp deposits her eggs inside a lepidopteran caterpillar, she also deposits her symbiogenic polydnavirus virions, which only express wasp genes. These genes are expressed in the caterpillar, where they prevent the encapsulation process that would otherwise wall off and kill the wasp egg.

Figure 12: Marilyn J. Roossinck, “The good viruses: viral mutualistic symbioses,” <http://hedrick.ucsd.edu/BICD136/PDF-links/TheGoodViruses.pdf>

Take one final alternative example: the polydnaviruses of endoparasitoid wasps (scientific lingo for viruses containing many strands of DNA of wasps that spend a portion of their lives *in* another organism.)<sup>256</sup> These wasps are carriers of bracho- and ichnoviruses, an ancient relationship, which has led some researchers to question “whether these viruses

<sup>256</sup> Marilyn J. Roossinck, “The good viruses: viral mutualistic symbioses,” <http://hedrick.ucsd.edu/BICD136/PDF-links/TheGoodViruses.pdf>

are really viruses anymore.”<sup>257</sup> This is primarily due to how “the genes involved in viral replication and packaging have moved to become part of the wasp genome, and the virions package wasp genes that are expressed after the wasp has deposited its eggs into its lepidopteran insect host.”<sup>258</sup> Many parasitoid wasps lay their eggs in a living insect larva. The innate immune system of the larva would normally wall off the egg, forming an encapsulation structure that prevents the egg from developing, but the wasp genes carried by the polydnavirus virions suppress this response. Without this suppression, the wasp eggs would not survive.<sup>259</sup> Thus, there is a kind of historical symbiosis between the wasp and the virus, the virus is allowed to spread through the wasp’s own reproductive processes and in turn the virus protects the wasp eggs from the larval immune system. The author of the article, Marilyn Roossinck calls these “good viruses,” but from an alternative perspective, how are they any different than Ebola, which seems to have little effect on bat populations which spread the disease?<sup>260</sup> The difference, seemingly, is one I noted early on in the chapter, the relation of each virus to the human. And so, this kind of thinking, the charged qualifications of symbiosis and parasitism, would nonetheless reproduce the very logic I have spent this chapter critiquing. It is the normative relations themselves that have to be interrogated, namely the inside/out dyad that has sustained human exceptionalism and refused alternative modes of relationality, being, and becoming.

What is interesting about parasitoid wasp (beyond the perception of its symbiosis) is that it exposes the very preconceptions that scientific classification engenders. Where does the wasp end and the virus begin? How do we conceptualize of inside and outside in such a

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<sup>257</sup> Marilyn J. Roossinck, “The good viruses: viral mutualistic symbioses,” <http://hedrick.ucsd.edu/BICD136/PDF-links/TheGoodViruses.pdf>

<sup>258</sup> Marilyn J. Roossinck, “The good viruses: viral mutualistic symbioses,” <http://hedrick.ucsd.edu/BICD136/PDF-links/TheGoodViruses.pdf>

<sup>259</sup> Marilyn J. Roossinck, “The good viruses: viral mutualistic symbioses,” <http://hedrick.ucsd.edu/BICD136/PDF-links/TheGoodViruses.pdf>

<sup>260</sup> <http://www.wired.com/2014/10/bats-ebola-disease-reservoir-hosts/>



complex genetic system? Is the wasp consuming the virus, or vice versa? Taxonomies are thus not only discursive divisions that naturalize epistemological gray areas, but function as ways to fundamentally structure being, with very real ethical consequences. The very notion of a discrete species is commonly defined according to Ernst Mayr's "biological species concept," as, "groups of actually or potentially interbreeding natural populations, which are reproductively isolated from other such groups" or a have high level of genetic similarity.<sup>261</sup> To coordinate ethics along species lines, therefore is to actively reproduce similarity as the de facto boundary of concern, to habituate ourselves to a kind of self-reflexive moral compass. An ethics that refuses its concomitant ontological biases, therefore, is a flawed one. It is crucial to remember that this is *not only* a problematic that emerges from the division of human from animal, but also from coordinated scalar and topographical myopia. The parasitoid wasp is a convergence of viral and insectine DNA that is both historical and microscopic, a genetic amalgamation that has taken place over eons. And yet the blurred lines between species is consistent across time, it is evident in the aesthetics of Francis Bacon, the genetics of parasitoid wasp, and the activist potential of ACT UP. Gilles Deleuze says that Bergson's concept of duration is "a case of 'transition' of a 'change,' a becoming, but it is a becoming that endures, a change that is substance itself."<sup>262</sup> Viral ethics engenders such a topographical mode of becoming, a fleeting inside-outness with the potential for justice.

This chapter has not sought to be a denial of human loss, but rather a recognition of how that loss is assembled and arranged, as well as what is lost in the process. Certainly, other beings feel loss; they are consumed in one way or another by it. An exceptionalist

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<sup>261</sup> De Queiroz, Kevin. "Ernst Mayr and the Modern Concept of Species." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 102.Suppl 1 (2005): 6600–6607. *PMC*. Web. 9 Jan. 2015.

<sup>262</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, 37.

conception of loss serves nothing other than a perpetuation of a particular ideal of the human, one with a long genealogy of colonialist and anti-queer sentiment. At the same time, virality should not be limited to its interactions in and among human beings. That which is viral infects not only the human world, but the organic and inorganic as well. A viral approach is one of many vectors and many folds, it is interdependent, affective, and entangled. The objective, then, is not to untangle, to find an origin or truth at the center, or to align, but to speculate, to engage with an entire spectrum of parasitism and noise.

### *Chapter 3*

#### **Viral Desire: Biopolitics, Memes, and Medial Becoming**

The truth is that we change without ceasing, and that the state itself is nothing but change.

—Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*

I have asked myself often enough whether, on a grand scale, philosophy has been no more than an interpretation of the body and a *misunderstanding of the body*...[and] what was at stake in all philosophizing hitherto was not at all 'truth' but rather something else - let us say health, future, growth, power, life

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*

a virus burrows deep inside me,  
penetrating my cellular core...  
breaching my last boundary,  
shattering my last illusion of autonomy.  
cross-dressed in a seductively innocent protoplasmic envelope,  
sHe slips past the antibodies and nestles safely within the folds of my DNA;  
whispering in the secret language of my body 'replicate me, replicate me'  
her strands of RNA twisting and twining with mine -  
conjugating, slicing, merging, integrating.  
hostess to another being  
my blood is contagion,  
I am a carrier.

—Melinda Rackham "carrier becoming symborg"<sup>263</sup>

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<sup>263</sup> <http://www.culturemachine.net/index.php/cm/article/view/291/276>

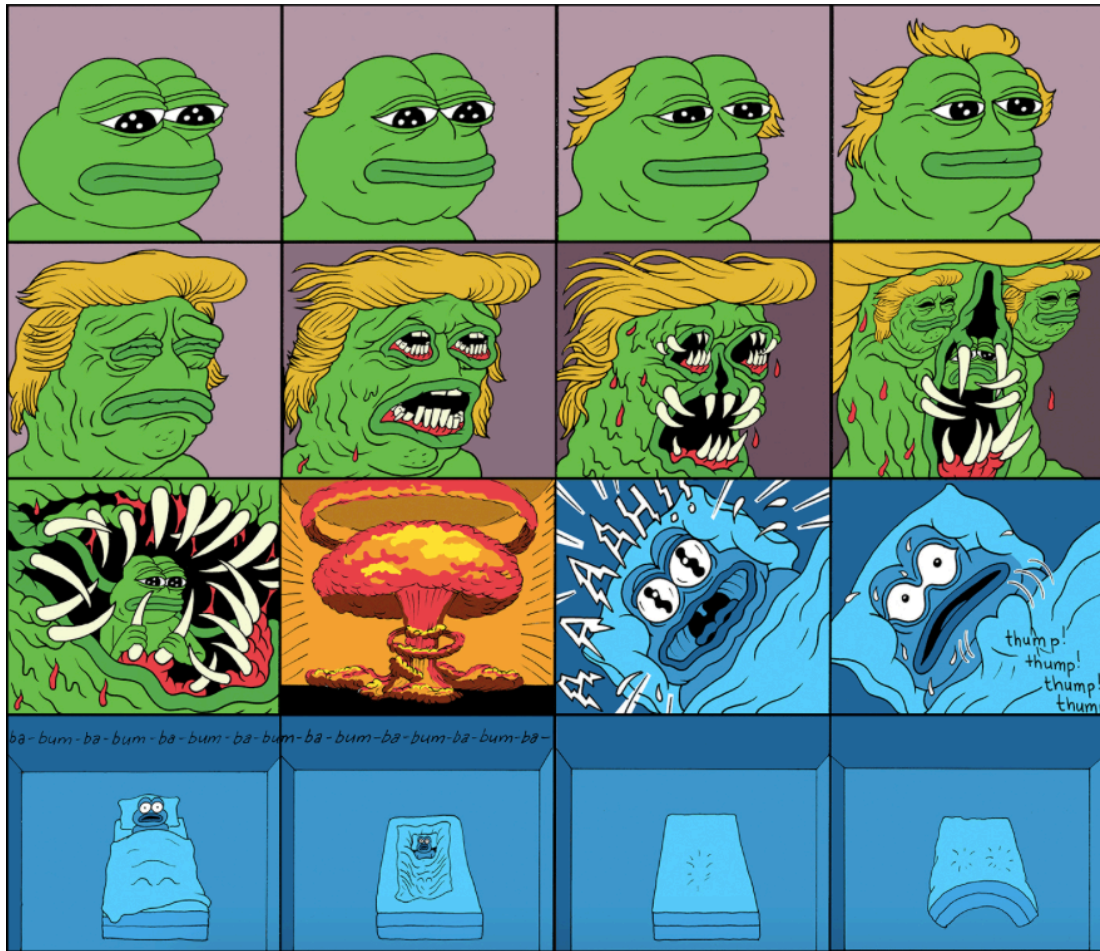


Figure 13: Pepe the Frog: To Sleep, Perchance to Meme

On January 20, 2017, noted scumbag Donald Trump was sworn into office as the 45<sup>th</sup> president of the United States, despite losing the popular vote.<sup>264</sup> As the inauguration unfolded, pockets of disruption swelled across the capitol. Protestors blocked checkpoints, clashed against battle-clad police, and liberated windows of their symbols of corporate greed. The defining moment of resistance, however, came just after the inauguration. During an interview with an Australian TV crew, Richard Spencer, a Nazi organizer and supporter of Trump, was punched in the face. In the video of the event, Spencer attempts to distance himself from the label of Nazi, turning the conversation to a button on his lapel and

<sup>264</sup> Gregory Krieg, "Popular Vote" December 22, 2016. CNN  
<http://www.cnn.com/2016/12/21/politics/donald-trump-hillary-clinton-popular-vote-final-count/>

beginning to describe ‘Pepe,’ who, he states, “has become a symbol of...”<sup>265</sup> It is at this point that Spencer is literally cut off as a black-clad protestor sweeps across the frame, his fist colliding forcefully with Spencer’s face. The anonymous protestor escapes, and we see Spencer from a distance, wide-eyed and shaken. The Spencer punch was a moment of beautiful rupture, a reality check aimed squarely at unsettling the rhetorical tip-toeing of Spencer and the ungrounded politics of the Trump regime as a whole. It has been remixed and shared hundred of thousands of times across social media, set to soundtracks as varied as Bruce Springsteen’s “Born in the USA,” Miley Cyrus’ “Wrecking Ball,” and DJ Supreme’s “Hit Me One Time!” The Richard Spencer punch was also a point of ontological convergence, in which virality, meaning, and matter assembled to chip away at viral fascism’s ideological wholeness. Virus against virus; an anti/retro-viral treatment of the disease of fascism.

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<sup>265</sup> “White Nationalist Richard Spencer Punched in the Face...” *YouTube*, January 20, 2017.  
<https://youtu.be/9rh1dhur4aI>



Figure 14: Neo-Nazi Richard Spencer Punched in the Face

Is the digital a realm of lesser reality, the terrain of anonymous play, rather than a site of real material and discursive work? The trajectory of the Trump campaign should (finally) demonstrate its import. That campaign gained widespread support through a 'memetic' logic suturing the material realities of 'the world' and 'the web,' an incessant reproduction of constructed meaning through its medial replication. In this, facts were brought into being not only through an authority's external validation, but also through their viral quantification. The swelling mass of baseless claims by the Trump campaign, as well as in the nascent Trump administration, suggest that the truth is merely whatever circulates most. Implied in many attempts to resist the chaotic realm of Trump discursivity, however, is an advocacy of transgressing factlessness altogether, that in reaffirming the concrete objective truths of: language, science, and the 'real' world (vs. the digital one) we can once again set the world right. I disagree.

This is not a new phenomenon. Foucault writes in *The History of Sexuality* of a similar undertaking in the trajectory of Freud's repressive hypothesis. In that case, if repression demanded silence about sexuality we could talk our way out of it. But as Foucault rightly observed, sexuality was not silenced, it was *everywhere*. It was integral to the institutional fabric of contemporary power. Foucault writes,

What sustains our eagerness to speak of sex in terms of repression is doubtless this opportunity to speak out against the powers that be, to utter truths and promise bliss, to link together enlightenment, liberation, and manifold pleasures; to pronounce a discourse that combines the fervor of knowledge, the determination to change the laws, and the longing for the garden of earthly delights.<sup>266</sup>

Our desires to escape the world of infinite, yet dispersed, replication as a means to power, mediated in the meme, will also do nothing to quell them. Liberation will not emerge from a retrenched adherence to objective truth. *Liberation will not emerge*. There is no escape from the discursive tendrils of power, only the subversive means to rearticulate, reassemble, and remix them.

Pepe, a cartoon frog, to complete Spencer's sentence for him, has become one memetic symbol of fascist viral hatred. Borne out of a 2005 comic series by artist Matt Furie, Pepe was coopted in 2008 by the online message board 4chan.<sup>267</sup> Pepe was first a meme about feeling good, then feeling bad, and then underwent a series of internet mutations, before becoming the *de facto* symbol of, self-described "alt-right," fascists. Pepe is a part of twitter handles, online meme culture, and has been used by Trump himself.<sup>268</sup> "The punch" has also become a meme in its own right, spreading quickly through social media and Internet forums, as well as being almost instantaneously remixed to a cadre of songs.<sup>269</sup> On Election Day, online shitposters celebrated electing "a meme as president," on inauguration

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<sup>266</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Part 1, An Introduction*. Translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Pantheon., 1978., p. 7.

<sup>267</sup> "Pepe the Frog" <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/pepe-the-frog>

<sup>268</sup> "Pepe the Frog" <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/pepe-the-frog>

<sup>269</sup> "Top ten Richard Spencer punch remix videos" *libcom.org* January 22, 2017. <https://libcom.org/blog/top-ten-richard-spencer-getting-punched-remix-videos-22012017>

day a meme challenged the normalization of fascism.<sup>270</sup> The election of Donald Trump can thus be read as a cultural nexus evidencing: the power of virality, its vulnerability to cooptation and its potential for subversion. That which is viral mediates the ideological and the material, transmuting digital desire into political/ethical reality. It is not so much, then, that the digital realm is separate from the ‘real world,’ but an integral part of it. If memes can become presidents, then we should not discount their affective and biopolitical power to mobilize, order, and align along lines of identity, ability, and political affinity. The consequences of memetic biopower should already be apparent; our task must be how to counteract them.

If the first chapter was an in depth explanation of what exactly viral ethics is and Chapter 2 was an exploration of the topographies of that ethics, then Chapter 3 endeavors to examine that which is viral and its relations to power. I argue that in limiting *bios* to its physicality, previous scholarship has both reified the normative human being as the sole instrument of biopower *and* failed to recognize the importance of numerous contemporary organic and inorganic networks in constructing regimes of ontological knowledge. Viral ethics isn’t solely predicated on the episteme, but surely must take into account the impact that such discourses engender. Virality is a form of medial connectivity (transmission, infection), but it is also means through which responsibility is disseminated. Viral ethics is a speculative exploration of ecological entanglement, those connections amongst and between beings as well as the corresponding matrices of power that arise therein. As a recalibration of what constitutes the biopolitical, several caveats are necessary for this chapter. First, biopower is scalar. The means through which life is managed are constitutive of/reliant on

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<sup>270</sup> Abby Ohlheiser, “We actually elected a meme as president’: How 4chan celebrated Trump’s victory” *The Washington Post* November 9, 2016. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2016/11/09/we-actually-elected-a-meme-as-president-how-4chan-celebrated-trumps-victory/?utm\\_term=.11011bc5e43b](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2016/11/09/we-actually-elected-a-meme-as-president-how-4chan-celebrated-trumps-victory/?utm_term=.11011bc5e43b)



incredibly large and small bodies, in addition to those that frequent human perception, with each fundamentally affecting one another. This means, for example, that the activities and interactions of ‘biological’ viruses, or the individual lines of code that make up a computer virus are just as productive as traditional mechanisms of government/capital in managing life.<sup>271</sup> Second, traditional models of biopower have sought to understand the question of what constitutes life from an already compromised standpoint. By locating the human as the sole object and perpetrator of biopower, many biopolitical analyses do a disservice to the full spectrum of possible epistemological sites. I aim to move beyond that simplistic differentiation and instead interrogate how the digital/inorganic and the organic are both productive sites of biopower, for and beyond the human. In contrast to works of media archaeology, this project is not a historical account of digital virality, but instead an interrogation of particular viral moments whereby media and life collide.

In espousing a viral ethics, this chapter, and in fact, this entire dissertation should make several things readily apparent to the reader. First, all ethical endeavors are always already viral. Thus, the fundamental unit of ethics, *the encounter*, at any scale and between any ontic beings (which I define rather broadly and need not be a physical encounter) is viral.<sup>272</sup> Think about the myriad affects, ideologies, embodiments, and articulations that go into an interaction as simple as getting your mail. Numerous assemblages of movement connect you to an envelope: the trajectory of paper, the infrastructure of the state that remakes mail at its various states, a genealogy of language that makes possible a form of interactional

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<sup>271</sup> Of course these interactions take place at multiple scales at once, so the Ebola virus affects governance and vice versa, *but not only for humans*.

<sup>272</sup> This I derive from Levinas, utilizing his articulation of ethics as encounter, but eschewing his correlate of the “face-to-face” encounter as a prerequisite for an ethics and thereby limiting ethics to the human. Though Levinas argues that ethics precedes ontology and in fact, brings about being, I argue the opposite about Levinas, via Derrida, that his “recognition” of human exceptionalism (an epistemological and ontological endeavor) makes possible his ethics. In this way it is interesting to read Levinas alongside Aristotle, whose *Ethics* highlights the virtues of human intelligence and reason that make possible an “ethical” life.

understanding. Thus, the idea that any relation can be a simple one-to-one transaction is a fiction that ignores the complexity and the mediated chaos of interaction. *All interaction is ecological. All interaction is entangled.* Viral ethics is an attempt to make sense of those complex interrelations and foment justice out of them. To do so requires an in-depth analysis and rearticulation of the overgeneralized media term that has come to be known as virality. To viral ethics, virality is a form of reproduction that documents unfolding processes of territorialized/deterritorialized of power *and* a hermeneutic to access those relations. The viral object is always materially affected in interaction. Any encounter fundamentally alters the parties involved; traces of interaction remain long after the event itself. As such, being is inescapably ethical. This doesn't mean that virality implies rational conscious action, but that it is a result of the desiring mechanisms of becoming immanent to all motion. Virality encompasses the multiplicitous interactions that being engenders; ethics is the schematic that governs and emerges from the viral encounter. This is a process that happens in the everyday, between humans and non-humans alike, it is only the episteme that makes the differentiations meaningful.

In his work *Virality*, scholar Tony Sampson differentiates between two different kinds of virality: one, molar virality, “endemic to new biopolitical strategies of social power...[is] a discursive (and prediscursive) means of organizing and exerting control” and second, molecular virality, is “located in the accidents and spontaneity of desire.”<sup>273</sup> Mobilizing the Deleuzian methodology of assemblage, Sampson distances himself from the use of virality as merely representational, or metaphorical, instead grounding his arguments in a more materialist approach. In doing so, Sampson demonstrates “how discourse is intimately interwoven with a prediscursive flow of contagious affect, feelings, and

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<sup>273</sup> Tony D. Sampson, *Virality: Contagion Theory in the Age of Networks*, 6.

emotions.”<sup>274</sup> Sampson’s differentiation of viralities will prove crucial to the manifold aims of this chapter. Cognizant of how the viral can at once be both molar and molecular, I will engage with particular medial nodes, highlighting them as both biopolitical and desiring. My aim, then, is not to oppose molarity and molecularity or biopower and affect, but demonstrate how they are mutually constitutive in constructing an ethics.

The central tension this chapter means to unpack, then, is not simply that between the digital and the organic, but becomings that resist such easy categorization, and in particular what the ethical consequences such states-of-being entail.<sup>275</sup> To be more precise, I will be investigating the contemporary reification of humanity through its increasingly cybernetic attributes and the resultant ethical implications of the “post-human”. To do so, I will interrogate how: biopower has been mobilized in digital/cybernetic spaces, the alternative and mutually constitutive geographies of desire contained therein, and the relevance of “new media” and biomedical ontologies surrounding memes, avatars, and other viral beings. Jussi Parikka says, “Plants and animals constitute their being through various modes of transmission and coupling with their environment,” a mediated ontology, in which “media are a contraction of forces of the world into specific resonating milieus”<sup>276</sup> Adding to Parikka’s sense of mediated being, I argue that the question of ethics is central to any ontological endeavor. The contagion, interaction, aggregation, and fragmentation endemic to ongoing media exploits highlight the necessity of wielding a viral ethics.

## Mimesis

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<sup>274</sup> Tony D. Sampson, *Virality: Contagion Theory in the Age of Networks*, 3.

<sup>275</sup> To be sure, I will be unpacking how exactly particular “states-of-being” have come to be classified and therefore differentiated/hierarchicalized; an epistemic endeavor where Foucault’s biopower becomes particularly useful.

<sup>276</sup> Jussi Parikka, *Insect Media*, xiv.

In the previous chapter I stated that one of the defining characteristics of the biological virus is its mode of reproduction, e.g., “viruses do not reproduce by division, such as bacteria, yeasts or other cells, but they replicate in the living cells that they infect.”<sup>277</sup> The virus is charged with mere replication, an absence of *sexual* reproduction. In both the scientific literature of the virus and by scholars such as Jacques Lacan, the virus is devoid of life (and therefore of death) due to its fundamental lack of complex reproductive capacity and vice versa. This equation hearkens back to Michel Serres’ discussion of parasitism, but also provides another intriguing question, the relation between sexuality, reproduction, and life/death as instruments of viral biopower. To this, Lauren Berlant has argued that an increasing social investment in the figure of the child represents the nationalist proliferation of normative heterosexuality. Likewise, Lee Edelman claims, “the Child... marks the fetishistic fixation; of heteronormativity: an erotically charged investment in the rigid sameness of identity that is central to the compulsory narrative of reproductive futurism.”<sup>278</sup> The disaggregation of virality from life/sexual reproduction in this way functions in a similar way to discussions around queer sexualities. Indeed, one need not look too hard to find the metaphorization of queerness with that which is viral, contagious, parasitic, or destructive.<sup>279</sup> One “problem” that haunts the queer/viral being, then, is a distinct lack of a future; without a future, one *never was*.<sup>280</sup> One reason why queer theorists have been insistent on the presentation of alternate modes of temporality, is precisely the erasure-of-being implicit in normative reproductive temporalities.<sup>281</sup> If life, according to its normative ethical definition, is predicated on sexual reproduction, what is to be made of that which does not reproduce

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<sup>277</sup> *Molecular Virology*, (2013 ed.), 17.

<sup>278</sup> Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004)

<sup>279</sup> In particular, the discourse around the HIV/AIDS epidemic is one such site.

<sup>280</sup> This is crucial to an ethics as well. Without proper being, the recognition of which comes through an encounter with the other, there is no life and therefore no responsibility to dispense.

<sup>281</sup> Here we could look to among others: Elizabeth Grosz, Lauren Berlant, Lee Edelman, Judith Butler, Jack Halberstam, etc.

normatively, or at all? How exactly does replication figure? I believe there to be a gradated stickiness to virality, which enables it to function both as attempted inoculation against queer forms of replication and to ensure that those normative pathways of re/production are constantly affirmed. To combat the injustices of contemporary virality, therefore, necessitates moving beyond 'productivity' as sole metric of the good. The current media-economy landscape is affective, attentive, and biopolitical.

Foucault, I believe, provides one possible avenue of inquiry. As Elizabeth Grosz, speaking of Foucault, notes, "Sexuality is a particularly privileged locus of the operations of power because of its strategically advantageous position at the core of individualizing processes of discipline and training, which intensify or realign bodily energies and pleasures."<sup>282</sup> She continues, "Sexuality is not a pure or spontaneous force that is tamed by power; rather, sexuality is deployed by power to enable it to gain a grip on life itself. Sex becomes not just something people do but the secret heart of life."<sup>283</sup> What Grosz is articulating is the central aim of Foucault's concept of biopower, the management of life. As Foucault says, "[Sex] was at the pivot of the two axes along which developed the entire political technology of life...Sex was a means of access both to the life of the body and the life of the species."<sup>284</sup> To Foucault, the body and the population (the two axes of which he speaks) served as vectors for mobilizations of power through sexuality, via various modes of disciplinary social control. Thus, the modern intensities of the biopolitical have come to outline the very parameters of what constitutes life. As Foucault says, the historical transition to modernity constructed "the strange figure of knowledge called man and revealed a space

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<sup>282</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 152.

<sup>283</sup> Ibid.

<sup>284</sup> Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality*. Vol. 1, *An Introduction*. Translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Pantheon., 145-146.

proper to the human sciences.”<sup>285</sup> Therefore, not only does any biopolitical apparatus simply manage life; it is the very means through which man came into being. An epistemological foundation for human life, the ethical implications of Foucault’s assertions are not to be diminished. Recall in the previous chapter my discussions on Levinasian faciality and the disaggregation of human from animal. Foucault is arguing something very similar, that man is historical and a product of particular regimes of knowledge.

Contingent to this new classification of life, known as man, were a whole host of binary classifications, normative and deviant features. Bodies were now subjects, identities that created, “the necessary conditions for the intense investment of power in the implantation of a sexual ‘profile’ or history at the heart or as the secret of each individual. When sexuality can be acknowledged as the innermost secret of our being...then its analysis and regulation become not only necessary but also desirable enterprises.”<sup>286</sup> The new biopolitical regimes of modernity affixed an ontic basis to sexuality. Reproduction, therefore, was one site of social control that discursive power appropriated. I argue that virality represents an alternative mechanism of replicating biopolitical control; another avenue through which power has been disseminated, in organic and digital bodies alike, a means of constituting the human. It is not only the computer virus, as Fred Cohen terms it, that is viral, however, but a whole host of digital transmissions including: memes, swarms, protests, and social media trends.

Foucault is not alone in this revelation. Darwin, Nietzsche, and Bergson all make similar arguments about the place of the human as a product of history; one of many animals, each with unique capacities for knowledge, aesthetics, and ethics. If we found in the first two chapters that humanity and life have been artificially sealed to one another, making

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<sup>285</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, xxiv

<sup>286</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 153.

death (and therefore ethics) a possibly only for the human, the next two chapters aim to undue such preconditions. Instead, as Elizabeth Grosz argues, “life must be understood as the ongoing tendency to actualize the virtual, to make tendencies and potentialities real, to explore organs and activities so as to facilitate and maximize the actions they make possible.”<sup>287</sup> Such becomings eschew the efforts of calculation and classification inherent to data aggregation/visualization and instead embrace the vitality of messiness and chaos.

Take, for example, a swarm. Deleuze and Guattari ask, “How can we conceive of a peopling, a propagation, a becoming that is without filiation or hereditary production? A multiplicity without the unity of an ancestor?”<sup>288</sup> Their answer is to look to contagion, to “propagation by epidemic.”<sup>289</sup> A swarm is precisely that, a mechanism of propagation that is not strictly beholden to genetic genealogy or species coupling. In Michael Crichton’s work *Prey*, he uses the language of swarm to demonstrate human assemblage, stating, “a human being is actually a giant swarm. Or more precisely, it’s a swarm of swarms, because each organ— blood, liver, kidneys—is a separate swarm. What we refer to as a ‘body’ is really the combination of all these organ swarms. . . . [It’s] literally nothing but a swirling mass of cells and atoms, clustered together into smaller swirls of cells and atoms”<sup>290</sup> The recognition of the constitutive elements of the biological human body, however, is quite different from the epistemological mobilization of “the swarm.” As Eugene Thacker notes, “An army ant swarm does have a morphogenetic aspect to it: there is a swarm front, a bivouac, and branching paths. But swarms, packs, flocks, schools are also defined precisely by their shapelessness and formlessness. They have no ‘head’ let alone a ‘face.’ They are headless animals, acephalous animality. They are animality without head or tail, polysensory, poly-

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<sup>287</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Becoming Undone: Darwinian Reflections on Life, Politics, and Art*, 20.

<sup>288</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 241.

<sup>289</sup> Ibid.

<sup>290</sup> Michael Crichton, *Prey*, 260.

affective, ‘amorphous but coordinated’”<sup>291</sup> Thacker argues that the philosophy of biology, driven by the question of what life is, necessarily designates what life is not, the non-human. He says, however, that swarm intelligence is one such presence of non-life, or what he terms “*becoming-nonliving*” that resists easy political (and therefore ontological) categorization. Thacker asserts, “the unique thing about insect swarms and other animal groups (packs, flocks, schools) is not just that there is no leader, but that there is something akin to a fully distributed control. Thus the political paradox of insect societies -- how to understand this balance between control and emergence, *sovereignty* and *multiplicity*?”<sup>292</sup> If insect swarms, to use the example Thacker provides, are “headless” and distributed they are decidedly antagonistic to traditional modes of individuation and subjectivity that have served as benchmarks for humanist ethics. They can, however, be coopted, as we see in the Crichton example, made to represent that which is dangerous to a cohesive human self. More than this, the question of swarm intelligence (in terms of dispersed group power, or ‘hive-mind’ mentalities) has distinct possibilities for biopolitical control. As Thacker asks, “the paradoxical question of the field of swarm intelligence -- can it be coded? Can one in fact engineer distributed control?”<sup>293</sup> If swarm intelligence, or headless animality, or molecularity, as Thacker describes them, represent alternative politics of being(becoming), what are the mechanisms of organization that naturalize them? How are they made biopolitical?

Deleuze and Guattari say in their work, *A Thousand Plateaus*, “The BwO [Body without Organs] is the *field of immanence* of desire, the *plane of consistency* specific to desire (with desire defined as a process of production without reference to any exterior agency, whether

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<sup>291</sup> Eugene Thacker, “Biophilosophy for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century” <http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=472>

<sup>292</sup> Ibid.

<sup>293</sup> Ibid.



it be a lack that hollows it out or a pleasure that fills it).”<sup>294</sup> Critiquing both the negative psychoanalytic economies of Freud/Lacan and the necessary transcendence of Kant and Levinas, Deleuze and Guattari instead posit unconscious desire, or drives as manifestations of environmental impetus. Daniel Smith asserts that to Deleuze and Guattari,

drives never exist in a free and unbound state, nor are they ever merely individual; they are always arranged and assembled by the social formation in which we find ourselves, and one of the aims of *Anti-Oedipus* is to construct a typology of social formations—primitive territorial societies, States, capitalism, and, later, in *A Thousand Plateaus*, nomadic war machines—each of which organizes and assembles the drives and impulses in different ways.<sup>295</sup>

To Deleuze and Guattari, these territorializations are central not only to the construction of human society and selfhood, but also to the formulation of life itself. Deleuze calls this pure immanence. He says,

There is not the slightest reason for thinking that modes of existence need transcendent values by which they could be compared selected, and judged relative to one another. There are only immanent criteria. A possibility of life is evaluated through itself in the movements it lays out and the intensities it creates on a plane of immanence: what is not laid out or created is rejected. A mode of existence is good or bad, noble or vulgar, complete or empty, independently of Good or Evil or any transcendent value: there are never any criteria other than the tenor of existence, the intensification of life.<sup>296</sup>

If the possibility of life is immanent to the BwO, apparent in its affinities, movements, and intensities, then the very archetype of life, the organism, represents instead a suppression of life. The organism to Deleuze and Guattari is “a stratum on the BwO, in other words, a phenomenon of accumulation, coagulation, and sedimentation that, in order to extract labor from the BwO, imposes upon it forms, functions, bonds, dominant and hierarchized organizations, organized transcendences.”<sup>297</sup> As we will see later in the chapter, the

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<sup>294</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 154.

<sup>295</sup> Daniel W. Smith, “Deleuze and the Question of Desire: Toward an Immanent Theory of Ethics,” *Parrhesia*, Number 2, 2007. [http://www.parrhesiajournal.org/parrhesia02/parrhesia02\\_smith.pdf](http://www.parrhesiajournal.org/parrhesia02/parrhesia02_smith.pdf), 71.

<sup>296</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, 74.

<sup>297</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 159.

Deleuzian organism is remarkably similar to the meme in their abilities to classify, signify, and subjectify. Moreover, “for Deleuze, transcendence is the fundamental problem of ethics, what prevents ethics from taking place.”<sup>298</sup> If this is the case, one must engage in a kind of immanent ethics cognizant of how, “the field of immanence is not internal to the self, but neither does it come from an external self or a non-self. Rather it is like the absolute Outside that knows no Selves because interior and exterior are equally a part of the immanence in which they have fused.”<sup>299</sup> This is medial thinking taken to its logical endpoint, an awareness of the connections that structure ethical thought and expansive ontology; the viral interlocutor unfolding.

### **The Computer Virus**

*“In terms of understanding networks, one of the greatest lessons of computer viruses and their cousins (Internet worms, Trojan horses) is that, like biological viruses, they exploit the normal functioning of their host systems to produce more copies of themselves. Viruses are life exploiting life.”*<sup>300</sup>

In 1984 the computer scientist Fred Cohen wrote a paper entitled, “Computer Viruses – Theory and Experiments” that both named and outlined contemporary risks to computer networks. Though software threats had existed to computing systems since the 1960’s, it was Cohen’s work and the acceleration of computer usage that brought a new kind of anxiety to software makers/users.<sup>301</sup> Cohen defined the virus as “a sequence of symbols, which, upon interpretation in a given environment, causes other sequences of symbols in that environment to be modified so as to contain (possibly evolved) viruses.”<sup>302</sup> Cohen, drawing on the biological figure of the virus, not only outlined the actions of these newly coined “viral” entities, but also argued that they exhibited the characteristics of living

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<sup>298</sup> Daniel W. Smith, “Deleuze and the Question of Desire: Toward an Immanent Theory of Ethics,” *Parrhesia*, Number 2, 2007. [http://www.parrhesiajournal.org/parrhesia02/parrhesia02\\_smith.pdf](http://www.parrhesiajournal.org/parrhesia02/parrhesia02_smith.pdf), 68

<sup>299</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 156.

<sup>300</sup> Galloway and Thacker, *The Exploit*, 83.

<sup>301</sup> Jussi Parikka, *Digital Contagions: A Media Archaeology of Computer Viruses*, 63-74.

<sup>302</sup> Fred Cohen, *Computer Viruses*, Dissertation, 1986, 5.

organisms. He argued, “The essence of a living system is in the coupling of form with environment. The environment is the context, and the form is the content. If we consider them together, we consider the nature of life.”<sup>303</sup> To Cohen, the reproductive and evolutionary aspects of the computer virus connected it to organic life. More than this, as Jussi Parikka notes, Cohen’s work was mobilized, “in a cybernetic fashion, life seemed to be a transitive circuit, an articulation between organisms and their environments.”<sup>304</sup> Cohen’s articulation of viral ontology is a mediated one, not simply being, but being as connection, as transition and transmission, an instability that Deleuze and Guattari might call *becoming*. As the previous chapter has (hopefully) shown, the difference between that which we call human and everything is more of a fuzzy borderlands than an easily demarcated line. Likewise, this chapter is interested in exploring the realm of the digital, pushing it beyond both its anthropocentricity and its disembodiment, as well as making useful its concomitant biopolitical apparatus. Virality can be technical, digital, and biological, but more than this it is medial. It is not the *figure* of a particular kind of dispersed ethics, but its *topography*.

Cohen’s conception of the computer virus helped push forward a sea change in how people conceived of their relation to the digital world, but it certainly hasn’t been the only word on digital contagion. Throughout the 1980’s and 1990’s there was a wealth of cultural production on what burgeoning media industries meant to humankind and how those interactions might affect what constituted ‘the human.’ Movies like *War Games*, *Videodrome*, and *Blade Runner* highlighted the dangers of non-human intelligence to American audiences. The idea that subversive actors might be able to hijack national security, mainstream media, or even the human body capitalized on the Cold War tensions of the Reagan era, but also demonstrated a growing public recognition of digital culture. Combined with the rise of

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<sup>303</sup> Fred Cohen, *Computer Viruses*, Dissertation, 1986, 222.

<sup>304</sup> Jussi Parikka, *Digital Contagions: A Media Archaeology of Computer Viruses*, 68.

cyberpunk literature and medico-cultural discourse of HIV, the milieu of infection rose to great prominence in the 80s, an endeavor that normalized traditional information networks whilst demonizing alternatives. As Susan Blackmore has asserted, “All this talk of viruses makes me wonder just why we call some pieces of computer code a virus and others a computer program...The answer is not so much to do with the harm they do...but to do with their function. They have none apart from their own replication.”<sup>305</sup> While Blackmore recognizes the facile distinction between virus and code in their outcomes (one as ‘positive’ for the dominant subset of users and the other supposedly antagonistic to those ends) I believe she misrepresents the function of the virus. Again we find that virality (in its digital or biological form) is identified through its *lack of purpose* beyond mechanistic replication, divorced entirely from ecologies of ‘normative’ reproduction and therefore not privy to any form of sexuality. Function becomes a loaded term of humanism, a way to deemphasize being that is not in service of hegemonic structures of power. This is precisely the means through which supposedly ‘deviant’ human populations have been managed as well. What are [insert social group]’s contributions to the state, to capital, to “society” and what are they “taking” from it? In this, ontology becomes accounting praxis, a balance sheet of who has earned benefits along lines of productivity and who has not. Reducing the viral to mere replication denies its mutative capacity for deviation, its possibilities for difference, and its ability to undermine the normative.

Donna Haraway has argued, “there is no ground for ontologically opposing the organic, the technical, and the textual.”<sup>306</sup> She says that such an “ontological continuity enables the discussion of the growing practical problem of ‘virus’ programs infecting

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<sup>305</sup> Susan Blackmore, “The Guru Trap or What Computer Viruses Can Tell Us About Saddam Hussein” *Computer Underground Digest*, vol 3., issue 31, August 23, 1991., 21.

<sup>306</sup> Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, 212.

computer software.”<sup>307</sup> Haraway too likens the computer virus to its biological counterpart as the “body’s unwelcome invaders.” Each of these analyses, however, takes ontological stability as a given, in which a cohesive human body or ‘pure’ piece of software is invaded by some malevolent unseeable force. Jussi Parikka, speaking on the constructedness of the virus, notes, “The biological virus became intelligible only through complex scientific and cultural assemblages...Similarly, the fleeting articulations and possible contexts of digital viruses and kindred programs have been stabilized, objectified, and made intelligible as malicious software in complex assemblages that include computer scientists, media practices, [and] capitalist discourses.”<sup>308</sup> Seemingly, the virus becomes a stand in for transmissions we don’t particularly like, the necessarily negative counterpart in a digital dialectic.

Some viral projects, however, have sought to employ digital viruses as means of undermining their normative engineering. In addition to standalone viruses like “Melissa,” or digital viral projects like *speculat1on.net*, Melinda Rackham writes in her poem/essay “carrier becoming symborg” of the influence of purity to the viral. She states, in the 1980’s, “viral infection became an ‘information transgression’ within the ‘strategic system of our immune system’ and the body a territory of hierarchical attack and defence mechanisms against alien invaders.”<sup>309</sup> Virality was not only an attack on the structural integrity/ideological purity of the human body, but also a means of managing code, installing threat and anxiety into the very fabric of digital discourse. Thus, closed software systems became “safe” software systems, open source projects (absent corporate incentives for profiteering) were dangerous and susceptible, and eventually the neutrality and anonymity of

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<sup>307</sup> Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, 252.

<sup>308</sup> Jussi Parikka, *Digital Contagions: A Media Archaeology of Computer Viruses*, 20.

<sup>309</sup> Melinda Rackham, “carrier becoming symborg,” *Culture Machine* Vol 3., 2001.  
<http://www.culturemachine.net/index.php/cm/article/view/291/276>

the Internet would become a threat to national security.<sup>310</sup> Rackham continues, “By engaging in this Star Wars strategy of disassociation from the body, the patriotic duty of anyone who was a viral carrier was to fight the enemy within, and not transmit the virus by contact with others. Non transmission of body fluids, especially blood, and denial of the flesh, enforced the self contained, closed off, and now disembodied citizen.”<sup>311</sup> Here, however, is where I diverge from Rackham. While she sees the ‘Star Wars’ approach as a means to disembodiment, I argue instead that the 1980s-1990s popular discourse of virality was itself a fusion of material containment and informatic purity. The hermetic ideology of both HIV and computer security rhetoric is not a line of flight from those bodies, but a way to reassemble them as individuals. It, the apparatus of the viral specter, does not evacuate the body of all material meaning, but attempts to eradicate its sociality and mobilize a particular kind of embodiment. Putting someone in solitary confinement is a specific strategy of body management, not an absence of embodied politics, but a material way to fundamentally alter someone’s relation to their own body.

So if the late 20<sup>th</sup> century relationship to virality was seemingly an endless series of inoculations against it, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the forces of capital deployed an alternative. The proliferation of social media was one site in which ‘virality’ began its transition from unambiguous ‘bad’ to profitable, when manageable, ‘good.’<sup>312</sup> Advertised as a way for people to connect, media platforms like MySpace, Facebook, and eventually Twitter, Instagram, Vine (RIP), Snapchat, etc., made sociality a public selling-point. These apps not only provide(d) the space for exchange, but also actively encourage a drastic increase in content

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<sup>310</sup> Just look at the contemporary push to destroy net neutrality in the wake of the Edward Snowden leaks. The Internet is a goldmine for all kinds of information to be bought, sold, and traded.

<sup>311</sup> Melinda Rackham, “carrier becoming symborg,” *Culture Machine* Vol 3., 2001.

<http://www.culturemachine.net/index.php/cm/article/view/291/276>

<sup>312</sup> The pun here is obvious right!?

production. Your profile is a way to divulge ‘to the world’ who you are, what you care about, and what your specific contributions are. This is, of course, a purposefully two-way street. Facebook and others, provide the infrastructure for those relations to self-hood, they police what content is appropriate, what algorithms are put in use to mediate trending topics, and most importantly, they have access to an almost unfathomable amount of personal data. When confronted with these realities, the viral, or, those media objects which spread fast and far, are valuable commodities to be encouraged, rather than demonized. And yet, even today, there is a tension between virus as antagonist (its ties to death, contagion, queerness, and toxicity either digital or organic) and as productive pathway of capital’s biopolitical control. This is precisely why a linear/historical account tracing the ascendance of ‘positive virality’ gives an incomplete picture. Crises of refugee status, police brutality, meme-racism, and alt-right fascism are all *contemporary* viral problems, just as they were problems of the past. Informatic circulation, however, *has* reached a fever pitch, fundamentally altering our relationships to the self, to capital, and to a concept of what constitutes ‘the human.’

These are also all ethical undertakings. Governments rebranding ‘mass surveillance’ as ‘bulk collection,’ are another, whereby the mining of supposedly innocuous data loses its big brother aesthetic, in favor of ‘benign’ algorithmic response.<sup>313</sup> The elimination of a naturalized human component of vision represents one marker in a transition to non/inhuman responses to dissidence, itself a mobilization of cybernetic biopower. Just as “we’ve never been modern,” we’ve also never been human, or even post-human. Such ontological containers serve only to assuage those feelings of fulfillment that come from chasing an impossible ideal. Being human, at its most ‘pure and enlightened,’ means being

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<sup>313</sup> Glenn Greenwald, The Orwellian Re-Branding of “Mass Surveillance” as Merely “Bulk Collection” *The Intercept*, March 13, 2015. <https://firstlook.org/theintercept/2015/03/13/orwellian-re-branding-mass-surveillance-merely-bulk-collection/>

principled and good. It also means maximizing embodied technologies available toward these ends. In the past, this has meant the rigorous pursuit of knowledge (Aristotle), seeing, feeling, and acquiescing to the divine (Aquinas), or mobilizing consciousness towards the rational (Descartes). The proximity of, and at times appendage-like quality of digital technology *does not* signify a departure from the instantiation of human-as-ideal, but is merely another mutation of its ethical prerogatives. The danger of approaching virality from a morally neutral perspective (whatever that is supposed to mean), makes one susceptible to replicating its normative aims. Thus,

The seemingly contradictory themes of the virus as the threat and the essence of capitalism are, in fact, intertwined and operate in sync. The ideas of risk control, safety measures and the construction of the responsible user are thus to be read as integral elements of viral capitalism: with these elements, or discourses, the fear of computer viruses has been turned into a part of the flows of consumer capitalism, products and practices that 'buy off anxiety.'<sup>314</sup>

Even consumer capital has begun its transformation from production to consumption into attention-based, or prosumer capital.<sup>315</sup> Why wage war on a battlefield of labor when it is much easier to incorporate, coopt, and indebt those you might otherwise have to fight against? As Lynn Margulis and Dorion Sagan point out, "Life did not take over the globe by combat, but by networking."<sup>316</sup> But, importantly, incorporation, indebtedness, and cooptation *are* forms of violence. One of the most powerful tools of hegemony is the ability to delineate the parameters of ethics, namely what exactly constitutes violence. Accessing the biopolitical power of the virus and its ethical prerogatives, then, requires a closer look at the diverse assemblages in which it is implicated. Thus, I turn to one of virality's most concentrated vectors, the field of biology.

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<sup>314</sup> Parikka, J. (2004) 'Digital monsters, binary aliens - computer viruses, capitalism and the flow of information', *fibreculture* 4, [online] Available at: <[http:// www.fibreculture.org/journal/issue4/issue4\\_parikka.html](http://www.fibreculture.org/journal/issue4/issue4_parikka.html)>

<sup>315</sup> I discuss this more in other chapters, particularly the total breakdown of typical relations of labor. Prosumers make the same objects they consume, and in doing so actively remake the terrain of capital against the dialectic.

<sup>316</sup> <http://nautil.us/issue/35/boundaries/parasites-are-us>



## Biologies

With this in mind, we must track various topographies of desire, charting the means/memes through which the biopolitical is at once digital, organic, and viral. Modes of viral reproduction are crucial to the biopolitical management of populations. It is useful, in this vein, to look at the concept of reproduction as an epistemic classification of desire, not as naturalized fact or biological reality. This is readily apparent in the notion of ‘horizontal gene transfer’ most commonly associated with bacteria, but extant amongst larger organisms as well. Horizontal gene transfer is “the movement of genetic material between bacteria, other than by descent, in which information travels through the generations as the cell divides.”<sup>317</sup> As one article on the subject notes, “the ancient communion between ferns and hornworts is the latest in a series of newly discovered examples of horizontal gene transfer: when DNA passes from one organism to another generally unrelated one, rather than moving ‘vertically’ from parent to child.”<sup>318</sup> Therefore, the traditional model of evolutionary biology, the tree, in which organisms evolve vertically through the generations passing traits on to their descendants, is at the very least an incomplete one. Timothy Morton presents something similar in arguing against deterministic interpretations of Darwinian evolution. He says, “[e]volution means that life-forms are made of other life-forms. Entities are mutually determining: they exist in relation to each other and derive from each other. Nothing exists independently, and nothing comes from nothing.”<sup>319</sup> This also aligns with the views of microbiologist and biophysicist Carl Woese, who argues that the earliest stages of life on earth emerged not from a single ancestor, but a “communal...loosely knit, diverse

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<sup>317</sup> “Horizontal Gene Transfer” <http://www.sci.sdsu.edu/~smaloy/MicrobialGenetics/topics/genetic-exchange/exchange/exchange.html>

<sup>318</sup> Ferris Jabr, “The Gene That Jumped” *Aeon* <http://aeon.co/magazine/science/how-horizontal-gene-transfer-changes-evolutionary-theory/>

<sup>319</sup> Timothy Morton. “Queer Ecology,” *PMLA* 125, no. 2 (2010): 275.

conglomeration of primitive cells that evolved as a unit.”<sup>320</sup> He continues, “it is through lateral transfer, not vertical inheritance, that systems primarily evolve at the progenote stage. As a result of genetic mixing, organismal lineages, consensus histories of an organism's genes, did not exist, although short-term ‘cell lines’ necessarily did.”<sup>321</sup>

Woese argues that the primordial origins of life came about not through normative cellular reproduction, but a chaotic miasma of genetic exchange. “The universal ancestor is not an entity, not a thing. It is a process characteristic of a particular evolutionary stage.”<sup>322</sup> For Woese, horizontal/lateral transfer was a medial endeavor, whereby the exchange itself rather than the entities engaged is of the utmost importance. He describes the environment in noting,

in a world dominated by lateral gene transfer, an innovation takes over by direct ‘invasion.’ The organism (organismal lineage) that carries the innovation also brings with it all its other idiosyncrasies, which are potential determinants of the future evolutionary course. The innovation established through lateral transfer, however, becomes stripped of extraneous genetic baggage by that process. Evolution at the subcellular level can be viewed as a bridge between modern organismal evolution and the much earlier evolution that involved ‘organic’ chemicals in an abiotic world.<sup>323</sup>

The invasive process that Woese describes is also championed by biochemist Ford Doolittle who argues,

Although genes are passed vertically from generation to generation, this vertical inheritance is not the only important process that has affected the evolution of cells. Rampant operation of a different process— lateral, or horizontal, gene transfer—has also affected the course of that evolution profoundly. Such transfer involves the delivery of single genes, or whole suites of them, not from a parent cell to its offspring but across species barriers.<sup>324</sup>

The notion of lateral gene transfer effectively explodes the concept of singular and coherent species classifications. What’s more, the work of Woese and Doolittle is strikingly in line

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<sup>320</sup> Carl Woese. “The Universal Ancestor” in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, Vol. 95, No. 12, June 9, 1998., 6858.

<sup>321</sup> Ibid.

<sup>322</sup> Ibid.

<sup>323</sup> Ibid.

<sup>324</sup> W. Ford Doolittle, “Uprooting the Tree of Life” *Scientific American* February 2000, <http://labs.icb.ufmg.br/lbem/aulas/grad/evol/treeoflife-complexcells.pdf>, 94.

with Deleuze and Guattari and their model of becoming. They argue, “Becoming is not an evolution, at least not an evolution by descent and filiation. Becoming produces nothing by filiation: all filiation is imaginary. Becoming is always of a different order than filiation. It concerns alliance. If evolution includes any veritable becomings, it is the domain of *symbioses* that bring into play beings of totally different scales and kingdoms, with no possible filiation...Becoming is involutionary, involution is creation.”<sup>325</sup> Deleuze and Guattari make the same argument that Woese does of a communal exchange across “species” boundaries. This is a kind of perpetual exchange, not limited to the primordial past, but in constant flux at all times.

Though Woese limits most of his hypothesis to the earliest/‘simplest’ modes of life, lateral gene transfer is something that also takes place in much more complex organisms. As Ferris Jabr writes, “what has become increasingly clear in the past 10 years is that this liberal genetic exchange is definitely not limited to the DNA of the microscopic world.”<sup>326</sup> Beyond bacteria DNA has been transferred amongst a wide range of organisms, including plants and animals, “not just between species, but also between different *kingdoms* of life.”<sup>327</sup> This has led many scientists to term the agglomeration of genes that are known as particular species to be mosaics, a diverse mixture of DNA from myriad sources rather than a genealogical line.<sup>328</sup> The apparatus through which these genetic transfers take place is equally intriguing, as it is believed that parasites (insect, bacterial, viral, or otherwise) are primarily responsible for

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<sup>325</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 238.

<sup>326</sup> Ferris Jabr, “The Gene That Jumped” *Aeon* <http://aeon.co/magazine/science/how-horizontal-gene-transfer-changes-evolutionary-theory/>

<sup>327</sup> Ibid.

<sup>328</sup> One of the earliest proponents of this line of thinking was scientist Barbara McClintock, who argued as early as the 1940s that “an organism’s genome is not a stationary entity, but rather is subject to alteration and rearrangement” (aka ‘jumping genes’) (<http://www.nature.com/scitable/topicpage/barbara-mcclintock-and-the-discovery-of-jumping-34083>) . Her work was widely dismissed for the next 20 years until more was understood about genetics. She eventually received the Nobel Prize for Physiology or Medicine in 1983. Ferris Jabr, “The Gene That Jumped” *Aeon* <http://aeon.co/magazine/science/how-horizontal-gene-transfer-changes-evolutionary-theory/>

the exchanges. Given the in-betweenness of the parasite this is hardly surprising. However, the reliance of species being on mediation, and more, its ephemerality, is crucial. HGT demonstrates a distinct lack of purity in the organic world, an insight that all being is fractured, and messy, and constantly in flux. To this, Elizabeth Grosz argues, “Becoming is thus not a capacity inherited by life, an evolutionary outcome or consequence, but the very principle of matter itself, with its possibilities of linkage with the living, with its possibilities of mutual transformation.”<sup>329</sup> I too believe that we must investigate the innumerable linkages that characterize not only the principles of evolution, but the profound impacts such a way of thinking might have on contemporary ethical and political questions.

The prior paragraphs may seem to be an aside in a chapter that otherwise purports to discuss the realm of the digital. I feel, however, that to disaggregate the digital from the organic would undermine the similarities *and* cross-pollinations that the two share. Moreover, the regimes of power I am investigating flow through digital and organic networks, the distinctions between which are becoming increasingly minute. Deleuze argues that this is a topographical question, beyond a semiotics of being, and towards a more complex understanding of ‘humanities’ thought. He asserts,

The forces within man enter into a relation with forces from the outside, those of silicon which supersedes carbon, or genetic components which supersede the organism, or agrammaticalities which supersede the signifier. In each case we must study the operations of the superfold, of which the ‘double helix’ is the best-known example. What is the superman? It is the formal compound of the forces within man and these new forces. . . . As Foucault would say, the superman is much less than the disappearance of living men, and much more than a change of concept: it is the advent of a new form that is neither God nor man and which, it is hoped, will not prove worse than its two previous forms.<sup>330</sup>

Digital viruses are merely one access point to understanding the mobility and exchange of desire, whereby infection is a mechanism of change, an introduction of a new element into a

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<sup>329</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Becoming Undone*, 52.

<sup>330</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, trans. Seán Hand (London: Athlone, 1988), 131-32.

supposedly stable (one could say normative) environment. Tracking precisely how particular information is transferred, in micro and macro-transactions, and looking at the constitutive elements of such transmissions is a means to understanding how that information is being managed. Foucault, in discussing biopower, talks predominantly about the role of institutions in constructing and governing life, I am interested in wholly different *scales of the biopolitical*. If human beings have billions of basepairs of DNA amongst trillions of cells at what threshold does the human become identifiable? How are particular kinds of knowledge outside the anthropocene affected by these networks of genetic/digital desire? More than this, what are the ways in which that genetic information is mobilized?

Richard Dawkins in 1976 wrote *The Selfish Gene*, a work that aimed to “examine the biology of selfishness and altruism.”<sup>331</sup> Dawkins, an evolutionary biologist, argues that “the fundamental unit of selection, and therefore of self-interest, is not the species, nor the group, nor even, strictly, the individual. It is the gene, the unit of heredity.”<sup>332</sup> Dawkins’ selfish genes are the generators of the evolutionary rigors of ‘survival of the fittest’ whereby life has become increasingly complex through genetic self-regard held above all else. He avers that origin of this phenomenon was a primeval molecule he terms ‘the replicator,’ which possessed “the extraordinary property of being able to create copies of itself.”<sup>333</sup> The relative stability of these molecules, whether through time of existence or speed/accuracy of replication led to their proliferation, through which the finite resources necessary to support an ever expanding population made competition between these molecules essential. Dawkins notes, “They did not know they were struggling, or worry about it; the struggle was

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<sup>331</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 1.

<sup>332</sup> Ibid.

<sup>333</sup> Ibid.

conducted without any hard feelings, indeed without feelings of any kind.”<sup>334</sup> It is through this naturalization of selfishness that Dawkins locates both the origins of life and the means through which more complex modes of life evolved. Eschewing intentionality and affect, evolution to Dawkins, is merely genetic self-preservation, a championing of the individual at its most basic level. Ironically then, Dawkins performs a kind of atheistic transcendence, whereby evolution acts as that great other that commands, “You will be organized, you will be an organism, you will articulate your body.”<sup>335</sup>

But Dawkins is not content to leave replicators to the ancient primordial soup of early life on earth, instead he articulates a new form of replicator, one that wields gene selfishness as transmitter for human culture. He calls this the meme, “a noun which conveys the idea of a unit of cultural transmission.”<sup>336</sup> Memes are afforded cultural capital through their abilities to replicate and outcompete other cultural artifacts for survival. As Sanjay Sharma states,

Memes are supposedly in a neo-Darwinian competition to survive in human minds, and there are three principal characteristics of successful memes: copying-fidelity (qualities that enable reproduction, such as memorability); fecundity (relevance and speed of replication); and longevity (length of time present for reliable reproduction). Predictably, the Web is considered the prime propagator of memes because of its ease of digital reproducibility and rapid diffusion of information.<sup>337</sup>

Sharma’s analysis of Dawkins makes evident the sexualized preconditions necessary to his concept of selfish genes/memes. Copying fidelity, fecundity, and longevity represent biopolitical mechanisms *wielded* for the management of information, whether it is cultural or genetic (or in many cases both). Similar apparatuses have been central to the manipulation and control of human life, as most biopolitical analyses have argued. Here, however, I tend

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<sup>334</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 20.

<sup>335</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 159.

<sup>336</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 206.

<sup>337</sup> Sanjay Sharma, “Black Twitter?: Racial Hashtags, Networks and Contagion” *new formations: a journal of culture/theory/politics*, Volume 78, 2013, 59-60.

that the micro-biopolitics of genetic or meme material does not require a human interlocutor to unfold, but neither is it natural or unmanipulated. Dawkins insistence on normative replication as the means through which memes propagate denies alternative methods of transmission that cannot be explained genealogically such as HGT. Furthermore, as Deleuze and Guattari argue, there is a heterogeneity that a logic of filiation/genealogy/genetics ignores, which can only be accessed through an embrace of epidemic or contagion. They say,

These combinations [human beings, viruses, molecules, etc.] are neither genetic or structural; they are interkingdoms, unnatural participations... This is a far cry from filiative production or hereditary reproduction, in which the only differences retained are a simple duality between sexes within the same species, and small modifications across generations. For us on the other hand, there are as many sexes as there are terms in symbioses, as many differences as elements contributing to a process of contagion.<sup>338</sup>

Therefore, what is missing from Dawkins conjecture, in addition to its reliance on naturalized reproduction, is a complex exploration of power on how and why memes are circulated and how desire figures into particular systems of dissemination.

The implications of the objective vacuum Dawkins' memes operate in is evidenced by his contemporary Daniel Dennett who declares, "The invasion of human brains by culture, in the form of memes, has created human minds, which alone among animal minds can conceive of things distant and future, and formulate alternative goals."<sup>339</sup> Dennett's assertion marks the meme as both uniquely human *and* a parasitic entity. Dawkins makes a similar claim, stating "When you plant a fertile meme in my mind you literally parasitize my brain, turning it into a vehicle for the meme's propagation in just the way that a virus may parasitize the genetic mechanism of a host cell. To an extent Dawkins is correct, cultural transmissions, are spread between people via mediated networks. He even uses the virus as an example of evolutionary ingenuity indicative of the selfish gene:

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<sup>338</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 242.

<sup>339</sup> Daniel Dennett. *Darwin's Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995, 4.

Viruses consist of pure DNA (or a related self-replicating molecule) surrounded by a protein jacket. They are all parasitic. The suggestion is that they have evolved from 'rebel' genes who escaped, and now travel from body to body directly through the air, rather than via the more conventional vehicles—sperms and eggs. If this is true, we might just as well regard ourselves as colonies of viruses! Some of them cooperate symbiotically, and travel from body to body in sperms and eggs. These are the conventional 'genes'. Others live parasitically, and travel by whatever means they can. If the parasitic DNA travels in sperms and eggs, it perhaps forms the 'paradoxical' surplus of DNA...If it travels through the air, or by other direct means, it is called 'virus' in the usual sense.<sup>340</sup>

What is troubling about his account, however, is the self-sustaining logic that it is reliant upon. Dawkins is quick to point out that selfishness is naturalized (in both its genetic and memetic forms) and that (ironically) individual human resistance is the only means towards escaping the perils of evolutionary egotism. He ends his work claiming, "We, alone on earth, can rebel against the tyranny of the selfish replicators."<sup>341</sup> By ascribing traits like greed and selfishness to evolution, however, Dawkins is effectively effacing those active agents, who whether with conscious intent or not, generate, manipulate, and obfuscate cultural products. Moreover, Dawkins enacts "the ethical themes one finds in transcendent philosophies like those of Levinas and Derrida—an absolute responsibility for the other that I can never assume, or an infinite call to justice that I can never satisfy."<sup>342</sup> This, "from the Deleuzian point of view of immanence [is] akin to imperatives whose effect is to separate me from my capacity to act. From the viewpoint of immanence, in other words, transcendence, far from being our salvation, represents our slavery and impotence reduced to its lowest point."<sup>343</sup> If memes/genes are viral assemblages that structure biological being and cultural transmission towards an ethics, how are they being applied?

## Viral Aesthetics

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<sup>340</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 196-197.

<sup>341</sup> Ibid., 215.

<sup>342</sup> Daniel W. Smith, "Deleuze and the Question of Desire: Toward and Immanent Theory of Ethics," *Parrhesia*, Number 2, 2007. [http://www.parrhesiajournal.org/parrhesia02/parrhesia02\\_smith.pdf](http://www.parrhesiajournal.org/parrhesia02/parrhesia02_smith.pdf), 68

<sup>343</sup> Ibid.





Figure 15: Google Search Trends for 'Harambe' (July 2016 – October 2016)

On May 28<sup>th</sup>, 2016 a three-year-old black boy fell into the gorilla enclosure at the Cincinnati Zoo. As a result a 17-year-old gorilla inside the pen, Harambe, was shot, as the zoo argued, for the boy's protection.<sup>344</sup> Nearly three months later, on August 22<sup>nd</sup> the director of the zoo, Thane Maynard, issued a plea for an end to the 'memeification' of Harambe, stating, "We are not amused by the memes, petitions and signs about Harambe...Our zoo family is still healing, and the constant mention of Harambe makes moving forward more difficult for us."<sup>345</sup> The three-month interim marked a significant transition in the media presence of Harambe, from symbol of public uproar and cross-species sympathy to widely memed Internet joke. The death and affective trajectory of Harambe, therefore, represents a unique vector in analyzing intersections of animality, race, and the phenomenon of virality. Harambe, like Cecil the Lion before him, became a widely appropriated Internet cause, one with fraught ethical implications.

At first, much of the outcry concerning Harambe centered on the question of responsibility, or the circumstances that led to his death. One *Scientific American* article raised

<sup>344</sup> "Cincinnati Zoo Stands By Decision to Shoot, Kill Gorilla" *WLWT5*, May 31, 2016.

<http://www.wlwt.com/article/cincinnati-zoo-stands-by-decision-to-shoot-kill-gorilla-1/3566098>

<sup>345</sup> Julie Carr Smyth and Dan Sewell, "Harambe Lives" *AP*, August 22, 2016.

<http://bigstory.ap.org/article/30e2268f9c084dcfbec37ee7b716a362/harambe-lives-killed-zoo-gorilla-gets-second-life-online>

concerns about the ethics of zoos, decrying the systemic and immoral circumstances, which brought Harambe and the boy together.<sup>346</sup> More prevalent, however, was public outcry about the boy's parents. A change.org petition, entitled "Justice for Harambe" garnered 500,000 supporters seeking prosecution against the boy's parents, Michelle Gregg and Deonne Dickerson, for negligence leading to Harambe's death (charges were never brought).<sup>347</sup> The petition called for the parents to "be held accountable for lack of supervision and negligence that caused Harambe to lose his life." Other responses expressed a less-veiled form of racism. The hashtag #Justice4Harambe was one such site, in which white supremacists charted the 'similarities' between people of color and gorillas.

The juxtaposition of race and animal imagery has an extensive and horrific history. In the U.S., colonialist racism that depicted people of color as 'less than human' was used to justify slavery. Blacks people were similarly demonized in the post-reconstruction era through associations with bestial or unbridled sexuality, particularly in the image of the 'sex crazed negro.' This trope has not disappeared today, however. Under the auspices of a newly invigorated politics of respectability, the character of young black men gunned down by the police is constantly in question. It isn't uncommon for the specter of dehumanization to rear its ugly head in the language of 'criminals,' 'thugs,' and 'animals.'<sup>348</sup> Through this lens, it is impossible to divorce the responses to Harambe's death from those to the manner in which many young black men lose their lives. Moreover, the widespread denigration of the young boy's parents, and the celebration of Harambe's life, act against similar movements around the loss of black lives, particularly the antipathy towards #BlackLivesMatter.

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<sup>346</sup> Marc Bekoff, "Why Was Harambe the Gorilla in a Zoo in the First Place?" *Scientific American*, May 31, 2016. <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/guest-blog/why-was-harambe-the-gorilla-in-a-zoo-in-the-first-place/>

<sup>347</sup> "Justice for Harambe" *Change.org* <https://www.change.org/p/cincinnati-zoo-justice-for-harambe>

<sup>348</sup> Jason Stanley, "The War on Thugs" *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 10, 2015. <http://www.chronicle.com/article/The-War-on-Thugs/230787>

It was with this in mind that many Twitter users began reconfiguring the outpouring of sympathy for Harambe, highlighting the hypocrisy of caring for a gorilla at the expense of black lives. The resultant viral meme #DicksOut4Harambe showcases the seeming cognitive dissonance many express when alternatively presented with the deaths of young black men and a gorilla. The hashtag has, however, like many other iterations of Black social media presence (and in true meme form), taken on a (racialized) life of its own. While espousing a subversive reconfiguration of what lives matter to whom, the memeification of Harambe has also largely become a breeding ground for racist and sexist rhetoric, as can be seen in the hack and doxxing of comedian Leslie Jones.<sup>349</sup> The viral possibilities of the meme seemingly cut both ways, then, providing a medium to challenge white supremacy on a large-scale while remaining vulnerable to cooptation and appropriation.

This, I believe, is tied to the temporal mechanisms of that which goes viral. As this insightful essay by Britney Summit-Gil reminds us, the contemporary ‘meme market’ metaphorizes an (often self-aware) economics of invested time in cultural objects.<sup>350</sup> Memes, in this way, have a peculiar shelf life.<sup>351</sup> Any medium has trends that come and go, but few others offer the opportunity for ‘democratic’ (I use that word very cautiously here) participation in that life cycle. The meme economy gives Internet users the power to briefly dictate what images circulate the most, not TV executives, fashion moguls, or politicians.<sup>352</sup> In a way, the aesthetics of the meme acknowledge this transience, as well as the tenuous grasp on cultural power that they wield. The memes that arise from me\_irl, 4chan, or

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<sup>349</sup> Andrew Marantz, “The Shameful Trolling of Leslie Jones,” *The New Yorker* August 26, 2016. <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/the-shameful-trolling-of-leslie-jones>

<sup>350</sup> Britney Summit-Gil, “Memes, Markets, and Metaphors” *Cyborgology* October 14, 2016. <https://thesocietypages.org/cyborgology/2016/10/14/memes-markets-and-metaphors/>

<sup>351</sup> I go into much more detail on the genetic history and utilization of memes in chapter 3, but my use here is meant to serve as introduction to their aesthetic importance.

<sup>352</sup> More on this, especially on the pseudo-self-awareness of the meme economy as founded on nothing but what its audience supports. It is an economy that is allowed to be aware of the fictions that capital undergirds, like children playing at war. Its innocence is infectious and intoxicating.

otherwise, at least in their contemporary iterations, don't seek ironic reappropriation or authenticity, but cleave the image entirely from anything but transience. That which replicates the most wins out. Memes in this way seem doomed to their Dawkinsian 'roots,' masquerading as a democratic and objective means of quantifying success, while inscribing that very ideology in their users.



Figure 16: dat boi

What is it, then, to speak of the death of a meme (or its resurrection)? The answer I believe is twofold. First, as previously mentioned, memes are a point of access in the process of cultural production. By killing off and resurrecting particular memes, users play at dictating what is seen as relevant (a useful parallel can be found in the 'grassroots' campaigns to resurrect dead cultural products, successfully done in the case of *MST3K* and *Veronica Mars* and still a pipe dream for *Firefly* fans). In doing so, they reify a contemporary capitalist market ideology of consuming that which you yourself have labored to produce. Second, and

concomitant with the first, is the connection between circulation and ontology. Michel Foucault argues in *The Order of Things* that the finitude of life is that which invigorates capital. He also demonstrates the *humanity* of market time. The irreality of economy, evidenced in the meme economy, isn't problematic to the reproduction of its logic, but a key component of its contemporary cultural reorientation. As a means of capture, memes can seemingly never arrest the motility of capital, regardless of their reconfigurations of life and death precisely because they are an actant in it.

In writing of her concept of the poor image, Hito Steyerl re-envision the object aura that Benjamin defines in his essay "The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction." To Steyerl, "The poor image is no longer about the real thing—the originary original," but instead "about its own real conditions of existence: about swarm circulation, digital dispersion, fractured and flexible temporalities... about defiance and appropriation just as it is about conformism and exploitation. In short: it is about reality."<sup>353</sup> In doing so, Steyerl moves us away from an aesthetics of a self-contained object, wrapped up in its own essence and hermetically sealed against the tide of replication. The aura of the poor image, instead, is a product of its transience, of its virality. As Steyerl asserts, "The poor image thus constructs anonymous global networks just as it creates a shared history. It builds alliances as it travels, provokes translation or mistranslation, and creates new publics and debates. By losing its visual substance it recovers some of its political punch and creates a new aura around it. This aura is no longer based on the permanence of the "original," but on the transience of the copy."<sup>354</sup> This is why memes take on an almost preposterously low fidelity aesthetics, they are quickly made, circulated, and reappropriated.

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<sup>353</sup> Hito Steyerl "In Defense of the Poor Image" *e-flux* November 2009 <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/>

<sup>354</sup> Ibid. Benjamin and Memes!



But if meme circulation is predicated on a need for replication (à la capital's insistence on perpetual growth) it still has to make headways with users (architectures of power still affect how images are circulated and how we feel about them). Steyerl explains that the brilliance of the poor image is the cooptation by which it operates, making cultural production a mutually constitutive process. This in itself is nothing new, cultural studies is practically founded on the ideas of Stuart Hall and Michel Foucault, in which media 'consumers' are actually active participants in the becoming of culture. What Steyerl highlights, however, is a technic through which that contribution is made explicit (a post-cultural studies moment where cultural production is dispersed and "egalitarian"). Thus, the poor image "is also permeated by the most advanced commodification techniques. While it enables the users' active participation in the creation and distribution of content, it also drafts them into production. Users become the editors, critics, translators, and (co-)authors of poor images."<sup>355</sup> Prospective child soldiers are made complicit in the production of heinous violence through their forced participation, they are in effect severed from one community and affectively bonded to those who are similarly 'guilty.'<sup>356</sup> The logic, to a different degree of course, applies in a similar way to the meme economy that Steyerl is expounding.

Steyerl's poor image is dexterously re-sculpted by Aria Dean, who argues in her fantastic essay "Poor Meme, Rich Meme" on the ontological implications of meme circulation. Dean states, "Relatability helps memes sustain a kind of cohesion in "collective being," a collective memory that can never be fully encompassed; one can never zoom out

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<sup>355</sup> Hito Steyerl "In Defense of the Poor Image" *e-flux* November 2009 <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/>

<sup>356</sup> This is probably an inappropriate comparison to make, but as of now I can't think of another analogy that fits so well.

enough to see it in its entirety.”<sup>357</sup> What Dean recognizes is the sticky temporary accumulation of affects that bridge how we see ourselves, as well as those formative images out of which identity emerges and to which sociality and community are beholden. Dean argues that blackness is one particularly charged site, stating, “There is no articulable ontology of blackness, no essential blackness, because blackness’s only home is in its circulating representations: a network that includes all the bodies that bear its markers, the words produced by such bodies, the words made to appear to have been produced by such bodies, the flat images that purport to document them, and so forth.”<sup>358</sup> To Dean, we occupy a world in which the constructedness of identity is self-evident, but also through which it is also evacuated of any subversive politics. ‘BlackPeopleTwitter’ is one such site in which the messiness of constantly un/becoming signification up for grabs has been oriented towards a kind of puppeteering, a meme mimesis. The trap of liberation that Foucault famously outlined early in *The History of Sexuality* has been reoriented,

What sustains our eagerness to speak of sex in terms of repression is doubtless this opportunity to speak out against the powers that be, to utter truths and promise bliss, to link together enlightenment, liberation, and manifold pleasures; to pronounce a discourse that combines the fervor of knowledge, the determination to change the laws, and the longing for the garden of earthly delights.<sup>359</sup>

In this, capital has coopted even the constructedness of being, allowing you to purchase bits and pieces of identity, not with any standard currency, but by participating in the reification of its own logic of liberation. “It me” “Me\_irl” and other memes are an acknowledgement of this.

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<sup>357</sup> Aria Dean, “Poor Meme, Rich Meme,” *Real Life Mag*, July 25, 2016. <http://reallifemag.com/poor-meme-rich-meme/>

<sup>358</sup> Ibid.

<sup>359</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 7.

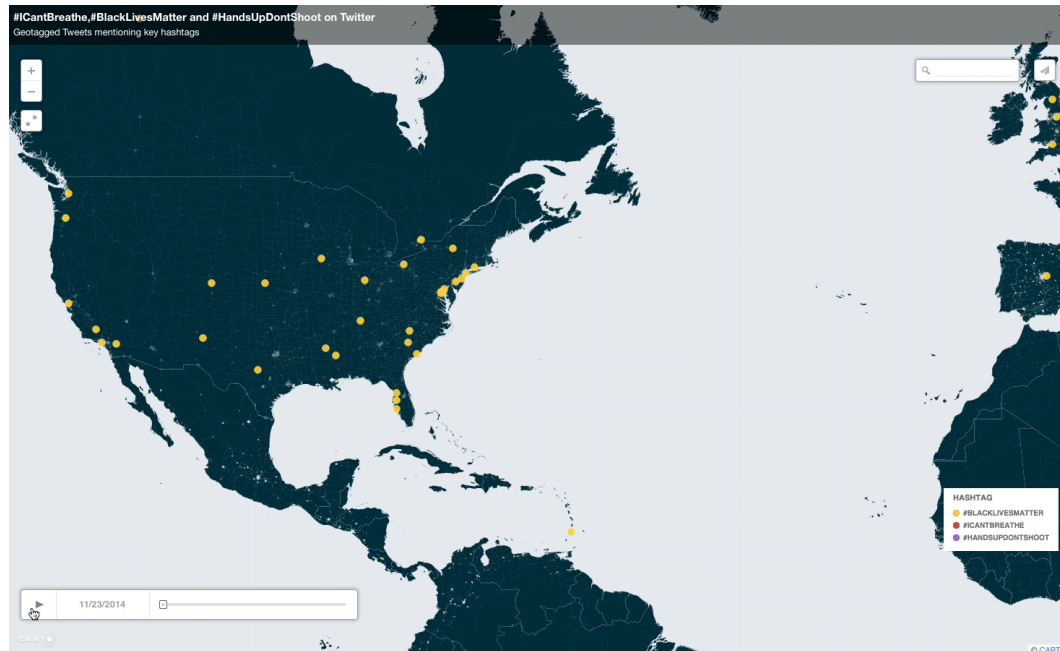


Figure 17: Viral Activity for #BlackLivesMatter, #ICantBreathe, and #HandsUpDontShoot

In the story behind #BlackLivesMatter, however, we can see the costs of erased identities. In July 2013, a Florida jury acquitted George Zimmerman of murder and manslaughter charges in the death of the 17-year-old black teen Trayvon Martin.<sup>360</sup> Alicia Garza, in Oakland, California, upon hearing the verdict took to social media and with her friends Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi created the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter.<sup>361</sup> It wasn't until a year later, however, with the August 9<sup>th</sup> murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri that the hashtag and the Black Lives Matter movement really began gaining traction. Garza, a queer woman of color, created the hashtag as a “call to action...an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise” and as “an affirmation of Black folks’ contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression.”<sup>362</sup> As

<sup>360</sup> Lizette Alvarez and Cara Buckley, “Zimmerman is Acquitted in Trayvon Martin Killing,” *New York Times* July 13, 2013.

<sup>361</sup> Alicia Garza, “A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement” *The Feminist Wire*, October 7, 2014. <http://www.thefeministwire.com/2014/10/blacklivesmatter-2/>

<sup>362</sup> Ibid.



#BlackLivesMatter expanded, however, Garza noted the steady occlusion of one of the originary intentions the hashtag had originally sought, as it had “taken the work of queer Black women and erased our contributions.” In a system so predicated on circulation and repetition, the importance of accumulated structural power cannot be understated.

We have come a long way from the earlier salvo on Harambe. But where have we ended up? Are there any subversive possibilities of the meme? While Sanjay Sharma argues that ‘Blacktags,’ or racialized hashtags, “have the capacity to interrupt the whiteness of the Twitter network,” Aria Dean argues that appropriation is an inevitability.<sup>363</sup> Dean asserts that “memes — even when produced by black users — cannot be viewed as objects that once authentically circulated in black circles for the enjoyment of the black collective but instead are always already compromised by the looming presence of the corporate, the capitalist.”<sup>364</sup> To move beyond a politics of authenticity, however, is not to accept the status quo, but to embrace the messiness of being and its concomitant wonkiness in time and space. If as Dean says, “The meme’s structure is at once its potential energy, its possibility, and its limit” it does not seek the infinite, but more.<sup>365</sup> Individual Internet users, therefore, are not the only one’s who have recognized the real-world potential of memes. Their application is constantly growing, for better and worse.

## **Meme Warfare**

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<sup>363</sup> Sanjay Sharma, “Black Twitter? Racial Hashtags, Networks, and Contagion,” *New Formations* (2013) [http://www.darkmatter101.org/wiki/\\_media/digital-race/sharma\\_black\\_twitter\\_final.pdf](http://www.darkmatter101.org/wiki/_media/digital-race/sharma_black_twitter_final.pdf)

<sup>364</sup> Aria Dean, “Poor Meme, Rich Meme,” *Real Life Mag*, July 25, 2016. <http://reallifemag.com/poor-meme-rich-meme/>

<sup>365</sup> Ibid.

# MEMETIC METRICS AND SUBMETRICS

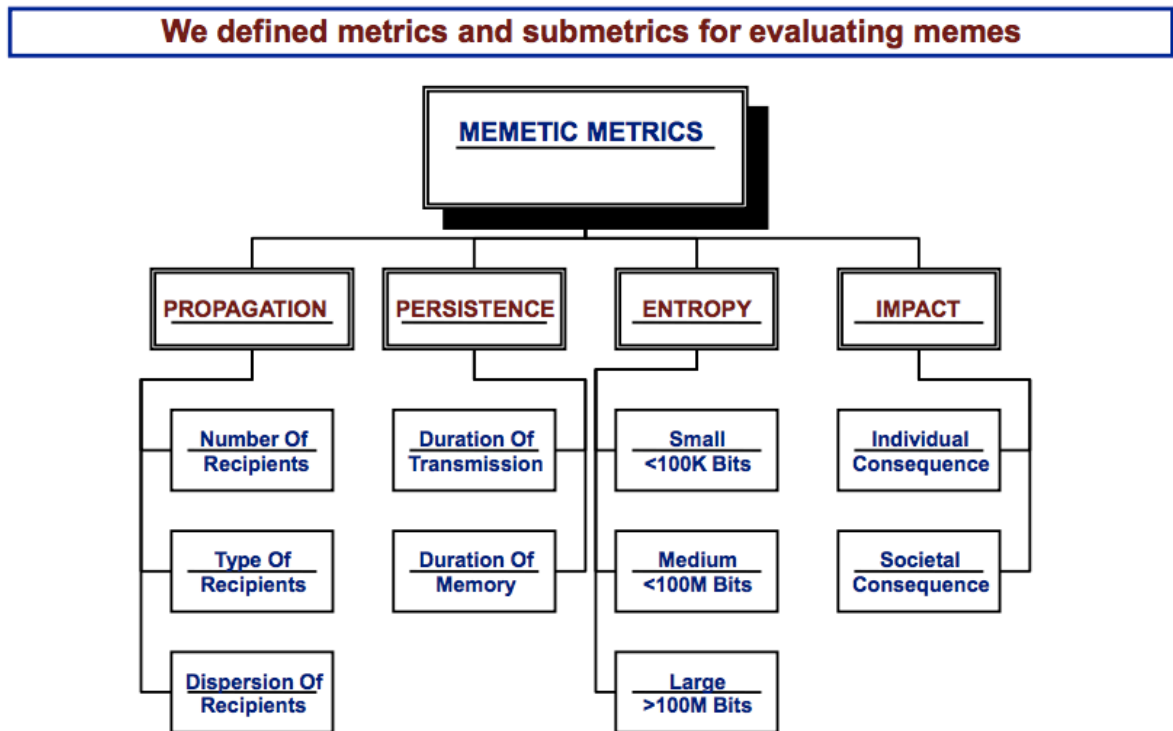


Figure 18: Meme Metrics for DARPA

The U.S. military is one institution that has expressed significant interest in memes. Dr. Robert Finkelstein, founder of the Robotic Technology Institute, engaged in a four-year study for DARPA on memetics (the study and application of memes). Their definition of a meme was, “information which propagates, has impact, and persists.”<sup>366</sup> As the above figure from the same study indicates, these qualifying factors for Finkelstein’s meme are akin to Dawkins’. It requires scope, duration, and resonance. But more than this, Finkelstein’s meme work is also predicated on a kind of natural selection. He states, “Memes (like genes) do not have cognition or foresight – they (like genes) have algorithms which drive natural

<sup>366</sup> Robert Finkelstein, “A Brief Overview of Memetics”

selection.”<sup>367</sup> Finkelstein thus falls prey to the same shortsighted ‘naturalizing’ impulse of Dawkins. These works fail on two fronts.<sup>368</sup> First, they discount the role of memetic ecology/architecture to meme success, sacrificing entanglement for self-determination. And second, both Dawkins and Finkelstein highlight an informatic dissemination of cultural capture that elides feeling. Memes are successful because they tell us something *and* affect us in constantly mutating ways. The impulse to share, therefore, comes from an intersection of knowledge and feeling, not merely the diagrammatic unfolding of a series of algorithmic responses to stimuli.

In 2015, however, heinous alt-right thinker, meme ‘entrepreneur,’ and former employee of Trump confidant Peter Thiel, Jeff Giese, wrote a paper for the NATO strategic journal on memetics that connected these two ideals. In it, Giese develops an idea he terms ‘memetic warfare,’ which he defines as “a competition over narrative, ideas, and social control in a social media battlefield.”<sup>369</sup> At the heart of Giese’s argument for an embrace of memetics is his perception of an increasingly distributed global communications network that the Internet has made possible. He recognizes that the rapid proliferation and incredible scope of contemporary data can become an invaluable political tool, going as far as to say “hashtags...are operational coordinates of memetic warfare.”<sup>370</sup> Because of this, Giese believes that there is a strategic need for proactive militarized memetic programs. He identifies that the social media landscape is another contested terrain of data truths, in terms of geopolitics, propaganda potential, and bureaucratic efficiency. As Giese argues, “once one starts viewing the Internet through meme-colored glasses, you see memetic warfare

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<sup>367</sup> Ibid.

<sup>368</sup> This, in addition to the obvious abhorrence of militarized anything, let alone memetics.

<sup>369</sup> Jeff Giese, “It’s Time to Embrace Memetic Warfare” *Defence Strategic Communications: The Official Journal of the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence* Vol 1 (1), 2015., p 70.

<sup>370</sup> Ibid., 72.

everywhere—in political campaigns, in contested narratives about news events, in the thoughtless memes shared by Facebook friends, and in videos on YouTube.”<sup>371</sup> Gieseck recognizes not only the cultural relevance of memes, but their affective circuitry as well. Given the 2016 presidential election results, Gieseck’s meme warfare has proved effective not only in a military capacity, but also in the national political arena.

The architecture of informatic dispersal is just as integral to its success as the content being distributed. Carefully curated social media platforms, software ecosystems, branded news nodes, and interpersonal technicities all contribute to the virality of a given piece of data. Thus, the connection between information and knowledge, repetition and ‘understanding,’ in the contemporary landscape is a fraught one. Memes make no claims to truth, they often operate at some distance to it. In doing so, they expose the fragility of an ethical system predicated on absolute-data objectivity and actively undermine it. A truth-world presupposes an egalitarian kind of access to the benefits of those truths, as in, “We hold these truths to be self-evident...etc.” This is an equivocation that post-structuralism exposed; that as independent subjects we all have a unique, though thoroughly intersected by matrices of power and perspective. If there is no universal truth, and the terrain on which it is meant to apply is itself ‘unequal,’ equality is a dangerous misapplication of the ethical imperative; it cannot, as a concept, cope with the uneven topography of being. This (the poststructuralist ethics of Derrida, Levinas, etc.) was/is a system predicated on exposing the great lies, gesturing to hypocrisy and rupture, and hoping that justice might emerge. A meme-world is different. It already recognizes the untruths of both pure subjectivity and pure objectivity. It does not seek a retreat to the self, because the self, even as ironic re-assemblage, is beyond passé. We now find ourselves in a perpetual state of Deleuzian

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<sup>371</sup> Ibid.

becoming, seemingly ethically arrested not because of some pastiche distance, but because of our inescapable entanglement; sutured across space and time to everything and nothing. There is no individuated static space to retreat to, only an unfurling infinite now, with its incessant repetition and steady evolution. To live in the meme world is to drown in information and learn how to breathe; to rapidly circulate and adapt. In this, we are not snowflakes or clones, but mutants.

While the Trump campaign, its alt-right meme allies, and the U.S. military each demonstrate the successes of authoritarian information instability, there are meme subverts against the fascist creep.<sup>372</sup> Lettuce Dog, a far-left meme collective, is one such site. Part of the so-called ‘Weird Facebook’ movement, Lettuce Dog, espouses anti-hierarchical politics as a key tenet of its meme-aims. Though often coopted by contemporary capital for branding, advertising, and oppressive shitposting, memes, like any medium, are defined by their entanglements. This means that memes aren’t in and of themselves any more conducive to the spread of oppressive ideology than television, radio, or film. By ‘owning’ the most prolific territories of meme-production, however, e.g., Facebook and Twitter’s trending algorithms, social media bots, and ‘power users,’ wield tremendous ideological power while appearing to remain ‘objective.’ Lettuce Dog acknowledges the absurdity of the current media environment and subsequently deploys an aesthetic that is purposefully poorly designed, recalling the early days of Internet design. These images (the figures below) are not ironic, they reorient ironic distance in order to collapse it. They are also unabashedly political, while nevertheless lampooning intricately designed corporate minimalism. In short,

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<sup>372</sup> Though I don’t think I’ll have the time to address this work here, there are also scores of online radicals who have been actively infiltrating and subverting white supremacist digital networks through sites like 4Chan, 8Chan, and Reddit, as well as the chat platform Discord.  
[https://www.buzzfeed.com/ryanhatesthis/meet-the-good-trolls-secretly-spying-on-trump-supporters?utm\\_term=.xc3p9rRe7N#.qad6mzv7Ex](https://www.buzzfeed.com/ryanhatesthis/meet-the-good-trolls-secretly-spying-on-trump-supporters?utm_term=.xc3p9rRe7N#.qad6mzv7Ex)

they are the quintessential media for an age of austerity. These memes are engineered by Lettuce Dog and other Weird Facebook cooperatives to be quickly produced, disseminated, and forgotten. Memes are the IED's of digital warfare.



Figure 19: Leftist Memes from Lettuce Dog

So what is the escape from total chaos? How do we reconcile an ethical system seemingly unmoored from any and all anchor points? One key component in understanding the contemporary relevance of meme culture is to address its economic circuitry. There is a false dialectic between distribution and reception when the meme maker is also consuming the meme. The Coca-Cola factory worker who also drinks coke might showcase for a few people (some family or friends) the brand and its connection to themselves, but the meme maker is a creator, distributor, and consumer. This is not to say that they aren't implicated in

larger assemblages of capital, but instead that the duration and order of operations of memetics is radically different than any traditional post-Fordist economic model. Memes rely on an already extant cultural knowledge to function, you either “get” them or you don’t, though their relative simplicity makes them easy to learn, in turn making them incredibly successful cultural products.

In his essay “Encoding/Decoding,” Stuart Hall writes, “when the viewer...decodes the message in terms of the reference code in which it has been encoded, we might say that the viewer is *operating inside the dominant code*.”<sup>373</sup> Hall contrasts this against oppositional code, through which the reader/viewer actively “detotalizes the message in the preferred code in order to retotalize the message within some alternative framework of reference.”<sup>374</sup> What was so crucial about Hall’s work at the time was its recognition of the productive work of culture in community formation. To be inside the dominant code is not only to passively intake institutional knowledge, but to contribute to its constant reformation. This is exactly why Hall calls this position “dominant-hegemonic,” which operates successfully through “*not overtly*” biasing their operations in a dominant direction: ideological reproduction therefore takes place here inadvertently, unconsciously, ‘behind men’s backs.’<sup>375</sup> Thus, to Hall, “a hegemonic viewpoint is (a) that it defines within its terms the mental horizon, the universe, of possible meanings, of a whole sector of relations in a society or culture; and (b) that it carries with it the stamp of legitimacy - it appears coterminous with what is ‘natural’, ‘inevitable’, ‘taken for granted’ about the social order.”<sup>376</sup> But, at least partially, against Hall, memetics does not fit his dominant, neutral, oppositional schema. Memes do work hegemonically, they define an acceptable landscape of meaning and attempt to legitimize it,

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<sup>373</sup> Stuart Hall, “Encoding/Decoding” *The Cultural Studies Reader*, Routledge, 1999. p., 101.

<sup>374</sup> *Ibid*, 103.

<sup>375</sup> *Ibid* 101-102.

<sup>376</sup> *Ibid* 102.

but they do not respect the strict demarcation of inside/outside groupings. Memes purposefully never re-totalize as they revel in partiality. Meme economies are also self-referentially Baudrillardian, always already aware of their role in constructing reality. They are also resolutely inauthentic, not aiming for any artisanal and essential quality to be captured, but to speed around the Internet and hook as many users as possible. In short, Memes are about endless desire production.

### **Aggregating Desire**

On January 5, 2015 an article appeared in *The New Yorker* entitled “The Virologist.” The piece, penned by Andrew Marantz details the empire-building endeavors of Emerson Spartz, a 27-year-old prolific web developer based in Chicago. The article is littered with quips about Spartz’s entrepreneurial spirit and notes that even from an early age he was reading “four short biographies of successful people every single day.”<sup>377</sup> Spartz goes on to articulate how this led him towards the realization that “influence was inextricably linked to impact—the more influence you had, the more impact you could create. . . . The ability to make things go viral felt like the closest that we could get to having a human superpower.”<sup>378</sup> Spartz Inc., Emerson Spartz’s Internet media company, which runs websites such as Dose.com, omg facts, and Mugglenet, aims to aggregate as much viral content as possible to generate ‘clicks’. Dose generates traffic by mobilizing hyperbolic headlines that are carefully selected using an algorithm Spartz has written. As the article states, “Spartz’s algorithm measures which headline is attracting clicks most quickly, and after a few hours, when a statistically significant threshold is reached, the “winning” headline automatically supplants

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<sup>377</sup> Andrew Marantz, “The Virologist” *The New Yorker*, January 5, 2015.  
<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/01/05/virologist>

<sup>378</sup> Almost comically, Spartz seems to be demonstrating precisely what Dawkins omits from his analysis of memes, power and influence.  
Ibid.



all others.”<sup>379</sup> This strategy coincides with what Tiziana Terranova calls the new “attention economy,” whereby,

In an earlier phase, new media economists stressed the abundance of information in the digital economy to assert a new kind of economic Darwinism, based on the capacities of a proliferating, connected life to create the new. This was an artificial kind of life, which the digital entrepreneur had to learn to harness and selectively channel in order to extract surplus value.<sup>380</sup>

Spartz’s algorithm purports to merely aggregate already circulating content, localizing it on Dose for consumption and reaping the benefits in the form of ad revenue. The problem with this simplistic explanation is that it obfuscates the work that aggregation does in actively channeling user desire.

Spartz gives an example of the kind of approach his company aims at. He says, “If you want to build a successful virus, you can start by trying to engineer the DNA from scratch—or, much more efficient, you take a virus that you already know is potent, mutate it a tiny bit, and expose it to a new cluster of people.”<sup>381</sup> This philosophy is at the core of what Spartz Inc. and a whole host of other media content aggregators are trying to achieve.<sup>382</sup> One photographer, whose work formed the basis for a list-based post, put it in stark terms, noting, “these viral sites—the gee-whiz types that are just trying to attract eyeballs—they don’t pay for licensing. They just grab stuff and hope they don’t get caught. I don’t want to make a comparison to Ebola, but I do think it’s no accident that they use the metaphor of a virus.”<sup>383</sup> Ebola aside, the circulation of the particular post, entitled “23 Photos of People

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<sup>379</sup> Andrew Marantz, “The Virologist” *The New Yorker*, January 5, 2015.

<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/01/05/virologist>

<sup>380</sup> Tiziana Terranova, “Attention, Economy, and the Brain” *Culture Machine*, Vol 13., 2012, 2.

<sup>381</sup> Andrew Marantz, “The Virologist” *The New Yorker*, January 5, 2015.

<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/01/05/virologist>

<sup>382</sup> BuzzFeed represents just one of the numerous and successful ‘clickbait’ sites that have arisen in the past couple of years. Reddit, a supposedly user driven aggregator represents an interesting alternative in terms of how desire is mapped, wielded, and ultimately disseminated.

<sup>383</sup> Andrew Marantz, “The Virologist” *The New Yorker*, January 5, 2015.

<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/01/05/virologist>

from All Over the World Next to How Much Food They Eat Per Day,” is quite astounding.

The citations form a kind of trail that follows the content through time and web space:

Beneath the final photograph, a line of tiny gray text read “H/T Elite Daily.” It linked to a post that Elite Daily, a Web site based in New York, had published a month earlier (“See the Incredible Differences in the Daily Food Intake of People Around the World”). That post, in turn, had linked to UrbanTimes (“80 People, 30 Countries and How Much They Eat on a Daily Basis”), which had credited Amusing Planet (“What People Eat Around the World”), which had cited a 2010 radio interview with Faith D’Aluisio and Peter Menzel, the writer and the photographer behind the project.<sup>384</sup>

The circuitous nature of this kind of content is not unique to Spartz Inc, with websites like Digg, BuzzFeed, Reddit and others collecting and distributing massive amounts of information every day. Each of these sites is curated, either by an executive staff employed by the sites, or by moderators who police the parameters of acceptable content (as in the case of Reddit). However, in each case much of the circulating media is created by unaffiliated users whose only recompense is in the form of affective currency.<sup>385</sup> What is most striking about these particular digital content networks is how they influence users:

Dozens of studies by psychologists, neurobiologists, and educators point to the same conclusion: When we go online, we enter an environment that promotes cursory reading, hurried and distracted thinking, and superficial learning. Even as the Internet grants us easy access to vast amounts of information, it is turning us into shallower thinkers, literally changing the structure of our brain.<sup>386</sup>

The scarcities implicit in a new media economy then, are not due to a lack of content, but of time. Digital media, therefore, must compete for human attention, mobilizing all sorts of neoliberal technics, such as data visualization, ‘likes’, ‘clicks’, and ‘shares’, to constitute the contemporary desiring-subject. What’s more, this kind of biopolitical management

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<sup>384</sup> Andrew Marantz, “The Virologist” *The New Yorker*, January 5, 2015.

<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/01/05/virologist>

<sup>385</sup> On Facebook this is quantified through an accumulation of ‘likes’ or ‘shares’ and on Reddit through a system of points known as ‘karma.’

<sup>386</sup> Nicholas Carr, “The Web Shatters Focus, Rewires Brains” *Wired*, May 24, 2010.

[http://www.wired.com/2010/05/ff\\_nicholas\\_carr/all/1](http://www.wired.com/2010/05/ff_nicholas_carr/all/1)

constructs the very parameters that allow for successful navigation of the digital realm.<sup>387</sup> As

Tiziana Terranova argues,

The economic/informational plastic brain is thus caught in a double bind: on the one hand, in order to participate in the attention economy, it must enter a technological assemblage of attention; on the other hand, becoming part of this assemblage implies a dramatic cognitive loss that is translated into a subjectivity more adept at carrying out routine tasks but less capable of reasoning, reflecting and intimacy<sup>388</sup>

The ability of a piece of content to go viral, then, represents a supposedly effective claim to user attention, an increasingly sought-after goal. This is a problem that ‘traditional’ media outlets have also been attempting to reconcile: “In March, a working group at the *Times* presented an internal report to the paper’s top editors. A few weeks later, the report was leaked, and BuzzFeed published it. The first sentence was ‘The *New York Times* is winning at journalism.’ However, it warned, ‘we are falling behind in a second critical area: the art and science of getting our journalism to readers.’”<sup>389</sup> Virality, in other words, is a successful cooptation and widespread dissemination of information; a naturalization of constructed content pathways. As Daniel W. Smith argues, “Your drives have been constructed, assembled, and arranged in such a manner that your desire is positively invested in the system that allows you to have this particular interest.”<sup>390</sup> This sentiment is perfectly summed up by Spartz who opines, “Art is that which science has not yet explained,”<sup>391</sup> The meme, the viral entity *par excellence*, is simply a mechanism for assembling digital/biological desire. It does so not out of selfishness or lack, but as a machinic element and productive

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<sup>387</sup> Thus, the ‘new media attention economies’ are not so different from other discursive regimes of subject management, whereby the discourse brings into being the subject. This can be thought of akin to Foucault’s ‘repressive hypothesis’, wherein the very notion of ‘repression’ constructed the repressed individual as a ‘distinct’ entity.

<sup>388</sup> Tiziana Terranova, “Attention, Economy, and the Brain” *Culture Machine*, Vol 13., 2012, 6.

<sup>389</sup> Andrew Marantz, “The Virologist” *The New Yorker*, January 5, 2015.

<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/01/05/virologist>

<sup>390</sup> Daniel W. Smith, “Deleuze and the Question of Desire: Toward and Immanent Theory of Ethics,” *Parrhesia*, Number 2, 2007. [http://www.parrhesiajournal.org/parrhesia02/parrhesia02\\_smith.pdf](http://www.parrhesiajournal.org/parrhesia02/parrhesia02_smith.pdf), 74.

<sup>391</sup> Andrew Marantz, “The Virologist” *The New Yorker*, January 5, 2015.

<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/01/05/virologist>

member of a particular system. It is important to remember then, as Deleuze and Guattari say, “Assemblages are passionate, they are compositions of desire. Desire has nothing with a natural or spontaneous determination; there is no desire but assembling, assembled, desire. The rationality, the efficiency, of an assemblage does not exist without the passions the assemblage brings into play, without the desires that constitute it as much as it constitutes them.”<sup>392</sup> The meme systems of Dawkins and Spartz, then, formulate one such system that arranges digital desire, the affects of which are crucial to mobilizing the contemporary parameters of life.

Against the power-less inclinations of Dawkins and the viral capitalism of Spartz, Elizabeth Grosz offers an alternative explanation for the proliferation of genetic and/or memetic information. She states, “Sexual selection is not the ability to choose the best genes for the following generation, but is rather the activity of spontaneous beings who operate according to their (sometimes) irrational desires and tastes to make bodily connections and encounters, sometimes but not always leading to orgasm or copulation, and even less frequently to reproduction.”<sup>393</sup> While Dawkins in his text attempts to elide the notion of genetic intent, Grosz actively argues that spontaneity and happenstance are the basis of evolutionary change. To Grosz, replication is an accidental byproduct of desire; “reproduction is the side effect or by-product of sexuality, not its purpose, aim, or goal.”<sup>394</sup> Grosz, therefore, succeeds not only in unmooring reproduction from sexuality, but also in demonstrating the importance of desire to biopolitical endeavors. This is not only true from the standpoint of evolutionary biology, whereby Dawkins projects selfishness onto desiring

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<sup>392</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A thousand Plateaus*, 399.

<sup>393</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Becoming Undone*, 131.

<sup>394</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

genes, but the dominant discursive mode of the contemporary meme as well, the Internet. What is taken as natural is always already the byproduct of some purposeful action.

To this, in March 2013, at Microsoft's annual research and development event TechFest, a new project was introduced that aimed to let "users interactively explore the full chain of events whereby individual news stories, videos, images, and petitions spread from one user to the next over a social network."<sup>395</sup> The program, called ViralSearch, aims to understand how content spreads through a social network such as Twitter. By aggregating large amounts of data and tracking how users share things on their twitter accounts, ViralSearch turns the transmission of content into a visually friendly genealogy of media, which Microsoft terms its "virality". The more "descendants" a video has, for example, meaning those who have shared it (which is broken up into generations, or subsets of users that represent one wave of shares) the more viral it is according to ViralSearch's virality percentage. More than this, it actively differentiates between virality and popularity, by looking precisely at how the information is shared. As researcher Jake Hofman says,

This is what people sort of typically have in their mind when they think about one of these viral videos, but nobody's really been able to actually look at the structure of these things to date. And so what we're able to do is going through these billions of events we reconstruct these trees by looking at all the followers of everyone who adopts the content and using a large cluster to reconstruct these things and then a novel scoring method to actually distinguish this tree as being viral from just being popular.<sup>396</sup>

The example given by Hofman is of a story shared by the official *Forbes* Twitter account, which reached a wide number of people, who then shared that story, but failed to be shared beyond that "first generation" of users. In contrast, Hofman pulls up the visualization of a cover of a Gotye song, which according to the parameters of ViralSearch is more viral

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<sup>395</sup> "ViralSearch: Identifying and Visualizing Viral Content" <http://research.microsoft.com/en-us/projects/viralsearch/>

<sup>396</sup> Ibid.

because of how many successive generations it has gone through and the multitude of users who have shared it throughout those generations. In essence, ViralSearch wields content as contagion, and quantifies precisely how contagious it is and who it has spread to. ViralSearch recognizes how things have “become viral in the sense that they’ve been passed on from one person to the next over many generations.”<sup>397</sup>

Though it debuted in March 2013, ViralSearch has yet to be made public, but is instead being used internally by Microsoft.<sup>398</sup> It does, however, represent one of many data tools aimed at mapping content transmission, with BuzzFeed’s “Viral Dashboard” and Facebook’s “Page Insights” being two other examples of social media analytics that are available to the public. The prevalence of these analytic mechanisms seems to indicate an increased engagement with not only recognizing how media is circulated online, but with exploiting those pathways as well. The management of digital information, via ViralSearch or otherwise, constitutes a refiguration of biopower, by which indices of “virality” refigure the Foucauldian mechanisms of desire through indirect management, reifying the human through digital architecture. One can see the possible profits in capitalizing on a “highly viral” user and the reproducibility of their posts. I do not wish, however, to disaggregate the digital from the organic. I am not interested in saying Facebook posts represent a wholly unique mechanism of biopolitical control, but rather I want to move towards a recalibration of the *relationship* between online networks and fleshy human bodies. Both are constituted in similar epistemological and ethical processes at once. Perhaps, then, the cyborg is not the liberatory figure that Haraway envisioned, but merely latest iteration of normative human

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<sup>397</sup> “ViralSearch: Identifying and Visualizing Viral Content”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wSwOsz0Hu0I>

<sup>398</sup> Tom Warren, “Microsoft ViralSearch: tracking and identifying popular web content on Twitter” *The Verge* March 4, 2013. <http://www.theverge.com/2013/3/4/4064340/microsoft-viralsearch-tracking-twitter-trends>

being. To be connected, to be digitally viral, is in many circumstances to have privileged access to knowledge, embodiment, and being.

This is, via Deleuze and Guattari, why Daniel Smith asks about our collective “stake in investing in a social system that constantly represses us, thwarts our interests, and introduces lack into our lives? In the end, the answer is simple: it is because your desire—that is, your drives and affects—are not your own, so to speak.”<sup>399</sup> The memetics of Dawkins, the aggregations of Spartz, and the viral geographies of ViralSearch are each assemblages of manufactured desire. Their productive *affects* are crucial to not only the system itself, but towards a biopolitics constitutive of a normative (post)human subject against which ‘deviant’ bodies, whether human, animal, viral, or digital, are carefully measured. These desiring machines are also integral to an ethics that disregards capacity in favor of universalized responsibility, in which a supposedly level playing field exists for all beings.<sup>400</sup>

ViralSearch works epidemiologically, as a technic that allows Microsoft to “understand” particular media contagions and exploit them. In September 1854 in London, England a different kind of contagion was being mapped. John Snow, a local physician was caught in the midst of a horrific cholera outbreak, which killed over 600 people in a matter of days. Snow doubted the common conception of the disease at the time, having been witness to several other cholera outbreaks, that it was caused by “miasmas” or poor quality gasses emanating from sites of decay such as sewers, graves, and garbage pits. Instead, Snow theorized that the unsanitary condition of the local drinking water was at fault by locating the incidents of cholera and mapping them. In doing so, and after interviewing residents

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<sup>399</sup> Daniel W. Smith, “Deleuze and the Question of Desire: Toward and Immanent Theory of Ethics,” *Parrhesia*, Number 2, 2007. [http://www.parrhesiajournal.org/parrhesia02/parrhesia02\\_smith.pdf](http://www.parrhesiajournal.org/parrhesia02/parrhesia02_smith.pdf), 74.

<sup>400</sup> Take a lesson here from disability studies which recognizes that ability is a naturalized and therefore constructed assemblage.

who both lived in and around the affected areas, Snow was able to pinpoint the problem as the local well at Broad Street. With the help of a neighborhood reverend, Snow convinced the authorities to remove the pump handle to the well and the outbreak subsided soon thereafter. Following his death, Snow's work on disease statistics and mapping was celebrated as an inaugural moment modern epidemiology.<sup>401</sup>

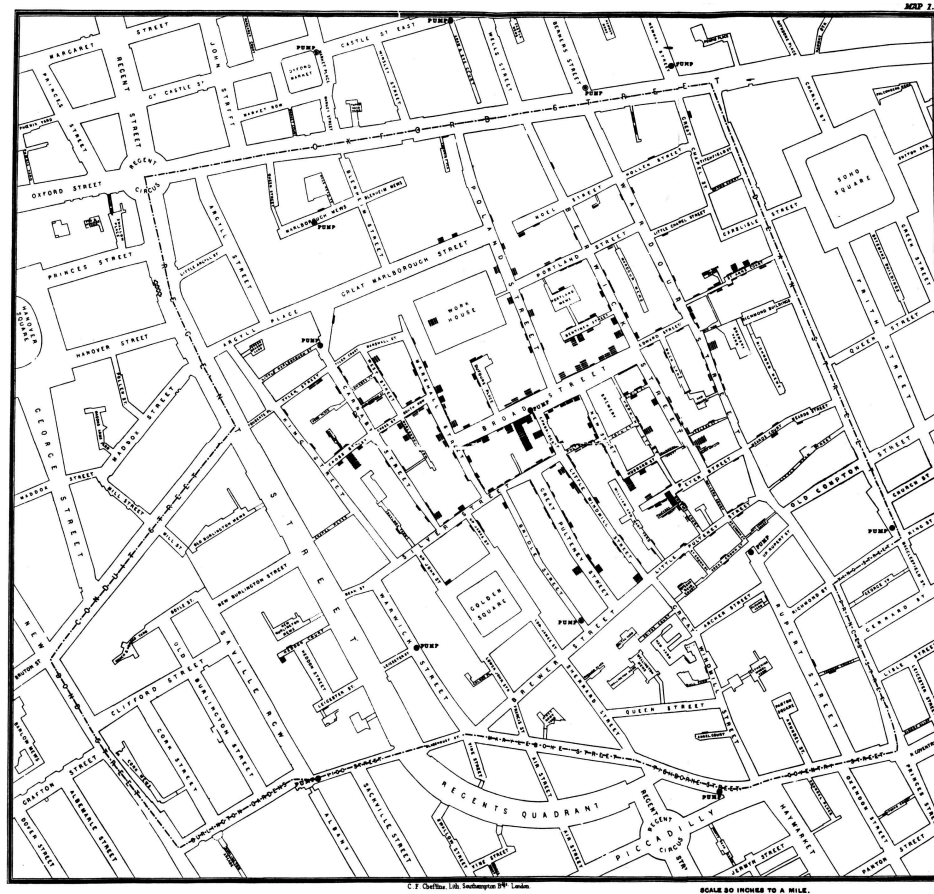


Figure 20: Clusters of Cholera Cases in London 1854 (Drawn by Charles Cheffins)

Why include a conversation on a 19<sup>th</sup> Century cholera outbreak in a chapter on digital biopolitics? For one, I believe the management of digital and organic contagions to

<sup>401</sup> [http://www.ph.ucla.edu/epi/snow/bbc\\_snow.htm](http://www.ph.ucla.edu/epi/snow/bbc_snow.htm), David Vachon, "Doctor John Snow Blames Water Pollution for Cholera Epidemic" *Old News* 16(8), 8-10, May & June, 2005.  
[http://www.ph.ucla.edu/epi/snow/fatherofepidemiology\\_part2.html#TWO](http://www.ph.ucla.edu/epi/snow/fatherofepidemiology_part2.html#TWO), Emily Willingham and Laura Helft, "Tracking Disease Outbreaks" *NOVA*, September 5, 2014  
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/body/disease-outbreaks.html>



have a remarkable level of overlap, both in terms of treatment and how they are visualized. In the field of medical epidemiology services like HealthMap.org aggregate data from Google Trends, Google Flu Trends, the *CDC*, media sources, eyewitness accounts, and the *WHO*, to map the spread of particular diseases. The website uses Google Maps API to show a historical timeline of disease outbreak and to quantify just how many cases are being reported. Funded by US government sources such as IARPA, DTRA, and the CDC, as well as by companies like Google, Unilever, Merck, Amazon, and Twitter, HealthMap.org has been run by the Boston Children's Hospital since it was founded in 2006. With its corresponding 'Outbreaks Near Me' app,

HealthMap brings together disparate data sources, including online news aggregators, eyewitness reports, expert-curated discussions and validated official reports, to achieve a unified and comprehensive view of the current global state of infectious diseases and their effect on human and animal health. Through an automated process, updating 24/7/365, the system monitors, organizes, integrates, filters, visualizes and disseminates online information about emerging diseases in nine languages, facilitating early detection of global public health threats.<sup>402</sup>

In contrast to ViralSearch, which seeks to locate and promote viral media to benefit

Microsoft (and whoever else the software is eventually marketed to), HealthMap uses similar mechanisms of data aggregation as a preventative to the spread of global contagion.

HealthMap, through its own stated intentions, seems to be continuing the work of John Snow, mapping infection onto localized areas and making people aware of disease hotspots. One can begin to see, however, the deeply troubling aspects of each program.

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<sup>402</sup> "About" *HealthMap* <http://www.healthmap.org/site/about>

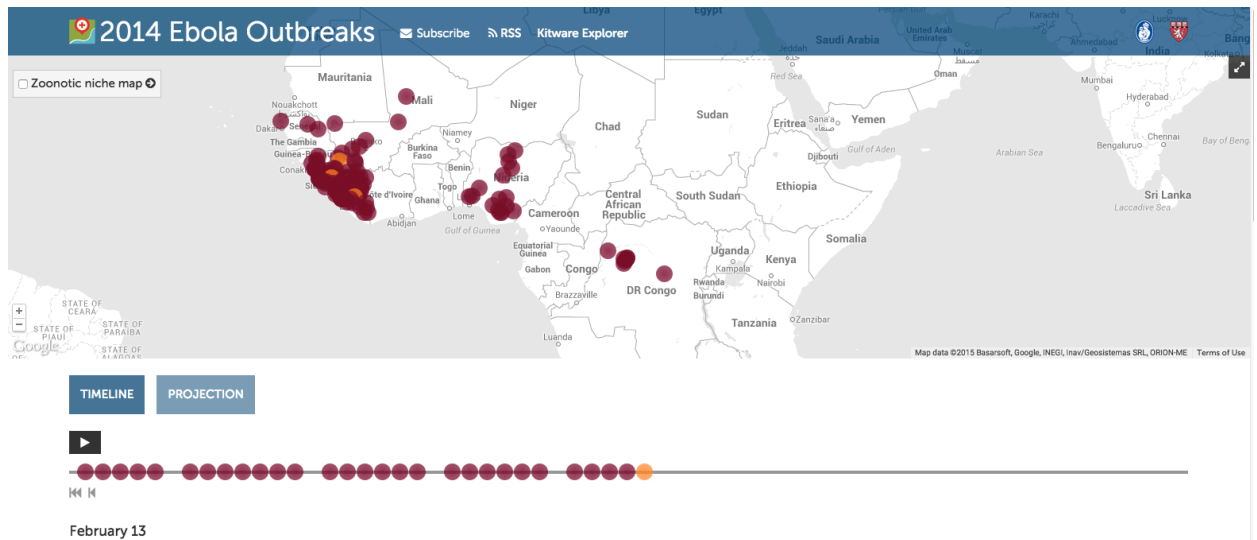


Figure 21: 2014 Ebola Outbreaks Timeline

HealthMap marks, with a colored gradient scale from yellow (low) to purple (high), activity of a given, or of all, diseases on a worldwide map.<sup>403</sup> HealthMap, then, contributes to the biopolitical process of what Lauren Berlant terms, slow death. She says, “slow death refers to the physical wearing out of a population and the deterioration of people in that population that is very nearly a defining condition of their experience and historical existence...[a] phenomenon of mass physical attenuation under global/national regimes of capitalist structural subordination and governmentality.”<sup>404</sup> Berlant is speaking of human populations, but I believe her theoretical mobilization of “slow death” is useful in alternative biopolitical scenarios prosthetic to, or even “outside” of the human. The digital visualization of disease via HealthMap makes apparent precisely how data is rallied in service of life itself. As a biopolitical mechanism, HealthMap transforms subjective data into “objective” fact, the

<sup>403</sup> More about the significance of marker color/size in incredibly vague language, “**Marker Color:** Marker color reflects the noteworthiness of events at a particular location during a given time window. An event's degree of noteworthiness is based on the significance rating of the alert provided by HealthMap users. In the absence of user ratings, the system assigns a composite score based on the disease importance and the news volume associated with the alert. If a location's marker has multiple alerts, the color associated with the most prominent alert is used.

**Marker Size:** The large circle indicates a country-level alert, while state, province and local alerts are indicated by the small circle.” (<http://www.healthmap.org/>)

<sup>404</sup> Lauren Berlant, “Slow Death,” 754.

consequences of which, in this case, is the demonization of entire geographic areas, making them and their inhabitants undesirable. In this, the territory itself becomes antithetical to healthy life.

Eugene Thacker argues that biomedica is, “an instance in which biological components and processes are technically recontextualized in ways that may be biological or nonbiological...novel configurations of biologies and technologies that take us beyond the familiar tropes of technology-as-tool or the human-machine interface.” Viral ethics takes Thacker’s biomedica perspective to heart. It questions the very basis of humanity’s supposedly unique fixation to life and demonstrates the injustices that emanate from such exceptionalism. This kind of ethics espouses and evidences a conception of being that is fundamentally viral, perpetually entangled, infused, and becoming. Deleuze and Guattari say, “Becoming is to emit particles that take on certain relations of movement and rest because they enter a particular zone of proximity.”<sup>405</sup> The intensities of that proximity form what they term, affect, being “a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another” altogether “implying an augmentation or diminution in that body’s capacity to act. *L’affection* (Spinoza’s *affectio*) is each such state considered as an encounter between the affected body and a second, affecting, body (with body taken in its broadest possible sense to include ‘mental’ or ideal bodies).”<sup>406</sup> Viral ethics is thus the application of mediated affective encounters. It is a documentation of embodied encounter and a template towards embodied justice. To evidence the assemblages structuring hegemonic archetypes of feeling is to access one integral component of viral ethics.

It is in *the manufacturing of desire* that viral networks of capital are able to generate regimes of humanist knowledge, whilst remaining ‘objective’ either through the truth of data

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<sup>405</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A thousand Plateaus*, 273.

<sup>406</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A thousand Plateaus*, xvi.

metrics, visualization and aggregation, and/or the naturalized pathways of media products such as memes. Reproduction of the ways we talk about desire, either in the biological or digital sense most often structures a normalized ideal of what gets replicated and how. To Dawkins, it is the idea that selfishness is a natural state-of-being that must be overcome through individual effort. To Finkelstein and Giese, it is the need for a militarized infrastructure to wage meme warfare and continue the projects of American exceptionalism. To Spartz, it is the corporate promotion of a science of aggregation and contagion. In each case there is a denial of both the productive effects of knowledge regimes *and* the cooptation of desire to particular end goals. This is the same critique that Deleuze and Guattari had of the psychoanalysts and their insistence on representation in the origins of ‘deviant’ desires. They argued psychoanalysts “killed becoming-animal, in the adult as in the child. They saw nothing. They see the animal as representative of drives, or a representation of the parents. They do not see the reality of a becoming-animal, that is affect in itself, the drive in person and represents nothing. There exist no other drives than in the assemblages themselves.”<sup>407</sup> My point is thus not to make the virus a symbol or representation of a more ‘complex’ or ‘real’ underlying process, but to cite the reality of becoming-virality, its immanent desiring production and its entangled biopolitical affects. To move beyond the violences of a humanist ethics, therefore, we must first understand the biopolitical and affective impetuses it emerges from. To do so would be to refuse the unyielding aggregated masses of information that supposedly constitute life and instead see being-entangled, not being-for-profit, accumulation, or reproduction.

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<sup>407</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 259.

## *Chapter 4*

### **Entanglements: Vitality, Responsibility, and Expenditure**

For a life to count as a good life, then it must return the debt of its life by taking on the direction promised as a social good, which means imagining one's futurity in terms of reaching certain points along a life course. A queer life might be one that fails to make such gestures of return.

—Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*

It would be futile to try to assign to life an end, in the human sense of the word. To speak of an end is to think of a pre-existing model which has only to be realized.<sup>408</sup>

—Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*

Nature is a bad economist: its expenditure is much larger than the income it procures; all its wealth notwithstanding, it is bound sooner or later to ruin itself.<sup>409</sup>

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*

Physics should represent a reality in time and space, free from spooky actions at a distance.<sup>410</sup>

—Albert Einstein

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<sup>408</sup> Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution* (London: Macmillan, 1922), 54.

<sup>409</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, "Schopenhauer as Educator," in *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 178.

<sup>410</sup> Einstein to Max Born 1947.

## Quanta

In 1935 Austrian physicist Erwin Schrödinger devised a thought experiment to demonstrate an inadequacy of contemporary physics. The experiment, now infamous in popular culture, depicted the following scenario:

A cat is placed in a box with a radioactive source. On the table is a Geiger counter with the radioactive source. If the Geiger counter detects a decay event, a relay trips a weight, which hits the flask, which releases the poison, which kills the cat; if no decay is detected, the cat remains alive. The fate of the cat is thereby entangled with the fate of the atom.<sup>411</sup>

Schrödinger's Cat, as the theoretical undertaking has come to be known, postulates several crucial concepts of quantum mechanics that troubled the then dominant tenets of classical physics. Foremost amongst these was Schrödinger's supposition about the determinacy of measurement. Classical physics (à la Isaac Newton) dictated that all objects, in their action, have observable and *universal* qualities that can be calculated, primarily through knowing the object's mass (e.g., gravity). Einstein, refining Newton's work in his theory of relativity, recognized that some 'known quantities', such as space/time, are not universal, but relative. This meant, for instance, depending on the speed at which one is traveling, space/time is experienced differently.<sup>412</sup> To both Einstein and Newton, however, these forces could be precisely calculated. What quantum mechanics (a subset of physics put forth by scientists like

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<sup>411</sup> Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 277.

A more detailed explanation from Schrödinger himself: "A cat is penned up in a steel chamber, along with the following device (which must be secured against direct interference by the cat): in a Geiger counter there is a tiny bit of radioactive substance, *so small*, that *perhaps* in the course of the hour one of the atoms decays, but also, with equal probability, perhaps none; if it happens, the counter tube discharges and through a relay releases a hammer which shatters a small flask of hydrocyanic acid. If one has left this entire system to itself for an hour, one would say that the cat still lives *if* meanwhile no atom has decayed. The psi- function of the entire system would express this by having in it the living and dead cat (pardon the expression) mixed or smeared out in equal parts."

Erwin Schrödinger, "The Present Situation in Quantum Mechanics." In *Quantum Theory and Measurement*, ed. John Wheeler and W. H. Zurek. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983),

<sup>412</sup> Here we have an introduction of subjectivity into the objective world of physics. There is also more possibly to be said about the linkage of space/time and the topography/curvature of that entity.

Schrödinger, Max Planck, Niels Bohr, and Werner Heisenberg) argued, however, is that the very act of measurement fundamentally alters the state of things. Instead of objects having already extant qualities/quantities that are then observed, observation itself was to be viewed as a means of knowledge production. Schrödinger himself theorized, “In general, [if] a variable has no definite value before I measure it; then measuring it does not mean ascertaining the value that it has.”<sup>413</sup> He continued, “Now it is fairly clear: if reality does not determine the measured value, then at least the measured value must determine reality.”<sup>414</sup> Therefore, ontologically the cat is only a probability until it is observed. To Schrödinger, it is the epistemological act of observation/measurement that *produces* being and defines reality.

More than this, however, in quantum physics, the observing agent does not just produce being, but is itself constituted by that which it is observing. This is one of Schrödinger’s most important contributions, which he called quantum entanglement. Quantum entanglement “refers to how tiny quantum entities...can come together, bond, and share quantum bits of information...Once these particles have become entangled, they continue to share information no matter how far apart they become in space and, perhaps, in time as well.”<sup>415</sup> Further explicating the epistemological implications of entanglement Schrödinger argues,

Any ‘entanglement of predictions’ that takes place can obviously only go back to the fact that the two bodies at some earlier time formed in a true sense one system, that is were interacting, and have left behind *traces* on each other. If two separated bodies, each by itself known maximally, enter a situation in which they influence each other, and separate again, then there occurs regularly that which I have just called entanglement of our knowledge of the two bodies.<sup>416</sup>

Schrödinger’s entanglement theorizes the sharing of information between two seemingly

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<sup>413</sup> Erwin Schrödinger, “The Present Situation in Quantum Mechanics,”

<sup>414</sup> All of this is sounding rather Foucauldian? Erwin Schrödinger, *Die Naturwissenschaften*

<sup>415</sup> Suzanne Nichols, “What is Quantum Entanglement: Quantum Connections Through Space and Time” <http://www.superconsciousness.com/topics/science/what-quantum-entanglement>

<sup>416</sup> *Emphasis Mine*. Erwin Schrödinger, “The Present Situation in Quantum Mechanics,” 161

unconnected entities across time and space, a quantum mediation of being.

Importantly, though, Schrödinger has parameters for what constitutes an observer. As Karen Barad notes, “Only upon observation by a *cognizing agent* can we speak of a resolution of the entanglement... Hence Schrodinger's understanding of the notion of entanglement is explicitly epistemic, not ontic.”<sup>417</sup> Cognizing agent is the key phrase here. In making the epistemological paramount, Schrödinger indicates (at least a form of) consciousness (read: human) as prerequisite to being. From an alternative vantage, however, there are numerous “observers” in the cat experiment, including the mechanical measurement devices and the cat itself.<sup>418</sup> If “conscious observation” is required, however, we must define consciousness.<sup>419</sup> As the previous chapters of this dissertation have indicated, the line seems to be drawn at the human, excluding all other life. We can thus return to Schrödinger’s cat from a new perspective. In making the connection between being, observation, and consciousness tautological Schrödinger limits their scope, denying those capacities to non-human actors. Thus, the ontological question of who or what constitutes an observer has profound ethical implications on life and death.

If it seems as if we have ventured into decidedly Derridean territory you might be right. In *Specters of Marx* Derrida argues, “What happens between two, and between all the ‘two’s’ one likes, such as between life and death, can only maintain itself with some ghost.”<sup>420</sup> Likewise, Schrödinger speaks of the “trace” that reveals a connection between elements of a

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<sup>417</sup> *Original Emphasis.* Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 284.

<sup>418</sup> This is actually a rather contentious topic in the physics world, with Schrödinger and John von Neumann articulating the need for a conscious observer and more recent scholars, such as, John S. Bell, Richard P. Feynman, and Anthony J. Leggett articulating realist positions that consciousness is inconsequential. Michael Nauenberg, “Does Quantum Mechanics Require a Conscious Observer?” *Journal of Cosmology* Vol. 14., 2011. <http://cosmology.com/Consciousness139.html>

<sup>419</sup> Thomas Nagel’s “What is it like to be a bat?” is one such formative essay that challenged the anthropocentricity of phenomenology. Maybe include something from that text here or elsewhere.

<sup>420</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, xvii



quantum system. The haunting presence of each entangled ‘body’ on one another even in the absence of visibly apparent presence is quite remarkable.<sup>421</sup> Here, Einstein’s dismissal of ‘spooky actions at a distance’ seems especially vital. Though Einstein argued for the connective fabric of space-time, it was a localized phenomenon. What both Derrida and Schrödinger alternatively provide, is an explication of a material cleavage, an insight into that residue left behind when already entangled bodies are made individual. To evince the onto-ethical results of such individuation requires an alternative to the static categories of life/death, human/non-human. Such a framework would be *hauntological*. As Derrida remarks in *Specters of Marx*, “To haunt does not mean to be present, and it is necessary to introduce haunting into the very construction of a concept. Of every concept, beginning with the concepts of being and time. That is what we would be calling here a hauntology. Ontology opposes it only in a movement of exorcism. Ontology is a conjuration.” To speak of the hauntological is to take seriously the lessons of quantum mechanics. In doing so, one can evidence the entanglement of the material and the abstract, while acknowledging the violences inherent to the dividing prisms of life and death. In offering an alternative vantage, viral ethics revels in the limn.

What, then, given the quantum appraisals of Schrödinger and Derrida, are the practical implications of being alive, dead, or in-between? Following the trajectory of the dissertation thus far the answer necessitates a few caveats. The first would be to determine what constitutes a “live being.” As I have previously argued, life operates as both ontological state and political possibility. You are alive both because you adhere to a set of embodied classifications *and* because you *possess* the capacity for some mental/physical action. In the

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<sup>421</sup> I am using presence in a manifold way: to connect space/time (being there/then), to undermine our normative conceptions of them as problems of scale, and to demonstrate the intricacies of haunting as both material and abstract phenomenon.

contemporary political and ethical climate, therefore, life requires being normatively human. But even for humanity the distinction between life and death has been somewhat fraught.<sup>422</sup> Most of the dividing factors, however, rely on a substance, whether material or immaterial, present in the live body but absent from the dead one. Christian thinkers (among others) believe/d there to be an essence to life, a soul, bestowed by god that differentiated the living being from the dead one.<sup>423</sup> Post-Enlightenment science was no different, however, with blood in the 19<sup>th</sup> century taking the role of deciding factor. William Harvey, “who discovered how blood circulated, wrote that it was ‘the first to live and the last to die.’ Blood was life. So long as it was liquid, life remained.”<sup>424</sup> Today we find ourselves in a similar situation, with breath and brain function taking the familiar role of life essence.<sup>425</sup>

It seems, then, that there is a two-part distinction that governs the chasm between life and death. The first, epistemological in nature and reliant on taxonomical difference, states that humanity is the sole *owner* of life.<sup>426</sup> The second, requires a particular state of being, in which specific parts of the body are functioning/animated according to a particular standard.<sup>427</sup> I believe the two are also mutually constitutive, however, with brain function acting as both a classifying tool that excludes beings of lower/nonexistent neurological function *and* indicator of “physical” life. Together these criteria have governed not only the difference between humans and other forms of life, but also between live and dead humans.

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<sup>422</sup> A distinction I don’t make uncritically.

<sup>423</sup> There is a relation here to Aristotle and his concept of entelechy which I delve into later. I am also tempted to discuss Derrida’s notion of the great other of god, through which responsibility and sacrifice are mechanisms of ethics/justice. But more on this later.

<sup>424</sup> Druin Burch, “What’s the Difference Between Life and Death,” *Slate*  
[http://www.slate.com/articles/health\\_and\\_science/medical\\_examiner/2012/09/the\\_difference\\_between\\_life\\_and\\_death\\_organ\\_transplants\\_should\\_take\\_precedence\\_over\\_outdated\\_definitions\\_.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/health_and_science/medical_examiner/2012/09/the_difference_between_life_and_death_organ_transplants_should_take_precedence_over_outdated_definitions_.html)

<sup>425</sup> Should probably have a citation here as well cataloging contemporary bio-medical thoughts on the “end” of life.

<sup>426</sup> Ownership over life is crucial as it is most certainly a thing that one can both possess and lose. More on how this is tied to capitalist concepts of scarcity and individuality later. I am also thinking here about the quantum lessons that Schrödinger affords us, about the importance of observability/measurability as indicators of presence (and possibly life?).

<sup>427</sup> Animacy in and of itself is a discursive category that merits further treatment in this text.

Schrödinger's cat notwithstanding, there is an abundance of evidence bridging the supposedly static gap between death and life.<sup>428</sup>

There is one central question this chapter seeks to answer, then, though any conclusions it comes to will certainly not be totalizing, fixed, or absolute. The question is this: does ethics require life? And if it does not, what might an ethics of non-life feel like? The epistemological divide erected between humans and other animals, as we have seen, requires the making of (particular) humans as worthy of an investment of life (and the concomitant rights alongside that classification), whilst simultaneously denying that right to other beings. This divide is reliant on multiple forms of manufactured difference, with anthropocentric arguments based on: intelligence, biological makeup, and social interaction mobilized to secure humanities' stranglehold on life. If ethics is a being's relation to an other, and the means through which being comes into being, then a reliance on normative life as prerequisite for an ethics refuses any form of being outside of life.<sup>429</sup> In such a system, humans are both the only "true" beings and the only beings worthy of ethical consideration precisely because they have produced themselves as such. Thus the tautology has become: Human=Life. Life=Human. Any gestures towards the "gracious" extension of life outside the realm of the human, by humans, e.g., animal personhood, companion animals, or species conservation, are often fruitless endeavors precisely because they emerge from this already compromised standpoint. In attempting to preserve non-human life, they often keep alive the very humanist ideals that perpetuate species hierarchies and in turn reproduce the very

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<sup>428</sup> *Uniform Determination of Death Act* (1980)

<sup>429</sup> Here is a place where I'm not on particularly solid ground in regards to the overarching theory. I do believe that the current state of affairs, the primacy of a normalized category of humanist ethics, is a Levinasian foregrounding of the ethical as the means through which (human) being is produced. What I am (at this point) unclear about is my own standing as-to ethics as first philosophy and if we simply are deploying the "wrong" ethics. In the ending third of the chapter I briefly delve into Karen Barad's agential realism as a theoretical mechanism to "solve" this problem, arguing as she does for a kind of assemblage; a Frankensteinian "onto-ethical-epistemology" that might approach being in a more just way.

conditions they have sought to undermine. This is not to say that there are not definite positive outcomes of such political acts, but that they almost always fall short of enacting a truly radical ethics. Such an ethics would require an interaction not just with life, but with non-life, and with death. If the “divide” between life and death reifies the fictive boundary between humans and other animals and displaces the ethical-political impetus to substantive change, *justice is sacrificed for life*. My aim, then, is not only to bestow life upon those who have been denied it, in some kind of species uplift, but to challenge the binary itself; to reject life as the fundamental prerequisite for ethics while remaining *ethical*. The previous chapters of this dissertation have been about exploring the constitutive elements prying life from death, human from animal; this chapter intends to be proactive in exploding those dynamics.

### **Biophilia and Neovitalism**

In 1984 Edward O. Wilson wrote *Biophilia*, a work named for the term he defined as the “innate [human] tendency to focus on life and life-like processes.”<sup>430</sup> Wilson locates this affinity for life as inherent, advantageous, and evolutionarily-based and his research focuses on the need to affirm and preserve life as one means of differentiating the human species from other forms of life. Twenty-seven years after Wilson’s *Biophilia* came out, Icelandic musician Bjork released a multimedia project of the same name. Bjork’s *Biophilia* was at once an app for iOS, a musical concept album, and a work of digital art that both celebrates and questions humanity’s lust for life. So why put in conversation such seemingly disparate cultural works? While Wilson is grounded in an evolutionary biologist’s explanation for empathy and animacy in organic life, Bjork imagines an artistic exploration of the complexities of digital life. Beyond sharing a name, however, both Bjork and Wilson’s sense of biophilia serve as a jumping off point in demonstrating a much larger philosophical

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<sup>430</sup> Edward O. Wilson, *Biophilia: The Human Bond With Other Species* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 1.

tradition, an obsession with the preservation of life.<sup>431</sup>

After decades of biopolitical analysis across disciplinary boundaries, I can think of no greater intervention than of questioning *bios* itself. Since Foucault's coinage of the biopolitical, the realm and management of *bios* has been extended and explained in a seemingly infinite number of contexts across disciplinary boundaries.<sup>432</sup> The central tenets of Foucault's biopolitical regimes remain little changed, however. The critiques implicit in corporate, state, transnational, and communal management of life (and importantly therefore the production of life via Foucault's discursive concept of power) almost always concern: first, the injustices of such apparatus control and second, but undeniably entangled with the first, the geography of the *bios*, or put simply, who does and doesn't count as life.<sup>433</sup>

Postcolonial and queer scholars were among the first, however, to question the biases of a monolithic biopower and to interject the importance of highlighting the variegated and gradated mechanisms of governmentality.<sup>434</sup> Recent scholarship has continued this trend, rightfully locating gaps in biopolitical critique, heralding the necessity of extending and affirming life as a political act of subversion, a means to counteract dominant narratives of belonging. Specifically, both animal studies and disability studies have brought into question the figure of the human itself, arguing that it represents an impossible and destructive normative ideal. As Judith Butler notes, "Hence, it is not enough to claim that human subjects are constructed, for the construction of the human is a differential operation that produces the more and the less "human," the inhuman, the humanly unthinkable. These excluded sites come to bound the "human" as its constitutive outside, and to haunt those

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<sup>431</sup> I think this paragraph needs to do a lot more, but what I am aiming at is evidencing the imperialism of life in: philosophy, the sciences, art, and culture. Life is an almost omnipresent medial phenomenon.

<sup>432</sup> Citation needed.

<sup>433</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1* (1984)

<sup>434</sup> We can think about movements in entire disciplinary fields, such as: critical race theory, queer theory, disability studies, and of course animal studies.

boundaries as the persistent possibility of the their disruption and rearticulation.”<sup>435</sup> The consequences of naturalizing “the human” have been manifold, from the racist endeavors of slavery and imperialism, to the able-ist machinations of biomedicine, to the explosive proliferation of industrial animal slaughter. Seemingly “humanity’s” affinity for life as envisioned by Wilson and Bjork is hyper localized at best and downright prevaricated at worst.

Even those well-intentioned biopolitical criticisms reify (albeit in a subtle way) the very taxonomic boundaries they have sought to undermine. Take for instance, Giorgio Agamben’s work on the question of the animal in his book *The Open*. In it Agamben differentiates between *bios* and *zoē*, as emblems of life and bare life respectively. The problem is that in doing so Agamben relegates the non-human (specifically “the animal”) to perpetual bare life, never quite capable of attaining *bios*.<sup>436</sup> James Stanescu rightfully acknowledges the inadequacies of Agamben’s concept of bare life in charting the genealogy of the term. Stanescu finds in Benjamin’s mere life a precursor to Agamben’s bare life in which, as Benjamin argues, “Man cannot, at any price, be said to coincide with the mere life in him ... there is no sacredness in his condition, in his bodily life vulnerable to injury by his fellow men. What, then, distinguishes it essentially from the life of animals and plants? And even if these were sacred, they could not be so by virtue only of being alive, of being in life.”<sup>437</sup> So to Agamben, while animals (and humans) can occupy the space of bare life, there exists an unbridgeable gap between the two, only humans are worthy of *bios*. Stanescu sums this sentiment up in stating, “Animals are not beings capable of having *bios* for Agamben.

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<sup>435</sup> Butler, 8.

<sup>436</sup> The question of “the animal” is another problematic I’d like to tackle, though as this chapter incessantly grows it might have to be put elsewhere. Nevertheless, the collapse of a staggeringly high number of diverse forms of being into the singular is a violence (one that perpetuates animal alterity) that cannot go unremarked upon.

<sup>437</sup> James Stanescu, “Species Trouble: Judith Butler, Mourning, and the Precarious Lives of Animals” *Hypatia*, 573

Indeed, definitionally, the animal is that which is outside of *bios*. Bare life, because it refers to the zone of indetermination between *bios* and *zoe*, is a condition that excludes the animal, and excludes us from thinking of the animal as having a *bios*, a qualified and particular life.”<sup>438</sup> It is not so much Agamben’s recognition of the current state of things for animals, which I find little argument with, but the wholesale denial of *possibility*. Thus, Agamben’s starting point, in reifying *bios* and *zoe* as distinct states of being, precludes animal life as such. If Agamben’s political-ontological hierarchy is deficient because of its static ethical erasures, then perhaps we must look to an active understanding of *life as potential* to ground its ethical possibilities.

It was precisely the “animating” force of life that Hans Driesch, a German philosopher and biologist, addressed in his 1914 work, *The History & Theory of Vitalism*. Writing about the vital spark he believed distinguished the living from the nonliving, Driesch describes entelechy, what he terms “the non-mechanical agent responsible for the phenomena of life.”<sup>439</sup> Driesch takes the concept of entelechy from Aristotle, who, “defined the soul as the *entelecheia* or form of the body, the principle of its actuality and functioning that aims at the fulfillment of the organism itself— formal, efficient, and final cause, as it were, rolled into one.”<sup>440</sup> To Aristotle, entelechy was the teleological potential contained within the ethical being, its *capacity*.<sup>441</sup> To Driesch, as Jane Bennett notes, “the agentic capacity of entelechy is

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<sup>438</sup> Stanescu, 574.

<sup>439</sup> Hans Driesch, *The Problem of Individuality: A Course of Four Lectures Delivered before the University of London in October 1913*. (London: Macmillan, 1914), 34.

<sup>440</sup> Walter Redmond. "Edith Stein on Evolution." *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* 13, no. 2 (2010): 153-176. <https://muse.jhu.edu/> (accessed January 28, 2016), 159-160.

<sup>441</sup> In this way, just as the having of sensory faculties is essential to being an animal, so the having of a mind is essential to being a human. Human minds do more than understand, however. It is equally essential to the human being to plan and deliberate, to ponder alternatives and strategize, and generally to chart courses of action. Aristotle ascribes these activities no less than understanding and contemplation to mind and consequently distinguishes the “practical mind” (or “practical intellect” or “practical reason”) from “theoretical mind” (or “theoretical intellect” or “theoretical reason”) (*Nicomachean Ethics* vi 8 1143a35-b5; see [Aristotle](#):

not a disembodied soul, for it is constrained by the materiality that it must inhabit and by the preformed possibilities contained therein. But despite this heteronomy, entelechy has real efficacy: it animates, arranges, and directs the bodies of the living, even under changing conditions. It is ‘an effective extra-spatial intensively manifold constituent of nature.’”<sup>442</sup> Bennett here is highlighting the material importance of Driesch’s claim, a biological/physiological, rather than spiritual, explication of life. Driesch’s aim is to differentiate mere mechanistic animation from vitality, something to him, which is more self-reparative and creative.<sup>443</sup> This forms his basis of what can be termed life as opposed to what exists as mere matter.

Henri Bergson deploys a similar line of reasoning in his concept of *élan vital*, the “tremendous internal push of life...the primitive impetus of the whole...the impulse which thrusts life into the world, which made it divide into vegetables and animals, which shunted the animal on to suppleness of form, and which, at a certain moment, in the animal kingdom threatened with torpor, secured that, on some points at least, it should rouse itself up and move forward.”<sup>444</sup> To Bergson, however, as to Driesch (and as opposed to Aristotle), *élan vital* is not teleological, but spasmodic, chaotic, and contingent. Jane Bennett sums up Bergson quite nicely in asserting, “the means available to *élan vital* do not preexist (even as latent ‘possibilities’) the moment of their deployment, but rather emerge in tandem with their effects.”<sup>445</sup> For Bergson, as opposed to Driesch, preservation of the ‘whole’ (be it a gene,

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[ethics](#)). In all these ways, investigating this capacity of soul thus has a special significance for Aristotle: in investigating mind, he is investigating what makes humans human. (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-psychology/>)

<sup>442</sup> Jane Bennett. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 75.

<sup>443</sup> Ibid.

<sup>444</sup> Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 102,139.

<sup>445</sup> Jane Bennett. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 78.



organism, or species) is not the impetus of *élan vital*, but in fact the opposite.<sup>446</sup> *Élan vital* “insert(s) some *indetermination* into matter. Indeterminate, *i.e.* unforeseeable, are the forms it creates in the course of its evolution.”<sup>447</sup> Thus the organism’s state of being is constantly in flux, a perpetual transition that distinguishes life from non-life, what Bergson, Driesch, and Deleuze call *becoming*. Once again Jane Bennett, “Neither *élan vital* nor entelechy is reducible to the material and energetic forces that each inhabits and must enlist; both are agents in the sense of engaging in actions that are more than reflexes, instincts, or prefigured responses to stimuli; both have the generative power to produce, organize, and enliven matter.”<sup>448</sup> It is through Bergson, Deleuze, and Bennett that this text finds the moorings for its definition of life as potential.

It is Bennett’s aim, however, to evidence the vitality of all matter, not just what we term life. She argues, “the ethical task at hand here is to cultivate the ability to discern nonhuman vitality, to become perceptually open to it.”<sup>449</sup> Bennett advocates a recognition of the vibrancy of all matter, not only “organic” matter, as a means to recognize its agentic potential. She advocates a “vibrant materiality,” which takes the concept of vitality from Bergson, Driesch, etc., and extends that reasoning to “inorganic” matter. As Bennett argues, “By ‘vitality’ I mean the *capacity* of things, edibles, commodities, storms, metals—not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own.”<sup>450</sup> Glossing Bennett, matter is affective, it is profoundly impactful on those beings it interacts with. Moreover, Bennett’s

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<sup>446</sup> Perhaps a bit more explanation here is necessary? Chapter 2 delves into questions of wholes and parts and about the importance of inside/outside.

<sup>447</sup> Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 132-133.

<sup>448</sup> Jane Bennett. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 80.

<sup>449</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>450</sup> The notion of capacity is crucial to this final chapter. Specifically how capacity is mobilized as qualitative indicator of all forms of difference (species, life/death, etc.)  
*Ibid.*, viii.

vibrant materiality “is a rubric that tends to horizontalize the relations between humans, biota, and abiota. It draws human attention sideways, away from an ontologically ranked Great Chain of Being and toward a greater appreciation of the complex entanglements of humans and nonhumans.”<sup>451</sup> Bennett here gives us a non-anthropocentric means of ethical engagement, an attempt to collapse ontological hierarchy under an expanded vitalism.<sup>452</sup> Leaving Bennett’s work, however, I am left with several unanswered questions: What is the place of death in Bennett’s analysis? If all matter is vibrant what is one’s ethical responsibility to life? Is there an injustice in collapsing all being into matter? And finally are there better parameters for ethical engagement than vitality and capacity? Or, as Karen Barad importantly notes, should we challenge “neovitalist theories that take every-thing to be living, without necessarily asking after the ways in which particular kinds of animate/inanimate distinctions come to matter for particular purposes of particular kinds of flourishing or particular beings.”<sup>453</sup> To simplify: what bodies matter and why?

### **Vital to Viral**

In July 2015 international outrage followed the death of a single animal, Cecil the lion. A male Southwest African Lion, Cecil was legally killed on July 1<sup>st</sup> in Hwange National Park in Zimbabwe by an American hunter, Walter Palmer.<sup>454</sup> Palmer faced no criminal charges for the killing of the lion, but was the subject of an expansive social media campaign aimed at condemning his actions.<sup>455</sup> The story was picked up by mid-July, but it wasn’t until later that month that it really took off. Utilizing the data visualization tool CartoDB one can see the *viral* impact of the death of Cecil.

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<sup>451</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>452</sup> Bennett is someone I believe in later iterations of this chapter that I will have to reckon with more and more. I appreciate her attentiveness to the ethical in a way that OOO doesn’t engage.

<sup>453</sup> Adam Kleinman, “Intra-actions” Interview with Karen Barad *Mousse*, 80.

<sup>454</sup> “Full transcript: Walter Palmer speaks about Cecil the lion controversy,” SEPTEMBER 7, 2015 <http://www.startribune.com/full-transcript-walter-palmer-speaks-about-controversy/325453351/>

<sup>455</sup> Get source here.

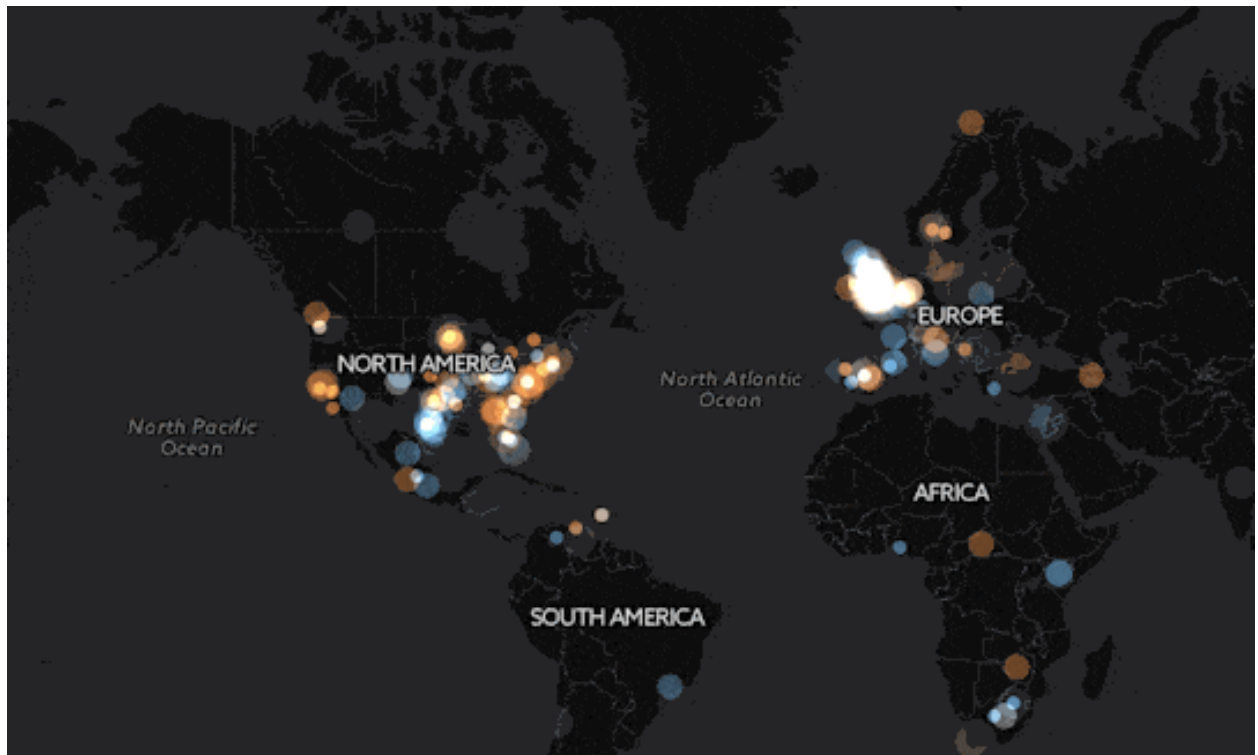


Figure 22: “Watch What Cecil the Lion Did to Twitter”<sup>456</sup>

The blips represent a high volume concentration of the use of the hashtag #cecilthelion on twitter over the course of seven hours on July 29, 2015. Data according to Amobee Brand Intelligence cites some 670,000 tweets about Cecil over the course of those twenty-four hours.<sup>457</sup> In addition to the quantity of tweets about the incident one can also get a sense of their geographical distribution.<sup>458</sup>

There are a number of questions that the Cecil the lion incident raise for me, particularly around the impact and dissemination of “caring” about death. One specific quote from Palmer is quite telling. When asked about the lion Palmer noted, “If I had

<sup>456</sup> Dan Tynan, “*Watch What Cecil the Lion Did to Twitter*” July 30, 2015 <https://www.yahoo.com/tech/watch-what-cecil-the-lion-did-to-twitter-125442840269.html>

<sup>457</sup> Jordan Valinsky, “Outrage and backlash: #CecilTheLion racks up 670K tweets in 24 hours” July 29, 2015. <http://digiday.com/brands/outrage-backlash-cecilthelion-racks-670k-tweets-24-hours/>

<sup>458</sup> In the non-word file document version of this chapter the CartoDB figure is an animated gif, which I feel demonstrates the productive capabilities of such tools much better. Additionally, the gif is itself a particular kind of media I need to interrogate further; namely the phenomena of repetition as a means of producing/assembling desire.

known this lion had a name and was important to the country or a study obviously I wouldn't have taken it."<sup>459</sup> The celebrity status of Cecil, a tagged lion part of a University of Oxford conservation study, and in particular his name seem to be key elements in the backlash against Palmer.<sup>460</sup> Additionally, however, I believe, is the species classification of Cecil, his identification as a mammal, as well as his *perceived* vulnerability. Cecil is certainly not the only animal to have a large-scale social media campaign on their behalf. Similar viral movements have accompanied: Tilikum, a male orca housed at SeaWorld and made famous through the documentary *Blackfish*, as well as the well-documented travails of animals like the black rhino, the silverback gorilla, or the giant panda.<sup>461</sup> There are numerous threads that tie each of these animals together: their apparent species closeness to humans, their supposed intelligence, their aesthetic appeal (being cute), but also their *apparent* scarcity.

Thus far I haven't much delved into the numerical dimensions of species ethics, but this is a lacuna that can certainly not go unremarked upon. One reason (beyond and in addition to the aforementioned) these animals seem to have an outsized impact above and beyond their similarly vulnerable counterparts seems to be the ability to individuate them.<sup>462</sup> Walter Palmer's quote about not killing an animal with a name in this sense is particularly striking. Naming in and of itself is a powerful act. As Foucault notes in *The Order of Things*, "in the act of naming, human nature – like the folding of representation back upon itself – transforms the linear sequence of thoughts into a constant table of partially different beings."<sup>463</sup> There are distinct ontological implications of naming according to Foucault,

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<sup>459</sup> "Cecil the lion: Zimbabwe will not charge US dentist over killing" October 12, 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/oct/12/zimbabwe-will-not-charge-us-dentist-killing-cecil-lion>

<sup>460</sup> "Cecil and the Conservation of Lions" <http://www.wildcru.org/cecil-home/>

<sup>461</sup> Perhaps something to be said about discourse around endangered animals. Since I wrote this Tilikum has died, but that's probably for the best given the horror of his imprisonment.

<sup>462</sup> Recall Schrödinger here, and the violence/residue of individuation.

<sup>463</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (Routledge: New York, 1989), 337.

evidencing the entanglement of knowledge production and being.<sup>464</sup> Foucault, therefore, offers us one insight into the impact of the named being, its *knowability*. Even though being named places one in a subordinate position to the one who does the naming, to be nameless, to be unknowable is to not be afforded *any* semblance of being in the Post-Enlightenment era. Thus one result of classification, implicit in the ascendance of binary identitarian discourse, is a solidification of the other. A science in manufacturing the “no one.”

There is also the transactory or economic importance of individuation.<sup>465</sup> In naming Cecil, he is afforded an identity, a token extension of humanity that makes it easier to empathize with “him.” This is in contrast to the [relative] lack of attention paid to the mass deaths of other species. Could dissimilar species garner the same attention? What about swarmed beings that resist easy individuation like bees, bacteria, or birds?<sup>466</sup> Here I believe we are treading on relatively familiar ethical ground. We will remember that the very basis of Levinasian ethics emerges from the one-to-one encounter. To Levinas it is through the face that we become duty bound to the other, a kind of magnetism that emerges from a recognition of similarity. Even the etymological roots of empathy are particularly telling, emerging from the Greek word *empathēia*, with ‘path’ meaning both ‘disease’ and ‘feeling,’ and ‘em’ meaning ‘in.’<sup>467</sup> Empathy, therefore, is the attempt or act of feeling what another being feels, to literally become them. It should come as no surprise, then, given the genealogy of constructed similarities and differences among species that the individual, faced, animal yields more affective weight than its en masse, faceless, counterparts. And yet,

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<sup>464</sup> Another moment in which poststructuralist and quantum thinking dovetail.

<sup>465</sup> Here liberalism and its core tenets are at their most apparent: the individual as sole inheritor of subjectivity and the opposition of nature to the individual. Once again Foucault, “It is the disorder of nature due to its own history, to its catastrophes, or perhaps merely to its jumbled plurality, which is no longer capable of providing representation with anything but things that resemble one another (Foucault 77-78).”

<sup>466</sup> I think this point necessitates a much longer treatment. The phenomena of the swarm presents an intriguing alternative to the individual from economic, ontological, and ethical vantages.

<sup>467</sup> I will certainly have more to say about the etymological ties between feeling and disease as it’s a connection I haven’t yet explored and is certainly a fruitful one.

I believe there is more to this story. Not only are our affects directed by a perceived species similarity, but just as heinously they are driven by the omnipresent biopolitical tendrils of late capitalism. Responsibility, as we will see, is the ethical currency whereby life and death are transacted, where species difference is naturalized, and through which large-scale violences are excused.



Another lion with a bow and arrow by the American dentist Walter Palmer, left, with the help of Theo Bronkhorst, a professional hunter. Photograph: Rex Shutterstock

Figure 23: Faces of Irresponsibility: Cecil and His Hunters<sup>468</sup>

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<sup>468</sup> “Cecil the lion: Zimbabwe will not charge US dentist over killing” October 12, 2015.  
<http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/oct/12/zimbabwe-will-not-charge-us-dentist-killing-cecil-lion>





Figure 24: 'Cage Free' Chickens and Swarm Ethics

If the killing of Cecil the lion is an act of irresponsibility, then we can see in the factory farm an instantiation of the “responsible.” Though the public slaughterhouse dates back to early nineteenth century France (leading to the coinage of the term *abattoir*) these were much different places than contemporary factory farms.<sup>469</sup> The public slaughterhouse did, however, mark a turning point in the visibility of animal slaughter. Abattoirs were specifically kept from public view.<sup>470</sup> The industrialization of animal slaughter, first concentrated in the U.S. in select cities like Chicago, brought a further degree of separation between animal consumers and the animals themselves. In addition to being less visible, as animal slaughter, dismemberment, and commodification became more streamlined, fewer workers participated in the process.<sup>471</sup> Moreover, around the 1960s in the US, factory farms further mechanized the process of animal slaughter, also moving from urban centers to gargantuan

<sup>469</sup> Amy J. Fitzgerald, “A Social History of the Slaughterhouse: From Inception to Contemporary Implications,” *Human Ecology Review* Vol. 17, No. 1, 2010

<sup>470</sup> Ibid.

<sup>471</sup> Ibid.

rural facilities. Sociologist Amy Fitzgerald notes that much like other ‘manufacturing’ industries in the mid-to-late 20<sup>th</sup> century US, slaughterhouses were sites of “working class fractionalization” with increasing numbers of immigrant labor and decreasing union influence.<sup>472</sup> What concerns this chapter, more than just the historical transformation to mass animal slaughter, however, are the ethical/ontological implications of such an undertaking. As Timothy Pachirat writes in his work *Every 12 Seconds*, “in 2009 some 8,520,225,000 chickens, 245,768,000 turkeys, 113,600,000 pigs, 33,300,000 cattle, 22,767,000 ducks, 2,768,000 sheep and lambs, and 944,200 calves were killed for meat in the United States.”<sup>473</sup> We have already noted many times that the lives of these particular animals are not of much concern ethically because of their status as non-life. Formative to that exclusion I believe, however, is their seeming overabundance. While Cecil the Lion is a ‘unique’ individual, important not only to the researchers studying him, but to the population en masse, the billions of nameless chickens, turkeys, pigs, cows, etc. have no such individuation afforded them. Ruth Harrison, one of the first activists to shed light on the horrors of factory farms in the 1960s offers an insight into why this might be the case. She writes, “Life in the factory farm revolves entirely around profits, and animals are assessed purely for their ability to convert food into flesh, or ‘saleable products.’”<sup>474</sup>

The constructed scarcity of life, therefore, makes it a more precious commodity, a product of a manufactured excess of sacrificial life. The sanctity of life is therefore predicated on the sacrifice of the animal other.<sup>475</sup> George Bataille, writing on economies of excess, only affords the privilege of delineating excess to the human. In arguing that eroticism and death represent instances of energy discharge *and* limiting those excesses, the

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<sup>472</sup> Ibid.

<sup>473</sup> Timothy Pachirat, *Every 12 Seconds*, 3.

<sup>474</sup> Ruth Harrison, *Animal Machines*

<sup>475</sup> Connecting scarcity and sanctity here as they can often go hand-in-hand.



animal is forever limited to its use-value, a calculable, but not calculating non-subject doomed to non-life.<sup>476</sup> Nicole Shukin, against Derrida's, "animal specter...as a fetish within deconstruction," argues, "the rubric of rendering suggests, by contrast, that capitalism is biopolitically invested in *producing* animal life as a spectral body."<sup>477</sup> Where I would disagree with Shukin, however, is in her characterization of the rendered/spectral animal as *life*. Derrida describes the spectral as a being of inbetweenness (as well as an inbetweenness of being) "neither dead nor alive, it is dead and alive at the same time. It survives."<sup>478</sup> He uses the specter, and therefore the animal, as a being that antagonizes extant structures of power, e.g., species being, industrial capital, and life itself. In contrast, Shukin claims that spectrality *occludes* historical structures of power, subjecting animal life to a kind of radical alterity outside of time altogether.<sup>479</sup> It is Shukin's aim, therefore, to augment Derrida's animal metaphysicality with an additional logic of materialist critique. She says, "If draining the historical substance out of virtualized animals represents one valence of rendering, recycling animals as mere material represents the other."<sup>480</sup> The danger, as Shukin sees it, of "idealizing the alterity of animal affect," is to reinstate/reproduce animal affect as "a technology of capital."<sup>481</sup> The benefit, to Shukin, in highlighting the material reality of animal death is to foreclose its immortality as "potential exchange value."<sup>482</sup> In contrast, I do not believe it necessary to abandon spectrality as a conceptual frame, but instead make apparent the materiality of the spectral. In particular, the works of Julia Kristeva and Karen Barad provide a means of access to an entangled material/discursive realm.

In Kristeva's formation, the abject is a magnetic force that troubles the distance

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<sup>476</sup> Citation needed.

<sup>477</sup> Shukin, 38.

<sup>478</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 153.

<sup>479</sup> Shukin, 38-42.

<sup>480</sup> Shukin, 40.

<sup>481</sup> Shukin, 42.

<sup>482</sup> Shukin 43.

between subject and object. As she says, it “draws me toward the place where meaning collapses.”<sup>483</sup> In this intimation of psychic collapse the abject both represents the threat that meaning is breaking down and structures our reaction to such a possible breakdown. As Kristeva states, “It is...not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order, what does not respect borders, positions, rules.”<sup>484</sup> Thus, the corpse, excrement, human defilement, mutation, and animality all mark the abject; to Kristeva they are horrors that highlight the instability of distinct human totality. The abject is a mechanism of subject stabilization. It attempts to inoculate against perceived threats and in doing so reifies those things as outside the parameters of normative subjectivity. It is, therefore, *not only* that Kristeva’s notion of the abject formulates a particular relationship between subject and object, but also that it aids in constructing those entities as such.

The return to the question of species as numerated entities, through the lens of Kristeva’s abjection, now becomes much clearer. The large-scale production of particular animals as “masses,” when outside of human influence chickens, pigs, cows, sheep, ducks, and other factory-farmed beings never group together above double digits, creates an environment that makes possible their cultural depiction as “abject.” Is it any surprise that ten thousand chickens piled on top of one another create an atmosphere of filth and putrid odors? Or how pigs have been decried as dirty animals because of their common depiction knee deep in slop? The same litmus test for purity that has been an incredibly effective means of denigrating via gender, race, nationality, sexuality, and ability, is brandished here as well, all in service of an uncorrupted ideal humanity that has never and will never exist. And yet the machinery of capital is even more inventive than this in categorically denying life under conditions one could call nothing other than despicable. Not only are the “lives” of

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<sup>483</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 2.

<sup>484</sup> Kristeva, 4.

farmed animals denied at every possible impasse, but even in death they are rendered exploitable excess. Thus, carcasses line dinner plates, but they also are reconstituted into feed for other farmed animals. Starved chickens and pigs cannibalize one another not out of any natural impulse, but from sheer malnutrition. Their violent journey through the human body also mimics the ontological trajectory that humanism has laid out for them. What was once a vibrant being is obliterated for human enjoyment before being subjected to the violences of chewing, digestion, and excretion. Thus, the ultimate alchemy is performed; *life turns to shit*. In these things, animal death, just like animal life, is made to manifest as excess. It is arranged in stolid, swarmed, faceless, antithesis to an individuated human calculation pronounced as a prerequisite to morality. Nietzsche describes this coming into being in *Genealogy of Morals*. He states,

The task of breeding an animal with the right to make promises evidently embraces and presupposes as a preparatory task that one first makes men to a certain degree necessary, uniform, like among like, regular, and consequently calculable. The tremendous labor . . . performed by man upon himself during the greater part of the existence of the human race, his entire prehistoric labor, finds in this its meaning, its great justification, notwithstanding the severity, tyranny, stupidity and idiocy involved in it: with the aid of the morality of mores and the social straightjacket, man was actually made calculable.<sup>485</sup>

The intersection of economy and morality, a topic that has been prevalent throughout this essay, finds its apotheosis in Nietzsche.

### **Debt and Responsibility**

Nietzsche writes in *The Genealogy of Morals* “the major moral concept *Schuld* [guilt] has its origin in the very material concept *Schulden* [debts].”<sup>486</sup> Nietzsche’s aim in connecting the ethical and the material here is to highlight the very constructedness of contemporary morality. Rather than espousing an innate or *a priori* ethics, Nietzsche instead charts the

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<sup>485</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, 2:1.

<sup>486</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, 499.

interpersonal benefits of claiming moral superiority. Nietzsche locates this sentiment in the *value* of claiming the “privilege of *responsibility*.”<sup>487</sup> He continues, “the consciousness of this rare freedom, the power over oneself and over fate, has in his case penetrated to the profoundest depths and become instinct...this sovereign man calls it his *conscience*.”<sup>488</sup> In constructing the conscience the ‘sovereign’ man wields not only the disciplinary power of morality, but the self-aggrandizing “*right to affirm oneself*.”<sup>489</sup> To Nietzsche this ideal represented a kind of disease that plagued human consciousness; one that emerged from a psychological rending of human from animal. He states, “thus began the gravest and uncanniest illness from which humanity has not yet recovered, man’s suffering *of man, of himself* – the result of a forcible sundering from his animal past.”<sup>490</sup> What Nietzsche discovers are the mutually constitutive effects of identity formation and ethics, their irreducible entanglement. In doing so, he demonstrates the violent history of human exceptionalism, made manifest through trauma, and espoused as morality.<sup>491</sup>

But, back to Nietzsche’s earlier point about the connection between guilt and debt. To explain, Nietzsche ruminates on the genealogy of punishment and its relation to justice. He states,

...the idea, now so obvious... ‘the criminal deserves punishment *because* he could have acted differently’—is in fact an extremely late and subtle form of human judgment and inference...Throughout the greater part of human history punishment was *not* imposed *because* one held the wrongdoer responsible for his deed, thus *not* on the presupposition that only the guilty should be punished: rather...the idea that every injury has its *equivalent* and can actually be paid back, even if only through the *pain* of the culprit.<sup>492</sup>

Thus a genealogy of morals and conscience has worked over time to erase the economic

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<sup>487</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, 496.

<sup>488</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, 496.

<sup>489</sup> Ibid., 496.

<sup>490</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, 521.

<sup>491</sup> “If something is to stay in the memory it must be burned in: only that which never ceases to hurt stays in the memory” Nietzsche 497.

<sup>492</sup> Nietzsche, 499.

origins of justice, in which punishment sought an equivalent value to that wrong enacted. This idea, as Nietzsche states, “of an equivalence between injury and pain” has its roots “in the contractual relationship between *creditor* and *debtor*.”<sup>493</sup> This relationship was one predicated on ensuring trust between two parties engaged in a transaction, “to provide a guarantee of the seriousness and sanctity of his promise, to impress repayment as a duty, an obligation upon his own conscience.”<sup>494</sup> For if the contract was violated, or somehow left unfulfilled, “he [the debtor] would substitute something else that he ‘possessed,’ something he had control over...his body, his wife, his freedom, or even his *life*.”<sup>495</sup> This kind of ‘insurance’ isn’t too far removed from similar transactions today, either licit or illicit.<sup>496</sup> The gambler puts both their financial and bodily integrity at stake in transacting with their bookie. The ‘homeowner’ or college student risks maybe not direct bodily harm, but the risk of penury, homelessness, or starvation by defaulting on a large loan. Nietzsche argues, however, that this recompense transcends the financial, and represents a form of pleasure afforded the creditor, “the pleasure of being allowed to vent his power freely upon one who is powerless, the voluptuous pleasure ‘*de faire le mal pour le plaisir de le faire*,’ the enjoyment of violation.”<sup>497</sup> He continues, “It was in *this* sphere then, the sphere of legal obligations, that the moral conceptual world of ‘guilt,’ ‘conscience,’ ‘duty,’ ‘sacredness of duty’ had its origin.”<sup>498</sup> Nietzsche locates the pleasure afforded those in wielding power over another, the wanton cruelty from which *morality* emerged. Indeed, the highest price one could pay was the

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<sup>493</sup> Ibid.

<sup>494</sup> Ibid.

<sup>495</sup> Liberalism at its finest: ownership over anything and everything. Ibid.

<sup>496</sup> There is the possibility, I think, to extend this logic to an essay on the implications of debt at alternative, yet entangled scales, such as the national/global. In such a scenario (like the one we face today) debt functions as a means of economic and ontological enslavement to a neoliberal system of capital. You are constituted through your economic transactions, and to abandon/challenge those debts would be to undo any stable concept of being in 2016 America (and beyond). Or in corporate tagline slang: *you are what you owe*.

<sup>497</sup> Ibid., 501.

<sup>498</sup> Ibid.

penalty of death, the loss of one's life to exact an equivalence for the debt owed to god, the community, the family, or the state. The precision of a life/death boundary, in its relation to various economic platforms of morality, was a means of insuring the power of this calculus. Thus, Nietzsche evidences the clear entanglement and mutually constitutive properties of morality, affect, and life.

Nietzsche also does extraordinarily well to demonstrate the violences of morality. In doing so, he shows how and why *responsibility* has come to be a crucial mechanism of humanist ethics. Being "responsible for" under the principles of humanism becomes a means of reinforcing hierarchy whilst dismissing its existence. Contemporary advertising gives us a number of examples of the heinous effects made possible in mobilizing responsibility, particularly in and around death. As Nicole Shukin deftly argues, "What makes animal signs unusually potent discursive alibis of power is not only that particularist political ideologies, by ventriloquizing them, appear to speak from the universal and disinterested place of nature. It is also that 'the animal,' arguably more than any other signifier by virtue of its singular mimetic capaciousness...functions as a hinge allowing powerful discourses to flip or vacillate between literal and figurative economies of sense."<sup>499</sup> Each animal, in these particular advertisements, becomes the ethical justification for its own consumption. Not only is the animal not capable of life, what little being it is afforded is mobilized towards the pleasure of its own commodification and destruction. The affective economy of interacting with animal (non)life, therefore, is one in which the animal assumes the role of debtor to which the human is owed some recompense. This can be seen in the three figures below, either arguing for: a need to consume oneself *Figure 25* (anthropomorphic auto-cannibalism), an alternative meat source *Figure 26*, or a pleasure in

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<sup>499</sup> Nicole Shukin, *Animal Capital: Rendering Life in Biopolitical Times* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 5.

being eaten *Figure 27*. Much like Gramsci's concept of hegemony, the non-human oppressed are sculpted into mouthpieces for their own exploitation.

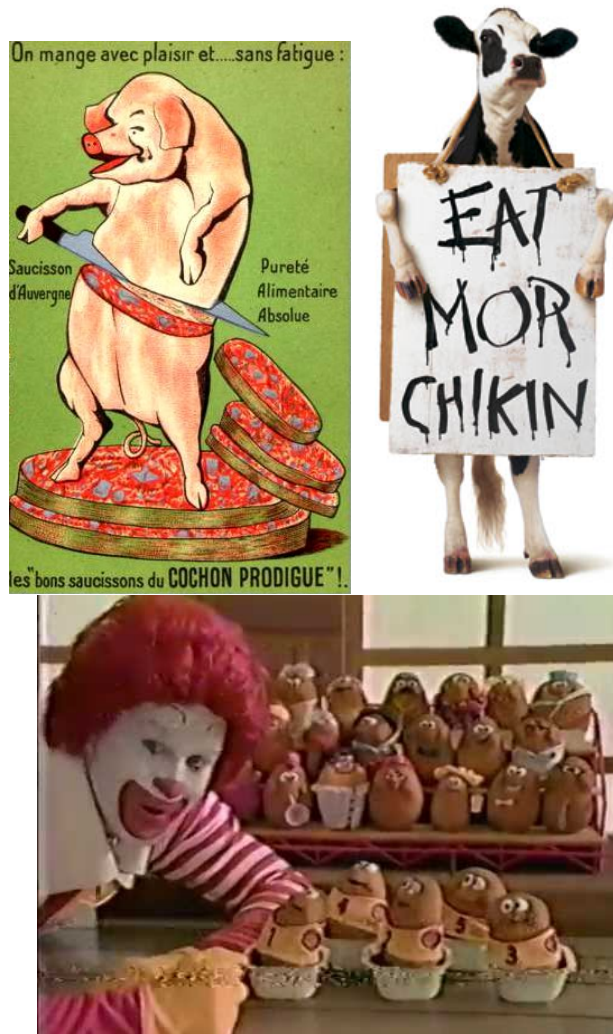


Figure 25: Autocannibalism<sup>500</sup> Figure 26: Transference<sup>501</sup> Figure 27: What a joy to be eaten<sup>502</sup>

Responsibility thus carries a dual ethical charge under humanism. Being responsible for someone or something is produced as a “burden” of capacity, it requires some manner of care and attentiveness. This is exactly why many farmers/consumers see no hypocrisy in

<sup>500</sup> This ad states “We eat with pleasure and without exertion/fatigue...the good sausages of the bounteous pig” “Let’s Meet the Meat” <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/LetsMeetTheMeat>

<sup>501</sup> “Eat More Chikn” *Chick Fil’A* ad

<sup>502</sup> *McDonald’s* (1988)

products like “humane meat.”<sup>503</sup> In believing that these animals have no capacity of their own, it is the responsibility of a ‘higher power’ to decide for them. This is, however, an ethical sleight of hand, because as Nietzsche reminds us, responsibility is itself a privilege, a position of power that reaps numerous social, psychological, and ontological benefits. Responsibility thus acts as a mask that disguises the economics of contemporary ethics, in which debt governs the parameters of being, paid with interest to the human. Recall the discussion from Chapter 1 on capacity and disability, in which the boundaries of ethical *production* are already set, by those who make themselves responsible. One can also easily think of an example whereby responsibility has been mobilized to excuse oppression and violence. In Nietzsche’s own time (and continuing to this day) imperialism was/is justified through claims of moral superiority and paternalistic responsibility.<sup>504</sup> More than this, as Derrida asserts, responsibility is always selective. One can never be responsible to all. He states in *The Gift of Death*, “I am responsible to anyone (that is to say, to any other) only by failing in my responsibility to all the others, to the ethical or political generality. And I can never justify this sacrifice; I must always hold my peace about it... What binds me to this one or that one, remains finally unjustifiable.”<sup>505</sup> In dissecting responsibility, we begin to see its *ontological* implications. Responsibility is an affective/discursive means through which life is produced and denied. The question then becomes, if responsibility is the currency with which humanist ethics is meted out, as I believe it is, what is the economy it is underwritten by?

## Economies

As a means of access, let us consider Georges Bataille, who in explaining his concept

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<sup>503</sup> Source?

<sup>504</sup> Think along the lines of Rudyard Kipling’s famous poem “The White Man’s Burden” and the corresponding ‘real world’ imperialist policies being enacted across the global south.

<sup>505</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 70.



of “general economy,” denaturalizes the link between life and economy as products of excess,

The living organism, in a situation determined by the play of energy on the surface of the globe, ordinarily receives more energy than is necessary for maintaining life; the excess energy (wealth) can be used for the growth of a system (e.g., an organism); if the system can no longer grow, or if the excess cannot be completely absorbed in its growth, it must necessarily be lost without profit; it must be spent, willingly or not, gloriously or catastrophically.<sup>506</sup>

Bataille is arguing for the importance of interrogating not only scarcity, as the impetus of capitalist analysis is wont to do, but *excess* as a primary economic actant at individual, systemic, and universal scales.<sup>507</sup> To Bataille, beyond the necessities of “productive social activity” each organism contains a surplus of energy (in a range of vibrant form: sunlight, eroticism, laughter) that acts as both a means of interactivity with the other and engine of growth/change. He continues, “economically, otherness emerges as that part of human activity which remains irreducible to systems of production and use.”<sup>508</sup> Bataille is therefore arguing that otherness emanates not from economic systems that reduce all human (inter)action to its supposed use/exchange value and exploit it (à la Marx), but from that excess which cannot be made “useful.” Outside the purviews of “usefulness,” is in Bataille’s terms, the “accursed share, “the sacred and cursed part, which articulates a sacred realm with the utterly profane world of filth, sexuality and crime.”<sup>509</sup>

Bataille distinguishes between the predispositions of always-too-particular and/or hyperlocalized economic thinkers and “*living matter in general*.”<sup>510</sup> To further his notion of the

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<sup>506</sup> Georges Bataille, *The Bataille Reader*, 184.

<sup>507</sup> *The Bataille Reader*, 19.

<sup>508</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>509</sup> Here we seem to be coming startlingly close to someone like Agamben for whom *homo sacer* is he who may be killed, but not sacrificed. As we will see, however, Bataille sees sacrifice as enmeshed in his concept of general economy. Of particular relevance too is someone like Kristeva whose psychoanalytics of abjection share a great deal with Bataille’s excess.

*Ibid.*,

<sup>510</sup> *The Bataille Reader*, 185.

general economy, upon which the accursed share relies, Bataille argues,

The human mind reduces operations, in science as in life, to an entity based on typical particular systems (organisms or enterprises). Economic activity, considered as a whole, is conceived in terms of particular operations with limited ends. The mind generalizes by composing the aggregate of these operations. Economic science merely generalizes the isolated situation; it restricts its object to operations carried out with a view to a limited end, that of economic man. It does not take into consideration a play of energy that no particular end limits: the play of living matter in general, involved in the movement of light of which it is the result. On the surface of the globe, for living matter in general, energy is always in excess; the question is always posed in terms of extravagance. The choice is limited to how the wealth is to be squandered. It is to the particular living being, or to limited populations of living beings, that the problem of necessity presents itself.<sup>511</sup>

Crucially, Bataille's critique is one of scope. To him, economic inquiry has limited itself to the particular. What Bataille is clamoring for is a realignment (or at least a gesture) towards alternative ecological economies. This is analogous to mistaking events for totalities, of observable systems for universal truths. As Charles Darwin remarks in *The Voyage of the Beagle*, "The earthquake, however, must be to every one a most impressive event: the earth, considered from our earliest childhood as the type of solidity, has oscillated like a thin crust beneath our feet; and in seeing the laboured works of man in a moment overthrown, we feel the insignificance of his boasted power."<sup>512</sup> Systems of monetary exchange, industrial capital, and a nascent neoliberalism, therefore, represent only small facets of a much larger Copernican economy.<sup>513</sup> These are anthropocentric economies that do not consider non-human resource flows. In Bataille's words,

...man is not just the separate being that contends with the living world and with other men for his share of resources. The general movement of exudation (of waste) of living matter impels him, and he cannot stop it; moreover, being at the summit, his

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<sup>511</sup> *The Bataille Reader*, 184-185.

<sup>512</sup> Charles Darwin, *The Voyage of the Beagle*, <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/944/pg944-images.html>

<sup>513</sup> This is perhaps an alternative approach, but similar criticism, to someone like Timothy Morton and his concept of hyperobjects. Morton lambasts acquiescence to a phrase like "climate change," which highlights localized events over worldwide processes. Indeed, part of Morton's project is to problematize our concept of "the world." How Bataille's concept of excess would engage with Morton's hyperobjects, however, I have not pursued as of yet.

sovereignty in the living world identifies him with this movement; it destines him, in a privileged way, to that glorious operation, to useless consumption. If he denies this, as he is constantly urged to do by the consciousness of a necessity, of an indigence inherent in separate beings (which are constantly short of resources, which are nothing but eternally needy individuals), his denial does not alter the global movement of energy in the least: the latter cannot accumulate limitlessly in the productive forces; eventually, like a river into the sea, it is bound to escape us and be lost to us.<sup>514</sup>

In further explicating excess, Bataille provides us with a means of exploring the dispersal of energies, affects, flows of discursive power *that don't necessarily have to be productive or valuable*.<sup>515</sup>

As Lysa Hochroth notes of Bataille's work, "Human improductive expenditure creates new improductive values, which reconnect humans to the universe through the loss principle."<sup>516</sup>

Improductive expenditure exhibits to Bataille the "intrinsic value" of desire to human existence, motivated by loss.<sup>517</sup> Hochroth again, "desire is a social need or interest based on the loss principle. It is not the need to fulfill a lacking or make up for something missing that fuels desire, but rather the losing itself that empowers the desiring."<sup>518</sup> Rather than pathologizing perversion, religion, or art Bataille highlights their value. In looking at excess we can approach those materials, bodies, abstracts, and ideas deemed improductive and ascertain the importance of their various entanglements.

The act/ideology of sacrifice is one such excess that Bataille highlights. Sacrifice, to Bataille, is both the expenditure of that which has been deemed antithetical and in excess to a use-value economy *and* the means through which the social value of the non-sacrificed is increased. This sacrificial mechanism is a kind of systemic stabilizer that banishes the

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<sup>514</sup> *The Bataille Reader*, 185.

<sup>515</sup> Here Bataille also dovetails with someone like Nietzsche, who recognizes the often irrational, yet no less significant expenditures, debts, and excesses of "nature" and humans alike.

<sup>516</sup> Loss will be a crucial theme in later iterations of this chapter, but as of this draft goes relatively unremarked upon. Lysa Hochroth, "The Scientific Imperative: Improductive Expenditure and Energeticism." *Configurations* 3.1 (1995), 53.

<sup>517</sup> Here I want to move away from the intrinsic nature of desire, whether manifest through loss or otherwise, and instead highlight the assembled nature of desire à la Deleuze, something my discussion of the gif will no doubt be entangled with.

<sup>518</sup> Lysa Hochroth, "The Scientific Imperative: Improductive Expenditure and Energeticism." *Configurations* 3.1 (1995), 52.

profane and bestows sovereign value upon the actor/witness offering the sacrifice. As Bataille remarks,

Symbolically, along with the object itself, the one who offers the sacrifice is seen as removed from the demands of utility and consequently as possibly a sovereign subject. Those who offer the sacrifice are not completely dominated by the needs of the system or the process, but, rather, can exist free of their constraints in the moment of the sacrifice...“The victim is surplus taken from the mass of useful wealth. And he can only be withdrawn from it in order to be consumed profitlessly, and therefore utterly destroyed.”<sup>519</sup>

The sacrifice is both an act of differentiation and affinity, “Sacrifice – ‘the production of sacred things’ - invests objects, and the community as a whole, with value by negating materiality and animality.”<sup>520</sup> Sacrifice, to Bataille, is a means of making life and making life valuable, a core act in the ascension of the human above its animal counterparts. One can see a parallel to Bataille’s thinking in Freud. To Freud, the ritual of sacrifice, in his case the sacrifice of the Father, represents one mode of the birth of human civilization in the concept of the taboo.<sup>521</sup> Here, we see an example of the prohibition of a particular act in its enactment, or, as Bataille says, “life’s intimacy does not reveal its dazzling consumption until the moment it gives out, inducing a ‘keen awareness of shared life grasped in its intimacy.’”<sup>522</sup> It is in sacrifice that humanity “recognizes” both its place as human *and* the preciousness of life.<sup>523</sup> As Bataille observes of the object of sacrifice, however, “once chosen, he is the accursed share, destined for violent consumption. But the curse tears him away from the order of things; it gives him a recognizable figure, which now radiates intimacy, anguish, the

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<sup>519</sup> Bataille offers an explanation of the route to sovereignty, a fundamental question that intersects with the concept of individuality and should be wrangled with, if not in this chapter, elsewhere. Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share*. Translated by Robert Hurley. (New York: Zone Books, 1989), 59.

<sup>520</sup> *The Bataille Reader*, 21.

<sup>521</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/41214/41214-h/41214-h.htm>

<sup>522</sup> Is Bataille here speaking of a ‘giving out’ of intimacy, life, or both? Ibid., 21.

<sup>523</sup> This recognition doesn’t necessarily have to be a conscious one and indeed speaks to the political efficacy of recognition as meek counterpart to subversion. What I cannot reconcile thus far, however, is the seeming ever-presence of animacy as prerequisite for the ethical leading me back to questions of capacity and Jane Bennett. It seems self-evident that change does not exist without some form of movement, but how that is categorized seems key?

profundity of living beings.”<sup>524</sup> That which is sacrificed, according to Bataille, gains an affective bond to those who witness the sacrifice. They are *made to be* in their death. *The gift of life is thus a mediated act of performance, only meekly bestowed to the other in death.* A death which supposedly resurrects a life that never was. And yet the affective bond Bataille highlights, which allegedly gives life to the dead, is also an act of individuation. It is only the specific entity which has been sacrificed that is supposedly bequeathed post-mortem life. The species writ large is nevertheless retained as other. With the shame of injustice salved in the aftermath of sacrifice, humanity is free to continue its reign of terror unabated. It should be wholly unsurprising that an act of incredible violence does not in fact inaugurate a palatable ethics. What *is surprising*, at least to me, is the way in which sacrifice has been continually upheld as a blueprint for humanist ethics. Giorgio Agamben’s work begins to unsettle this frame, but I aim to go further.<sup>525</sup> To undo the mechanisms of humane ethics, therefore, loss must be apprehended not as an individual occurrence, but as an ecological phenomenon, in circulation and entanglement.

### **The Gift of Life**<sup>526</sup>

While Bataille categorizes the multiplicitous power of sacrifice and its concomitant social implications, through a viral ethics I aim to highlight the animal/inhuman as *false*

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<sup>524</sup> Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, 59.

<sup>525</sup> According to Agamben, as we have seen, that(non)being of bare life, the *homo sacer*, or she in the state of exception, *cannot* be sacrificed, because they are already outside the parameters of normative life.

<sup>526</sup> In its final form this section will probably need a much more in depth interrogation of the concept of sacrifice, its historical background, contemporary applications, and its connection to both the gift and the concept of absolute duty. Additionally, highlighting sacrifice as the false premise of the gift necessitates putting forth an alternative framework from which to approach the messy world between life and death. If sacrifice is an offering that demands a result, e.g., I burn this animal or virgin to appease the gods (itself a means of accruing ontological power, as in, YOU can be sacrificed, but I cannot) or this steak died so I can survive (a similar ontological trick), then both sacrifice and the gift are about perspective (as a means to psychologically diminish the cruelty/horror of the act of killing). To one side, the industrial farmer or the devout priest, it is a sacrifice, to another, the protestor and especially the animal itself, it is a needless expenditure of life. To expend is both to disburse and to waste. Its latin root *expendere* comes from *ex*, ‘out’ and *pendere*, ‘to weigh, pay.’ Here the omnipresence of measurement and its ties to ethics should not be understated. In fact, I am really starting to like this footnote, so I’ll probably include part of it later on in my argument about sacrifice and bare life.

sacrifice. The affective bond that Bataille recognizes as being implicit in the act of sacrifice only ever serves as a salve for sacrificer and witness. In this it mirrors the moral economics of the gift. As Bataille states,

It turns out that the giver has only apparently lost. Not only does he have the power over the recipient that the gift has bestowed on him, but the recipient is obligated to nullify that power by repaying the gift. The rivalry even entails the return of a greater gift: In order to *get even* the giver must not only redeem himself, but he must also impose the 'power of the gift' on his rival in turn. In a sense the presents are repaid *with interest*. Thus the gift is the opposite of what it seemed to be: To give is obviously to lose, but the loss apparently brings a profit to the one who sustains it.<sup>527</sup>

Nietzsche is seemingly omnipresent in Bataille's reconfiguration of the gift. To both, the gift represents not a kind of selfless act of kindness, but an economic transaction designed to indebt, to owe. The gift, as emblem of excess, *exposes responsibility for what it truly is, a means of differentiation and control occluded through its status as moral imperative*. Animals given the gift of 'life' repay their creditors with interest. *They are not sacrificed, but expended*. Therefore, just the act of recognizing the violence being enacted in animal exploitation is a step forward.<sup>528</sup> But glossing Nietzsche, we can also see the *valuations* made manifest in these human-animal (other) relations, especially those predicated on the destruction of being. By mediating on the concept of the gift through an analysis of the GIF (I know), I hope to demonstrate the critical import of ethics and expenditure.

In 1987 the online service provider CompuServe introduced Graphics Interchange Format 87a, today commonly referred to as the GIF. The GIF allowed for multiple image frames to be stored in one embedded file, which in turn made possible quickly downloadable complex color images. This iteration of the GIF was followed by an animated and indefinitely repeating image format, GIF89a, which proliferated alongside the then nascent

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<sup>527</sup> Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, 70.

<sup>528</sup> Really trying to think through the linguistics I want to deploy here, because I think they are super important. Both expenditure (as the following paragraphs hopefully demonstrate) and restitution ground the economics of affective encounter.

Internet. Though relatively unique in the digital realm at the time, the animated GIF has a long genealogy of antecedents amongst other forms of media. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, optical toys such as zoetropes, phenakistoscopes, mutoscopes, and flip books (followed shortly thereafter by the motion picture) allowed viewers to not only see technologically-produced media images (as in the case of the photograph), but provided an optics that brought those images *to life* through animation. Alongside the technological wonder those devices have brought, therefore, are profound questions about the affective and ontological implications of the animate. As political theorist Jane Bennett has argued, animations “disturb perhaps because they explore the possibility of the ‘animateness’ of humans, nonhumans, and non-animals alike.”<sup>529</sup> She continues, “If the power to self-move, to laugh, or to dance adheres, albeit differentially, in all material things, then humans must reckon with a much larger population of entities worthy of ethical concern.”<sup>530</sup> Today, therefore, the GIF is not only a cultural object, but also a complex and entangled economic medium wedded to an ethics of the contemporary phenomenon of virality. I contend that the GIF is a cultural medium that both exposes the ethical imperatives of circulation and as that which re-orient a geography of giving and its affects as medium, network, and object.

In the 1990’s and early 2000’s the typical Internet user’s encounter with a GIF was likely a relatively static encounter. Web 1.0 GIFs were primarily displayed on personal webpages (as in Geocities or Angelfire pages) and posted on early-internet forums. These GIFs typically served a contextual purpose, articulating what kind of space the user was about to interact with (under construction, nationalist, whimsical), their function contained to defining the parameters of each particular website. The resurgence of the GIF in the past

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<sup>529</sup> Jane Bennett, “Commodity Fetishism and Commodity Enchantment,” *Theory & Event* 5:1, 2001.  
<https://jscholarship.library.jhu.edu/bitstream/handle/1774.2/32811/5.1bennett.html>

<sup>530</sup> Ibid.

10 years, however, while also capitalizing on the affective possibilities of the medium, has primarily been incited by its viral utility. Driven both by an increase in the spaces of image exchange and the ease with which to create/circulate those images, sites like Tumblr, 4chan, and Reddit, as well as traditional social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, have provided the digital architecture to make possible the easy mass exchange of images. GIF content has likewise expanded, now encompassing: popular television, cute animals, comedic fails, expressive reactions, technical instructions, and sports/news replays to cite only a few examples.

These new animations being circulated, however, are in all likelihood not .GIF files. With the 2008 creation of HTML 5, a series of Internet standards that defines the structure of the web, higher quality and more economical animation alternatives such as Gfycat and GIFV have largely supplanted the GIF online.<sup>531</sup> Sites like Imgur and Giphy are 'GIF'-hosting platforms from which GIFV's and Gfycat's are dispersed. Like the accompanying trends of video and music streaming, GIF file ownership has been sacrificed for accessibility. Individual GIFs on these sites, therefore, are much more at risk of being taken down, subject to stricter terms of service enforcement, DMCA takedown requests, and state-sponsored censorship. Even under this regime of media precarity, however, GIFs are more popular than ever.<sup>532</sup> The GIF, therefore, represents one of the most omnipresent forms of affective media entangled in the topography of the Internet, one that speaks to the unique spatial and temporal characteristics of the web. While other animated images such as motion pictures express a sense of linear time the GIF has a much different relation to and embodiment of time/space indicative of the aporia of the gift.

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<sup>531</sup> Since they are still colloquially known as GIFs, however, I will refer to them that way throughout the essay.

<sup>532</sup> Alex Williams. "Fresh From the Internet's Attic" *New York Times*, February 13, 2013.  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/14/fashion/common-on-early-internet-gif-files-make-comeback.html>



Mediating the concept of the gift in a series of lectures that would become the work *Given Time*, Jacques Derrida notes a representation of time as circle, as “one of the most powerful and ineluctable representations... in the history of metaphysics.”<sup>533</sup> Martin Heidegger in *Being and Time* demonstrates the import of claim, citing Hegel’s traditional conception of time, as its “essence in the now...as boundary...and [its] circular course.”<sup>534</sup> In deconstructing the Hegelian notion of circular time, to Derrida, the key takeaway from Heidegger is time in its attachment to being, as both presence (a pun on present/gift) and representation. It is therefore, in the ways that time is wielded, and towards what ends that it is most important. Derrida asserts, “as time does not belong to anyone as such, one can no more *take* it, itself, than *give* it.”<sup>535</sup> The illusory objectivity of time, as well as the impossibility of its ownership, however, does not make it any less potent as a mechanism of capital. If the linear time of motion pictures analogizes progress as the promise of a better future (which capital can provide), the looping time of GIFs figures a narcissistic attachment to the present (which capital can continually provide).

And so, what is true of time, to Derrida, its actual inability to be transacted or exchanged, is also true of the gift; it is “annulled in the economic odyssey of the circle as soon as it appears as gift or as soon as it signifies *itself as* gift.”<sup>536</sup> Therefore, in Derrida’s estimation, common sense notions of gifting, exemplified by the potlatch economies that Marcel Mauss outlines in his anthropological work, “speak of everything but the gift.”<sup>537</sup> To Derrida, Mauss’s work conflates gift with economy, missing the infinite circuitry of debt and obligation in that which is supposedly given. Giving a gift, or sending a GIF, inaugurates an

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<sup>533</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf. Chicago, 1992 Originally published as *Donner le temps* in 1991. p. 8.

<sup>534</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>535</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>536</sup> Jacques Derrida and David Wills. *The Gift of Death*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995. p. 24.

<sup>537</sup> Ibid.

expectation of something in return. Thus, Derrida, much like Nietzsche, sees the impossibility of the gift as crucial to a dominant *economic* circulation of values in: *nomos* (law), *oikos* (home), and exchange. This seemingly inescapable circular logic of exchange is continually reconstituting an interpersonal ethics of responsibility predicated on obligation. Or, as Derrida says, “It is necessary to answer for [répondre] the gift, the given, and the call to giving. It is necessary to answer to it and answer for it. One must be responsible for what one gives and what one receives.”<sup>538</sup> Derrida, ever the good Levinasian, cites the ethical call-to-action of responsibility, a product of being, transacted.

Implicit, yet obscured, in the concept of sacrifice, therefore, is an act of destruction, not only of the sacrificed object’s materiality, but a foreclosure of its future possibilities. This is what Bataille and Derrida access in mobilizing their concept of the gift.<sup>539</sup> As Derrida says, “The gift is not a gift, the gift only gives to the extent it *gives time*. The difference between a gift and every other operation of pure and simple exchange is that the gift gives time. *There where there is gift, there is time*. What it gives, the gift, is time.”<sup>540</sup> If, as Derrida argues, the gift is that which gives time, we can see in the ritual slaughter of animals its *latent and delayed* effects.<sup>541</sup> This is the fictional factuality of observation that Schrodinger alluded to. Quanta reveal their “true” individuated selves only when manipulated into that form in the act of measurement. In quantum mechanics this is called superposition, in which, “an unobserved photon exists in all possible states simultaneously but, when observed or measured, exhibits

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<sup>538</sup> Jacques Derrida *The Gift of Death*, 63.

<sup>539</sup> The gift (at least in Derridean terms) in its impossibility is an acknowledgement of the inescapability of calculation, of selfishness, and self-making. It is a symbol of humanist ethics laid bare, the refusal to acknowledge one’s own constant complicity/subjectivity.

<sup>540</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago, 1992), 50.

<sup>541</sup> By ritual I don’t mean akin to the colloquial concept of animal sacrifice, but the contemporary ritual of banal animal destruction.

only one state.”<sup>542</sup> Measurement is not only the production of a particular kind of knowledge, but a temporal foreclosure of all other ontological possibilities. This is the cruelty of traditional epistemology laid bare. Absolute knowledge engenders violence because it eradicates potential alternatives and alternative potentials. Correspondingly, it is only after the fact, in the (non)death of the animal, that one can *recognize* the “distinct” units of life and death. The eradication of animal life becomes, not simply a constellation of acts that are morally acceptable, but a germinal event in the production of a clear line between life and death. These states of being are manufactured in their observation, leaving behind only the ghosts of un-actualized potential. All else withers away as mere probability. Thus, when ethics becomes a task of measurement, it should come as no surprise that its results are hierarchical.

Derrida again is instructive, stating, “One would even be tempted to say that a subject as such never gives or receives a gift. *It is constituted, on the contrary, in view of dominating, through calculation and exchange*, the mastery of this hubris or of this impossibility that is announced in the promise of the gift.”<sup>543</sup> Derrida argues that the gift is “constituted” in its arrival and as such only comes into being at the moment in which it ceases to be a gift. He illustrates this in his work *Given Time*. Derrida states, “From the moment the gift would appear as gift, as such, as ‘what it is, in its phenomenon, its sense and its essence, it would be engaged in a symbolic, sacrificial, or economic structure that would annul the gift in the ritual circle of the debt.”<sup>544</sup> Again, we see the gift as an enacting of the impossible. In giving, one owes the giver a debt, sparking an inescapable chain of gifts and debts. I would add that the promise

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<sup>542</sup> Karl Tate, “How Quantum Entanglement Works (Infographic),” <http://www.livescience.com/28550-how-quantum-entanglement-works-infographic.html>

<sup>543</sup> *Emphasis Mine*. Derrida,

<sup>544</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago, 1992), Originally published as *Donner le temps* in 1991., 23.

of the gift is a corollary to the similarly impossible “coherence” of human subjectivity as a unique and individual property. What both leave behind, those excesses and abjections, are the remnants and revenants that haunt our loss of entanglement. In their calculative efforts, measurement, classification, and taxonomy give us consistency at the expense of justice. *The messiness of being is integral to its ethical constitution*, if not its contemporary mobilization, and ghosts are reminders of the infinite possibilities snuffed out in knowing.<sup>545</sup>

Just as Derrida deconstructs the various matrices of power in the exchange of the gift, we can see the obfuscation of violence in the act of animal slaughter. Carnism implies that the animal other offers itself up as willing and/or neutral sacrifice, that the animal graciously bestows life upon us. It *gives* us life. Sacrifice annuls violence through its affective claims to the greater good. The gift of life and the gift of death, entwined. And yet, there is no martyrdom, no affinity or affiliation with the “living” afforded the slaughtered animal. It exists only as antithesis, as a means to make the human unique and individual. As James Stanescu argues, “The human stands at exactly this place of negation, a taxonomical creation that claims existence based entirely upon defining what it is not.”<sup>546</sup> Thus the gift of the animal, therefore, should not be approached from the vantage of sacrifice, but of *expenditure*.

It may seem as if I am now teetering dangerously close to Giorgio Agamben, heralding the animal as emblematic of his notion of bare life (e.g., *homo sacer*) which can be killed, but not sacrificed. Indeed, Agamben’s sacred or accursed man should give us pause, recalling Bataille’s accursed share of an excessive general economy. Where we diverge, however, is in the borderlands we each seek to occupy. Agamben naturalizes life in making his primary distinction between *bios* and *zoe*, while my own zone of indeterminacy aims to denaturalize

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<sup>545</sup> Derrida and *l’arrivant*?

<sup>546</sup> James Stanescu, “Beyond Biopolitics: Animal Studies, Factory Farms, and the Advent of Deading Life,” *Phaenex*, Vol 8, No 2 (2013), 139.

the static categories of life and death. For clarification, it is worth repeating Agamben's exact definition of *homo sacer*. He states, "The protagonist of this book is bare life, that is, the life of *homo sacer* (sacred man), *who may be killed and yet not sacrificed*."<sup>547</sup> My position, instead, is that the non-human, the inhuman, the animal, *cannot be killed*, precisely because they have never lived. Rather, they are expended.

To speak of expenditure of all forms of the non-human is to make plain the heinous secret of the gift as an inescapable economic ethics, to lay bare its measurements and calculations. If sacrifice is an offering that demands a result, e.g., I burn this animal or virgin to appease the gods (itself a gendered/species means of accruing ontological power, as in, YOU can be sacrificed, but I cannot) or this steak died so I can survive (a similar ontological obfuscation), then both sacrifice and the gift are about perspective and self-making (as a means to psychologically diminish the cruelty/horror of the act of killing). Derrida says,

And this is produced as soon as there is a subject, as soon as donor and donee are constituted as identical, identifiable subjects, capable of identifying themselves by keeping and naming themselves. It is even a matter, in this circle, of the movement of subjectivation, of the constitutive retention of the subject that identifies with itself. The be- coming-subject then reckons with itself, it enters into the realm of the calculable as subject... There where there is subject and object, the gift would be excluded. A subject will never give an object to another subject. But the subject and the object are arrested effects of the gift, arrests of the gift. At the zero or infinite speed of the circle.<sup>548</sup>

To one side, the industrial farmer or the devout priest, the animal is a sacrifice that brings into being a kind of false subjectivity. To another, the protestor and especially the animal itself, this is seemingly a needless expenditure of life. What veganism often gets wrong is its insistence on holding up the corpses of dead animals as symbols of life extinguished.<sup>549</sup> It

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<sup>547</sup> My emphasis. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 8.

<sup>548</sup> Jacques Derrida, trans. Peggy Kamuf, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money* (Chicago, 1992), 23-24.

<sup>549</sup> When I say holding up, I mean both figuratively and literally. There is a day of remembrance by vegan activists in which they each hold an animal corpse to demonstrate animals as embodied, once-alive beings,

takes the carnist argument at face-value, parading the animal as a sacrifice.

Alternatively, the concept of expenditure ties together the transactory and ontological implications of life. It joins the material and the metaphysical. The Latin root of expenditure is *expendere*, which comes from *ex*, ‘out’ and *pendere*, ‘to weigh, pay.’<sup>550</sup> Measurement, in this case weight, is not alienated from transaction, but entangled in it.<sup>551</sup> The Latin roots of expenditure are a relic of the historical concept of currency, in which a material was *directly and observably* bound to exchange. One could access value through a relatively simplistic measure, which was standardized, weight.<sup>552</sup> Today, the complexity and seeming distance between material and value makes it more difficult to recognize their entanglement, especially in regards to the ethical.<sup>553</sup> The anachronism of expenditure is nevertheless illuminating because it exposes the perceptual biases economics tends to elide. Founding an ethical system on transactory notions of responsibility, valuation, and worth and then binding those qualifications to normative humanity ensures injustice. Importantly, however, to expend is both to *disburse and to waste*. Expenditure is a two-fold recognition of economic morality, it highlights the transactory nature in which justice is meted out, as well as shameful byproducts of such a moral calculus. In mobilizing the concept of expenditure I want to demonstrate that which is expendable, that which can be easily transacted, profited from, and disposed; that which is made excess.

And so through the long journey to expenditure we arrive at the very heart of what

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rather than disembodied slabs of flesh. The commodification of animals, however, isn’t only in their disembodiment, but their otherness, even in ‘life.’

<sup>550</sup> Expend, *Oxford English Dictionary*,

<http://www.oed.com.proxy.libraries.rutgers.edu/view/Entry/66502?rskey=6pm213&result=1#eid>

<sup>551</sup> See: quantum mechanics and Nietzsche.

<sup>552</sup> Gold and other “precious” physical materials guiding these “scarce” economies.

<sup>553</sup> I will certainly be writing more on the connections between entanglement, debt, and the gift in upcoming revisions. Here, however, the notion of an “immaterial” economic standard (at least at the national/global scale) in which value is reliant on confidence in the economy (a kind of strange impossible gift itself) on the surface makes it more difficult to assail, which is part of its brilliance. However, as I will hopefully demonstrate, the economy, regardless of its standard (gold, silver, confidence) has always been about a kind of epistemological/ontological valuation.

this chapter has attempted to reckon with. Does ethics require life? My answer, as I believe I have shown, is a complex one. Humanist ethics binds life to the human. It makes any moral encounter a calculation, specifically a calculation of one's proximity to normative humanity. It defines the parameters of ethics through the medial architecture it erects for itself. In film, memes, biomedicine, genetics, economics, and psychoanalysis, the ends define the means. Like Foucault's repressive hypothesis, life has been demarcated by a series of ecological components purposefully selected to assemble it, and "life" is naturalized through the willful denial of its construction. More than this, when life becomes a thing defined by one's ownership over it, the fight to defend it is categorized only by those characteristics you are said to have, a morality of self-interest. To be ethical in this regard is to revel in similarity, to abide by the status quo. On the contrary, to be ethical alongside viral ethics is to be attentive to, entangled in, and supportive of that which is radically different than yourself. It is to value the valueless without any stake in the outcome. To espouse viral ethics is to recognize the vibrant performances that characterize all life, even at its seeming margins.

And so ethics may not require life. Two asteroids in space can encounter one another, a collision that can be apprehended according to the principles of viral ethics. But what is lost in their mutual obliteration? It may seem consequentialist to deploy such a seemingly unabashed after-the-fact judgment, but I mean to define loss in a much more temporally expansive way. What, at the limits of our speculation, both forwards and backwards in time, is lost in interaction? Some speculations will no doubt be erroneous, but it is the very potential for mistake that makes the ethical possible. It is the corona of life that gives these intersections their gravity. If we define life by its potential: for feeling, for experience, for change, for interaction, and for impermanence, the foreclosure of these possibilities is the very height of the unethical.

Karen Barad, in her treatment of entanglement, suggests an approach of what she terms agential realism, “advocating...a relationality between specific material (re)configurings of the world through which boundaries, properties, and meanings are differentially enacted...and specific material phenomena...This causal relationship between the apparatuses of bodily production and the phenomena produced is one of agential intra-action.”<sup>554</sup> A crucial effort must be made, then, to *recognize* the lessons of quantum physics, the entanglement and complementarity of things, its resistance to objective calculation and knowability and to *mobilize* a corresponding ethics capable of enacting justice. Sticking with the theme of physics, the ethical-political apparatus of the enlightenment and beyond might be described as misapprehension of gravitational force. Our tendency in this regard has been towards anthropo-centricity, to orbit humanity and diagnose each of our ethical failures only in relation to that impossibly large entity. Like the disrupting influence of heliocentricity was for a geocentric world, to think beyond the human is not to dismiss the important and unique problems that face humanity. Instead, it is to offer an alternative way of approaching the world that addresses the diverse multitudes of life. We must also remember that gravity is relational. Though its influence through small bodies is less apparent than its large-scale effects, each and every entity exerts influence on one another. They are entangled across space and time. Those spooky actions at a distance haunt ethics as much as the sciences.

I would like to close this chapter with another, less violent, cat story. Jacques Derrida, in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, recalls, “I often ask myself, just to see, who I am-and who I am (following) at the moment when, caught naked, in silence, by the gaze of an animal, for example the eyes of a cat.”<sup>555</sup> Derrida, grasped by the gaze of his cat, discovers himself naked

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<sup>554</sup> Karen Barad, 139.

<sup>555</sup> Jacques Derrida and David Wills, “The Animal That Therefore I am,” *Critical Inquiry*, Vol 28. No. 2 (Winter 2002), 372.



before an animal. This scenario inverts the typical relationship expressed between human and animal, with the human, Derrida, finding himself apprehended by a cat. Derrida's recognition is not only that we ourselves are constantly being remade in the eyes of others, or that creation is an incredibly charged locus of power, but also that being and ethics are deeply social undertakings. Empathy is said to be an experience of otherness, to attempt to walk in someone else's shoes or see through their eyes. Entangled empathy would be a disruption of the very idea of discrete and distinct otherness. The most vibrant ethical possibilities of life can be found in mutual becoming. Such encounters express the symbiotic potential of viral ethics, whereby individuality is merely a passing referent in the becoming of life.

*Conclusion*

**I'm Wide Awake, It's Mourning**

Its warm and the air is acrid. The usual burst of morning sensoria awaits, announcing the day, prying open still sleeping eyes as I walk from one room to the next.

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I'm so tired.

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There is an atmospheric stillness that comes before the trauma. Whether a trick of remembrance or some act of extrasensory perception in anticipation of the event, nevertheless it lingers. Maybe it's because of the acceleration one feels in the frenzied moments that follow, a harried mélange of shock and action, expanding and compressing time into an unrecognizable state.

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Where the after is terminal velocity, the before is pregnant stasis.

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And that's when I feel her eyes on me from across the room. They are wide and full of frenzied fear. They lock with mine, somewhat impossibly, as her neck contorts in wild circular fits.

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Strictly speaking there isn't anything I can actually do; no medicine to administer, no magic reprieve from the ongoing violence. And yet still I pick her up gently. I hold her against my body, stroking her back in a futile attempt to assuage her pain; an inoculation as much for me as I desperately hope it is for her; an attempt to reign in the ever-mounting anxiety cascading through both of us in waves. But the violence only becomes more pronounced.

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This is a trajectory toward death, but it is not.

Nor is it life. It never has been.

It is somewhere in-between.

There is a fundamental problem inherent to humanist-oriented phenomenology, in which each perceived object exists solely for you. Borne out of the ideals of the enlightenment, the uniqueness of perception is often highlighted as a progressive ideal of being, signaling an apotheosis of the conscious, intelligent mind. This mindset, however, has had deleterious effects on our ethical relations to others. If the protection of humanity is heralded as the most idyllic ethical objective, then anything outside the parameters of the human can be sacrificed to meet that aim with little to no moral objection. Moreover, the individual has become the *de facto* ethical interlocutor, out of which all morality is meant to emanate. Thus, the liberal impetus to individual responsibility is an ethical trap in which justice becomes a matter of one-to-one interaction, the search for similarity, and taxonomy; rather than multimodality, difference, and affinity. Viral ethics, alternatively, problematizes responsibility, situating it not simply as an act/ideal one undertakes, but an ever-changing assemblage one both participates in and is possessed by. Viral ethics doesn't seek the attainment of total selflessness, but instead intends a recognition of: the constructedness of individuality, the contextual entanglement of being(s), and an onus to lessen the multifaceted violences we commit everyday to the best of our ability. It would be impossible to live an entirely non-violent life, but why not work to do as little harm as possible?

This dissertation has posited that the institutional apparatuses of humanism (biology, psychology, economics, etc.) represent an incomplete and wholly normative picture of humanities' relation to other forms of being and that the very notion of *bios* itself is compromised. Looking at medial intersections between biology and technology I have argued that ethical claims relying solely on the sanctity of life will always fall short. Indeed, the very dependence on the supremacy of life as the end-all be-all political apparatus of ethical application has significantly hindered post-human efforts at justice. By troubling

taxonomical regimes of life/knowledge, I have hoped to articulate the importance of death and non-life to any ethical endeavor, arguing not for a human-centric ethics, but interrogating how human has become a stand-in for life; and if in fact ethics requires life? If the “divide” between life and death reifies the fictive boundary between humans and other animals and displaces the ethical-political impetus to substantive change then we have sacrificed justice for life.

What, then, are our alternatives? Achille Mbembe’s necropolitics, while on the surface offering a viable alternative to the omnipresence and downright imperialism of life, merely represents a dialectical alternative to *bios*, garnering the same conclusions. Necropolitics theorizes the power over life and death, the “generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations.”<sup>556</sup> And yet what has never lived may never die. The feeding tubes that keep “alive” both hunger striking prisoners at Guantanamo Bay and fatten the livers of future *foie gras* geese represent a mechanism of control over life, a denial of death. Both invite analysis of systems of violence, so why, then, couch one’s argument against each in an exclusionary or exceptionalist way? Why call an absent heartbeat or ceasing brain function an absolute end? Can we not articulate an in-betweenness that doesn’t expend alterity? Agamben’s mere life is a start, but its fundamental flaw is in how it decries the sanctity and humanity of life. By deifying life, we hold it to the same impossible standards of the human and by extension fall victim to the same inadequacies, the same normative assumptions, the same violences. To reject life as sacrosanct, or pure, then, is not accede to nihilism or to herald death as the great emancipator. On the contrary, such critique opens the possibility for exploring the ethical and ontological possibilities across life and death, in their overlap and entanglement.

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<sup>556</sup> Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*

The central problem this dissertation has attempted to overcome, therefore, is that *bios* can only ever be a gracious extension of a second-class form of life; a steady trickle down ontology that defers being indefinitely into the future. This is the kind of token being that nevertheless can be snatched away when convenient, the “trick” of the gift of life to which Derrida refers. Judith Butler might alternatively call it precariousness. To Butler, the concept of precariousness aims to “reconceive life itself as a set of largely unwilled interdependencies, even systemic relations, which imply that the ‘ontology’ of the human is not separable from the ‘ontology’ of the animal.”<sup>557</sup> It follows, then, that we can find affinity and solidarity in our shared life and common trajectory towards death, in mourning.

By diametrically opposing life and death, or more often by refusing to even look beyond the scope of life, however, most biopolitical scholarship not only solidifies the boundaries between life and death (which are much more murky than often implied), but in doing so reifies the ethical boundaries between human and other. As Akira Lippit argues, “In the era of modernity...the animal is relegated to the interstices of ontology. Neither present nor absent, the animal hangs in the dialectical moment that marks the beginning of human history. In this manner the animal becomes an active phantom in what might be termed the crypt of modernity. Ineradicable, the animal continues to haunt the recesses of the modern human being.”<sup>558</sup> And yet, personal responsibility is not the end all be all of ethics. Questions about what ‘I’ can do to alleviate injustice, or what my actions would be in a given moral scenario are certainly important, but they all too often elide structural or ecological violences. Just as charitable donation seeks a greater good through the “gift” of an ethics poisoned by capital, individual action reduces ethics to diagrammatic human aggrandizement. Might we look beyond the self instead?

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<sup>557</sup> Judith Butler, *Precarious Life*

<sup>558</sup> Akira Mizuta Lippit, *Electric Animal: Toward a Rhetoric of Wildlife* (U. of Minnesota Press, 2005), 54.

So what if instead of regarding the liminal and phantasmic space the non-human beings occupy as degenerative (which it undoubtedly can be) we could find the joyous, even subversive possibilities of being-between. Derrida argues in *The Gift of Death* that “one must give without knowing, without knowledge or recognition” for if “it [the gift] is touched by the slightest hint of calculation, the moment it takes account of knowledge...or recognition...it allows itself to be caught in transacting: it exchanges, in short it gives counterfeit money.”<sup>559</sup> A kind of mourning that sacrifices that which is most dear, “without knowledge or recognition” would enact a form of justice that Derrida calls for. Pure ontological mourning, however, which Derrida argues is always the *modus operandi* of mourning, always seeks to localize and to ontologize and cannot pass muster. The mourner in this configuration calculates in their desire to make the dead static, to keep them in the grave and nowhere else. Perhaps the closest approximation of an uncalculating mourning is what Derrida calls for in *Specters of Marx*, a form of justice made manifest in simply letting ghosts speak. This would provide a perfect soundboard for that hauntology, in which the voices of phantoms, so often construed in the passive sense, made out only as victims, are allowed to project their experiences to a future they have in another sense been denied. Such an endeavor is echoed by Butler who asserts, ethics emerging from precariousness, “cannot be an awakesness ... to my own life, and then an extrapolation from an understanding of my own precariousness to an understanding of another’s precarious life. It has to be an understanding of the precariousness of the Other.”<sup>560</sup> If we conceive of the purposeful destruction of non-human being simply as a product of value determined by market scarcity, we submit to a heinous hermeneutic of capital, critiquing, yet nevertheless caught in its grasp. If we refuse that monolithic perspective, however, and address both scarcity *and*

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<sup>559</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 112.

<sup>560</sup> Judith Butler, *Precarious Life*, 134.

excess as mechanisms of ontological extermination we can actively subvert the multiplicitous means through which being is denied.

17th Century poet John Weever wrote “Our love for one another differs from the love animals might feel for one another in that an animal perishes in the field without “anticipating the sorrow with which its associates will bemoan his death.”<sup>561</sup> Weever means this as a slight, a means to affirm human superiority over the animal other. I take it differently. To not seek out explicit meaning, to not calculate in the borderlands of being is an ethics of the highest order. To mourn the unmournable, in the boundaries, the spaces between made apparent in the virus, is emblematic of those things. It is a recognition and acceptance of unknowability. Rather than charting an epistemic solution to the problems of epistemology we must *feel* our way to justice. I began the conclusion with such a feeling, an ode to Artemis not designed to categorize the systemic means through which she was denied being, but to showcase my sorrow, if it was anticipated or not.

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<sup>561</sup> John Weever, *Antient Funeral Monuments of Great Britain, Ireland, and the Islands Adjacent* (London: W. Tooke, 1767) <https://archive.org/details/antientfuneralm00weevgoog>

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