Mundus imaginalis

If objects, as detailed earlier, are nothing but objectifications co-arising alongside subjectifications as parts of events, then the status of perception becomes different as well. The third and final part of this book explores the ramifications of that difference in the world of perception, of images, of signs and meanings, and of the ways those images take us with them, inhabiting and possessing us like gods, angels, and demons.

Object-oriented ontologist Graham Harman argues that there are real objects — self-sufficient entities that are what they are in and of themselves — and there are sensual objects — things that arise between objects, that mediate for them, that do the touching for the real objects that cannot possibly touch. In Harman’s dichotomy, perception is a matter of these sensual objects that arise at the interface between real objects.

A process-relational view shares the view that results from this, which is that relationality is impossible without sensuality, or in fact without aesthetics. Harman calls aesthetics “first philosophy” because it is what arises whenever an object encounters another — whenever it reaches out beyond itself. As he and Timothy Morton describe it, aesthetics is the way objects encounter each other, even if they can never fully exhaust each
other. It is the way I encounter the sights and sounds of this autumn morning (which I do today by noting and admiring it, and by adding my own exhalation to it as it adds pleasure to my day). Aesthetics is the way fire encounters cotton (which it does by burning it).1

As we have seen, Whitehead and Peirce, like others in the process-relational tradition, agree about this firstness or primacy of aesthetics. For Whitehead, “the teleology of the Universe is directed to the production of Beauty.”2 For Peirce, aesthetics precedes ethics, which in turn precedes logic. The object-oriented ontologist and her process-relational cousin agree also in their insistence on reality. The difference comes in the objectologists’ insistence on something beyond the aesthetic — beyond the relational — that both precedes and completely eludes the aesthetic and relational. If that “beyond” is something that belongs to an object, which is never touched in its depths, then here is where the process-relationists part company. The latter consider this a spatialization — a kind of reification, or thingification — of something that is temporal because it is in the nature of the process of all things.3

Process-relational ontology, in other words, rejects this dichotomy of the real and the sensual. It takes the touchings, or prehensions — the sensual perceptions, mediations, sense-makings, interpretations, graspings, prehensions, efforts to move or act upon things as they are grasped — as fundamentally real and not as secondary to anything else. There is, in this view, no thing separate from its thinging.

That is not to say that there is no separation in the thinging; there is. It is what occurs in the relational act itself: in the movement by which the world is grasped, or prehended, and in the

movement toward the world that the prehension is for (that is, in the subjectivation). And, on the underside of all this, there is separation in the withdrawal of the world from that grasp. Insofar as there is continuity across thingings (which there is in the worlds that we deal with every day), that continuity comes from relational coordination — which can be spatial, temporal, or both — across thingings. To thing, in this sense, is to respond to things, which is always a matter of perception or creative integration of what is given.

This means that reality itself is perceptual; it is prehensive. There is nothing beyond that except the movement toward and away from it. Reality is imagistic. It consists of mediations that arise out of the congealed mediations of previous arisings. It is prehension all the way down, with crucial differences arising in the qualities of each prehension — how they reshape what they (selectively) inherit, how they move with that which they have gathered.

Image is, in this sense, everything. But image is never pure, true, accurate, or complete. It is never a perfect representation of something else, because it is always slipping from what it is imaging. It is always in motion, between what is imaged from and where it images to. Image, in this definition, is a creative reconfiguration of elements perceived or prehended, a configuration that, once satisfied, is passed on to the world for further refiguration.

This thought of the image as immanent, active, moving, and engaging, is enriched by a certain tradition of thought on the imagination that runs parallel to the tradition of processual realism, a tradition that we can now bring to the aid of the latter.

Traditionally, imagination has been thought of as something like the ability to produce internal images, and as intermediate between sensing and thinking, but prone to fallacious perception of the world. William James defined “imagination” as “the faculty of reproducing copies of originals once felt,” but added that this can be both “reproductive” and “productive,” where “elements from different originals are recombined so as to make
new wholes.”⁴ The German idealists, including Kant, referred to a productive and “transcendental” imagination that, in forming images, was a precondition for all knowledge of the world.

A series of twentieth-century philosophers and psychoanalysts—including Ernst Cassirer, Paul Ricoeur, Gaston Bachelard, Gilbert Durand, and Cornelius Castoriadis—have pursued this idea of a productive and dynamic imaginaire which underpins human interpretive and symbolic activities.⁵ Some have drawn on the writings of French historian of religion Henry Corbin, whose idea of l’imaginal, or the mundus imaginalis, was intended as a revival of Islamic Sufi and Neoplatonic conceptions of the “intermediary world” between the sensible world of material forms and the ideal or intelligible world of Platonic or spiritual forms.⁶ This idea of the imagination as an active, creative capacity that mediates between human perception and an ontologically real beyond-human world has long found a home within the tradition of esoteric and hermetic thought, a tradition historians have traced back to the late Hellenistic world, but which emerged more fully in the Renaissance and early modernity (in figures like Marsilio Ficino, Pico della

Mirandola, Paracelsus, and Jacob Boehme), to be picked up later by Romantics (such as Blake, Coleridge, and others) and occult and New Age metaphysicians of the last few centuries. Others, suspicious of any notion of a “higher reality,” nevertheless speak of an intersubjectively shared, intermediate world of symbolic forms and cultural meanings, variously described as an “imagosphere,” “iconosphere,” or “semiosphere.”

A key point here is that the image is not merely visual; it is perceptual, polysensorial, and affectively primed. An image is itself — it is an image, the image — but it is always also part of a relational network by which images and meanings, material objects and interpreting subjects, intersect, and from which their acts of imaging originate, deviate, and to which they remain always tethered. Imaging, or image-making, is subjective, intersubjective (or collective), and infrasubjective (unconscious or preconscious) all at once. There is no such thing, really, as the imagination, or one’s imagination. There is imaging.

In the post-Freudian context of psychological theorizing, the notion of the “imaginal” has been most thoroughly rendered by archetypal psychologist James Hillman. Following Corbin and

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Carl Jung, the foundational datum for Hillman’s archetypalism is the image conceived not as a representation of something else but as irreducible and autochthonous, “psyche itself in its imaginative visibility.”9 The source of images, for Hillman, is “the self-generative activity of the soul itself,” with “soul” being a term for the “tertium between the perspectives of body (matter, nature, empirics) and of mind (spirit, logic, idea).” Soul, in Hillman’s definition, is “the perspective between others and from which others may be viewed,” “a perspective rather than a substance, a viewpoint toward things rather than a thing itself.”10 This makes it a close relation to the mental-perceptual mediating dynamic between subjectivation and objectivation, or Shinzen Young’s “flow,” that is at the heart of reality conceived as relational process.

The image, in Hillman’s account, is not only what is seen but also the way of its seeing, and soul is the way of seeing that “deepens” events into experiences.11 It is, in this sense, a way of perceiving that allows the fruition of secondness (action) into thirdness (realization). Archetypal or mythic images are not images that “ground” or “compensate” for some lack or deficiency, as in other forms of psychoanalysis. Rather, they enable and open up: they are “images of intelligibility” that disclose “the plot of things, the way in which the world appears and we are in its images.”12

Humans, in this account, are not mere viewers of images; we dwell in (and as) images, and in so doing we make the world. The human is “a sense-enjoying, image-making creature,” an animal “in an ecological field that affords imagistic intelligibility.” Our task is not merely to see and respond to things, but to see “the face of the Gods in things.” This requires an active imagination and an “aesthetic culture,” and it calls for a “polytheistic psychol-

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10 Ibid., 5, 16.
11 Ibid., 16.
ogy” appropriate to a pluralistic universe — the kind of universe proposed, among others, by Whitehead and James.13

The method of archetypal psychology is a “giving over to the images and cultivating them for their sake.”14 Images, according to Hillman, make a “moral claim” upon their subjects, and the appropriate response to this claim is metaphorical, poetic, and imaginative, a method of “sticking to the image” so that the image can “release and refine further imagining.”15 This releasing is a releasing into the image, which, since it is a moving image, always means into a world that takes one somewhere else. In and through that movement one becomes other. Where a more conservative Jungian interpretation (and Hillman was a close, if somewhat iconoclastic, follower of Jung’s) might consider archetypal images to be those things that keep us tethered to an underlying substrate of foundational meanings, the reading I am proposing is one that keeps us tethered only to the ongoing creative becoming of the universe. In selecting which images to enact, we become the aesthetic, ethical, and (eco-)logical enactors of the worlds we create, alongside the others we create them with.

This notion of cultivating images for the sake of the images themselves is not the kind of thing one hears from a semiotist like Peirce, for whom semiosis is ultimately moving in the direction of greater reasonableness. For Hillman, by contrast, the movement often seems to be away from reasonableness toward something more mysterious and unfathomable. Yet the movement, for both, is in the direction of realization. And to the extent that Peirce’s reason remains grounded in ethics and, ulti-

mately, in aesthetics, the implication is that reason itself is the fruition of the very possibilities found in ethics and aesthetics. If the image is understood in a process-relational sense as movement, or, more precisely, as a particular constellation of possibilities for movement, as a fragment of time that looks simultaneously backward and forward to its past and future virtualities, then every image ought to be seen as a living and moving image. Images in this sense contain affective and semiotic capacities, vectors along which we can move if we open up to them.

**Iconoclash**

And if image is everything (or at least part of everything), then we are fated to dwell in a universe of what Bruno Latour calls iconoclash — conflict over the nature of the images by which we reflect, refract, and diffract ourselves and our world, and from which we can never extract ourselves except at the expense of self-delusion.

The two extreme reactions to such a world, Latour posits, are iconoclasm and idolatry. The first denies the power of icons, or images, except as passive intermediaries of other things. (Most commonly, it denies the power of others’ icons, not recognizing its own denial to be iconic or imagistic in the least.) Iconoclasm takes images to be mere representations, dead photographs, more or less accurate, of something else that may be or may have been alive and whose significance is primary. Dreaming of an “unmediated access to truth,” it distinguishes the thing itself from its representation, and assumes the first is of an order of

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reality and significance that the latter cannot possibly attain. Alternatively, it may deny that even the object of the representation has any reality apart from what people fallaciously ascribe to it. In this harsher version, iconoclasm not only denies the icon any validity outside the realm of humanly created meaning; it also denies such validity to anything else. (Strict social constructivism, if taken as a claim about reality rather than as analytical method, belongs in this category.)

The second reaction, idolatry, takes the images as fully present and final, as only what—and as powerful as—they claim to be, and not as relationally dependent at all. They are “transcendental signifieds,” which stand in independent glory apart from the universe of muddy entanglements that define the rest of us.

Instead of these two opposed positions, Latour advocates iconophilia, which he calls “respect not for the image itself but for the movement of the image,” for “the movement, the passage, the transition from one form of image to another.” Images, by this definition, are always in motion. They are the responsiveness that objectifies in subjectivating, the vehicles for the mutually co-constitutive subject-objectifications that make up reality in any and every moment.

Adam Miller takes Latour’s writings on religion as the basis for theological speculations that approximate what I am getting at here. Miller writes, “Every object is a kind of icon that bears rather than reflects the mobile presence of the other objects that constitute it.” In contrast to iconoclasm and idolatry, iconophilia is the approach that “patiently solicits” the icon. It “stay[s] with objects and suffer[s] the grace of their work, the grace of both their making-available and their packing-away.” Iconophilia is much like the “critical idolatry” advocated by W.J.T. Mitchell, which “does not dream of destroying” idols, but “recognizes

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17 Latour, “How to be Iconophilic,” 421.
18 Ibid.
every act of disfiguration or defacement as itself an act of creative destruction for which we must take responsibility.” It is a “playing” and “sounding” of idols, by which they are made to “speak and resonate.”

For the iconophile, icons or images are the vehicles that carry us and the world across the spaces that render the immanent transcendent, and the transcendent immanent. They are the gods, the angels and daimones, the deities with whom we are co-dependent. “If the gods exist in Latour’s pluriverse,” Miller writes, “they are not pure, unconditioned, or exceptional. They are not free from the necessity of translation, negotiation, and compromise. Nor are they free from a need for techniques, instruments, technologies, calculations, and metrologies. The gods too, like every other object, must receive the resistant availability of the proliferating multitude as the gift that it is.”

If image is everything, and if image is always impure — never a mere representation, but also never a totality in and of itself — then we find ourselves in a universe that is once again polytheistic and pagan: a universe in which images are as gods that possess those who are imaged, but who never do so fully and whose possessions must always be negotiated. The question is always how to subject ourselves to them, how to venerate the gods, comply with them, transgress against them, defile them, and negotiate our relations with them.

Without us, no gods; without the gods, no us. The gods here may well be Whitehead’s “eternal objects,” which are eternal only insofar as they are not dependent on time, as they can arise anywhere when the conditions are ripe for their appearance. They are dependent, rather, on us, for without our active participation they have no reality. Without us, they remain only as “pure potentials.” In and through us they are worlded.

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21 Miller, Speculative Grace, 43.
22 Whitehead, Process and Reality, 22.
What I am suggesting here is that a certain paganism — an iconophilic and pluralistic practice of engagement with deities, or something akin to deities — can help us think through the place of the image in perception and sensibility. Paganism serves as something like the ancient and original ground of imagistic consciousness, the ocean in which we semiotic beings swim.

In my book *Ecologies of the Moving Image*, I argued that the moving image is central to how moderns make sense of the world. If the modern world, as Martin Heidegger claimed, was the “age of the world picture,” then it makes sense to think of the twentieth and twenty-first century worlds as the “age of the world motion picture.”23 (That it has become a digital age, in part, is relevant, but let us leave that for later.) And, of course, the oral and textual traditions of literacy that mark much of human history have hardly gone away. But if we take prehension — the creative act of taking account — as the paradigmatic act, then it is precisely acts of imaging, of moving semiotically from what is given to its uptake, via whatever organs or vehicles of perception and cognition may be available, that make up the universe. How we image the world, and how we take up those images in our acts of imaging, is both how we add to the world and how we constitute ourselves in the process. There is no safe space into which we can retreat without being defiled and transformed by our acts of imaging.

A pagan world

Adding a word like “pagan” to our vocabulary at this point is not intended to confuse. It is intended to acknowledge an original confusion, an original hybridity — between self and other, image and imaged, within which we always find (and lose) ourselves. The term *paganus* emerged historically, in the late Roman empire, as part of an effort of purification whereby the

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complex meta- and trans-human politics of appeasement and local obeisance, a politics of negotiated relations and genuflections, translations and syncretisms, idols and propitiatory rites, was subsumed within the universal calculus of a monotheistic verticality. Here was the self, sinful and needing of correction, agent-like within clear limits. There was the one true God, ultimate agent and arbiter.

Christianity almost inevitably failed at this purification. From the Catholic veneration of saints, angels, and the Holy Theotokos herself to the spirit-filled graces and possession-like movements of Pentacostalism, the world’s complex enchantments have continued to churn up from the imagistic production engine of reality. Here is where Charles Taylor’s thesis on the “immanent frame” — a thesis that poses modernity as a kind of purification of transcendent realities — needs to be examined (which we will do presently).

In an account of the political theology of ancient Greece, historical anthropologist Marcel Detienne claims that “over three-quarters of the world is naturally polytheistic.” “Consider,” he writes, “the eight hundred myriad deities in Japan, the countless metamorphoses of the deities of Hinduism, the thousands of genies and powers of Black Africa. Likewise, the forests and mountain ranges of Oceania, the Indian subcontinent, and South America are teeming with pantheons with great clusters of deities.” These, like the gods and goddesses of ancient Rome or of West Africa, with their descendant mixtures in the Afro-Caribbean religions of Vodoun, Santeria, Candomble, and others, are characterized by fluidity and flexibility, with multi-

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ple names and personalities blurring into others and fulfilling overlapping functions as one moves from one place to another. The “field of polytheisms,” in Detienne’s account, “constitutes a vast continent,” one in which gods are not only everywhere, but are “plural, constituted by the intersection of a variety of attributes.”

The figure of paganism has played a curious role in the intellectual history of the modern world, bobbing up and down at various times against the horizon of philosophical thought. It thoroughly infused the humanism and artistic flourishing of the Renaissance, just as it helped power the Enlightenment project with hopes of a revitalization of the worldliness of Classical thought. More recently, pagan thoughts have figured heavily in the ruminations of philosophers from Nietzsche and Heidegger to Lyotard, Serres, and Sloterdijk. To deepen our understanding of the implications of the “pagan” perspective I am proposing and to better establish its polytheistic iconophilism — this open engagement with the middle-ground of images and icons and of how they take and carry us, and we them, in turn — will require engagement with some alternative perspectives.

Specifically, in the forthcoming pages I will engage, critically but I hope productively, with two alternatives to my proposed iconophilism: Canadian social philosopher Charles Taylor’s analysis of modernity and secularism, and Slovenian cultural theorist Slavoj Žižek’s critique of all manner of “holist” or totalizing metaphysics (which echoes similar critiques by Graham Harman and Timothy Morton). The first of these laments (albeit ambivalently) the loss of an enchanted world, while the second celebrates it, but both agree on a kind of alignment between left-wing politics and Christianity (in name if not in substance). To negotiate the differences between an iconophilic process-relationalism and these alternative perspectives, I will draw upon.

the work of allies: in particular, political philosopher William Connolly’s “immanent naturalism” and Bruno Latour’s and Isabelle Stengers’s writings on cosmopolitics.

In the process, I hope to build a case for an iconophilic and imagistic process-relationism that is neither secular nor post-secular, but that can mediate between the world-building efforts of theists and secularists alike. In a world where the play of images, deities, religiosities, and the ghosts of multiple life-ways are all in undiplomatic flux, such an approach can help us navigate the rapids.

The immanent frame

According to a well established narrative, most closely identified with sociologist Max Weber, technological modernity has disenchanted our world and created rifts between humans and nature, spirit and matter, body and soul, sacred and secular. Many modern thinkers celebrated this disenchantment as a liberation from the shackles of faith and superstition. Others accepted it as the price to pay for the benefits of modernity. For thinkers like Condillac, Marx, and Comte, an enchanted world may have had its comforts, but we are past it now and there is no going back. Enlightenment requires a clearer, more sober understanding of ourselves and our world.

A second, more critical tradition lamented this disenchantment and proffered ways of reversing or revaluing that which was lost in the process. Representatives of this critical tradition range across the political spectrum: from pessimist Romantics, religious fundamentalists, and conservative traditionalists — whose ranks include the likes of Carl Jung, Rene Guenon, Ananda Coomaraswamy, Ernst Jünger, Martin Heidegger, and Alain de Benoist — to socialists and neo-Marxists like Max Horkheimer, Theodore Adorno, Ernst Bloch, and Michael Löwy. Some, like medieval historian Lynn White, Jr. and cultural historian Morris Berman, have suggested a quasi-religious solution to what is essentially a problem of the disappearance
engaging images

of religion. Variations on such a “re-enchantment” are popular among ecological thinkers.

There is a third tradition that rejects the disenchantment/re-enchantment frame altogether, seeing it as a modern construct that misses the complexity underlying terms like enchantment, wonder, and even the sacred—qualities that have not disappeared at all, but have simply shifted from some places (temples and religious experiences) to others (technological gadgets, Hollywood stars, bodies, sexual conquests, ostentatious displays of wealth, nature, the world itself). Here we find the views of those who see the universe as open, emergent, and in a state of ceaseless becoming, a world in which enchantment, wonder, or spirit are immanent rather than transcendent: philosophers and scientists like Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, Bruno Latour, Donna Haraway, Stuart Kaufmann, Ilya Prigogine, William Connolly, and Catherine Keller. It is from them that I take my impetus in teasing out the fault-lines of the secular and the religious.

In recent thinking about the sacred and the secular, the second, critical view has found an influential champion in Cana-


dian social philosopher Charles Taylor. Taylor’s celebrated 2007 tome *A Secular Age* presented an exhaustive analysis of the “malaises of modernity,” including a wide-ranging account of the constitution of modern secular subjectivity and of the “conditions of belief” that shape it. Inspired in part by Heidegger’s hermeneutic phenomenology and by Foucault’s analysis of the discursive and pre-discursive shifts shaping people’s orientations in the world, Taylor posited a categorical opposition between “transcendence” and “immanence,” an opposition he aligned closely with religious belief and “unbelief.”

Taylor’s argument, in a nutshell, was that modernity has achieved a “great disembedding” that has produced a “buffered” modern self—a kind of self-as-object, which is as disconnected from other selves as it is from the world at large. This bounded object-self has become disengaged from the larger world in at least three significant ways. First, in the “enchanted” and “embedded” world of pre-modernity, religious life had been “inseparably linked with social life,” with sociality embedded in a cosmos “populated by spirits, demons, and moral forces.” For moderns, this embeddedness has been sundered. Second, “the primary agency of important religious action” had always been “the social group as a whole, or some more specialized agency recognized as acting for the group,” such that people “related to God as a society.” Today, the primary agent is the individual. And, third, “Divinity’s benign purposes” were “defined in terms of ordinary human flourishing,” that, too, for Taylor, is gone.

According to Taylor, this triple embedding within “social order, cosmos, and human good” was disrupted not in one fell swoop, but over the course of several historical shifts. The emergence of “Axial” religions and philosophies in the middle of the first millennium BCE—including the teachings of Plato and

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31 Ibid., 26.
32 Ibid., 148.
33 Ibid., 150.
34 Ibid., 151.
Aristotle, the Buddha, Confucius, Lao Tzu, and Jesus—enabled a transcendence of the human condition that, significantly, was individual. For instance, elements within Christianity individualized the understanding of religion through their focus on repentance, the monastic vocation, the facing of Judgment Day rather than seeing death as part of the round of life, and so on. But these eventually developed into “post-Axial compromises” wherein individual salvation could be sought, but always within a moral landscape shaped by socially shared understandings of virtue and wickedness.

It was not until much later that a fully non-religious alternative became available as a counter-force to religious faith. This alternative was “exclusive humanism,” which first developed as an intellectual alternative to Christianity. Exclusive humanism was “an achievement” that required “training, or inculcated insight, and frequently much work on ourselves”—work that included articulating and internalizing a notion of benevolence as internally rooted (either in reason or in a natural propensity to sympathy, or in a synthesis of the two), of disengaged reason and individual agency (accompanied by many forms and practices of “interiorization”), and of secular public space. For those who followed this shift, the “porous self” was replaced by a “buffered” self, “for whom it comes to seem axiomatic that all thought, feeling and purpose, all the features we normally can ascribe to agents, must be in minds, which are distinct from the ‘outer’ world.” And the social and cosmic embeddedness of the person was replaced by out-and-out individualism. Gradually, there emerged the possibility of a self that is both “ontologically prior to and independent of its surroundings.”

Once this stage was set, a variety of religious and non-religious options began to spread along the continuum between traditional religion and “exclusive humanism,” with belief itself

35 Ibid., 255.
36 Ibid., 539.
becoming an individual option. Taylor calls this proliferation of options a “nova effect,” which contributed to the spreading of a background “malaise” of meaninglessness. This “malaise of modernity” was characterized by a sense of the *fragility* by which meaning and over-arching significance can be attained, a flatness experienced, for instance, in the lack of ways to solemnize the crucial moments of passage in our lives, and an “emptiness of the ordinary.” The inevitable yearning for “something more” created “cultural cross pressures.”

Finally, as a response to this malaise, there was a flourishing of “expressive individualism” rooted in Romanticism but democratized by the cultural revolutions of the 1960s. In the end, the previously reliable, if not natural, links between spirituality, society, and a felt experience of order within which we humans were embedded, was gone. We live, today, in an “immanent frame” in which “the buffered identity of the disciplined individual moves in a constructed social space, where instrumental rationality is a key value, and time is pervasively secular,” and all of this is understood as “natural.” This immanent frame, which for Taylor has become hegemonic, *allows* for an openness to “something beyond,” but does not demand nor necessarily encourage it.

Taylor’s ambivalence toward this immanent frame is palpable. He tries to view it positively, but also seems to fear its implications, saying that if one opts against transcendence, “one can indeed live in a world which seems to proclaim everywhere the absence of God. It is a universe whose outer limits touch nothing but absolute darkness; a universe with its corresponding human world in which we can really experience Godlessness.” This means “the sense of an absence; […] the sense that all order, all meaning comes from us. We encounter no echo outside.” The implication is that something novel has appeared in the world: “A race of humans has arisen which has managed to experience its world entirely as immanent.” “In some respects,” he acknowl-

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edges, “we may judge this achievement as a victory for darkness, but it is a remarkable achievement nonetheless.”

**More than one way to be porous**

The scope of Taylor’s argument is audacious, and his method is rich and engaging. In probing into the framework of tacit assumptions by which people make sense of the world—its embodied intentionalities, discursive frames and practices, communal bonds and conditions of belief—Taylor pushes far beyond the behavioral, mechanistic, and rational choice assumptions that characterize too much of modern psychological theory. His may be, as Wendy Brown calls it, “the first erudite phenomenology of secularism.”

But critics have pointed out that Taylor’s critique is both too ethnocentric and too monological. It is, on the one hand, too focused on the experience of a small subset of humanity—those who personally experience the loss of what sociologists of religion have called a “sacred canopy.” The majority have remained either strongly committed to religion or do not abide by the particular parsing of the “transcendent” and the “immanent” that Taylor insists on. As Cassidy writes, even Augustine had taught “that God is neither to be found outside of nor beyond us, but is rather to be found in the depths of interiority, even ‘closer to me than I am to myself’.”

For other Christians, God is to be found in the face of “the other,” the neighbor and stranger, and not at all somewhere beyond humanity. At the same time, counter to Taylor’s assumption that God brings “fullness” while the im-

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39 Ibid., 376.
manent frame remains “empty,” there are Christian mystics for whom God precisely offers an “emptying” rather than a “filling.”

More significantly, Taylor relies on an overly internal understanding of the North Atlantic “West,” as if there has been no rest of the world against which the West both defined itself historically and depended on for its self-constitution. As a heterogeneous group of scholars and historians have been persuasively arguing for decades now—Edward Said, Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, Gayatri Spivak, Walter Mignolo, Enrique Dussel, Talal Asad, Chandra Mohanty, Tomoko Masuzawa, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Arturo Escobar, Gloria Anzaldúa, Timothy Fitzgerald, Boaventura de Sousa Santos, Akeel Bilgrami, and others—the last five centuries of western history are inconceivable without reference to the expansion of imperialist and masculinist European economies to other continents, the “discovery” and colonization of the Americas, the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, and encounters (direct or indirect) with the “otherness” of China, India, the Ottoman Muslim world, Orthodox Christianity, and the West’s internal other, Judaism.42 Then there is the persistence of a dynamic natural world that has interacted with human society in complex and mysterious ways: through plagues, diseases, and natural disasters, and through intermeshing political-ecological dynamics such as the rise of an international merchant class, the enclosure of common lands, intensification of private property relations, rural to urban migrations, and the production of new “natures” around the world.

Once these are all added to the picture, it becomes clear that various forms of otherness—cultural and ecological difference—have perpetually bubbled to the surface, to be encountered as background and as foreground, and to be made sense of both ideologically and practically. These have given rise to new projections or imaginaries of transcendence, from classical to Enlightenment and evolutionist notions of “the savage” and “the barbarian” to Rousseauian ideals of the “noble savage,” and for reaction formations in which efforts to gain cultural superiority were made through the vertical projection of identity towards a distant God and affirmed through hierarchic ideologies, technologies of discipline and control, and the like. Discourses of “religion,” “barbarism,” “civilization,” and “primitivity” arose in the midst of such encounters.

In light of these complexities, Taylor’s account appears to rely on an ahistorical discourse of transcendence-versus-immanence that is unable to account for the ways in which transcendence itself has been relational and historically mutable. His analysis is premised on a duality according to which “believers” hold to a faith in a “fullness” that is “beyond human life” and beyond the living world itself, while “unbelievers” believe in other things—in nature, the power of art and sensual beauty, human generosity and kindness, and so on—but fall short of the transcendence Taylor seeks. For Taylor, as David Gordon observes, “the sacred is historically invariant, always and only God,” a divinity that transcends not only the human world but the natural world as well.43

A more relational view would have to acknowledge that any historical change in fundamental background assumptions—which is what Taylor is aiming to diagnose—“means a transformation in the sorts of entities that can show up”: such as gods or a single transcendent God, a lawfully defined Nature, the sovereign Nation, the Economy, a Humanity that is the single source of meaning, and so on and so forth.44 If each of

44 Ibid., 669.
these discursive objects is a product of history alongside other products, then Taylor’s dichotomy of an exclusively human immanence and an exclusively divine transcendence comes to look fragile indeed.

This suggests that there may be many other ways of being “porous” than the one that Taylor privileges. Why, for instance, would it not be possible to conceive of a world inclusive of humans but not exclusively human that is itself meaningful, value-filled, and agential in its nature?45 As Gordon puts it, “To conceive of oneself as a purely material being of flesh and bone is to understand oneself as more porous to one’s surroundings, not less so, since one is metaphysically of the same substance as the world.” Naturalism, he suggests, “has its own humility.”46 And the range of variations between religiosities and naturalisms comes to seem much richer when they are not assigned some point on a historical timeline— from pre-Durkheimian to Durkheimian to post-Durkheimian, as Taylor calls them.47 If religion is not exclusively about transcending “the world,” then the embedded cosmos that ostensibly made up the pre-modern world might not be entirely played out. And if we have not all fallen from grace, we may not need to choose between climbing back or lamenting the loss.

All that said, there is something to Taylor’s frame that speaks to a recognizable division among people today. It makes sense to claim that something like secularism—in combination with capitalism, modernization, liberalism (or neoliberalism), developmentalism, and other factors— has tended to corrode and dissolve the bonds that have kept “traditional culture” alive today, whether among indigenous or peasant communities or reli-

45 This is Akeel Bilgrami’s argument in Secularism, Identity, and Enchantment (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), particularly in the chapter “The Political Possibilities of the Long Romantic Period.”
47 For examples of other variations on the spectrum of hybrids between religion and naturalism, see Bron R. Taylor, Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).
giously unified regional, national, or transnational cultures. The term “traditional” is loose at best, and it is exceedingly difficult to qualitatively compare the different forms of such “traditional culture.” Cultures have always been multiple, disunified, stratified, and complex. Cultural encounters and clashes have always resulted in divergent outcomes, ranging from peaceful or contentious assimilation of one group by another to various forms of mutual accommodation, co-existence, or syncretic mixing. Positing a singular culture of “global, liberal, secular modernity” is hazardous at best, and opposing it to any and all other cultural variants is an even more outrageous overgeneralization.

Yet, just as it is possible to situate people and communities on a scale divided between those who benefit most from the conditions of Anthropocenic capitalism (the A/Cene) and those who are almost entirely victims of it, so it is also possible to situate people somewhere on a spectrum between those who are fully assimilated into a globalizing “liberal, secular, modernity” and those who have almost entirely resisted such assimilation. Most of the world falls somewhere in between, with options for leaning one way or another (as Taylor skillfully points out). In this sense, Taylor’s argument, if not taken as a historical one, succeeds in addressing a profound divergence in the world today, one that helps explain a variety of significant global developments—from “9-11” and the “wars” on “terror” to the rise of religiously fundamentalist, ethnically exclusivist, anti-globalist, and anti-immigrant movements in many countries.

“Secularism,” “liberalism,” “tradition,” “faith,” “globalism,” “fundamentalism,” “development”: all these terms carry potent punch today, even as they are notoriously slippery in their definitions. Religious traditions have certainly not gone away, as secularization theorists had long predicted. The question has become not when they will finally go away, but whether the world is becoming post-secular in any recognizable way, or whether it is merely continuing in a kind of see-saw dance between faith and secularity, multiple modernities, and other forms of identity-making and contesting on scales ranging from the local and
infra-local to the national and transnational. If a shift “beyond the Anthropo(S)cene” is to take hold among a significant proportion of humanity, it will have to do so across these divides between the educated, urban, liberal, secular “moderns” and the rest — which may mean a majority — of humanity.

Jamesian maneuvers

In the debates that followed the publication of Taylor’s book, a third position took shape that attempted to navigate between the religious “transcenders” or “traditionalists” and the areligious secularists or “exclusive humanists.” This position, represented in the writings of David Gordon, William Connolly, Patrick Lee Miller, Lars Tonder, Elizabeth Hurd, Akeel Bilgrami, and others, in one way or another attempted to bring together a sense of “enchantment” with a “worldly orientation to religion and politics.” This tradition is key to negotiating the “post-secularizing” terrain of global culture.

Perhaps the most detailed and persistent elaboration of such a third position is that undertaken by political theorist William Connolly. In a series of books including Why I Am Not A Secularist, Neuropolitics, Pluralism, Capitalism and Christianity American Style, A World of Becoming, and Facing the Planetary, Connolly has presented a sustained defense of what he calls “immanent naturalism,” a view that sees the universe as open, creative, and pluralistic, and that advocates a “reverence for the protean diversity of being.” With an eye toward the practical,

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I will compare the kinds of spiritual practices suggested in the writings, respectively, of Charles Taylor and William Connolly. To facilitate this comparison, I will focus particularly on their respective use of a shared resource, the ideas of pragmatist philosopher and student of religion William James, and on the thread of the imagination and the “imaginal.”

As mentioned, Taylor’s *A Secular Age* is highly attuned to the background assumptions and pre-discursive orientations shaping our understandings of the sacred, but his analysis is overly constrained by the elite internal dialogues of the North Atlantic “West.” If, following Corbin and others, we think of the middle-ground between explicit thinking and tacit background assumptions and orientations as an “imaginal” field or “imagosphere,” then Taylor’s understanding is constrained by the Eurocentric model he assumes for our history. The constitutive “others” that have shaped that history — internal and external, cultural and natural others — might well seem unimaginable from within that frame.

In his analysis of modernity’s “immanent frame,” Taylor invokes William James in his description of the “open space where you can feel the winds pulling you, now to belief, now to unbelief.” To stand in this “open space,” he writes, “is to be at the mid-point of the cross-pressures that define our culture.” He singles out two particular forms or “leanings” within this “open space”: that of the ex-believer who feels “the imminent loss of a world of beauty, meaning, warmth as well as of the perspective of a self-transformation beyond the everyday,” and that of the believer who remains “haunted by a sense that the universe might after all be as meaningless as the most reductive materialism describes.”

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51 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 549.
52 Ibid., 592.
53 Ibid.
54 Ibid., 593.
always remain anticipatory. Parallel to the continuing regret of ex-believers is this sense that the struggle for belief is never definitively won.”

Where Taylor’s Jamesian “open space” remains epistemological, caught between the two views that ostensibly frame our culture, William Connolly’s use of James is ontological, making a claim about the universe itself as being pluralistic and, on some level, undecideable. For Connolly, James is “a pluralist in two senses: in the image of the universe that he embraces,” which is pluralistic through and through, “and in his appreciation that others might legitimately adopt other images of it.” In Connolly’s take on James, the universe itself is considered “open” and capable of bringing in unexpected novelty. Translated into Taylor’s terms, this is a recognition of a transcendence that, instead of being relegated to an outside (whether to a transcendent deity or a supernatural realm), is built into the immanent structure of the cosmos itself.

The upshot for practice is significant. When Taylor comes, in his final chapter, “Conversions,” to discuss spiritual practice, it is to the “experience” of transcendence, “(re)conversion,” and “fullness,” in which “one feels oneself to be breaking out of a narrower frame into a broader field, which makes sense of things in a different way.” Taylor urges us to resist the temptation to psychologize this as individual “experience.” Rather, it is a breakthrough to a transcendence which “corresponds to reality” outside of the “immanent frame.” He refers to various mystics and saints, but focuses particularly on three modern figures — Ivan Illich, Charles Peguy, and Gerard Manley Hopkins — who in different ways grapple with “the inescapable tension between the ultimate order of the Parousia, which is in gestation today” and “the established order of civilization as we live it,” and who

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55 Ibid.
57 Taylor, A Secular Age, 768.
58 Ibid.
find “their own way” within this tension. The choice of the three, interestingly, reflects the persistent influence on Taylor of Martin Heidegger: Illich is as much a critic, if not more so, of instrumental technological rationality as was Heidegger; Peguy, building on Bergson, is said to “anticipate” Heidegger’s “famous analysis of the three ekstaseis”; and Hopkins is a Christian version of the kind of poet Heidegger came to celebrate in his later writings. What we see, then, is an expansive interpretation of spiritual practice, including social critique and poetry, held together only by the fact that each of them is a Christian.

Taylor does refer on numerous occasions to Buddhist or other forms of religion, occasionally suggesting, for instance, that “what may have to be challenged here is the very distinction nature/supernature itself,” but he fails to follow up on these suggestions. In the book’s final two pages he gestures, hesitantly, to the potential virtues of “paganism” or “polytheism” in a brief critique of two weaknesses found in Christianity and the “axial religions” — Christianity’s “repression and marginalization” of embodiment and its tendency “to homogenize.” But he internalizes these critiques by claiming that “Christianity, as the faith of the Incarnate God, is denying something essential to itself as long as it remains wedded to forms which excarnate.” This potential opening onto something transcedent to Christianity is thus deflected into itself. Meanwhile, the thinkers who show a more radical openness to embodiment, pluralism, and the blurring of the nature/supernature dichotomy are mostly brushed aside as marginal voices of an “immanent revolt” that, for all its revolting, remains always “immanent.”

William Connolly has long championed an “immanent revolt” that redefines transcendence in ways consistent with the process-relational thinking of this book. Connolly consistently calls for a Spinozist “ethic of cultivation,” a philosophy “of ethics not as obedience to the command of a personal God or a categori-
cal imperative, but as cultivation by tactical means of *hilaritus*, a love of life that infuses the body/brain/culture network in which we live.”  

For him, the kind of “deep pluralism nourished by a generous ethic of engagement” that he calls for “requires micropolitical work on the subliminal register,” work that includes the kinds of things he variously refers to as “relational arts,” “arts of the self,” “spiritual exercises,” “ethical artistry,” and “corporeal practices.” Such activities “work on interceded layers of relational being. They help to organize those complex mixtures of word, image, habit, feeling, touch, smell, concept, and judgment that give texture to cultural life.” It is in these “interceded layers” that the “dense, often intense, relation between mystical/subliminal states and doctrinal representation and interpretation” is “effectuated”: not only “by gods, genes, traumatic experiences, and neurotransmitters such as dopamine, norepinephrine, serotonin, and acetylcholine,” but also “by ritual, tactics, arts, and exercises variously practiced by members of religions of the Book, Buddhists, Freudians, and Nietzschians.”

This list may bring to mind many of the techniques of spiritual exploration found in today’s spiritual marketplace — the sundry healing practices, meditation and visualization techniques, image and symbol systems from runes to Tarot cards to *I Ching* to “centering prayer” and “Sufi dancing” and spiritual journaling and “power place” pilgrimage, all intended to bring about change in the consciousness of the technique-accumulating seekers. Neither Taylor nor Connolly would uncritically endorse all (if any) of these methods. Taylor would undoubtedly find them too instrumental, too invested in the “self” that does the seeking, self-exploring, and self-enhancing, with little necessary reference to a transcendent domain. Connolly, on the other hand, deploys language (such as “arts of the self”) that suggests some complicity with this individualist frame. But his


63 Connolly, *Neuropolitics*, 129.

64 Ibid., 132.
voluminous writings on politics conveys the clear message that selfhood is not a bounded and unchanging container, but is always in process, dynamically related to others and to a world on which it is intimately dependent. His ethos of pluralization specifically encourages an engagement with one’s critics and interlocutors, and his “quasi-pagan faith” of immanent naturalism is one that, he claims, cultivates a sensibility of care and “love of this world.”

Connolly here is proposing an alternative model of the relationship between reason, values, and practice both to those, such as Taylor, who assume a predetermined view of value or transcendent meaning, and to those (like Kant, Habermas, and Rawls) who privilege reason at the expense of affective and prerational processes. His “arts of the self” include practices that “corporealize” culture and reshape both “thinking and sensibility in profound ways.” Culture, in this understanding, is embodied “in repetitive practices that help to constitute the dispositions, sensibilities, and ethos through which meaning is lived, intellectual beliefs are settled, and relations between constituencies are negotiated.” Ritual, in turn, is “a medium through which embodied habits, dispositions, sensibilities, and capacities of performance are composed and consolidated.” All of this is entirely consistent with the Peircean and Whiteheadian views espoused in this book, which aim to change the ways we relate to ourselves and the world through the cultivation of habits of perception, action, and realization.

In all of this, Connolly is no less an urban intellectual than Taylor, if not more so. To say, as Connolly does, that he is “not a secularist” is certainly not the same as saying that he is not secular. The Latin word saeculum, at any rate, refers to the shared world of the present: the age, time, generation, world, lifetime, or breed of those who belong to a given world. Connolly es-

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65 On his “quasi-pagan” faith, see ibid., 124. The phrase “love of this world” comes up frequently in Connolly’s recent writings.
66 Ibid., 84.
67 Connolly, Pluralism, 56.
68 Ibid., 57, emphasis in original.
pouses a certain faith and seeks out practices to render that faith as real as any; in this, he is not separating the *saeculum* from the eternal or transcendent, but is expanding it to invite in possibilities that others may be leaving out. He mentions churches and other religious organizations in his list of allies for building an “eco-egalitarian resonance machine” to counter the “evangelical-capitalist resonance machine” that has ascended to power in the United States of late.

But Connolly’s option of philosophical exploration remains the option of an individual who is quite capable of standing apart from any community because his grounding in the world of modern, secular *culture* is solid. To effectively engage with cultural worlds whose relationship to secular liberalism is much more conflicted may require the capacity to move even further across the divide between the secular world of intellectuals and reasoned arguments, and the worlds of what we might call *other rationalities* — those that are culturally still somewhat intact, but whose cardinal reference points bear little resemblance to those of liberal political dialogue, democratic pluralism, and respectful debate.

For this we require an ontological politics that understands that humans already live in different worlds, different *kosmoi*, and that any effort to bridge them will always be precarious, with neither guarantees nor shared foundations on which to build such bridges.

**Ontological politics**

In her multivolume work *Cosmopolitiques* (1996–97) and publications that followed it, Belgian philosopher of science Isabelle Stengers forwarded a “cosmopolitical proposal” that, unlike most forms of cosmopolitanism, does not presume the existence or even the possibility of a “good common world,” an ecumenically peaceable cosmopolis. It assumes, instead, that such a peaceable common world would always have to be cobbled together by whatever means of negotiation are available. Her proposal, furthermore, is intended to “slow down the construction
of this common world, to create a space for hesitation regarding what it means to say ‘good.’”\(^{69}\) The “cosmos” of her cosmopolitics “refers to the unknown constituted by [the] multiple, divergent worlds and to the articulations of which they could eventually be capable.”\(^{70}\) Such a cosmopolitics cannot pre-assume what will count as “common” — whether, for instance, it may be “nature” along with “human nature,” the laws and discoveries of science, sovereign nations, “cultural differences,” or (on the other hand) gods, souls, ancestors, spirits, demons, or anything else that could be brought to the negotiating table.

Stengers’s call has been echoed and amplified by an array of theorists, of whom Bruno Latour has been the most influential. If Latour’s decades-long work studying the relations between science, technology, society, and modernity has had a dominant refrain, it is that we can no longer rely on the singular foundation of a “nature” that speaks to us through the unified voice of science — a “nature,” as John Law puts it, that is the “unique author of a single account” propping up a “reality that is independent, prior, singular, and definite.”\(^{71}\)

Instead, we must learn to live amidst a multiplicity of ways of knowing, ways of living, and ways of building worlds, a multiplicity in which the very foundations of our world may not even be recognized by others. One of these foundations for the “moderns” (which means for us, if we align with that world) is the one that sees “culture” and “nature” as radically opposed terms. For Latour, this dichotomy presumes two interlinked things: first, a “multiculturalism” for which culture is taken to differentiate us, one group from another, in ways that could be evaluated based on commonly accepted standards of human rights or goods; but, second, a “mononaturalism” that takes nature to be simply there, singular, lawful, and invariable. Science, in turn, is the

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\(^{70}\) Ibid., 994.

\(^{71}\) John Law, After Method: Mess in Social Science Research (New York: Routledge, 2004), 123.
social force that has been delegated with the power to reveal nature for us and to speak on its behalf.\footnote{Latour, \textit{Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy}, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).}

Latour rejects this division: nature, he argues, does not provide a bedrock of reality against which our activities can be measured, because each culture is always already enacted and embedded within a particular set of ecology-making processes. Each is always already no less than a “nature-culture.” And all such natures-cultures are both similar and different. They are similar in that they simultaneously construct humans, divinities and nonhumans. None of them inhabits a world of signs or symbols arbitrarily imposed on an external Nature known to us [westerners] alone. […] All of them sort out what will bear signs and what will not. If there is one thing we all do, it is surely that we construct both our human collectives and the nonhumans that surround them. In constituting their collectives, some mobilize ancestors, lions, fixed stars, and the coagulated blood of sacrifice; in constructing ours, we mobilize genetics, zoology, cosmology and hæmatology.\footnote{Latour, \textit{We Have Never Been Modern}, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 106.}

The key is that there is no privileged vantage point for sorting through these semiotically disconnected worlds. Coordinating some common understanding across the gaps requires not imposing one’s own categories, but working toward some form of “translation” and “diplomacy,” a process in which “everything takes effort, continuing effort.”\footnote{Law, \textit{After Method}, 131–32.}

How, if there are no pre-given grounds for adjudication, might we navigate between dramatically different interpretations of the world and the human place within it? Latour suggests beginning with a different set of questions than the usual ones. Rather than asking “who is right and who is wrong?” or,
more typically, “why do they persist in believing their wrong ideas?” he proposes such questions as: “What sort of people are they?” (People, after all, are products of formations in which personhood, subjecthood, of one kind or another, is recognized.) “What are the entities under which they assemble?” To what do they ascribe their assembly as such? “And how do they distribute the agencies making up their cosmos?”

Latour takes as a precondition that we live in perilous times, when scientists evoking a looming climate catastrophe are asked, “Why should we trust you any more than anyone else?” His inquiry is intended to answer this question in the only way that is admissible once the foundations are taken away. The answer is always: look to what they do. Look to how they make their world, and how we make ours. Compare on the basis of what is made, and what we might make together — through the mediations we might come up with in the diplomatic project that lies ahead of us all. Science, by this account, is not what it says it is; it is how it works. Much of Latour’s earlier work was devoted to showing precisely how carefully and sophisticatedly scientists enact their practices and how, in doing so (when they succeed), they build worlds that are robust and resilient.

In his 2013 Gifford Lectures, Latour refers to the cosmopolitical project that is ahead of us as an experiment in “demogenesis”: an attempt at creating a “people” and a “body politic” out of the many who confront each other in the wake of the Anthropocene. These people might include the human as well as the animate, the organic, the technological, the fantastic, and so many others — all those agents formerly called “objects” alongside those formerly called “subjects.” The great challenge for his project is this: How does one conduct diplomacy with things that do not speak, at least not in a language known to

the moderns? How can we envision a diplomacy — a messy and rambunctious “parliament” — that could translate the languages spoken by all the entities of the shadowy super-entity hesitantly being hailed “Gaia”? (More on her momentarily.)

The take-home point here is that once we abandon the notion of a nature that is fully outside culture, and of a culture that is fully separate from nature, we are left with the fact that all that there has ever been is different kinds of relations made between people (as long as there have been people) and the places, forces, gods, and other beings that are taken to make up the world. Humans have always been thickly entangled within this larger world: we have always been enworlded, enspaced, territorialized, and folded over with so many other others. Our relations to places and landscapes have always been morally imbued and ontologically loaded. No “nature” has been pure backdrop, pure “abstract space,” in Henri Lefebvre’s felicitous phrase — until someone came along to make it so and to enforce such an abstraction onto reality.76 That abstraction underpins the A/Cene. It is a colonial creation, and it is time for us to decolonize.

If our relationship to the world’s other agents has always been variable, it has also always been contractual insofar as those relationalities that “worked” required maintenance over time. The contracts of these natural-cultural collectives take their force from relations that are felt to be morally obligatory and that exceed its participants in time and in space. There is some sort of contract, entity, constellation of divinities, or web of understandings and patterned relationalities that continues beyond the time of our own being here. That is what makes them non-Anthropocenic.

At the very least, the cosmopolitical option is one that acknowledges that there are obligations at stake: that we are caught in a world riven with multiple obligations, whether to “the economy” and “infinite growth,” or to “the nation,” to some “revolution,” or to the ancestors and deities, the sacred waters

of South Dakota, the mountain hollers of Appalachia, or the *Ubuntu* or *Buen Vivir* of any particular natural-cultural collective. (And once we put it that way, is it not evident how few of us are ready to put our lives on the line for “the economy”?) There is some element of choice in these relations, but there is also always some element of *being chosen*: by our places, by our predicaments, by our gods.

**The subject and the subjectless**

Invoking the spectre of the sacred, of Gaia, of the divine and the ecological, and of the other figures I have stitched into my argumentative fabric (the relational, the pagan, the Buddhist) is bound to raise hackles with those concerned about the disappearance of the human subject. Relational philosophies have frequently been subjected to the criticism that any kind of relational “holism” is anathema to the ethical particularity that is the great gift of modernity, of liberalism, of the Christian West, or of some related historical protagonist.

In the debates over rival forms of speculative realism, object-oriented ontologists have made some variation of this argument (though the fault lines might be drawn a little differently, as when Timothy Morton argues on behalf of an “object-oriented Buddhism”). Where Harman, Morton, and others have defended the object, others have defended the human subject. Slavoj Žižek’s arguments are compelling in this regard, and are worth considering here for at least three additional reasons: because his psychoanalytical approach engages with an affective level of the political that other approaches fail to adequately consider; because of certain parallels between his Lacanian model of the psyche and the process-relational view I am proposing; and because of Žižek’s resonance in today’s anti-capitalist political left.

In a world of manifest injustice, Žižek has come to celebrate a Leninist decisiveness in political action, which he allies with a Pauline Christian love of “the act,” and which he sees as ineradicably linked to the possibility of subjectivity. In opposition to these, he has critiqued a long line of theoretical opponents and
ideological “ersatzes,” from complacent “liberal multiculturalism” to obsessive ecology, “New Age spiritualism,” “neo-paganism,” and “Western Buddhism.” To all of them he ascribes some version of an “indifference” or “noninvolvement,” which allegedly comes from their shared ideal of “absorption” in a cosmic “balance of the One-All,” a “balanced circuit of the universe” that, according to Žižek, Pauline Christianity and its political successor, Leninist revolutionism, throw off the rails. In particular, Žižek claims that “Western Buddhism” has established itself as “the hegemonic ideology of global capitalism.”

To understand his critique, we must start by understanding his own presuppositions. In tracing his “creative synthesis of German idealism and Lacanian psychoanalysis,” Adrian Johnston’s analysis in Žižek’s Ontology helps us immensely with this. (About Johnston’s book, Žižek himself has said that “While reading it, I often had the uncanny feeling of being confronted by a line of argumentation which fits better than my own texts what I am struggling to formulate — as if he is the original and I am a copy.”) Johnston articulates Žižek’s ontology as a form of “transcendental materialism” according to which “Cogito-like subjectivity ontogenetically emerges out of an originally corporeal condition as its anterior ground,” but “once generated, this sort of subjectivity thereafter remains irreducible to its material sources.” In other words, autonomy or subjectivity “immanently emerges” as an “excess or surplus” from out of a plurality of corporeal-material, pre-subjective existence. That foundation — which is “asubjective, heteronomous” and “libidinal-material” — includes conditions that make it possible for subjective autonomy to emerge. But once it has emerged, it “cannot be reinscribed back” within that “ontological register out of which it

79 Ibid., xxiv.
grew.” For better or worse, the genie of subjectivity, one might say, cannot be put back into the bottle. \textsuperscript{80}

All of this is to say that, for Žižek, we are not born as subjects, with anything like the “freedom” to act, but we become subjects and thereafter act within a socio-linguistic system that recognizes our subjectivity. From the moment we have done that, there is no going back. We are left, instead, with an irreparable “gap, a non-dialecticizable parallax split” that haunts our being and, at the same time, makes some measure of freedom possible. This freedom is both precious and, in an important sense, anti-systemic. It is eccentric. “Being free,” Johnston writes, “is a transitory event arising at exceptional moments when the historical, psychical, and biological run of things breaks down.” \textsuperscript{81}

The genesis of subjectivity, then, is material, but its essence is non-material, yet more than epiphenomenal.

A process-relationalist might ask in response to this: what can be more Deleuzian than this account of networked systems, productive organic-machinic assemblages out of which arise the capacity to act and, from one moment to another, to perpetually become? And what can be more Whiteheadian than the gap that opens up in the event of every moment that makes up the (processual) universe? But where Žižek and Lacan seem to limit the experience of subjectivity to the human, and Johnston to “exceptional moments” of humanity, Whitehead and Deleuze would extend it to all things—which in each of their systems are always events rather than object-things.

Moreover, what can be more Buddhist than the recognition that the “gap” that opens up in each moment, between each thought or mental impulse, can be penetrated through meditative practice precisely to free us from the fantasy images and objects and “things” we think are real, so as to make it possible to experience the fluidity of life with some measure of liberated equanimity?

\textsuperscript{80} Ibid., 271.
\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 286–87.
Let us explore this latter point of apparent convergence. Buddhism (for the most part) and Lacanianism both posit an emptiness at the center of the human subject, which that subject perpetually strives to fill. Lacan sees the psyche as built on an in-assimilable gap between the bodily-material substrate on which subjectivity is built and the subject itself. Buddhism sees the self as a relational construct with no essence, whose underlying reality is a flux of dependently-originative causal forces. Both traditions aim to help us face the emptiness or gap that is at our core, so that we can live with it rather than deflecting it into illusory and ultimately unsupportable fantasy-constructs — such as those of the ego (the subject, the “I”) and the objects that will ostensibly satisfy its desires, or various collective identity projects (ethnic, national, or other kinds) with their ideological props and scapegoats. And both posit that only by facing this gap directly can some kind of amelioration (salvation, or genuine love) be possible.

Žižek admits this commonality. In Less Than Nothing, he writes, “The only other school of thought that fully accepts the inexistence of the big Other is Buddhism.” Considering Buddhist ethics, he continues:

Does not Buddhism lead us to “traverse the fantasy”: overcoming the illusions on which our desires are based and confronting the void beneath each object of desire? Furthermore, psychoanalysis shares with Buddhism the insistence that there is no Self as a substantive agent of psychic life: […] the Self is the fetishized illusion of a substantial core of subjectivity where, in reality, there is nothing. This is why, for Buddhism, the point is not to discover one’s “true Self”; but to accept that there is no such thing, that the “Self” as such is an illusion, an imposture. […] Crucial to Buddhism is the reflexive change from the object to the thinker himself: first, we isolate the thing that bothers us, the cause of our suffering; then we change not the object but ourselves, the way we relate to (what appears to us as) the cause of our suffering […]. This shift involves great pain […] it is] the violent experience
of losing the ground under one’s feet, of being deprived of the most familiar stage of one’s being."82

But in the end, for Žižek, Buddhists “do not repair the damage; rather, [they] gain the insight into the illusory nature of that which appears to need repair.”83 The difference between Buddhism and psychoanalysis, he claims, is that

for Buddhism, after Enlightenment (or “traversing the fantasy”), the Wheel no longer turns, the subject de-subjectivizes itself and finds peace; for psychoanalysis, on the other hand, the wheel continues to turn, and this continued turning-of-the-wheel is the drive.84

The death drive, according to Freud, “is the tension which persists and insists beyond and against the nirvana principle.” Žižek calls Buddhists’ “nirvana principle” the “highest and most radical expression” of the “pleasure principle,” which psychoanalysis (according to Žižek) militates against. “Even if the object of desire is illusory,” he continues, “there is a real in this illusion: the object of desire in its positive content is vain, but not the place it occupies, the place of the Real; which is why there is more truth in the unconditional fidelity to one’s desire than in the resigned insight into the vanity of one’s striving.”85

This last passage is revealing: instead of recognizing “the vanity of one’s striving” and opting for inner peace, Žižek seeks an “unconditional fidelity to one’s desire.” That desire, for him, arises out of the tensions in the (Freudian) drives, generating the subject and making us human. Ironically, this “unconditional fidelity to one’s desire” sounds not so different from what some forms of Vajrayana Buddhism aspire to. In Vajrayana, what the practitioner aims for is not extinction in the blissful passivity

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83 Ibid., 130.
84 Ibid., 131.
85 Ibid., 132–33, emphasis added.
of nirvana, but the following of desire in order to unite with the deities that are its emanations — which, since those deities are themselves “empty,” means a union with Desire itself. Žižek dispenses with Vajrayana by caricaturing it as one of the most “ridiculously ritualized” religious forms, humorously comparing its invention of the prayer wheel with television’s canned laughter.

But the difference can be specified more precisely. In Žižek’s understanding, it is the empty subject that we need to retain. For Mahayana Buddhism (at least), it is emptiness itself, which is taken to be something like an open cognizance that is empty of all reifications, all stillings of the flow, yet which is irrepressible in its nature. (I’m drawing more on the Tibetan tradition of Dzogchen here than on other forms, but the general point holds for other strands of Mahayana Buddhist thought.) The difference, then, is this: what counts for Žižek is the subject at the point of his or her individual production; for Buddhists, it is subjectless subjectivity, or subjectivity at the point of its disappearance, its self-emptying.

Understanding this distinction requires asking not only what subjectivity is, but also what the nature of reality is. If reality is inert substance, mute matter, or mere existence without subjectivation, and if the human subject is the one thing that transcends mere matter, then there is nothing more significant than human subjectivity at the point of its origin. Žižek would in this case be quite right about what needs to be protected, defended, and cultivated: human subjectivity in its preciousness, and the individual human subject above all. The only alternative would be passivity (of the sort that Žižek ends up ascribing to Buddhism). But if reality — not just human but all reality — is the ongoing production of subjectless subjectivity, or subjectivation-objectivation, then subjectless subjectivity is always already active, not merely passive, and it is not something that belongs to anyone.

In this sense, Buddhist prayer wheels are not exactly identical to sitcom laugh tracks, but they operate on the same principle. Both acknowledge that the world is always already in affective-semiotic motion, and that we, moving beings, are affected on
a preconscious level by the in-motionness at work around us. With its mantras, prayer wheels, and other habit-making practices, Mahayana Buddhism attempts to shift that motion into a movement toward liberation. Sitcom laugh tracks, by contrast, attempt to shift that motion into pleasurable distraction. The goals are entirely different. If Žižek dislikes both equally, it is because he values willful subjectivity — the kind that speaks “I” into the void of its own creation — at the expense of the affective but subjectless subjectivity that a more processual ontology would ascribe to both humans and to the world.

Concluding his foray into Buddhism in Less Than Nothing, Žižek refers to a paradox, whose formal structure is that of the “double vacuum” of a Higgs Boson field. This double vacuum “appears in the guise of the irreducible gap between ethics (understood as the care of the self, as striving towards authentic being) and morality (understood as the care for others, responding to their call).” For Žižek, “the authenticity of the Self is taken to the extreme in Buddhist meditation, whose goal is precisely to enable the subject to overcome (or, rather, suspend) its Self and enter the vacuum of nirvana.”86 To this, a Buddhist might say: yes, perhaps this is part of Buddhism (though neither “overcoming” nor “suspension” sound quite right in a Buddhist context). But it is certainly not the whole of it, at least not in the Mahayana tradition where care for others — or for the liberation of others — is equally, if not supremely, important.

Žižek acknowledges that Buddhism has oscillated between a “minimal” and a “maximal” goal: the first, related more to Theravada Buddhism, is a “spiritual shift” that occurs “within,” while the second, Mahayana’s, is the more radical goal of liberating everything from suffering. But he concludes by pointing to the “irreducible gap between subjective authenticity and moral goodness (in the sense of social responsibility): the difficult thing to accept is that one can be totally authentic in overcoming one’s false Self and yet still commit horrible crimes — and vice versa, of course: one can be a caring subject, morally committed to the

86 Ibid., 134.
full, while existing in an inauthentic world of illusion with regard to oneself.” The “two vacuums,” he writes, “never coincide: in order to be fully engaged ethico-politically, it is necessary to exit the ‘inner peace’ of one’s subjective authenticity.”

In the end, Žižek’s critique is not so much a critique of Buddhism’s philosophical core as it is a critique of one of the tropes by which that philosophical core has so often been adumbrated: the trope of inner peace and happiness — the cessation of suffering and attainment of bliss through the elimination of ignorance. In its contrast, he poses the Judaeo-Christian ethic of external, traumatic “encounter,” of “the Fall” into the world, and into love. The virtue of his critique of Buddhism is in the value he places on suffering and on choice. Subjectivity is only possible because of our condition of separation, the very gap that underlies our suffering. Eliminating that gap, he argues, should not be the point of a spiritual or philosophical practice. What should be is recognizing that the gap is one we share with all manner of gapped, broken, suffering (because groundless yet ground-seeking) beings.

Analogously, a philosophy that values the arising of subjectivity out of the drives (or wherever subjectivity comes from) without recognizing the fundamental entanglement of those drives with everything else that lives, that moves, that suffers, that dies, is a philosophy that privileges will without offering a means for deciding how that will should act. Here is where Žižek’s ontology privileges freedom over solidarity — which, ironically, aligns him with political liberals and even libertarians. That is precisely why Žižek needs his Marxism: it provides him with an ethical foundation for action, and a goal wider than freedom itself: that of human solidarity. To the extent that it offers an understanding of our relations with all beings who suffer, Buddhism may be more inclusive in this respect. It provides a wider vision for justice and solidarity than Marxism, even at its humanistic best, has ever provided. But to the extent that both seek not inner peace but subjectless subjectivity, both are reach-

87 Ibid., 135.
ing out to the “beyond” at which genuine action becomes possible.

**Totality, or original hybridity?**

Žižek’s account of paganism and ecology take a similar tack. He sees both as embracing a cosmic-organic totality, which acts as an imposition on human fallibility and subjective freedom. To critique ecology, he latches onto the idea that ecology, or nature, serves as a kind of Big Other, which with its pattern of regular rhythms and homeostatic balances provides a reassurance that papers the gap that would otherwise tell us that we, and reality, are riven, torn open and fundamentally meaningless, lacking ultimately in any comforting balance and harmony.88

Here one could reply with a technical disagreement: the science of ecology has long abandoned the notion of homeostatic balance as a universal baseline for all ecological processes. Instead, it mixes cybernetic metaphors of homeostasis with others taken from the competitive individualism of Darwinian biology, the nonlinear stochastics and “chaotics” of complex systems theories, and the pragmatics of adaptive management.89 But it is not scientists that Žižek is most concerned with. In his argument’s favor, there have certainly been environmentalists who have pursued their cause as if its attainment would provide a “wholeness” and “plenitude” that they (delusorily) imagine will


close the Lacanian gap for them. A warning against totality—a reminder that we live in an open and fundamentally unknowable and uncontrollable universe—may in this sense be warranted.

All the same, environmental advocacy harbors a long history of writers and activists explicitly aiming to break open the comforting illusions of bourgeois social reality: asking their readers, for instance, to confront the mysteries of the universe rather than merely assume that we are comfortably ensconced in a transcendent social or moral-religious realm locating us humans well “above” and outside of nature. Environmental historians have often pointed to the history of human projections onto nature: as cosmic harmony, as goddess and mother, as “red in tooth and claw,” as cybernetic computer, and so on. The more informed response to this history of ideas is neither to fixate on one episode of it—such as the Disney “Lion King” mythology of nature as cosmic harmony, as Žižek sometimes does—nor to reject them all as “social constructions.” Rather, the nuanced response is to ask how and why these ideas have reflected and affected their social and ecological contexts and what that means for us today.

As for paganism, Žižek’s generalizations again get the better of him. Of course paganism, like any religious system, can be used to excuse the grossest violations of others’ rights. (Christianity has itself been no stranger to such abuses.) But paganism in its practice rarely presented the kind of fully systematized cosmic harmony Žižek is suggesting. The world of Greek and Roman religion presented a barely coherent landscape of energies, relations, and divine forces. The polytheism of the ancient Greeks, writes Robert Parker, was “indescribable”: “Gods overflowed like clothes from an over-filled drawer which no one felt obliged to tidy.” It can more reasonably be argued that polythe-

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91 Robert Parker, Polytheism and Society at Athens (Oxford University Press, 2005), 387.
istic systems are precisely not systems of monological “totality,” but that they represent something closer to an “originary hybridity”: a production of forces, variously anthropomorphized or not, at the many interfaces between humans and the extra-human world, whose plurality has always been syncretic and endlessly negotiable.

If pagan religion seems to be about a maintenance of systemic relations and mutual obligations between humans and their deities, then, the forms these relations take are neither universal nor unchanging. The generic principle of sacrifice, for instance, so seemingly widespread in those cultures labeled “pagan,” can best be thought of as a principle of mutual obligation, a systemicity of a sort characterized by a flowing back-and-forth of relational bonds and expectations. In a messianic Christian context, this back-and-forth systemicity does not disappear, but only becomes centralized and sublimated into the figure of the dying-and-resurrecting messiah (and that only where Marian and saintly cults have not predominated). Monotheistic religion has certainly had its bouts of “totality” and “purification.” Secular modernity may have attempted to slough off this sacrificial economy, but in the process merely enabled the other main narrative function of Christian eschatology: its messianic linearity, which became the myth of progress and Enlightenment (later supplemented by the Marxian myth of revolutionary salvation).

Paganisms today (where they are named as such) remain minority persuasions. While they sometimes aim to reconstruct ancient faiths, at least as often they follow the contours of a post-secular persuasion marked by the recognition that the human is not transcendent of nature, but is an intimate part of an open and emergent natural world.\textsuperscript{92}

By way of contrast with Žižek’s analysis, Jean-François Lyotard has written of a paganism of the borderlands, a place, as

Martin Jay describes it, “of endless negotiation between peoples, all in a kind of exile, a porous boundary through which different intensities clashed without resolution.” 93 Lyotard called his paganism “godless,” “without Olympus and without pantheon, without prudentia, without fear, without grace, without debt and hopeless.” 94 This paganism is “a name” for “the denomination of a situation in which one judges without criteria.” 95 As Daniel Smith puts it, Lyotard’s paganism reflects the “groundlessness” according to which humans “are constantly having to match wits with the fate that has been given them” by a “shifting plurality of gods who are themselves subject to persuasion and metamorphosis.” 96

To a modern eye, which means to one for whom belief in God is a private matter, the history of God in a western context includes his removal from the world to a place outside it, where he can safely remain as creator, but eclipsed by the processes that maintain that world. By contrast, to see the world as filled with gods — to epistemologically repaganize it — is to break down this barrier between deity and world, flooding it with the possibility of minor interventions everywhere. Paganism in this sense refers to the modes of being and practice — imaginal, ar-

95 Jean-François Lyotard, Just Gaming (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 16; and see Martin Jay, “Modern and Postmodern Paganism.” Lyotard was to later revise his stance and shift to an ethical position of “obligation.” In Peregrinations: Law, Form, Event (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), he admitted that “the polymorphic paganism of exploring and exploiting the whole range of intensive forms could easily be swept away into lawful permissiveness, including violence and terror” (15).
96 Among the more helpful and provocative accounts of what a contemporary polytheism might look like is Jordan Paper’s The Deities Are Many: A Polytheistic Theology (Albany: SUNY Press, 2005).
tistic, religious, philosophical, and scientific—that somehow, of their own accord, bleed out of the everyday relationalities and dependencies between people and earth. To use Bruno Latour’s terminology, such a post-secular paganism would reflect the “polynaturalism” of a world that has “never been modern,” never having been purified into a single cosmic governmental-ity. Rather, it is always already contaminated by an original hy-
bridity, where image and icon, god and person, community and shadow are and have always been interpenetrated in multiple ways.

**Image, archive, cloud: on the ecology of images**

All this talk of images makes it difficult to avoid the acknow-
edgment that we live today in a world of images run amok. Or at least in a sea of images whose thickness and generativity is beyond anything the Earth has seen before. What, if any, is the qualitative distinction between those images and the ones that might (or do) serve as our gods?

Consider the following six trajectories.

1. More and more people are being born today, and more and more of them live out a full life. About one in ten people who have ever lived are alive today. (The estimates range from 6.5% to over 12% depending on the weight given to various demographic factors.) With birth rates exceeding death rates, that percentage is increasing.

2. More and more of these people are growing up with recording technologies—image and sound recording tools that preserve something of the present for the future. It is likely that over one-third of humanity now owns digital cameras.

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Facebook users upload over 350 million photos per day to the site, which already includes some 300 billion, more than 15,000 times larger than the Library of Congress. Every two minutes we snap as many photos as the whole of humanity took in the 1800s; and one in ten photos we have were taken in the past twelve months.\(^98\) YouTube and its siblings provide an ever-expanding archive of cinematic material uploaded, downloaded, re-edited, cross-referenced, spoofed, and endlessly commented upon. While some of these images are added to our archive by individuals for their individual and collective consumption and narrative construction, others are added by state or private organizations with an eye for monitoring, surveilling, managing, predicting, marketing, or prognosticating.

3. As images recording the present are preserved, they become past. At the same time, what is past becomes archived and opened to the present. Film reels, photographic imagery, and other productions are being added to the archive of what is digitally viewable, storable, sharable, and remixable. Technologies of retrieval — from digitization software and sampling technologies to historical, archaeological, detective, and forensics tools of various kinds — enable an ever deeper digging into and unlocking of the past. The “datability” of the past — of the earth as fossil repository and echo chamber — adds to the archive of images, sounds, signs, and documents that can be dredged up and set into motion.

With image and sound technologies, the past is now visible into the era of reproducible images and the era that preceded it: \(\text{BP (Before the Photograph)}\) and \(\text{AF (Anno Foto-}\)

grafici, the Year of Our Lord Photograph). One day we may count backwards to the year 1825, which will be the new Year Zero, when the first permanent photograph was produced by Joseph Nicéphore Niépce in Chalon-sur-Saône, France. Sound technologies came later, and touch and smell reproduction remain in their infancy. But even these demarcations in time are malleable. Recreations of the past, stillings of moments intended for preservation as teaching tools, sacred objects, memory emblems, political symbols, personal mementos— these have been with us at least since the cave walls were painted at Lascaux and Chauvet.

4. Interactive media, from Google Glass (whatever happened to it?) to multiuser video games to increasingly lifelike virtual worlds, render data space more immersive, more embodied, and at the same time more fluid. Even if many of the audio and visual recordings on YouTube and Vimeo are moments found in the “real world”— found objects in a discoverable reality— the default mode of cinematic imaging is no longer the mimetic representation and photo-indexical recording of reality. Rather, it is once again, as it was in its beginning (125 years ago or so), a matter of animation, the graphic manipulation of images. The growing archive of images and sounds becomes a database available for manipulation for a multitude of purposes— aesthetic, economic, political, or religious.

5. Then there is the storage of all of that. Every piece of data is material, and every object that stores, reads, produces, reproduces, manages, recombines, and even deletes data is also material. These entities are premised on an infrastructure by which materials like copper, lead, silver, tin, chromium, barium, silicon, mercury, beryllium, arsenic, and a variety of petrochemicals and otherwise hazardous compounds, are mined, smelted, refined, manufactured, transported, and disposed of, by oil rig, airplane, land and sea cable, human hand and lung, and so on— with handling and exposure extend-
ed all along the way. E-waste has been the fastest growing waste stream for years. Digital storage capacity overtook analog storage capacity in 2002, and within five years of that date, 94% of storage was already digital. As of 2011, humanity stored some 300 exabytes of information — that is, 300 followed by 18 zeroes. Data disks, however, degrade and must be replaced; and with the emergence of new formats, there is a need for format conversion and migration, which means new storage replacing old storage. But old formats do not go away; they remain as relic and waste, a material ghost whose materiality never dissipates.

6. Finally, there is the cloud. Cloud computing is the frontier of the personal computing industry and, in a certain sense, marks its end — the end of the personal and the triumph of the nodal. By definition, the Internet is a distributed system: it links billions of devices into a network of networks that share data, images, and documents across the world. The infrastructure it requires is immense. In theory, cloud computing replaces local storage and software with storage and management of files in distant data centers or “server farms.” In practice, it often supplements the former with the latter as a means of adding security to data files, which instead of being saved in one place — on a home computer or hard drive — may be saved in several places to ensure ready


access by home computer, smart phone, tablet, and an array of wireless devices. Cloud computing contributes to the perception that digital media “dematerialize” our relations with the earth, but any image or data requires materiality for its existence. As Maxwell and Miller put it, “The metaphor of a natural, ephemeral cloud belies the dirty reality of coal-fired energy that feeds most data centers around the world.”

 Debates over the sustainability of cloud computing revolve around the possibility of its shifting from fossil fuels to renewable energy sources, and toward a smart grid that accounts for how much data one is using, through what operations, and so on. To date, data centers’ energy usage pales in comparison with that of transportation technologies (about 2% to about 25%), which shows, as Google’s Urs Hölzle has argued, that it takes less energy to ship electrons than atoms. But even as data storage moves to the cloud, 15% of global residential energy is spent on powering domestic digital technology. Even so, a smart-grid style accounting of the cloud would limit its “rematerialization” to the arithmetical and statistical. Inherent in the expanding archive of digital information, images, texts, audio and video recordings, is a slipperiness where data objects cannot be pinned down. They are not exactly here, where I am accessing them, nor there, on a server somewhere in Wyoming or Illinois or Central Australia; they are in between, mobile, in the rush of semiosis. As the amount of data each of us produces increases, and as more of it gets stored in multiple data servers, available upon request in the ever more ubiquitous datasphere, so does the need for data security measures that also require secure storage and accessibility.

 As the archive of images and sounds continues to grow, and as it “dematerializes” — that is, as it is globalized into a cloud

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that is fuzzy in its spatial parameters, but is as thoroughly material as anything — boundaries distinguishing the personal from the public are deterritorialized into a multitude of spaces, traces, databanks, strata, and flows. Access to these spaces and databanks — and, more importantly, the capacity for management and manipulation of the data they hold — becomes the prize among a competing array of local and global players. With this de- and re-territorialization, the struggle to re-establish a democratic commons takes on new forms.

Ultimately, such struggle is part and parcel of every de- and re-territorialization the planet has seen. Image technologies bear witness to this history. As Nadia Bozak delineates in The Cinematic Footprint, cinema, like photography, has always been ecologically embedded. It depends on a powerful combination of at least two forms of solar energy: the capture of reflected solar light, and the indirect products of that energy that have been stored and compounded over millennia in the form of fossil fuels.¹⁰³ As Henri Bergson might have put it, cinematic images are a form of captured, organized, and released light-heat-energy-movement. In this, they take what is common to all of us — all living substances — and reorganize it in the crafting of meaningful worlds. To make cinema is to craft worlds from worlds, and in doing so, to bear an obligation to the light, heat, and energy used in their making.

All life on this planet is the product of one or another permutation of the interaction between energy originating from the sun (light and heat) and the surface of the Earth that it strikes. Everything we know is an evolved permutation of that endlessly differentiating process. Modern image technologies, analog or digital, are products of a certain political ecology: they arose alongside the industrialization of material production, an unleashing of productive capacities that had been stored on or beneath the surface of this planet for millennia. The digitalization of the image (still or moving, or some combination of the two) is

not of a matter of post-industrialization, but merely of the digital, post-Fordist globalization of that same political ecology. It is the latest phase of the development of the bio-socio-technical apparatus that has undergirded industrialization. Image technologies are part and parcel of a world that has become faster, more mobile and fluid, and more diversely integrated—economically, politically, and culturally—even as its tensions have become intensified and globalized.

**Time of the image**

If we live in a world whose outer circumference has become thickened with the production of millions of images, it is important to realize that these images are not merely visual: they are bits or “moments” of “world,” which are produced, reproduced, and sent reeling into an ocean already thick with recombinant imagery. And these moments of world are not individual images so much as they are affective currents.

Take music videos. This form packs in, often with utmost intensity, the animate mobility of the audiovisual image: the affective spectacle of a particular set of motions, speeds, sounds, glimpses, gazes, sensations, feelings; the cutting together of one thing into another, sutured by rhythm and song, to create some sense of a narrative arc, or at least of movement or tension between the kinds of structuring oppositions that make narrative possible; and the semiotic openness by which what would normally stand on its own—a song or musical piece—becomes overlaid by and adjoined to other things entirely. One might argue that music videos reduce the interpretive openness of a piece of music by locking it into a series of visual and narrative reference points. But every such reduction is also a transformation that creates new possibilities for interpretation. The images of a music video, propelled by its music, are intended to stay with viewers, and because most music videos are under five minutes in length, those images are carefully chosen, with little digression from their basic sense. Their external reference points may be focused, more than anything else, on the production of the
artist’s persona, such that the viewer might be expected to say something like “This is the best thing she’s done yet!” — where she may be Lady Gaga, Beyoncé, Rihanna, Adele, or Katy Perry. But this artist’s persona is always implicated in broader cultural relations, within which fan responses find their meanings and chart their affective paths through the world. At their most effective, music videos elicit a deeply affective charge, a frisson or wave intended to carry a viewer somewhere, both over the satisfactory burst of duration that constitutes the video itself and well beyond it afterward.

Much the same could be said of any video that goes viral on the Internet. This is the same whether they are “found” or “spontaneous” videos — random shots of life that happened to be caught on camera — or carefully planned and orchestrated works of budding video auteurs. In the first category, one finds, for instance, the video shot by a Chinese security camera showing a two-year-old girl being hit and run over by a truck, followed by several passersby ignoring her — a video that elicited a round of anguished soul-searching, blame seeking, and recriminations among Chinese citizens. The clip itself was short, no longer than the original film reels of the Lumière brothers, and just as silent, but it became a live and mobile moment, a moving episode, an event that captured and transmitted an intensity of feeling for its viewers.

Also in this category one might include the images from the undersea “Spillcam” that brought the Deepwater Horizon oil spill seeping eerily into thousands of viewers’ bedrooms in the summer of 2010, or the many YouTube videos of the massed movement of starling murmurations (as the formations are called), or of cute or bizarre animal encounters — brief cinematic outtakes from a trans-human world that delights viewers irrespective of any extinction crisis we might collectively be responsible for.

Taken collectively, cinematic imagery in the digital age presents a universe whose outer circumference is always expanding. That circumference is not bounded; it is open, with new works being added like thoughts and exhalations of a cinematic
humanity. And within that circumference, the dots that connect it are no longer singular, bounded units so much as they are fluid bursts—more like bacteria that share genetic information across boundaries, or rhizomes that connect with others in ever-widening webs, than like sedentary organisms that take root and bear fruit in a single plot of soil. The moving images shared on YouTube and other social media mix with the reports of cable television and other forms of reportage to provide a staged running commentary about the world that, in turn, builds and binds our world. By the minute, they are adding new vectors of transmission on which future worlds might be borne if only the creative advance—the reach toward a new intensity of beauty, relationality, and meaning—was there.

Whether this situation strikes us as fortunate or not, it is here where experimentation can occur for carving out spaces in which the A/Cene could be challenged.

**Of gods and the eyes of the world**

Filmmaker Werner Herzog has argued that while “destruction of the environment” is an “enormous danger,” “the lack of adequate imagery is a danger of the same magnitude.” “If we do not develop adequate images,” he warns, “we will die out like dinosaurs.”

If we define images as broadly as a pansemiotic, process-relational ontology suggests, then Herzog’s claim is both trivial and comprehensive. It is trivial in that we will die out, after all, like dinosaurs, and perhaps much quicker than they did. It is comprehensive in that it is precisely our capacity to develop adequate images that will define the future of our worlds. If moving images are not just things that we see, but ways of seeing that draw us in and take us places, and if we ourselves are made of such drawings-in and takings-places, then the play of such drawings, takings, goings, movings, and becomings constitutes

the universe. And then it is fitting to consider our most powerful moving images as the “gods” that carry us across the gaps of a folded, bumpy, fraught, and turbulent universe.

Countenancing gods may seem retrograde and contrary to the democratic and humanistic goals many of us harbor. But gods have more to do with democracy’s origins than is evident at first blush. The earliest examples of democratic public assembly including those in ancient Athens, the Hellenistic city-states, and republican Rome, did not separate the political from the religious, artistic, scientific, legal, or other domains. The Greek political world, as Nancy Evans puts it, “was governed by civic rites.” Every Greek city “relied on countless religious practices in every aspect of its daily functioning. Citizens stood not only in political and social relationship to each other but also in religious and cultic relationship to each other, to their children and ancestors, and to the city’s gods.”

Assuming the category of gods to be not yet exhausted is something that a post-secular world may need to do. In any case, we should define that category liberally, to include spirits, angels, prophets, saints, ancestors, descendants, culture heroes, tricksters, and many other non-human or para-human agencies—“meta-personal” powers, as Marshall Sahlins calls them, to which people defer, which they attend and honor, with which they maintain relational compacts, and which they are generally loath to give up. They may or may not be human constructs, but they are always also more than that, and it is that “more than” that largely defines them. Gods in this sense can be male or female, neither or both, human-like or utterly other than hu-

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105 Nancy Evans, Civic Rites: Democracy and Religion in Ancient Athens (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 5.
106 I prefer “para-human” to “metahuman,” the term Sahlins employs in his important recent piece on “The Original Political Society,” Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory 7, no. 2 (2017). “Para-” suggests something similar but different, “beside” or “near” to the human. “Meta-” suggests something “later,” “beyond,” or of a different order to the human. Each has its virtues, but I prefer to leave the ontological ordering ambiguous. That said, “meta-personal” works well. And see Paper’s The Deities Are Many for a well argued case on behalf of a theology of such meta-persons.
man, and they can be something discovered along the way, not pre-existing history but elaborated alongside it in the historical unfoldment of a people, a *demos*.

But to the extent that there exists “a people” — and it is always risky to define such a group — that people will have its gods. And when there are multiple and overlapping configurations of such *demoi* — organized in families, clans, moieties, batallions, neighborhoods, cities, tribes, nations, gangs, political parties, sports teams, secret societies, and other formations — they will be engaged with multiple and overlapping configurations of divinities, spirits, or ancestral and other powers.

We can see such configurations in ancient Greece, Rome, and Egypt, and endless variations of them in indigenous and tribal societies. They are among us today as well, in the bumpy and multifaceted religious landscapes of East and South Asia, Africa, and South America, and in Catholic and Orthodox christianities to the extent that that monotheistic faith has allowed its polymorphous impulses to thrive. To a visitor unprepared for it (as I was on a recent visit), the presence of altars, shrines, and temples across the urban and rural landscapes of a country like contemporary Taiwan is overwhelming and somewhat perplexing. (One expects it more in India, Bali, or Thailand.)

It is not necessary to argue that every form of social organization is a religion and that its symbols are deities; or that religion is exclusively social in a Durkheimian sense. But it is worth considering that to the extent that social forms maintain allegiance, it is through mediators that act something like gods — that sometimes are explicitly that, but more often are something a little godlike, a little humanlike, and more than a little mysterious.

Continuing this speculative exercise, we might say that gods have always been the ones who see us and in whose presence we justify our existence. As Diana Eck writes in her study of the divine image in India, the “single most common and significant element” of religious practice in India is *darśan, or darśana*, the “seeing” of the divine image which is simultaneously a meeting
of gazes, a seeing and being seen through the mediator of the divine image.¹⁰⁷

Accounting for such divinities has been one of the many goals of Bruno Latour’s ambitious *Modes of Existence* project, a collaborative and international scholarly-cum-artistic endeavor that aimed to develop a language that could help bring diplomacy to the gapped and fractured worlds of a “multinatural” humanity. In his monograph initiating the project, Latour divided up the powers of the godlike into “beings of presence” and “beings of metamorphosis.” The first are recognizably religious, forces which initiate conversion or salvation in us, but who are not subject to transaction, while the second are psychologically dynamic and centrifugal in their effects. This distinction may betray Latour’s own Christian assumption that some forces (“divinities,” which “bear psyches”¹⁰⁸) take us out of ourselves, to some unspecified elsewhere, while others (“gods”) bring us back to ourselves, to the fundamental withness of being with others, here, now, not in chronological time but in eternal, kairotic time.¹⁰⁹ (Latour may share a Christian bias with Charles Taylor, but he insists precisely on the kind of God who is closer to us than we ourselves, not the kind seemingly preferred by Taylor, who is transcendent of ourselves and of nature.) In times when we may need to be brought back to a new and different sense of ourselves, our community, and our Earth, this distinction between beings of metamorphosis and beings of presence may not hold up very well: they all take us out of ourselves and into ourselves, for the movement “out” is the movement that shapes the next subject in the sequence.

In any case, together these beings would mediate the relationship between psyche, earth, and cosmos, where the bounded, modern, liberal “subject” is rendered open and permeable to the passages of elemental winds and divine circulations. What

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¹⁰⁹ Ibid., chs. 7 and 11.
would such beings see if they were to look at us? What, for that matter, does the world see when it looks back at us? (This may or may not be the same question.)

The first thing to say in response, of course, is that in the planetary context there most certainly is no “us” yet. Humanity as a collective agent does not yet exist; and whether it ever will is an open question. In our global world, there is no single people, no demos. The demos of a reassembled democracy remains to be constituted. Nor, then, is there any unified compact of earth, sky, gods, and mortals, as Martin Heidegger famously called for. But it is apposite to ask whether it is possible for a demos to emerge without the appropriate gods — gods who would look back at that people and offer it an opportunity to cultivate the capacity to see themselves as they appear in eternity’s eyes. That eternity, of course, is the same one that will bury that demos, along with the Anthropos that masquerades as one today.

Paul Klee’s 1920 ink, chalk, and watercolor drawing “Angels Novus” (pictured as the frontispiece of this book) presents a suggestive model here. As related earlier, Walter Benjamin took it to represent the “angel of history,” with his face “turned toward the past” and seeing “one single catastrophe” piling “wreckage upon wreckage” at his feet. “The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed.” Benjamin’s reading was his own, a wartime reading of a relatively unknown (at the time) artwork from a previous wartime. We could equally choose to see the angel as facing not the wreckage of the past, but us as we view the wreckage of the present building up around us, or the wreckage of a future we might, in some measure, avert.

Of the fifty or so paintings of angels produced by the Swiss-born Klee, most of them in his last few years of life, this early one remains the one that most directly faces us, the viewer. It gazes less at us than into us. This gaze that discomforts us — what does it see, in the Era of the Human?
In Sergei Loznitsa’s remarkable 2016 film *Austerlitz*, the eye of the camera plays the role of such an unseen angel. What it sees is visitors to the Sachsenhausen and Dachau concentration camps — Holocaust tourists, in effect. Loznitsa sets up his camera in front of the crowds to give us several-minute long blocks of time watching the visitors arrive and move through the camps, with tour guides, listening devices, or without. Loznitsa’s ethical challenge here is: how to show us the Event of the death camps today, three-quarters of a century after they were used for the machinery of mass slaughter? How to lead us into it, without providing the decades of narrative that have become customary to it, but which have lost their potency? His answer is: by not showing us that machinery at all, but instead, by showing *us* — today’s viewers and visitors — and letting us lead ourselves into it.

“We” are, of course, not we, for as long as we maintain the distance afforded by the viewer’s irony — we, viewers, on this side of the screen; they, the tourists, on the other. But that distance, which is what gives us the sense that we are superior to them, cannot be maintained indefinitely, and this is our viewerly

challenge. If it— the world, the dead, the death camp victims, the Angel of History, Time itself— could look back at us, this is what it would see today: these faces of curious, T-shirted, camera-toting onlookers and selfie-takers. The materiality of a tourist mass making its way across the viewscape of death. Looking, snapping photos, eating, looking, moving, chatting, listening (to a hand-held device), looking some more. Advertising a bodyscape of T-shirt logos, brands, and slogans that identify us as incorporated into the symbolic order of our society.

Are not the death camp victims, and the death camps themselves, the ancestral deities to whom the visitors pay their respects, haltingly, haphazardly, not quite knowing how? Can they, can we, learn to do that better? The film, in its open-endedness, suggests that perhaps we can.

What I am trying to suggest is that there is a need for divinities, for angels, or for ancestors and descendants to serve as the eyes and faces by which we see ourselves. Those gods and descendants exist, circulating spectrally at the peripheries of our worlds. Sometimes they are more human than ourselves. What does not yet exist is the People that can account for its own collective action on this earth. If and when such a People comes into being— the “new earth” and the “people to come” that Deleuze and Guattari heralded, in their final co-authored volume¹¹— will it look anything like us? And will it not include a range of intermediate beings, angelic or godlike ones that help us deal with the more elusive tricksters on which our planetary future inescapably rests?

**Skin of the living**

One of the names of the deities being invoked into presence today is that of Gaia. First named by novelist William Golding to denote his neighbor’s, James Lovelock’s, theory of a quasi-

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unified system of planetary biogeochemical processes, Gaia’s icons have proliferated into numerous scientific, popular, and para-religious forms.

Bruce Clarke describes the scientific majority view on Lovelock’s hypothesized Gaia as denoting “an Earth system with a panoply of open and closed loops, circular feedbacks interconnecting biotic and abiotic systems into an elastic but coherent consortium.”¹¹² He qualifies this “consortium” as “heterogeneous,” “disunified,” and “metabiotic” — meaning that it is emergent from “the systemic coupling of living operations with the abiotic dynamics of their cosmic, solar, and Earthly elements.”¹¹³ As far as the science goes (and it’s been shown to be a fruitful theory, if hardly accepted so far by anything approaching a consensus), so far, so good.

Isabelle Stengers tweaks this Gaia in the direction of something a little different — not a Gaia that is the Earth-sized goddess of New Age and pagan religiosity (which she is well aware of), but a Gaia that is “the name of an unprecedented or forgotten form of transcendence: a transcendence deprived of the noble qualities that would allow it to be invoked as an arbiter, guarantor, or resource.” This Gaia is “a ticklish assemblage of forces that are indifferent to our reasons and our projects.”¹¹⁴

This indifferent but ticklish assemblage responds, unfeelingly, to our activities. And yet she is one whose responses we need to figure into our calculations — which is something that, to be effective, will need to be done feelingly. How, then, to do that?

The short answer is: experimentally, through trial and error. Ideas are not enough, and nor are images. As Jane Bennett writes in Vibrant Matter, “We need not only to invent or reinvoke concepts like conatus, actant, assemblage, small agency, operator, disruption, and the like” — I would add Gaia, gods,

¹¹³ Ibid., 18, 22; and see Michael Ruse’s The Gaia Hypothesis: Science on a Pagan Planet (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).
the posthuman, cosmopolitics, the parliament of things, and all the rest. We need also “to devise new procedures, technologies, and regimes of perception that enable us to consult nonhumans more closely, or to listen and respond more carefully to their outbreaks, objections, testimonies, and propositions.”

The first step, in any case, is to retrain our perception so that we could learn to hear those outbreaks, objections, testimonies, and propositions. Bennett suggests one “everyday tactic” by which to begin doing that, a method that she associates with Charles Darwin’s practice of allow himself to “anthropomorphize, to relax into resemblances discerned across ontological divides.” As examples she offers: “you (mis)take the wind outside at night for your father’s wheezy breathing in the next room; you get up too fast and see stars; a plastic topographical map reminds you of the veins on the back of your hand; the rhythm of the cicadas reminds you of the wailing of an infant; the falling stone seems to express a conative desire to persevere.”

There is a playfulness and gentleness here, a relaxing into the folds of a larger, livelier world, that seems at odds with any injunction to pay heed to the stern-faced gods of some new dispensation. Bennett reminds us that there is pleasure to be gained in a re-entry into the world of the living. There is tenderness to be found in the folds of a world of overlapping bodies, once the shadow of the Anthros dissipates into the leafy textures of a half-lit, half-shadowy world with its soft embraces. That is where, amidst the wind outside and the rhythms of the cicadas, we might come to hear the outbreaks, testimonies, and other propositions of our suitors.

In a piece on the cosmology of Whitehead, James Hillman addresses this question of the intelligibility of the world and how to regain it. All things, he argues, “are inherently intelligible”; their intelligibility is “given with the shapes or physiognomy of the world which is afforded directly to our sensate im-

116 Ibid., 120.
aginations, to us as animals.” Why, then, “do we feel lost, behind a dark glass, disoriented?” Hillman asserts that it is our Lockean theory of perception that has removed “the emotional face of things.” Hillman is referring here to John Locke’s carving up of nature into its mathematically measurable “primary qualities” and the “secondary qualities” that are byproducts of perception — a “bifurcation of nature” that Whitehead spent his last twenty-five years attempting to overcome.

Theories of how things went wrong inevitably mislead, but the point for Hillman, and by extension for Whitehead, is that it is a matter of perception to correct this: “Seeing the face of the Gods in things means noticing qualities as primary and speaking in a richly qualified language. Adjectives before nouns.” For Hillman, it is in paying attention to the sensually perceptible qualities of the world that we can recover an “aesthetic cosmology” in which human beings would be “resituated” within “a world ensouled.”

**Sacrifice zones, Chernobyl, and the post-human**

The place of the gods, from which they would gaze down upon us, has in the past been the scene of sacrifice. The only details to be determined might typically be: what is to be sacrificed, how, when, and to whom?

Two linked but differently inflected histories of modern sacrifice could be instructive here. The first national parks were created in part with the intent to “save” nonhuman Nature from us, to honor and protect it as a relic of an earlier time. These places, in effect, sacrificed the instrumental or commodity value of these lands for their perceived intrinsic, ecological, or even spiritual values. That America’s first national parks were sacrificed at the altar of the nation — as part of America’s effort to be-

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118 Ibid.
come a respectable nation among other nations, one that lacked cathedrals but made up for it in “nature’s cathedrals” — is simply reflective of the fact that the nation itself was the prime deity of the young American becoming-nation. (And that its indigenous inhabitants and their worlds were also sacrificed was an unstated precondition.)

At a global level, UNESCO’s world heritage sites and biosphere reserves have in turn sacrificed instrumental uses for the sake, and at the altar, of a more global concept of heritage, patrimony, legacy, ancestrality, and by implication, futurity — the future of a world and an Earth imagined to be held in common by all humanity living and to come. Insofar as it preserves the nonhuman world from the hands of those who would destroy it (and often its effects are more complicated), this first form of sacrifice could be thought of as a form of self-sacrifice.

The second form of sacrifice is less gratifying to ponder, and its victims are still among us all around. In 1972, the US National Academy of Sciences recommended that the Four Corners Area of the US Southwest, primarily populated by Native American tribes and subjected to decades of uranium and other forms of mining, be designated a “National Sacrifice Area.” Industrial technologies have since produced hundreds of scars on the landscape and imposed sacrifice on many communities, who have been forced to relocate or simply left to suffer the consequences.

In a time of climate crisis, much of the world is becoming an ecological sacrifice zone. And in times of Anthropocenic crisis, one might suggest that a summons, a call to prayer, is being issued by these zones of sacrifice, and by the victims of sacrifice — calling upon us to sacrifice of ourselves at the altar of a larger Earth community whose membership is not yet known and whose contours not yet shaped.

The Chernobyl Zone offers a suggestive model here. When reactor number four of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in northern Ukraine exploded on the night of April 26, 1986, it launched a series of events that was to dramatically affect the lives of hundreds of thousands of Soviet citizens, along with a
vast geography of living organisms and ecological relations. The accident qualifies as an Event, or hyper-event — an event that triggered chain reactions, which in turn rearranged agential relations operating on multiple spatial and temporal scales.

A few of the ways it did this are evident to anyone who has studied the details.¹¹⁹ More than any other single event, the Chernobyl catastrophe and its aftermath — including a near-total state-wide news blackout about the extent of the event for a full eighteen days — served to sunder the emotional commitments that held together the Soviet Union. It not only tolled a final death-knell to the “sputnik religion” that had guided many Soviet scientists’ commitments to the state-celebrated marriage of technology and socialism,¹²⁰ but it also unleashed popular forces

that had begun to boil during the economic stagnation of the late Brezhnev, Andropov, Chernenko, and Gorbachev eras. The environmental movements that resulted paved the way, in turn, for the emergence of republican independence movements, until the Union could no longer hold together. For Ukraine, in turn, Chernobyl’s legacy provided a set of narrative resources—both about Ukraine’s historical victimhood and about its long-denied sovereignty—that served as powerful impetus for that country’s herky-jerk dance away from its “elder brother” Russia and toward “Europeanization,” both in the overwhelming initial vote for independence in 1991 and in the partial if not entirely successful revolutions of 2004 and 2014.

On a more global scale, the accident, which unleashed the largest release of radioactive contamination in human history, helped propel humanity into a “global risk culture,” as Ulrich Beck designated it, characterized by deep uncertainty, instability, and disparity in social groups’ capacities to avoid or absorb risk.121 Like similar events, the accident remains a harbinger of a more global ecological collapse that remains ever virtual, hovering on the horizon, yet which is manifested in countless data points connecting the impacts of industrial activities—the production of pollutants, toxins, and hazardous wastes affecting terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems, climate systems, and social systems, and together resulting in a sense of the future’s precarity and uncertainty. The full impact of the Chernobyl accident remains hotly debated, with competing reports claiming wildly varying tolls of excess cancers and related fatalities.122

But it is what transpired in the Zone of Exclusion, or Zone of Alienation (Zona Vidchuzhennya), that is most evocative of the Event’s otherness. Depopulated of its human residents after the accident, the area known as the 30-kilometer Zone (while not exactly 30 km in diameter, it totals approximately 1000 square miles within the territory of Ukraine) includes the former city of Pripyat, a handful of smaller towns (including Chernobyl), and over a hundred now empty villages.

Over the years, several hundred of the resettled villagers, generally elderly, have elected to come back and effectively squat on their land. Others have come to loot: for home appliances, carpets, metals, cultural-historical artifacts, jewelry, and anything else of potential value on any market.

Still others have come to “stalk” the Zone. The latter term is taken from Andrei Tarkovsky’s 1979 film Stalker and the science-fiction novel, A Roadside Picnic, on which it was based, about an anomalous Zone (created, in the novel, by extraterrestrial debris) that is cordoned off behind an army-patrolled border, with travel into it prohibited. Those who do lead unsanctioned tours into the Zone are called “stalkers.” As an apparently uninhabitable Zone, the Chernobyl Zone has attracted hundreds, and perhaps a few thousand, such stalkers over the years. The Zone invites curiosity and even a kind of utopian aspiration. It has more recently become a zone of “dark” or “doom tourism,” with some 15,000 to 20,000 visitors a year touring it since tours were legalized in 2011. Then there are the gamers — avid enthusiasts of the S.T.A.L.K.E.R. video games (S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl, Call of Pripyat, and Clear Sky), in which players “battle zombies, mutant animals, and other improbable foes in a hyper-sensationalized contaminated ‘zone of alienation’.” “Imagine Chernobyl’s absolute worst possible effects,” Sarah Phillips

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writes, “multiply by ten, add steroids, bring on the Kalashnikovs, and you have S.T.A.L.K.E.R.”

Finally, there is the tremendous ecological bounce-back that has transpired in the exclusion zone ever since most of the humans left it. As Mary Mycio wrote in *Wormwood Forest: A Natural History of Chernobyl*, the Chernobyl zone has become “a vast and beautiful wilderness of forests and wetlands that are gradually consuming the remains of towns and villages” and “teeming with moose, deer, wild boars and some 250 species of birds,” with wolves seen in broad daylight, wild Przewalski horses reintroduced and thriving, and even endangered lynx making a comeback.125

The Zone has thus become a zone of presence and absence: the presence of forces unleashed by industrial calamity; the absence of the very causes of those forces — the human and industrial activities that precipitated them, except as ruins, memories, and odd remainders and bizarre outliers. Most interesting is that the abandoned city of Pripyat, once a Soviet “model nuclear city,” has now become the model *post*-human city, featuring as a stand-in for the post-apocalypse, or for the simple idea of the disappearance of humanity, in numerous media projects including National Geographic’s *Aftermath: Population Zero*, History Channel’s *Life After People*, and the book that inspired both of these, Alan Weisman’s *The World Without Us*, and in fictionalized dramatizations like the post-nuclear horror flicks *Chernobyl Diaries* and the *Return of the Living Dead* series.126

The trope of post-humanity situates the Event of Chernobyl into the narrative of the Anthropocene and what would follow it. There are four main variations of this narrative, which date it back, respectively, to the agricultural revolution, the demographic collapse in the Americas following the Columbian encounter, the Industrial Revolution, and to the so-called “great acceleration” of the mid-20th century, with its atom bombs, petrochemicals, fertilizers, and other novel substances disseminating rapidly into the Earth’s biosphere, hydrosphere, and lithosphere. Of these, Chernobyl most obviously fits the fourth variation, its release of radioactive isotopes being the single largest in history. Michael Marder writes in *Chernobyl Herbarium* that “Chernobyl’s 30-km radius is an advanced laboratory, at the leading edge of what is going on with the entire planet. In a consummation of the alienation or self-alienation that has unfortunately proved to be constitutive of the human, the whole world is on its way to becoming Chernobyl or a gulag.” “Entire regions of the world,” Marder continues, “are converted into no-go areas, whether as a consequence of wars or environmental devastation. The effects of climate change leave no place unaffected.”

Chernobyl in this sense qualifies as part of a growing list of ecological sacrifice zones, sites of “negative ecological heritage” that mark the places where the sacrifice that is algorithmically

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factored into global risk society takes its specific toll on distinct human and nonhuman populations. This makes it also the scene of a kind of global future heritage, a virtual heritage insofar as it represents both the much anticipated eco-apocalypse and the return of “nature” implied in the geological model, according to which the Anthropocene will be followed by an era in which humans are no longer central at all. (And another layer after that, and another.)

In this, we can argue that the Zone may not be the 30-km Exclusion Zone at all. Rather, it is the other way around: the Zone is us, industrially equipped human collectives transforming the surface of the Earth on a scale that is geological. The Zone, at its maximum extent, may also be the Holocene, the safety zone shaped around human activities over the last 12,000 years, which in fact provided the conditions for everything we know as civilization, and which today may be on its way out.

Chernobyl, in its multiple visualizations — as an error registering the nuclear and technological sublime; as the limit case of a bipolar military-industrial modernity; as a cipher of contested narratives, including those that would yoke it to an emergent new-old national sovereignty (that of Ukraine); as an emptied yet ambiguous and alluring terrain; and as a signpost on the accelerometer of the Anthropocene — scrambles the reference points that preceded it and renders them anomalous. It is both an anomaly and a new set of references that marks us as anomalous. It is a hyper-event and an Event, which serves to remind us that we might begin to mark limits around ourselves — in the same way that the Onkalo deep geological nuclear repository in Finland has been conceived as needing a circle cast round it, “to create a boundary between the world of humans and the realm of all that exceeds us.”131 Or at least to begin enclosing and excising the System to which we have been sacrificing, the AnthropoCapitalist Moloch — so as to create sacrificial spaces in

which the Earth and its intermediaries, its intercessors, may appear to us of their own accord, in their own time, if and when they choose to do so.

In this sense, the key is not sacrifice so much as it is vulnerability (*vulnus* meaning wound, thus, woundability). It is by recognizing our mutual vulnerability, as humans and nonhumans sharing today’s interstitial spaces, that our Zones of Sacrifice can become emblems of the temporal interstitiality in which we might together negotiate a common world. In these interstitial spaces we might begin to hear new divinities calling us to the Agoras of a new *Demoikracy*—an *oikos* consisting of many *demoi*, each ruling itself and gathering in unspecified *maidans* where a new post-global commons might be conceived and assembled. Its assembly would scramble the contours of our own worlds, with their nation-states and property relations, and produce new ones around very different forms of neighborliness, eco-regional assemblage, and biotically complex “transnations” consisting of agents known and as yet unknown to us.

There is today neither a humanity nor any other “we” capable of taking this on by ourselves. The new *demoi* must be cobbled together from diverse ensembles of moving parts, all of them living, dynamic, and elusive in their agency and in their commitments, and many of them not at all human.

Cultivating anthropocenic mindfulness, in this context (let us finally decapitate the “A” of the anthropos), means cultivating the capacity to wait watchfully, with eyes and hearts open to the ethico-political dynamics of the webs that bind us. Our material, social, and perceptual ecologies are the sites of multiple projects, formations, and legacies, both oppressive and liberatory. Through them we might hear the calls of rival ancestries, descendancies, and image-bearing divinities. It is our task to open to those who might carry us through the mutual vulnerabilities of the work of creating a habitable Earth that is not ours to own, but is ours to honor.