In the conclusion to the last chapter, I suggested—with reference to the work of Catherine Malabou—that science fiction texts by Quiroga, Bioy Casares, and Aira may point toward a decline of the regime of writing and the rise of an alternative organizational paradigm, that of plasticity. For Malabou, graphic-linguistic models of inscription, programming, and coding, which are reliant on images of “gap or difference,” provided powerful interpretative tools that were key to the dominance of structuralist, poststructuralist, and deconstructive approaches.¹ The paradigm of writing is now, she suggests, being replaced by plasticity, which “characterizes a regime of systematic self-organization that is based on the ability of an organism to integrate the modifications that it experiences and to modify them in return.”² Ian James observes that Malabou’s commitment to plasticity is “first and foremost a commitment to a radical materialism,”³ and this is certainly evident in Malabou’s emphasis on processes of transformation and on complex exchanges between human experience and the environment.

In this chapter I explore a number of contemporary science fiction texts that register a move away from the linguistic paradigm and toward one that may best be described as “new materialist.” As a body of thought associated with the work of Manuel De Landa, Rosi Braidotti, and Donna Haraway, among others, new materialism is a critical response to the dom-
inance of the “linguistic turn” and social constructivism under structuralism. Instead of understanding language as constitutive of reality, new materialism emphasizes, as Braidotti puts it, “the concrete yet complex materiality of bodies immersed in social relations of power.” It attempts to rethink the dualisms (mind/body, nature/culture, human/inhuman, language/reality) that have remained intact in postmodern thought, and to give greater attention to what has been neglected in postmodernism, principally matter and the processes of material transformation. This does not imply a naive rejection of the role of cultural mediation: as Diana Coole and Samantha Frost put it, “Our material lives are always culturally mediated, but they are not only cultural.”

As scriptwriters, directors, translators, and theorists, Javier Daulte and Rafael Sprengelburd (who is, in addition, an actor) are prime examples of the “teatrista,” a term that has become popular in porteño theater circles in recent years to encompass multiple roles within the creation, staging, and critique of theater. They are part of a new generation of dramatists who have experimented with different modes of theatricality since the mid-1990s, seeking to challenge the predominance of text and discourse in theater by exploring extralinguistic and nonsymbolic forms of meaning. In the wake of the Teatro Abierto movement, which began in 1981 as a cultural response to the dictatorship, much Argentine drama has pursued realist approaches with respect to national history and contemporary politics. The work of Sprengelburd in particular exemplifies a recent interest in Argentine theater in positing realms of experience that cannot be reduced to the linguistic, and in constructing a postanthropocentric vision in which the agency of the material world is brought to the fore. While many of his dramatic pieces borrow elements from science fiction, *La paranoia* (2008) is his most explicit engagement with the genre, and also one of his most sustained metafictional excursions. The first part of this chapter contrasts *La paranoia* with Javier Daulte’s *4D Óptico* (2003) in order to set into relief Sprengelburd’s turn away from a linguistic, constructivist paradigm and toward a new materialist one. The second part presents a reading of two novels by Marcelo Cohen, *Variedades* (1998) and *Donde yo no estaba* (2006), which develop a new materialist understanding of subjectivity and also move on to explore how we might conceive the role of literature and writing differently within a materialist paradigm.
The Mathematics of the Material Universe: The Science Fiction Theater of Javier Daulte and Rafael Spregelburd

A team of laboratory scientists in the employ of a huge Japanese company is at work on a new version of the Hyperdeep, a high-tech optical device designed to detect ever-decreasing stocks of fish in the ocean. An accident during testing has the effect of creating a portal to an alternative world. With the help of a software program that unfolds the folds of Einsteinian spacetime, the scientists detect a parallel plot taking place in a mansion elsewhere. There, a singer is about to perform her last concert before being assassinated. The conspirators’ passions and rivalries mirror those of the scientists back in the first world, who realize that they must derail the assassination plot if the collision of the two alternative realities is not to produce an implosion of the universe.

In Javier Daulte’s comedy *4D Óptico,* science does not serve the disinterested pursuit of knowledge. It is entirely funded by businesses seeking a greater competitive edge: North American insurance companies have invested millions in predictive technologies to minimize their losses, while the tourism sector funds research into chaos theory in the hope of more accurate weather forecasts. However, Daulte’s conception of theater as a game, committed only to the rules of that game and opposed to a “teatro responsable y tal vez didáctico, o en definitiva, por qué no, dictatorial” (theater that is responsible and likely to be didactic, or ultimately—why not?—dictatorial) leaves little room for solemn social comment on the dubious operations of scientific or commercial institutions. His use of science in *4D Óptico* is primarily placed at the service of developing a metatheatrical approach, and the science fiction genre is thoroughly parodied. The scientists are not interested in saving the world so much as seeking personal fame by publishing their alternative-reality hypothesis and pursuing their various amorous adventures. Moreover, while the play draws on real science, such as the curvature of space-time and heterotic string theory, its characters’ explanations swing between deliberately opaque scientific mumbo-jumbo and oversimplifying, banal images, such as a “flexible banana,” used to describe folds in space-time.

More broadly, the parallel-universes plot allows Daulte to expose the devices and illusions of theater. Our attention is drawn to the play’s extremely deft choreography, which takes us seamlessly from one world to the other, and charts the increasing transgression of objects and people across the
threshold that supposedly separates them. The fact that the actors playing the scientists in the laboratory are the same as those playing the gangsters in the mansion highlights the practice of doubling up in casting: it is only later that we realize that this is not the usual convention of reducing cast members to a more manageable number, but a crucial element of the play’s poetics. As María Florencia Heredia observes in her study of the play, meta-theatricality is also developed through scenes such as the one in which the scientist Paulina, in an effort to thwart the assassination plot, consciously takes on the role of Angie in the mansion and is manipulated by another of the scientists with a kind of joystick. A metatheatrical intent also lies, of course, behind the scientists’ discovering that what they experience as reality is only an illusion, as their experiments prove that “el mundo material no existe” (the material world does not exist).

Daulte’s flirtations with science fiction draw closely on the River Plate tradition of fantastic literature. The mannequins in his Automáticos (2005) gradually take on human gestures and emotions, recalling the increasingly lifelike dolls of Felisberto Hernández’s Las Hortensias (1949), while the inclusion of Borges’s poem “El Golem” (from El otro, el mismo, 1964) in the text of 4D Óptico clearly acknowledges the influence of Borges’s fictional forays into philosophical idealism. Rafael Sregelburd’s La paranoia (2008), the principal focus of the discussion that follows, also appears to emerge from this tradition: Sregelburd himself ventures a comparison with Julio Cortázar’s “La noche boca arriba,” in which the relationship between the real world and a dream world is suddenly inverted at the end of the story.

Both Daulte and Sregelburd find in mathematics a commitment to observing and developing forms, systems, and procedures that provides an ideal model for a theater that wishes to question the prevalent mode of social realism. Daulte explains that, as a system of relations, mathematics is “indiferente a los contenidos” (indifferent to content); its rules are arbitrary in the sense that they are not allegorical of something else, and they are a rich source of narrative possibilities when combined with other rules to form what Daulte calls a “procedimiento” (procedure). Sregelburd also draws on mathematics and science—fractals, Gödel’s theorems of incompleteness, chaos theory—in his search for new forms and systems that suggest the complexity of the universe, beyond its possible constructions in human language.

A crucial difference emerges between Sregelburd and Daulte, however, in the appeal they make to mathematical and scientific models in their work. Daulte—as we have seen in the case of 4D Óptico—often points to the impact of the subjective (emotions and human relationships) on the supposedly
objective (scientific advances), and draws on Einsteinian physics to suggest the ultimate unreality of the material world. Sprengelburd, on the other hand, turns to mathematics and scientific theories to explore a realm of reality that exists beyond the human: a materiality that subtends the universe and resists our attempts to reduce its complexity. It is not mathematics as an abstract, content-free series of forms that motivates his work, but the glimpse it affords us of a complex patterning that traverses the physical world and links all phenomena in dynamic and aleatory associations.

Sprengelburd’s *La paranoia* is set in the distant future, when time is measured according to the Mayan calendar, and humanoid robots and teletransporters are old technology. The universe is governed by the “Intelligences,” supreme beings that maintain the cosmos in a state of equilibrium and have guaranteed peace for the world. There is, however, a condition placed on their protection: that humans continue to supply them with a raw material for which they have an insatiable need, and which is unobtainable on any other planet. Their desire is for fiction, humanity being, it seems, “la única especie capaz de imaginar lo que no pasa” (the only species capable of imagining *what doesn’t happen*). The Intelligences first ransacked the world for its books, and then proceeded (with decreasing levels of satisfaction) to plunder its films, television programs, documentaries, cartoons, and reality shows. Then, fortuitously, they were transfixed for 253 seasons by a small artificial plant, before even that eventually lost its appeal.

Such is the crisis that brings together three specialists in Piriápolis, charged with the task of inventing an original fiction that will please the Intelligences and ensure the survival of the planet. They comprise a mathematician who has trouble with natural numbers, an astronaut who “doesn’t practice,” having been psychologically scarred by a traumatic encounter with gamma rays, and a writer whose plagiarists are more successful than she is. They are assisted by an obsolete model of a robot who refuses to countenance the idea that she is not human. The action of *La paranoia* is split between the stage and a large screen placed toward the back of the stage, on which we view sequences that appear to belong to a number of different fictional narratives, including a speech given by a (probably Lithuanian) submarine captain to his crew members, an exchange between two Japanese soldiers after the invasion of China, a transvestite performance in a Venezuelan cabaret, and the tragic story of Brenda, a young girl chosen by a powerful corporation to undergo intensive training and plastic surgery with the aim of turning her into Miss Venezuela, and eventually Miss World.

As spectators, our initial hypothesis is that at least some of these filmed
sequences represent fictions invented by the Piriápolis team: it is they who come up with the Brenda story, and an investigation into the case provides the motor for the comically clichéd scenes from the Venezuelan crime drama. Moreover, the scenes often appear to respond to the twists and turns of the onstage narrative, as the team tries desperately to comply with the impossible rules issued by the Intelligences concerning the kind of fiction they require. The rules are as follows. First, as the Intelligences think as one, they cannot accept the development of individual characters. Second, they will not accept what they refer to as “estilo” (style), being the creation of similarities between one thing and another. Third, they reject hierarchies: “Odian la división racional en figura y fondo” (They hate the rational division between figure and background). The narrative must not direct the perception toward a single person or event, casting the others into the background, but allow for greater freedom and diversity of perceptions. In fourth place, the fiction must not attempt to activate processes of identification: the Intelligences do not wish to see something they already understand, and have no interest in participating in some kind of shared emotion. And last, if that were not enough, the fiction must appeal to many, not just a few. These rules act as a playful metacommentary on La paranoia's exploration of human perception and language, and the power of fiction to gesture toward what lies beyond the order they impose on the world, allowing us to glimpse another order: one that is chaotic, complex, and transcends the human.

Jorge Dubatti divides Spregelburd’s oeuvre into two periods. He identifies the first as “metalinguistic” and deconstructive in orientation, centrally concerned with presenting “reality” as a linguistic construction and pointing to the arbitrary nature of signifiers. From the mid-1990s onward, however, Dubatti perceives a shift away from paradigms of language and textuality to affirm the existence of realities “que se cuelan entre las redes del lenguaje” (that seep through the nets of language). Other principles of organization gain prominence in Spregelburd’s work, drawn from the fields of logic, mathematics, and science, including theories of chaos and complexity. It comes to be characterized by a search for the existence of a principle of organization that is “extra-humano, que excede la escala del hombre, que es inaprensible desde criterios antropocéntricos” (extrahuman, that exceeds the scale of man, that cannot be grasped from an anthropocentric viewpoint). Dubatti argues that this shift mirrors a broader one away from the “linguistic turn” of the twentieth century. While he rather vaguely denominates this new direction a turn toward “lo real metafísico,” however, I will argue that it is more productively understood within the context of theories of new materialism.
This perspective, which reconsiders the human within a broader, non-human set of ontologies, is evoked in the conflict of perspectives between humans and Intelligences in _La paranoia_. The latter, unconstrained by the human desire to derive symbolic meaning from matter, are able to perceive broader forces in the universe that cannot be captured in human language, such that “lo que para nosotros es religión para ellas es polvo, materia, y matemática elemental” (what for us is religion, for them is dust, material, and elemental mathematics).\(^{23}\) The Intelligences’ proscription against individual character and style displaces and disperses agency across multiple beings and forms of matter. It is in fractals and chaos theory that Spregelburd discovers a patterning that is not reducible to human categories of perception and thought, a syntax of the material universe that is entirely alien to our own attempts to impose order on it. Coole and Frost observe that theories of nonlinear dynamic systems developed in physics since the 1970s have drawn attention to their self-organizing properties in a way that resonates strongly with “a posthumanist sense of material agency.”\(^{24}\)

The dynamics of chaos provide inspiration for a number of formal innovations in _La paranoia_, as they do for many of Spregelburd’s theatrical works, often allowing him to create a poetics that raises questions of meaning and order without embedding them within language. Drawing on the insights of the writer and painter Eduardo del Estal, a frequent inspiration, Spregelburd submits that “la realidad es la resistencia de las cosas a todo orden simbólico” (reality is the resistance of things to any symbolic order);\(^{25}\) for Spregelburd, this does not mean that reality is absurd or meaningless, but that its complex patternings do not easily yield to human observation. In _Fractal_ (2000), the arbitrary nature of the link between the first act and the second (the sending and receiving of a videotape) simultaneously suggests and problematizes the existence of a deeper meaning that might lend coherence to the piece as a whole, encouraging us to reflect on the possibility of regimes of meaning that cannot be reduced to the linguistic or the symbolic. Spregelburd’s stated preference for expressing ideas through the design of a theatrical situation rather than offloading them onto dialogues\(^{26}\) is often accommodated by means of experimenting with fractal-like designs for his works, in which forms are repeated, on a reduced scale, within the work itself, or through the evocation of the kind of chaotic resonances that disturb conventional causality.

In _La paranoia_, a wealth of such resonances is created by the juxtaposition and partial merging of the narrative spaces of the screen and the stage. Apparently unconnected scenes are linked by small but suspiciously signifi-
cant details, provoking the spectator to consider the possibility of relationships between them that go beyond those of simple causality. For example, stage directions for the second scene call for the hanging of “curiosos tapices chinos” (strange Chinese tapestries) in the Piriápolis hotel; these might evoke the setting of the first scene, which narrates an episode from the Japanese invasion of China, but no explanation of any relationship between the scenes is yet forthcoming. Julia is the first to perceive links between the different narrative worlds, although the only logic she can find to explain them is one of phonetic resemblance:

JULIA: ¿“Maracatel”? . . . ¡Hay un patrón! Laboratorios “Maracay,” “Maracaibo,” “maracucho,” “maraca” . . .

HAGEN: Las maracas que le dieron a Claus . . .

JULIA: “Marico,” tres maricos venezolanos en La Guaira . . . Las palabras que usamos son variaciones de lo mismo. . . . Debe haber un patrón en lo que estamos diciendo. 28


HAGEN: The maracas Claus was given . . .

JULIA: “Marico” [gay], three Venezuelan gays in La Guaira . . . The words we use are variations of the same. . . . There must be a logic in what we are saying.

We discover that mise en abyme and fractal-like recursion often provide the governing logic linking the different sequences: for example, both the Japanese soldier scene and the transvestite cabaret are the waking dreams of Lázaro, the Venezuelan police officer. Many of these resonances—such as the mention Julia makes of a conference in Norway, which is echoed moments later by Barragán on-screen—initially lead us to the reasonable hypothesis that the Piriápolis team is constructing fiction out of the material of their own lives. However, this belief becomes increasingly difficult to sustain, as many of the props, motifs (and even people) that cross the boundary between the world of the stage and the world of the screen are cut loose from any narrative function, taking on instead a decidedly metafictional role.

Such is the case with the “Hilandera China” (Chinese spinner), the name of a character in the Japanese soldier scene and a tarot card in the Venezuelan drama, “la que teje los destinos, y los enmaraña” (the one who weaves destinies, and tangles them up), and with the tiny pieces of plastic rescued
by Hagen from the gamma disaster (and shown onstage), which are patently the same as those found by Lázaro on the floor of the laboratory (and shown on-screen). According to Hagen’s explanation, the tiny colored pyramids are given names and numbers strictly on the basis of the relations between them, or more precisely, the capacity of any one pyramid to land close to another when they are thrown across the floor. Julia realizes that the “Se- faratón,” as it is called, is a kind of literature that is powered by multiple possible combinations and relations, rather than an alphabet in which each sign refers to a concrete referent: “Es decir, una literatura que se redujo a valores de relaciones matemáticas” (That is to say, a literature reduced to the values of mathematical relations). Like Sprengelbord’s play, this “alphabet” suggests a literature that is governed by topology and material relations, rather than language, meaning, or symbolism.

Our understanding that the Piriápolis drama is the primary narrative level, to which all the others are subordinated, is completely overturned at the end of the play when it is revealed that Claus and Hagen are the names of two of Brenda’s childhood teddy bears and that the entire Piriápolis team is a figment of Brenda’s imagination. As in Borges’s “Las ruinas circulares,” the dreamer is finally revealed to be the subject of another’s dream. However, if Borges’s fiction is designed to provoke ontological uncertainty by exploring the consequences of philosophical idealism, in which “being is perception” (Berkeley), Sprengelbord’s dream ultimately sidelines the creative power of human perception and imagination and points instead to a patterning and a creation of forms that exceeds the human. The narratives of La paranoia are not contingent upon character or the unfolding of a drama, but on forms and processes that transcend them, and that point to the self-organizing principles of a chaotic universe. The Piriápolis team, Brenda, the Japanese soldiers, and the Venezuelan transvestites serve only to articulate the logic that produces and organizes them. It is a logic proper to chaos, of unexpected associations, unpredictable causalities, and the magnification of the insignificant.

For Sprengelbord, fiction has the potential to reveal the simplifications we impose on the universe and to point beyond itself to a reality that may not be captured in language. The Intelligences’ rejection of hierarchies and orders of perception is clearly absurd: it would be impossible to create a fiction that dissolved the categories of figure and background on which human perception and the construction of meaning relies, and Sprengelbord readily admits that “todo acto de creación es una búsqueda de forma, un intento de dar forma a aquello que es todavía mero caos” (every act of creation is
a search for a form, an attempt to give form to that which is, as yet, mere chaos). However, there are ways in which fiction may move beyond the world without meaning of the theater of the absurd, as well as the poststructuralist relegation of all meaning and reality to linguistic constructions, by gesturing toward a reality that does exist beyond our simplifications of it, and that is not cut to the measure of human perception or language. For Sregelburd, the best fiction “huye de lo general, ahonda en lo particular” (flees from the general, delves into the particular), producing examples and events that do not respond to general laws. It replaces linearity and causality with multiplicity, uncertainty, and complexity, and rejects psychologically coherent characters in favor of the exploration of an organizing principle that transcends the human.

La paranoia is in many ways, then, Spregelburd’s own response to the challenge laid down by the Intelligences to produce a fiction in accordance with the five rules given. It undermines individuality in characters by questioning their autonomy—Lázaro is not the only character of whom it is true, as he suspects, that “alguien manipula mi vida” (someone is manipulating my life)—and by merging aspects of their life stories with those of other characters, as well as subjecting human destinies to the movement of material objects and the patterns they create. It rejects “estilo” (style), defined here as the construction of similarities, by opening theater up to different disciplines and spectatorial regimes (the physics of chaos, the mathematics of fractals, and the dialogue established with the cinematographic form). It also attempts to complicate the viewer’s perception of figure against background and to disrupt processes of identification. La paranoia forms part of a series of plays written and directed by Spregelburd, the Heptalogía de Hieronymus Bosch, all of which are inspired by Bosch’s painting of The Seven Deadly Sins and the Four Last Things (ca. 1500). As Spregelburd explains, each of his plays captures something of the spirit of Bosch’s work: its infinite detail, the lack of a center, the way it encourages the eye to rove, and its nostalgia for a former order, now absent. As for the fifth rule, that the fiction should appeal to many, not just a few, it could certainly be argued that Sregelburd’s play, in its use of humor and its obvious play with theatrical and generic conventions, avoids some of the pitfalls of more elitist instances of avant-garde theater.

Sregelburd’s materialist approach also responds, of course, to the distinctiveness of theater in relation to literature, cinema, or visual art. In particular, it carves out a role for theater beyond the linguistic. Sregelburd prefers to consider theater a form of “contagion” rather than “communication”:
No hay para mí comunicación en el arte, ni en el teatro, en sentido estricto. Lo que hay son otras formas de contacto. Yo la llamo “contagio.” Contagio de impresiones, de temores, de intuiciones aún sin nombre, aún fuera de lo lexicalizable.\(^{35}\)

For me, there is no communication as such in art, nor in theater, in the strictest sense. There are other forms of contact instead. I call it “contagion.” Contagion of impressions, fears, intuitions as yet unnamed, as yet beyond that which may be lexicalized.

Theater may experiment with other forms of contact and interaction because it is embedded in an embodied performance that necessarily takes place within the context of a gathering, or what Dubatti has theorized as “convivio teatral” (theatrical gathering). As Dubatti suggests, the situated and territorialized nature of “convivio teatral” acts to preserve the culture of orality and presence in a lettered society that is increasingly governed by virtual communications.\(^{36}\) In its emphasis on embodied performance, presence, event, and process rather than language and representation, Spregelburd’s theater shares some features with “postdramatic” theater as analyzed by Hans-Thies Lehmann. The particular advantage of this framework, in comparison to other performance studies approaches, is that it articulates a link between postdramatic theater from the 1960s to the present day and the historical avant-garde, which—most notably in the theater of Antonin Artaud—also challenged the dominance of the text by drawing attention to the materiality of performance.\(^{37}\)

Heredia argues that the composition strategies of Daulte’s 4D Óptico are closely related to the aesthetic practices of the neobaroque as a cultural dominant in our era, a moment marked by “el exceso, la inestabilidad, el cambio y lo polidimensional” (excess, instability, change, and the polydimensional).\(^{38}\) Spregelburd’s work also invites characterization of this kind. Transmitting the wishes of the Intelligences to the humans waiting on earth below, the robot assistant in La paranoia continually repeats the word “pliegue” (fold); to the frustration of the Piriápolis team, she misses the all-important explanation of what is being discussed, and so the word is left hanging, opaquely. In the context of the play’s multiple mirrorings, metacommentaries, and mises en abyme, however, one would be justified in reading it alongside Deleuze’s work on the “fold” as “the criterion or operative concept of the Baroque.”\(^{39}\)

Expanding on Deleuze’s notion of the fold in relation to baroque fictions, both of seventeenth-century Spain and of twentieth-century Argen-
rina, Carlos Gamerro finds the central feature of the baroque to lie in the quest to “intercambiar, plegar o mezclar” (exchange, fold, or mix together) different planes of reality—

ficción/verdad, cuadro/modelo, copia/original, reflejo/objeto, imaginación/percepción, imaginación/recuerdo, sueño/vigilia, locura/cordura, teatro/mundo, obra/autor, arte/vida, signo/referente

—in order to disrupt simple binaries and invert hierarchies, emphasizing “el compuesto calidoscópio, siempre cambiante, que surge de todas estas combinaciones y entrecruzamientos” (the kaleidoscopic, always shifting compound that arises from all these combinations and crossings-over). In Deleuze’s reading of Leibniz’s writings, these not only provide a key to understanding the baroque as a philosophy and set of aesthetic practices, but also prefigure contemporary scientific theories of matter, both organic and inorganic, pointing to a complex understanding of subjectivity in which the inside is always the outside folded in, and the human opens out to nonhuman forces that are then folded in to produce new modes of expression and experience. This dynamic is central to new materialist perspectives on post-human subjectivity; it also links Sprengelburd’s dramaturgy with the novels of Marcelo Cohen, whose work—I will suggest—marks a similar move away from a linguistic paradigm to a materialist one and explores what this might mean for our understanding of the act of writing.

New Subjectivities and New Materialisms in Marcelo Cohen’s Metafictions

Many of Marcelo Cohen’s novels and short stories establish a dialogue with scientific theories of chaos and complexity in order to construct a vision of radical immanence, in which human and nonhuman realms are caught up in multiple exchanges and mutual transformations within a material universe. His work consistently decenters the human subject as a locus of agency, choosing instead to present agency as distributed across both organic and inorganic matter. The view of the material world that emerges from his
fashion is very similar to that proposed by new materialists, for whom mat-
ter—in De Landa’s words—is not “an inert receptacle for forms that come
from the outside,” but rather “an active matter endowed with its own ten-
dencies and capacities, engaged in its own divergent, open-ended evolution,
animated from within by immanent patterns of being and becoming.”

In its exploration of the multiple, mutable subject, Variedades (1998)
starts to dismantle what Jacques Rancière calls “the metaphysics of repre-
sentation” and to imagine how we might understand the act of authorship
in the absence of a coherent, centered self. In Donde yo no estaba (2006),
Cohen extends these ideas to consider how we might conceive the exercise of
writing within a thoroughly materialist conception of the universe. Braidotti
places emphasis in her recent work on the importance of Deleuze’s thought
as a crucial precursor to new materialism, and my reading of Cohen’s texts
will also trace resonances with the Deleuzean concept of “becoming imper-
ceptible” as a way of abandoning the metaphysics of representation and of
locating the act of writing as immanent to the material world, rather than
above it or imposing form upon it.

Variedades: Abandoning the Metaphysics of
Representation and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion

In Variedades we find ourselves in a hypermediatized society in which ce-
lebrity images are even bigger business than they are in our own world. The
Baron de Marut and his wife Finita Vitasti are the media stars of the mo-
ment. The media company charged with managing their image approaches
the narrator with an unusual proposition: to undertake, under contract, to
appear as the baron at various media events, in order to increase his exposure,
and thereby the company’s revenue. The (nameless) narrator undergoes ex-
tensive plastic surgery and studies the gestures and vocal mannerisms of the
real baron at length before his first public appearance. Everything proceeds
according to plan for some time, and he becomes accustomed to his new life,
even conveniently falling in love with his consort, Mansi (Finita’s double).
Unfortunately, the baron’s unscripted strangling of his wife sets in motion a
series of events that will see the narrator decommissioned from his role and
his face altered once again: this time quite arbitrarily to form the likeness of
Rembrandt’s son, copied from a painting admired by the plastic surgeon.

Such precipitous changes in the narrator’s appearance drive him into an
existential crisis. He is unable to maintain the illusion of a coherent self that
would remain consistent throughout his different roles and the various reconstructions of his face. He longs to be able to point to something and say, “Esto soy yo a pesar del tiempo” (That is me, despite the passage of time), but instead fears that he is merely “un tic tac de creación y borrado, sucesivas formas instantáneas bajo una luz estroboscópica” (a ticktock of creation and deletion, successive instantaneous forms beneath a strobe light). This revelation echoes Hume’s empiricist vision, according to which the self is “nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement.” The narrator of Variedades discovers, in a similar way, that he is simply the sum of the multiple roles and appearances he has adopted: there is no essence of the self that endures alongside, or in spite of, these. He realizes that “yo era un espacio de confluencia” (I was a space of confluence), and that it is only the illusory continuity of our perceptions that allows us to deduce the notion of “un elemento aglomerador” (an element that binds them together).

This radically unstable understanding of the self is at the root of the narrator’s difficulties in writing his story. The question of literary style presents him with the worst dilemma: he wonders “cómo conseguir un estilo, modesto pero duradero, cuando uno, yo, intuye que lo único de duradero que hay en uno es, intentaré formularlo, una sucesión de lo que va mostrando en su existir. Acciones. Momentos. O, en mi caso, caras” (how to acquire a style, modest but long-lasting, when one—I—intuits that the only long-lasting thing that exists in one is, I will try to express it, a succession of what one shows throughout one’s life. Actions. Moments. Or, in my case, faces). While a strong sense of individual style eludes him, he recognizes that developing one would only give the illusion of a coherence that does not exist. He criticizes his own choice of style as one that is too suggestive of a permanence of self, commenting in parentheses:

I don’t like this style. Although it might be more agile, the use of the historical present brings me too close to the character whose adventures I am writing up, almost as if that character were me; when in re-
ality I am now another, and in a little while I might be yet another. So I will return to the indefinite preterit, the storyteller’s sturdy shield.

The narrator is often paralyzed in his literary endeavors by the recognition of what Rancière refers to as “the irreconcilable multiplicity of individuals contained within what we call an individual,” and struggles to find a style that might express something of that jumble of different moments and faces. He realizes that a belief in the coherence of our selves is only reinforced by language, “con su tendencia al estilo personal” (with its tendency toward personal style), which “distingue y petrifica” (differentiates and petrifies). Language promotes the illusion of selfhood, under—as Braidotti phrases it—“the fictional unity of a grammatical ‘I.’”

However, this tendency “puede paliarse, si uno se atreve, redactando sin estilo” (can be diminished, if one dares, writing without style), and this becomes the narrator’s goal in *Variedades*. The narrator introduces shifts within his own use of language—lexicon, tense, narrative structure—throughout the novella, in an attempt to undermine the emergence of a single, coherent style and to reflect the shifting multiplicity of subjective experience. Literature is consistently represented in *Variedades* as a process of exchange and mutation rather than a coherent, finished text produced by a single author. In Cohen’s imagined society, literature enjoys a moment of tangible revival, in which writers and readers stop by the communal boards in the main city square to post up their stories and write comments in the margins of others. The narrator posts draft chapters of his own story—the one we read—on the boards in the square, returning anxiously to discover his readers’ critiques and suggestions for redrafting. Writing has become a thoroughly interactive exercise: he converses with his critics, thanking them for their comments and attempting to remedy the deficiencies of his style in the next installment of the narrative.

Most importantly, Cohen presents writing as a radical act of creating new relations and subjectivities rather than an exercise in mimesis. This leads him away from a understanding of literature as representation and toward one that has much in common with Deleuze’s conceptualization of art’s role in becoming other. Cohen counters the “hermeneutics of suspicion” that has underpinned Marxist, Freudian, and deconstructive approaches through a rejection of a “depth model” of literature, in which words gesture to something else that might exist independently from them. The narrator knows that he must reject polarities such as “hondo/llano, fondo/aspecto” (deep/flat, background/form), as these are artificial and unproductive opposi-
tions.\textsuperscript{54} He also dismisses the metaphorical expression “quitarse la máscara” (to take off one’s mask), with its meaning of showing one’s true face or self, as “un disparate” (an absurdity), as there is nothing beneath the mask: the mask is all there is.\textsuperscript{55} For Deleuze, similarly, “It is not that we have a self that we then conceal or express through simulation or performance. . . . The idea of an original or underlying self or essence is the effect of the produced masks and copies.”\textsuperscript{56}

This proposition—that the image is all there is—does not lead in Deleuze to any kind of nihilism. While many theorists of the postmodern—Jameson and Baudrillard, among others—have lamented the occlusion of reality via an endlessly proliferating series of simulacra, Deleuze does not express any nostalgia for some previous moment in history in which we were more in contact with reality than we are now. As Claire Colebrook suggests, Deleuze “provides a positive definition of the image. Images are not pale replicas or second-rate versions of a real world. Images are fully real, from the images produced by a camera to the images produced by the eye that expects what lies beyond its immediate viewpoint.”\textsuperscript{57} In Deleuze’s empiricist philosophy, no world exists separately beyond our perceptions and images of it. This understanding challenges dominant conceptions of our postmodern era as one that has lost touch with reality, beset by the myriad images, copies, and simulations of television and advertising.

Cohen’s empiricist approach tempers and complicates what might otherwise be a straightforward denunciation of the powerful distortions of the mass media in a future society not so different from our own. His interest is not primarily in showing how image-making or writing betrays a reality that lies beyond it, but in presenting both as creative processes that generate new forms of perception rather than revealing or representing hidden truths. Rancière, drawing on Deleuze’s theorizations,\textsuperscript{58} observes,

For literature to assert its own power, it is not enough for it to abandon the norms and hierarchies of \textit{mimesis}. It must abandon the metaphysics of representation and the “nature” on which it is founded: its modes of presentation of individuals and the connections between individuals; its modes of causality and inference; in short its entire system of signification.

The power of literature must then be sought in that zone before representative sequences, where other modes of presentation, individuation, and connection operate.\textsuperscript{59}
Cohen’s purpose, in Variedades and in a number of his other fictions, seems to be to stage an experiment in abandoning “the metaphysics of representation” in precisely this manner. He attempts to undo individuation by insisting on the multiple and provisional nature of the self as the locus of perceptions, and to present literature as emerging from this preindividuated, unstable zone of affects and relations.

The abandonment of the hermeneutics of suspicion would become even more marked in Donde yo no estaba, in which Cohen describes a “cultura de sospecha” (culture of suspicion) that had reigned for many decades in the past, in which the media were accused of inventing reality and “la gente culta era muy dada a la crítica ideológica, a la desconfianza defensiva” (educated people were very much given to ideological critique and a defensive mistrust). In this novel, too, he develops in greater depth an understanding of writing as an act that reveals—and performs—our embeddedness as human subjects within a material world of continual transformation and exchange.

From Mimesis to Metabolism: Writing and Becoming-Imperceptible in Donde yo no estaba

Cohen’s Donde yo no estaba, like many of his fictions, is replete with electronic and mechanical prostheses that extend the consciousness and capacities of his human subjects to the inanimate objects that surround them. The tax inspector has a prosthetic device referred to as an “agente recordatorio” (reminder agent) attached to his right arm and connected by fiber optic cables to his tendons, which helps him detect instances of tax evasion as well as controlling his cardiac rhythm and blood pressure, and alerting him to the presence of insane individuals who might be a threat to him. Other devices also act directly on the brain or senses of humans, including the “estimulador cutáneo” (cutaneous stimulator) by Aliano’s bedside and various inventions designed to trigger memories of the past. A kind of virtual multisensory network, the Panconciencia, allows individuals to enter the conscious minds of other citizens, seeing and hearing what they experience. As he connects up, Aliano describes becoming aware of “el vocerío del multiverso interior” (the clamor coming from the interior multiverse) and reflects that “mi historia personal ya no era cosa solitaria” (my individual past was no longer a solitary thing).

The use of prostheses always unleashes forces of dispersion in Cohen’s
characters. In *Donde yo no estaba*, for example, Yónder is implanted with a kind of compendium of public relations methods to assist him in his mission to the Baluga islands, but this is later hijacked by a writer who uses him as a spokesperson for his seditious pamphleteering. His conscious mind has become distributed across multiple presences. This impact of this kind of prosthesis is only a more hyperbolic instance of the kind of mutual interpenetrations that complicate notions of selfhood through Cohen’s novel, however. The self-effacing and rather conventional Aliano, forced by circumstance to develop a relationship with this troubled, repulsive youth, begins to refer to “el Yónder-en-mí” (the Yónder-in-me) to describe those parts of his mind that have entered into some kind of encounter or fusion with Yónder, while other parts (“lo que en mí no es Yónder,” what in me is not Yónder) remain at least comparatively separate.

While managing multiple presences within their consciousness causes the characters some difficulty, the dissolution of the coherent self becomes Aliano’s central creed. He aspires to an “adelgazamiento del ser” (slimming of the self), which recognizes that “el yo es una prenda sin contenido” (“I” is a garment with nothing inside). It is a desire expressed succinctly in the words of an apocryphal poet, transcribed by Aliano in his diary: “Dame, genio de la lámpara / la opción de disolver mi forma / en la injustificada sopa química / donde las formas se deshacen y vuelven a hacerse / por toda la eternidad” (Give me, genie of the lamp / the choice to dissolve my form / in that arbitrary chemical soup / where forms melt and remake themselves / for all eternity). Aliano’s guru teaches that “un buen procedimiento de depersonalización es ingerir lo que de sus personas suelten otros, y en el mismo acto evacuar parte de uno” (a good method for depersonalization is to ingest what others let go from themselves, and in the same process evacuate part of oneself). This simultaneous emptying out and folding in of the world around posits the self merely as the locus of relations with its environment and introduces a radical philosophy of immanence.

The subject that emerges has a great deal in common with the “nomadic” and “posthuman” subjects theorized by Braidotti, who draws explicitly on a tradition of monist ontology and vitalist materialism. Within this perspective, “The subject is a transversal entity, fully immersed in and immanent to a network of nonhuman (animal, vegetable, viral) relations . . . shot through with relational linkages of the contaminating/viral kind which inter-connect it to a variety of others, starting from the environmental or eco-others and including the technological apparatus.” Braidotti’s recourse to the vocabu-
lary of viral contamination here echoes Aliano’s realization in *Donde yo no estaba* that he and Yónder “nos parasitamos mútuamente” (are engaged in mutual parasitism). Her account of the human subject as embedded in relations with the natural and technological environment also accords with the complex relations between the human and the nonhuman in Cohen’s many cyborg figures.

The primary framework for Cohen’s immanent worlds may well be a Buddhist one: the principle of nondualism advanced by Aliano’s gurus has much in common with the kind of teaching on “el obstáculo del yo” that Cohen summarizes in his introductory text on Buddhism. As Cohen himself recognizes, however, a rejection of the opposition between subject and object also has roots in Western thought, from Nietzsche to the poet Fernando Pessoa and the physicist Erwin Schrödinger. It also bears the legacy of Spinoza’s monism. As Deleuze suggests in his work on Spinoza,

> An animal, a thing is never separable from its relations with the world. The interior is only a selected exterior, and the exterior, a projected interior. The speed and slowness of metabolisms, perceptions, actions and reactions, link together to constitute a particular individual in the world.

Deleuze’s choice of the term “metabolism” becomes extremely significant in relation to Cohen’s writing, as the kind of material exchanges his characters undergo with their environment are often described with reference to metabolic processes and the ingestion and evacuation of food and liquids. Aliano reads from the writings of his guru that

> Somos lo que comemos. . . . no tenemos ningún carácter, moral, identidad ni nada en que reconozcamos salvo los procesos químicos que se obran entre lo que nos metemos por la boca y los jugos gástricos. Líquido amniótico, leche de teta: con eso empieza todo. Después comemos carne o papas y la química más compleja, la del cerebro, produce una fríolera de ilusiones, por ejemplo la del ser.

> We are what we eat. . . . we have no character, ethics, identity nor anything in which we may recognize ourselves except the chemical processes that take place between what we put in our mouths and our gastric juices. Amniotic liquid, breast milk: everything begins with
that. After that we eat meat or potatoes and a more complex chemistry, that of the brain, produces a series of mere illusions, for example that of the self.

Within this materialist conception of subjectivity, the borders of the self dissolve, leaving no room for dualistic thought. This understanding reveals, first, the speciousness of any mind/body distinction. For Cohen, even the act of reading, so apparently cerebral and abstract, may reveal to us how thoroughly our consciousness is mired in chemistry: Aliano remarks on the fact that reading Lumel’s poetry floods his body with endomorphins that lessen his headache. Second, it confuses any distinction between the self and the other. Aliano realizes that “soy la flor y el jardinero. De todo hay en mí un poco” (I am the flower and the gardener. There is a bit of everything in me). And third, it returns to the material world the agency erroneously ascribed only to humans. As the world, oneself, everyone else, and what people think are part of the same substance, Aliano affirms, “Lo que vemos ve. Lo que oímos oye” (What we see, sees, and what we hear, hears).

In a number of his narratives, Cohen extends this materialist vision to explore the nature of writing in a posthuman, nondualistic universe. How might a perception of radical immanence affect our understanding of the role of the writer and the act of writing itself? Aliano refuses to be governed by the climaxes and dénouements of novel-writing and its search for “la máquina encubierta” (the hidden machine) that brings form and resolution to a story, choosing instead to compose a diary into which he consciously enfolds the banalities and excesses of everyday life in such a way that the diary seems coextensive with lived time. Even so, he is horrified that he continues to recognize himself in his writing, despite his resolution to dissolve any sense of the self. A metaphor here, a syntactical flourish there: all bear witness to his manipulation of life in writing. This horror does not stem from a desire for writing to represent the world without the distortion of a mediator. Instead, it expresses Aliano’s desire to “deshincharse” (deflate oneself) in order to “hacer lugar a los otros” (make room for others).

Cohen draws on the same metabolic processes that govern subjectivity in his texts to describe writing as a form of exchange and transformation: Aliano decides that “voy a escribir como se come” (I am going to write in the same way as one eats), going on to explain that the stomach returns to the earth almost exactly what the earth gives it, minus the few grams it needs to keep the body functioning. Writing becomes an exercise in losing one’s
self and ingesting the work of others. Lumel, a rather eccentric woman with whom Aliano starts a relationship, composes poems that consist of texts written by others, pieces of informative prose that set out, variously, local myths in relation to river eels, the details of a pathology investigation, or the traditional customs of the region’s goatherds. Retyped in verse form, these acquire a simple elegance that does not detract from their earthiness and lack of literary pretension. Aliano admires her poetry greatly, considering it to be more durable as it draws on the work of others. He refers to “la valentía de ser mero marco de un hacer ajeno; aunque lo valiente sería no ser siquiera un marco, porque hay marcos muy llamativos” (the courage to be a mere frame for another’s work; although real courage would be not to be a frame at all, because frames can be very striking). 80

Cohen also experiments in Donde yo no estaba with syntactical choices that convey the importance of relations and becoming rather than substance or essence. Infinitives replace conjugated verbs in a way that emphasizes movement or processes of transformation over the subject as agent: Aliano pronounces, “Que la vida pase por los verbos. Ocasear. Aguar. Verdear. Tri-nar. Enlunecer. Acompañar. Espaciar. Durar. Estañar” (May life happen in verbs. To sunset. To water. To green. To chirp. To moonize. To accompany. To spread out. To last. To solder). 81 Ideas and phrases often circulate independently of the subjects who utter them, and unprepared switching between third and first persons further undermines the concept of a bounded self, giving expression to the mental interferences and exchanges that mark relationships between the self and other in Cohen’s fiction.

There are significant similarities between Cohen’s understanding of writing as an exercise in losing one’s self and Deleuze’s conceptualization of art as a practice of “becoming imperceptible.” Braidotti emphasizes the importance of this principle within materialist, posthuman thought. Becoming imperceptible “marks the point of evacuation or evanescence of the bounded selves and their merger into the milieu” 82 and opens up the human to other realms of agency: “By transposing us beyond the confines of bound identities, art becomes necessarily inhuman in the sense of nonhuman in that it connects to the animal, the vegetable, earthy and planetary forces that surround us.” 83 It is Aliano’s relationship with the bionic animal Keto that reveals to him that “el lenguaje es inhumano” (language is inhuman), that is, not exclusive to humanity. 84 For Cohen, the posthuman condition allows us to grasp the extent to which we are immersed in a material world of continual transformation.
Conclusion: The “Eternal Dance of Atoms”

Braidotti observes that postanthropocentrism most frequently figures in science fiction and popular culture in the mode of “neo-gothic horror,” articulating a deep-seated anxiety about the transformation of relations between the human and the technology. She labels this “narrow and negative” imaginary “techno-teratological.” Like Haraway, she also sees in this moment of fluidity a vital opportunity to decenter (post)modernist thought on the body and to reposition the human in relation to the nonhuman. Spregelburd and Cohen take up this challenge, exploring modes of writing that emphasize the material relations that define human subjectivity and gesturing beyond anthropocentrism to an understanding of agency that embraces both human and nonhuman, organic and inorganic, forces. If Spregelburd explores extra-linguistic realms of experience and order, Cohen pushes at the limits of language, allowing us to glimpse ways in which it might actually decenter the human and express something of our relationship with the material world.

For all its deconstructive zeal, postmodern and poststructuralist thought effectively leaves intact a dichotomy between language and reality and often entirely sidelines the real/material as entirely constituted by language. As John Smith and Chris Jenks argue, “Radical constructivisms rest on the over-estimation of human construction and authorship,” having “the unintended effect of recentering the human subject as the locus of agency despite the intention to undermine such claims.” New materialism questions the anthropocentric assumptions of the linguistic-constructivist paradigm and replaces it with one of radical immanence.

What Spregelburd and Cohen allow us to appreciate is the potential in literary texts or theatrical performance to gesture toward the material realm and to displace and decenter human subjectivity. Colebrook suggests that “literary language, by deforming the syntax and grammar that enables efficient, striving, and self-maintaining life, frees human thought from its own rhythms and propensities.” This process of deforming and defamiliarizing is clearly at work in the syntactical play of Cohen’s fiction, but it is also visible in the folded hierarchies of Spregelburd’s dramatic narratives. The power of literary or theatrical language in both cases does not rest in a capacity to transcend lived reality and take up a privileged position in order to deconstruct its dynamics, but in its ability to immerse us as readers or spectators within a complex, material universe, subject to continual transformation, in which human agency is only one force among many. This vision of multiple becomings within a creative universe resonates strongly with Deleuzean
thought, but also has much in common with Rancière’s understanding of the politics of aesthetics. For Rancière, “The unique power of literature finds its source in that zone of indeterminacy where former individuations are undone, where the eternal dance of atoms composes new figures and intensities every moment.”89 The redistribution of subjectivity that takes place within artistic practices becomes central to their potential to challenge the dominant system of ordering the world.