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Quotation as Critical Practice

A D A M B A R B U

Patrick Greaney. *Quotational Practices: Repeating the Future in Contemporary Art*. University of Minnesota Press, 2014. 224 pp.

What does it mean to return to the question of authorship in a seemingly “post-everything” theoretical context? Patrick Greaney’s recent book *Quotational Practices: Repeating the Future in Contemporary Art* (2014) responds to this question by analyzing the historical and critical function of quotation in modern and contemporary art. Specifically, Greaney rejects the conventional defense of appropriation in art that simply reproduces the “death of the author” argument. In his opening pages, Greaney states that quotational works are “most often understood as questioning, challenging, dismantling authorship – and that’s it” (x). He goes on to suggest that critics and theorists of art ask the wrong questions by tying their analysis—whether negatively or positively—to “the modern notion of the author or artist whose works are original, referential, timely and immediately critical” (xi). Instead, highlighting the ways in which texts are displaced across multiple overlapping sources and cultural histories, Greaney charts a new path for understanding quotation as critical practice.

To develop his argument, Greaney analyzes a number of modern and contemporary artists and writers who pursue non-unitary forms of subjectivity through experimental forms of writing. The book is organized around five case studies, beginning in 1950s with theorist Guy Debord, who advocated for a total upheaval of the dominant social order in post-war Europe, and ending with the contemporary artist Glen Ligon, who produces text based paintings that negotiate the complex histories of racial identity in the United States. In each of his analyses, Greaney draws heavily on linguist Émile Benveniste’s writings on language and subjectivity, principally his argument that “I” does not signify a specific speaker but refers only to the “instance of discourse” (120). He emphasizes Benveniste’s theory that when we encounter “two successive instances of discourse containing ‘I,’ uttered in the same voice,” nothing guarantees the separation of one “I” from the next (120). Greaney’s foundational argument, then, is that there is no necessary primacy of this “I” as compared to the next. Across and between his sometimes seemingly disparate examples, Greaney’s reading is not focused simply on the supposedly authentic disclosure or discovery of the self, but rather considers the ability for overlapping forms of authorship to animate transitory, unstable, and ongoing processes of subject formation.

Greaney's argument is also deeply rooted in Walter Benjamin's reading of quotation as the repetition of the possibilities within source materials. Benjamin's interest in the potential of quotation to cultivate the "untimeliness of the present" and reflect the "unrealized past." In particular, Greaney draws on Benjamin's concept of the "dialectical image" to demonstrate how quotational writing can be used to think beyond commodity language and against the logic of the redemptive progress of history. In Chapter 1, Greaney reads the dialectical image in relation to the philosophies of Nietzsche, Heidegger and Adorno. In the work of each theorist he traces a certain interest in the "emergence of the moment," the possibility of returning events to the "there" of their surfacing, by means of repetition (532). Greaney concludes the chapter by offering crucial point that frames each of the case studies that follow: "Quotational writers manage and administer texts and documents with the aim of liberating themselves from the histories that find their origin there" (17).

Chapter 2 focuses on the Situationist concept *détournement*, particularly taking up the book *Memoires* (1958) created Guy Debord and Asger Jorn. *Détournement*, here, refers to the critical repetition and reuse of an actively extracted element to create a new meaning that contains the liberatory potential of the future within the present. The concept of *détournement* is central to Greaney's understanding of the historical function of quotation because it "appears as a multiplicity and tension in the present" (31), a tension that is evident (either positively or negatively) across a variety of late 20th century conceptual writing practices. Greaney focuses on positioning Debord's philosophy against itself to deduce "what makes *détournement* possible." Here, he takes issue with the gendered aspects of Situationist language by considering the ways in which Debord's theory of a reproduced pseudo-cyclical time seems to depend on a feminized, passive spectacular subject that must be overcome by an active, masculine interruption of historical time. By tracing the example of Charles Baudelaire's poem *Solitude* (1869), Greaney points to the inadequacy of the active/passive binary and instead opens up the definition of *détournement* to encompass interruptive forms of passive insinuation through quotation. Thus, reaching further into the foundations of the Situationist critique, Greaney arrives at the point that *détournement* can and should be continually *détourned* onto itself, "even if this is not Debord's intention" (39).

In Chapter 3, Greaney turns to Belgian artist Marcel Broodthaers to consider the relationship between quotation, irony, and bourgeois artistic production. Broodthaers maintains that art must attempt to contest reification, and, at the same time, that art is reification – a paradox that expresses the impossibility of remaining outside of the structure of the art market and achieving the status of a "political artist." Thus, the artist explores different ways to construct a capitalist critique using the ironic double play between his own "guilt" and "innocence" as a producer of luxury goods. Within

this framework, Greaney focuses on Broodthaers' limited edition artist book *Je hais le mouvement qui déplace les lignes* (1973), which consists of a drawn-out, fragmented quotation of Baudelaire's sonnet "La Beauté" (1857). Greaney argues that with *Je hais*, Broodthaers removes the trace of his voice from the text, and, sets Baudelaire into motion through the form of the artist book to critique art's spectacularization (84). In this transformation of authorship, Broodthaers both defers the finality of Baudelaire's poem and maintains a sense of critical distance in his own work. For Greaney, this demonstrates that it is the "I" in the title *Je hais* that has been opened up, abandoned, revisited, and détourned once again.

The focus of Chapter 4 is Austrian writer Heimrad Bäcker's transcripts (1986), a book comprised solely of first hand quotations taken from official documents relating to the Shoah. As a former member of the Nazi party, Bäcker touches on the difficult question of historical non-resolution by homogenizing these varying sources and speakers into one body of work. For Greaney, Bäcker is able to interrupt the utopian language used in Nazi propaganda, as well as post-war efforts to "bury" National Socialist language. Furthermore, by analyzing the aesthetic qualities of the Nazi documents alongside discourses in concrete poetry and other avant-garde conceptual writing practices from the time, Greaney suggests a utopic and revolutionary mode of thinking can be "imbricated in all aspects of modernity" (109). Through his authorial "incompleteness," then, Greaney argues that Bäcker displaces the utopic modernist sensibility and stages the impossibility of ever comfortably knowing when or how the "I" can exist outside of the language in which its "own" histories are written. Ultimately, Greaney suggests that transcripts counters violent identitarian thinking by creating new fictions that are "uncomfortably close" to and yet "disturbingly distant" from their sources (91).

Lastly, in Chapter 5, Greaney turns to three contemporary artists who employ quotational practices in their work, namely Sharon Hayes, Vanessa Place, and Glen Ligon. Across the three case studies, Greaney focuses on the ways in which quotation allows these artists to remain silent "in their refusal to speak for themselves or as themselves" (117). Overall, he argues that their works exercise the historical contingency of Benevise's "I" and achieve an opening up of history whereby alternative, liminal forms of subjectivity can be imagined. Greaney's strongest argument emerges from a reading of Hayes' performance titled *In the Near Future* (2009) in which the artist stands in a busy street holding up a sign that reads "I AM A MAN," a direct reference to iconic images that emerged out of the 1968 strike by Black sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee. *In the Near Future* points to a double negative identification where Hayes "herself" neither belongs to the masculine "I" presented in the text, nor to the historical context from which this writing is sourced. For Greaney, the historical "untimeliness" of this gesture produces an "an out of sync present" that highlights

the uncertainty of our personal and political futures (121).

Overall, one might contend that Greaney's separate case studies, which span from 1950 to 2008, could have featured a tighter selection of artists and/or socio-cultural themes. However, these general structural questions should not detract from the content of his critique. The text will prove to be a valuable teaching tool in advanced contemporary art and literary theory classrooms because it invites its reader to think beyond those established forms of interpretation that focus on authorship solely in terms of its preexistent "authenticity" or "originality." Instead, Greaney reads quotation as an intentional form of historical displacement from the aesthetic, cultural, and political norms that lie at the heart of a persistent modernist utopian logic. *Quotational Practices* teaches that the transitory loss of the historical stability of the "I" is, in itself, an interruptive gesture in which the seemingly dead past becomes the stuff of future possibilities.

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Queering Animal Acts

MIRANDA NIITTYNEN

Una Chaudhuri and Holly Hughes, eds. *Animal Acts: Performing Species Today*. University of Michigan Press, 2014. 246 pp.

“**A**nimal Acts” writes Una Chaudhuri, “are a powerful way to change the world” (1). Performance arts, in particular, create room for political discussion, as well as forging alternative spaces, places, time, and creatures. Indeed, “[t]here is no doubt that we need to think unheard-of thoughts about animals, that we need new languages, new artworks, new histories, even new sciences and philosophies” (6), writes Matthew Calarco as he encourages interdisciplinary scholars to take new directions in unconventionally constructing research on the other : nonhuman animals. It is for this very reason that readers should be excited about Una Chaudhuri and Holly Hughes’ edited collection *Animal Acts: Performing Species Today*, as it offers a fascinating and playful alternative to what has yet to be imagined for animal studies scholarship and animal rights activism. Through its critical praxis, *Animal Acts* performs multispecies perspectives (both as animal and human). These perspectives are acted out through lighthearted humor and wild imagery, while seeking to represent the position of various animals in their troubled relationships to human domination. While some of the performances within *Animal Acts* take up the subjective position of particular animals, other performances acknowledge the ways in which animals coexist with and co-produce human cultural worldviews.

Una Chaudhuri, a leading scholar in performance studies involving animal imagery and environmental impact, provides a rich and comprehensive introduction that fuses together the philosophical and the practical and encompasses various aspects of animals in human life. From dogs and cats to monkeys and insects, the editors and authors in the anthology analyze several fascinating animal performances. Each chapter begins with a performance written by distinguished performance artists (Holly Hughes, Rachel Rosenthal, Deke Weaver) and are followed by an analysis of that performance by some of the most renowned scholars in the fields of animal studies (Donna Haraway, Nigel Rothfels, Cary Wolfe) and critical performance studies (Jane Desmond, Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes); these authors are a few among the many to contribute to this important text that engages in a political, philosophical, and theatrical commentary about the current position animals have in the twenty-first century. *Animal Acts* portrays a number of partial perspectives, some of which are fantastical, autobiographical, erotic, and historical. In response to practices and

ideologies that dominate, sublimate, and destroy the animal, *Animal Acts* radically reinterprets oppressive discourses, in order to propose other animals as (borrowing from Judith Butler) both intelligible and grievable.

Animal Acts teases, blends, and – in its own creative ways – queers our current ideological beliefs that posit humans as fundamentally distinct from other animals. Following from Sara Ahmed’s use of ‘queer,’ the animal characters, actors, and animal acts distort what is comfortably acceptable for other animals. In her text *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, Ahmed explains queer in a doubling sense, not just an (anti-)identity that involves sexual orientation toward the ‘wrong’ object, but also an aesthetic and affective principle that disrupts normative or ‘straight’ perception (161). From this perspective, *Animal Acts* is queer not only in the ways readers engage with the text, but also the ways in which sexual acts are re-interpreted involving animal characters. The text’s queer imaginings draw attention to the many ways in which animals permeate our everyday lives and, in doing so, calls into question the common assumption that it is our language, rationality, or worldliness that separates us from animals. This is significant because although current cultural understandings of the animal – sewn together by various philosophical, scientific, aesthetic, and social discourses – often configure the animal as that which exists to entertain and give pleasure to the human, and may seem to be of little consequence to humans’ capacity to access resources to ensure their survival, these beliefs have powerful consequences for the bodies of other animals. Chaudhuri explains these discourses through ‘zoöēsis,’ a term used to describe “actual and [...] imaginative interactions with non-human animals” (“Animal Geographies” 647), fundamentally the “vast field of cultural animal discourse and representations” (*Animal Acts* 6). These multiple discourses are found in a number of cultural sources such as literature, art, media, and theatre, but also social practices such as meat-eating, pet owning, circus shows, dog-shows, and bullfighting (Chaudhuri, “Animal Geographies”; “Bug Bytes”; “Performance and Animal Life”). Put simply, the animal is everywhere in human experience; “Animals mean all sorts of contradictory things to different people” (Chaudhuri, *Animal Acts* 8). Building on this argument, Chaudhuri and Hughes’ text performs fractured representations tied to specific animals. In this way, the text itself seeks to disrupt the categorization of ‘animal’ as a restrictive and fixed category.

The task to both represent animals, while simultaneously disrupting this restrictive category, is by no means an easy task. At times, the performances present heteronormativity, westernized conceptions of animal subjectivity and neoliberal ways of perceiving the world; however, these norms were met with a critical unpacking by the subsidiary essays. While *Animal Acts* is about animals, it also presents animal oppression alongside various forms of human *othering*. Through this juggling act, Chaudhuri and Hughes take responsibility in staging intersectional reflexivity that

is required by any politically informed text. This responsibility is not only owed to other animals but to human groups that face daily oppression, marginalization, and trauma in the face of patriarchal, capitalist, and heterosexual norms that privilege some over others. Resisting the urge to stack chapters in an instrumental or systemic method, Chaudhuri and Hughes further honor this responsibility by producing a text that itself performs the fractures that they seek to expose (3).

The eleven performances in *Animal Acts* are stand-alone transcriptions. In other words, readers are not subject to reading each individual chapter in linear order. As a result, readers may be oriented toward certain chapters, titles or specific animals based on their own experiences and perspectives. Because the pieces are transcribed from live performances, readers are called forth to imagine the performances as they play out in their minds. Excerpts of the live performances, however, are posted for viewing on the book's website. This gesture allows for a number of bodily acts to unravel as readers move between textual to visual presentation. Readers perform acts to acquire textual and visual knowledge; readers are invited to move, while being moved; readers might even move alongside their animal companions. By means of accessing current information about animals in a society ran by global technologies, Chaudhuri writes that “[t]he ‘scientific facts’ about animals now commingle promiscuously with mythological remnants, old wives tales’, superstitions, rumors, saws, and Internet hoaxes. Do elephants really never forget (as Weaver’s elephant asserts)?” (8). The interconnections between visual and textual, performance and autobiography, truth and fact add to the blurring effect of the text. Other animals, through this blurring effect, are misplaced, found, and sought out in ways that are strange or off-kilter, hyperactive or digitized.

In the eleven performances included in the book, only one performance includes live animals on stage. This chapter is Rachael Rosenthal’s powerful full-length performance, *The Others*. Though the inclusion of animals in entertainment arts is nothing ‘new’ and has involved extreme forms of exploitation, Rosenthal’s *The Others* responds to the “immoral use of animals in art” (5). Influenced by a performance piece involving an actor and her pet rat, Rosenthal sought to ethically incorporate animals in performance art and to see these animals as agential subjects. From this position, the animals on stage were left to roam and act as they please. This inclusion of animals on stage was met with a finale adoption of the local shelter animals (all of whom have been abused and subsequently rescued by humans) into the homes of the audience members. Though the discussion of staging animals in performance is left open to the reader (most especially given that this performance concludes the text), we can still engage in the ways in which “[Animals] transform theatre’s relationship with representation by appearing as a real presence on stage; they challenge its meaning-making processes and invite a reassessment of the ways in which theatre is

produced, received and disseminated” (Orozco 3).

Animal Acts is rife with queer politics and imaginings that celebrate the ways in which other animals slip outside of categorical restrictions. Animal subjects are queer as they – like queer subjects – throw off the yoke of their biological determinations (i.e. taxonomy, sexuality, husbandry). Throughout the performances, animal characters engage in cross-species sexual desires. This is not only accentuated by the text’s cover that stages Stacy Makishi exposing her genitals to a wall of taxidermy mounts, but is evident throughout the text’s chapters. Personal stories of growing up queer in American society are shared in Holly Hughes’ *The Dog and Pony Show*, as well as Kim Marra’s *Horseback Views*, while Vicky Ryder, Lisa Asagi, and Stacy Makishi’s performance blurs the film noir genre with lesbian BDSM sex acts in *Stay!* Queer relationships are blended with fetishism and multispecies sexual desire. Queer animals are embellished in Carmelita Tropicana’s *With What Ass does the Cockroach Sit*, where a flirtatious parrot approaches orgasm with her male owner, and in Jess Dobkin’s *Everything I’ve Got*, which poetically enacts the drowning of the unicorn who refuses to couple-up on Noah’s Ark.

Species ontology is queered through the actor’s performances of animal subjectivity, while perception is distorted by the various acts that these animal-human-performers assemble. The multiple assemblages of subjectivity (whether it animal or human) queers perception even further in Tropicana’s *With What Ass*, an excerpt from *Queer Tales of a Transnational Cuban Cockroach*. Tropicana, who acts out all of the animal characters in her performance, stages multi-species desires as a metaphor for the desire of bodies across geographical borders. Discussions of race, transnational borders, and immigration are paramount to the piece; “Having animals and humans represent these contemporary social tensions on stage attempts to bridge an almost unsurpassable gap between divided communities” (85), responds Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes. Similarly, Kestutis Nakas’ *No Bees for Bridgeport* portrays bees as ethnic immigrants that move into a suburb, enacting the anxieties of the human (white, middle class) neighborhood. In this sense, animals are born as fables and become, as Joshua Takano Chambers-Letson writes in his analysis, “a screen upon which we—the readers and writers of fables—can project the exigencies of human political and social being” (106).

The book’s expression of queer animality—save for Tropicana’s queer Cuban cockroach—however, is, for the most part, limited to that of white, middle class subjectivities. This does not necessarily downgrade the political potential of the book; however, as the performances and subsequent essays show that any interaction with animals already involves, and cannot be separated from, hierarchies that produce certain types of human exceptionalism and privilege. Other animals are used to vali-

date and defend larger systemic ideologies of difference and oppression, such as racist and speciesist discourses that inform colonialism and imperialism. Nonetheless, even simple pet owning (and their breeding practices) are to a certain extent policed by norms of sex and race. In her performance *The Dog and Pony Show*, Hughes enacts the following:

And you will practice your tolerance, too. When you go to the party and the word gets out you have purebred dogs. And the jokes start in about ‘eugenics,’ then about ‘mutants,’ and ‘racism,’ ending with the ‘holocaust.’ You’ll laugh along. Otherwise you will have no friends, and you will be tempted to get even more poodles. (27)

In other words, even Hughes’ conventional practice of pet-owning a purebred dog highlights that quotidian experiences are informed by social and cultural norms. Notably, *Animal Acts* centers the often erased animal as the nucleus of the socially, geographically, and institutionally oppressed; it is through this centering of other animals in performance that the book’s political potential is reached.

Animal Acts is the first collection of its kind and invites future collections to embrace theatrical arts in animal studies scholarship. Through its intersectional blendings, *Animal Acts* evokes a queer, feminist, anti-racist, and anti-speciesist political framework. While readers might be oriented toward certain kinds of animal discourses, a sharp disorientation effect arises as each chapter disrupts our traditional and normative view of animality, humanity and the numerous dichotomies that create inequalities in the world at large. While some chapters address the pressing concerns and anxieties involving specific animal species at risk of extinction, such as bees and elephants, other performances engage in actors *speaking for* animals through characterization. Alas, each performance shows – in separate and unique ways – that animals never fully bend to human will. Whether it is the unexpected ejaculation of Holly Hughes’ dog ‘Presto,’ a runaway circus elephant, or a unicorn that refuses the ark of what Lee Edelman has coined “reproductive futurism,” each animal in *Animal Acts* reminds its readers that animals never truly embody the norms placed on them; instead, like humans, they continue to slip outside the discourses imposed upon them.

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Doktorvater

GERRY CANAVAN

Robert T. Tally, Jr. *Fredric Jameson: The Project of Dialectical Criticism*. Pluto Press, 2014. 208 pp.

Phillip E. Wegner. *Periodizing Jameson: Dialectics, the University, and the Desire for Narrative*. Northwestern University Press, 2014. 328 pp.

When Fredric Jameson was selected as the winner of the Modern Language Association's sixth Award for Lifetime Scholarly Achievement in 2011, his reply was (of course) dialectical; he told an interviewer that winning a lifetime achievement award was "a little alarming" while at the same time it was "very nice to have the recognition." (This kind of double-edged honour was perhaps becoming a bit of a pattern for Jameson; he'd just won the prestigious Holberg International Memorial Prize in 2008.) One wonders then how Jameson might feel about the recent publication of two monograph-length retrospectives on his career, both written by former students: Wegner is a former graduate student of Jameson's at the Program in Literature, while Tally took his classes as an undergraduate at Duke. I am a former graduate student of Jameson's, too, as is one of the editors of *Reviews in Cultural Theory*—making my own writing of this review feel unexpectedly difficult, even uncomfortable, or perhaps ever so slightly incestuous. It's hard not to feel the unhappy pull of eulogy as I write—something I am trying very hard to refuse, just as one can sense Wegner and Tally refusing it in their books—as well as a strong urge to slip into old habits of familiarity (after knowing him a decade, I can only think of him as "Fred") and anxiety (I wonder how he'll feel about this unusual and probably ill-advised opening paragraph, if he reads it at all). Over the years, Jameson's students have come to form an odd kind of international family tree, an immense, looping network of child-scholars and grandchild-scholars and aunt-and-uncle-scholars and niece-and-nephew-scholars, all linking back to Fred—*Jameson*—as its affable and ineffable head. So much of my response to these books feels personal rather than properly scholarly—familial, somehow.

I begin my review in this conflicted, confessional mode because both Tally and Wegner do; both foreground their personal relationships with Jameson, albeit with considerably more confidence and grace than I feel able to muster, situating his writing within the context of teaching within the university system to which he has dedicated his life. Jameson's very public profile and reputation as "America's most famous Marx

ist” actually makes him something of a rare exception in this regard: he is one of the leading members on the relatively short list of scholars who have been more influential outside their classrooms than inside them. For most of us the classroom is where the lion’s share of our work happens, however much our egos might prefer things to be otherwise. For most of us the classroom is the work.

Tally’s introduction, “Jameson as Educator,” invites us to see these two purviews of the academic as indelibly linked, rather than privileging the artificial divide between them that is enforced by faculty activity databases and tenure portfolios and university merit-pay worksheets. Jameson is “above all” a teacher, Tally writes:

In more than 20 books and in hundreds of shorter pieces, Jameson has consistently introduced often difficult and frequently novel ideas or texts, while invariably situating them in a meaningful cultural, historical, and intellectual context, and then, armed with both the new knowledge and a structure that gives shape to it, the reader, like the student, is prepared to strike out upon his or her own critical adventures or literary explorations. (2)

In his own introduction, Wegner highlights that inevitable second stage of the student-teacher interaction, the striking out on one’s own; he titles the chapter “Betraying Jameson.” The title cleverly alludes to the kind of Oedipal “anxiety of influence” / “kill the father” betrayal that commonly follows a close working relationship like that of supervisor-dissertator, a category Wegner nonetheless refuses; he is speaking instead of the sort of dialectic of fidelity and betrayal that one might find in Alain Badiou or Slavoj Žižek. “The true betrayal,” Wegner quotes Žižek, “is an ethico-theoretical act of the highest fidelity; one has to betray the letter of Kant in order to remain faithful to (and repeat) the ‘spirit’ of his thought” (qtd. in Wegner 3). In some sense that kind of faithful betrayal, or betraying fidelity, is the inevitable task of any intellectual history, Tally and Wegner’s projects included: each seeks to synthesize Jameson’s fifty-year career (and famously formidable body of work) into a single, stand-alone volume, an ambition which will necessarily always be an act of both distillation and dilution.

It’s little wonder, given a shared ambition to extract from the same set of texts an overarching, essentially “Jamesonian” philosophical system, that Tally and Wegner’s two books overlap significantly. Both choose a basically chronological structure for their intervention; both highlight the same, expected key terms (metacommentary, postmodernism, cognitive mapping, utopia...); both touch upon many of the same intellectual controversies (such as the infamous “Third-World Literature in an Era of Multinational Capitalism”). Indeed, both authors even find themselves drawn to the same Jamesonian concept to frame the particularly Jamesonian difficulty of trying to

(re)produce the Jamesonian system. The title of Tally's first chapter quotes Jameson's 2007 claim in *The Modernist Papers* that "the dialectic requires you to say everything simultaneously" (qtd. in Tally 15), while Wegner's preface takes as its epigram the longer articulation of the same thought from *Marxism and Form* (1971):

The peculiar difficulty of dialectical writing lies indeed in its holistic, "totalizing" character: as though you could not say any one thing until you had first said everything; as though with each new idea you were bound to recapitulate the entire system. (qtd. in Wegner xv)

But the methodological differences between the books—or, I would perhaps suggest instead, their necessary dialectical synthesis—can be seen in the distinct stances they take towards this key proposition.

For Tally, this totalizing drive becomes the mission statement for his entire book: his sense that there is neither an "early Jameson" nor a "late Jameson" but instead one single Jameson who is always emerging and yet never quite arrives. Indeed, Tally even provocatively suggests that the key element of Jameson's style is precisely this sense of perpetual emerging; Jameson's writing is "tentative, aspirational, and above all projective," as if it is always merely the prolegomena for the true work to come:

In Jameson, it seems, we are always moving toward something just beyond our grasp even as we are simultaneously looking back on the historical circumstances that make such an attempt even conceivable, while also persistently taking note of our current, all-too-real situation in the here and now. (5)

The time-out-of-joint character of Jameson's work is surely a key component of both its difficulty and its charm; Jameson is at once at the cutting edge of theory and weirdly old-fashioned, with one foot in Wagnerian operatics and the other in the outer-space colonies of Kim Stanley Robinson (yet another of Jameson's students, incidentally, out there in the world).

Tally takes this more obscure, even mystical quality of Jameson's writing to heart in his own construction of Jameson-in-miniature: early on he warns his reader not to expect "any easily maintained précis of his key ideas, assuming such a thing is even possible" but instead to take his book as an "adventurer's guide for those who, through reading his books, wish to accompany Jameson in the adventures of the dialectic" (5). The unfinished, or unfinishable, nature of Jameson's writing is for Tally precisely the source of its vitality; like the totalizing system of global capitalism with which Jameson is so preoccupied, we might focus on this or that map of Jameson's system, or this or that portion of it, without ever quite being able to grasp the whole thing

in our minds. For Tally the dialectic's unrealizable requirement to "say everything simultaneously" is the secret key to understanding Jameson—it produces the crucial elements of both Jameson's system and his style.

Most of all it produces Jameson's career-long interest in utopia, which for Tally is as much an ontological proposition as a political one. Quoting Jameson's reading of utopia (as distinct from both dystopia and anti-utopia) in *The Seeds of Time* (1994), Tally notes that for Jameson utopia is a by-product of his brand of totalizing philosophical thinking: "the thinking of totality itself—the urgent feeling of the presence all around us of some overarching system that we can at least name—has the palpable benefit of forcing us to conceive of at least the possibility of other alternate systems, something we can now identify as our old friend Utopian thinking" (qtd. in Tally 114). Rather than the sort of "utopia of failure" with which Jameson is sometimes associated—the dream that not only never materializes but cannot even be thought except sideways, out of the corner of our eye—Tally reads utopia as a kind of emergent property of philosophy itself, the not-quite-thinkable dream of philosophy's final completion—a "meditation on the impossible" (154). Utopia therefore exhibits the precise out-of-time quality that characterizes so much of Jameson's project: is it a prophecy, or a half-recalled memory, or some crafty inhuman thing that dashes of sight every time you catch a glimpse of it in your peripheral vision, or a synaesthetic hallucination, or a religion, or... ?

Wegner's book begins, as I have noted, with the same observation about the dialectic and totality from *Marxism and Form*, applied again to Jameson's own career—the feeling that, as Wegner puts it, "in order to grasp any particular point [Jameson] makes, it is as if we need to have the whole of his work before us" (xv). But Wegner's project, at approximately twice the length of Tally's and more clearly pitched at a specialist rather than a generalist audience, is much less willing to privilege the unclosed (or unclosable) aspects of Jameson's work. Instead Wegner is inclined to focus on each book in Jameson's opus as a "unique historical event," an "encounter" (212), and only then to explore what sort of totality might emerge from their sum. Thus, while Wegner's Jameson remains of course highly dialectical in his thinking—and Wegner singles out for particular criticism the critics who attempt to take one idea or even one sentence from Jameson and mistake that one part for the whole—at the same time Jameson's "implicit" injunction to "always totalize" seems to emphasize this goal's tantalizing *possibility* rather than its impossibility, its radical and inevitable incompleteness. Paradoxically, for Wegner the way we can actually access this synchronic, overarching "aspiration to totality" is precisely through the "diachronic perspective, wherein each individual text is understood as one point within another larger narrative sequence" (xxiii-xxiv). Hence the title of Wegner's project: *Periodizing Jameson*. Thus we have dialectical intellectual history: both books are framed as stand-

alone units which nonetheless stack together in a train. Wegner's gambit is to frame this pattern in Jameson's work with the same triad Jameson uses to diagnose history: realism, modernism, postmodernism. Jameson's work becomes, in itself, a kind of progressive unfurling, even "stages" towards a final future completion that is still to come, as opposed to Tally's vision of multiple lines of attack on a singular goal. The movement of Jameson's trajectory has, or can be said to have, its own internal logic, even as this or that individual work is better read in isolation as a unity.

The interplay between "historical process (always historicize!)" and "social totality (always totalize!)" becomes for Wegner the dialectical engine that drives Jameson's work (31). The result takes us back towards Tally's focus on the relationship between unclosability and utopia, but here framed as more of an intellectual problem for Jameson's project than as its telos. We might recall the foundational gesture of More's Utopia was the digging of the deep trench that severed the peninsula from the mainland and turned it into an island, an act of enclosure; in some sense Jameson's work persistently resists any parallel gesture of narrative closure even as it consistently points towards it. Jameson's most recent writing, which "struggles to put the question of Utopia back on the table precisely in a moment that seems allergic to such radical totalizing visions," can ultimately conceive of the project only in negative terms: "utopia as a form is not the representation of radical alternatives; it is rather simply the imperative to imagine them" (*Archaeologies* 416). Thus we see in Jameson's recent writings utopian turns that in the hands of another thinker would seem utterly bizarre: the quasi-accelerationist vision of Wal-Mart (of all things) as Utopia in *Valences of the Dialectic*, or of the U.S. Army (even worse!) as Utopia in recent talks at the Society for Utopian Studies and the Marxist Literary Group (due out in book form this June). Jameson seems from this perspective to be wriggling out of his own trap, refusing in some sense to reach his own named final destination (or, at least, not just yet). Wegner ends with an extended meditation on precisely this problem, smartly drawing on Jameson's *Representing Capital* (2011) and his observation that *Kapital* is both "finished and unfinished all at once. What this means in fact is that we can expect both boundaries and lines of flight simultaneously, climaxes along with unfinished business" (qtd in Wegner 211). Jameson's work, particularly his late work, presents itself to us in similar terms, even in the too-soon untimeliness of texts like Wegner's and Tally's, which attempt to somehow lasso the entire "legacy" of Jameson even as "it continues to grow in nuance and complexity" as Jameson himself continues to write (Wegner 213).

This paradox returns us also to the question of what it means to be Jameson's student, whether metaphorically as his reader or literally as his dissertation advisee. Early in Tally's book he paraphrases other critics who see Jameson as "embrac[ing] all things—but, like a python, squeezing the life out of them" (20). What resists this

totalizing enclosure in Tally's treatment is Jameson's foregrounding of the productive tension between history as a nightmare and the future as possible utopia, located in the present as a site of struggle—a critical perspective that remains vital and alive insofar as it is always both urgent and irresolvable. Wegner's version of this same problem comes in his conclusion, where he quotes Evan Watkins's observation that Jameson's work is "an 'anomaly' among that of the 'masters of theory' for the simple reason that 'you can't follow this act.'" (Wegner 213). "Jamesonian" has simply never caught on as an adjective in the mold of Hegelian, Marxist, Freudian, Foucauldian, even Žižekian—even as many people (some of his many former students and dissertation advisees among them!) are clearly doing "Jamesonian" analysis. Rather than unfinishable, from this perspective Jameson's project looks too finished, too complete: he ate the whole elephant, and left nothing behind for the rest of us. Wegner's answer is to return to the question of fidelity and betrayal: to attempt to simply *do Jameson* is itself a betrayal of the Jamesonian ethos, and turn him into a "discourse of the university," another kind of too-close, python-like suffocation. The alternative is to see Jameson not as a master or a mapmaker so much as, again, a teacher, who one day leads us to the gates of the school and then hurls us out into the world to find our own way. "Maybe you can't do this for yourself," Wegner quotes Watkins. "It's not exactly clear what it might mean to 'follow Jameson's direction.' But it is always possible to learn from his work how to do what you do far better and in more historically responsible ways" (qtd. in Wegner 213). As a conclusion to a two-hundred page exegesis, this is perhaps somewhat deflating—you mean this was all a dead end? a road to nowhere?—but for Wegner it seems something more like a rousing call to arms, a "joyful possibility" that speaks to Jameson's "inexhaustible richness," resulting in an exuberant final benediction: "May we prove equal to the task!" (213). Jameson's very irreproducibility, his singularity, can become the engine for our own critical production, so long as we betray him right.

For its part, Tally's conclusion (which similarly turns to *Representing Capital*) points towards one way we might try to follow Jameson by not following him, by highlighting his skill as a reader. Jameson's method requires constant reference to the works of others, from Hegel and Marx through Freud, Lacan, Greimas, Adorno, Benjamin, and on and on, all closely read but repurposed for Jameson's ends. Jameson's model of the dialectic thinking as "thought to the second power" is his model for dialectical reading as well (157). The call of *The Project of Dialectical Criticism* and *Periodizing Jameson* (especially when taken, dialectically, together) is that Jameson himself is now permanently ensconced in that vast canon of writers whose writing will be referenced, cited, borrowed, plagiarized, stolen, glossed, collaged, remixed, reimagined, shorthanded, selectively interpreted, and deliberately but productively misread by the scholars of the future, as the struggle continues and the work goes on.

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Critical Bottoming: Repositioning Male Effeminacy and its Racialization

JOHN PAUL STADLER

Nguyen Tan Hoang. *A View from the Bottom: Asian American Masculinity and Sexual Representation*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014. 287 pp.

The figure of the gay, Asian bottom is often misunderstood. His racial, gender, and sexual identities are typically conflated and maligned for being too submissive and effeminate. This, at least, is the opening contention of Nguyen Tan Hoang's *A View from the Bottom: Asian American Masculinity and Sexual Representation*. Opposite this caricature, Nguyen offers a recuperative reading of the figure of the gay Asian bottom.¹ In this monograph, part of Duke University Press's *Perverse Modernities* series, Nguyen develops the idea of "critical bottoming" in order to upend the sedentary meaning of this figure's markers. In the process, Nguyen's book offers an intersectional approach to the complex relations of gender and race through the axes of sexual representation and practice.

In his first chapter, "The Rise, and Fall, of a Gay Asian American Porn Star," Nguyen presents a case study of the first gay Asian porn star in an American context, Brandon Lee.² Lee's rise to fame, Nguyen argues, derives from his assimilationist presentation, 'large endowment,' and exclusive role as the top in his porn videos. Nguyen provocatively suggests that Lee's fame was made possible because it rebuked the negative associations Asian men had accrued throughout the late twentieth century. However,

¹ Nguyen sees his own reading as importantly not offering "redress and reparation" but rather granting the capacity to learn "to live with past and present danger, in particular, everyday injuries marked by gender, race, and sexuality, that cannot find relief or make amends through legitimate social or political means" (25). In this spirit, and as he invokes later, this book carries forward Jose Munoz's project of disidentification developed in *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*.

² This chapter expands his earlier essay "The Resurrection of Brandon Lee: The Making of a Gay Asian American Porn Star," which appears in the influential collection *Porn Studies* (edited in 2004 by Linda Williams).

the pornography Lee appears in also problematically presumes a viewing subject who is always interpellated as a white gay male. Nguyen's essay version of this chapter resolved this interpellation by calling for a counterpornography to attend to the Asian immigrant as a desiring subject (252), but since then, Brandon Lee's growing porn career has necessitated an expanded analysis. Not only has Lee come to bottom, but his newer films feature him as an egotistical diva and as villain, replete with exaggerated Asian dialect (practices that Nguyen calls "yellow yellowface").³ Nguyen develops the concept of an "accented pornography" to understand what might otherwise be dismissed as racist gestures; in his account, accented pornography self-reflexively makes the gay Asian male immigrant-subject central to the pornographic fantasy scenarios (61-69).⁴ Furthermore, accented pornography ironizes and critiques Asian stereotypes by exploiting power differentials, which, for Nguyen, results in an unsettling of their rigidity (69).

In "Reflections on an Asian Bottom," Nguyen turns to Hollywood and the pre-Stonewall film *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (1967) to unpack the associations between Asian and anus, and in the process, the desirability of effeminacy. This second chapter hinges upon the minor character Anacleto, an effeminate Filipino houseboy, whose affective bond with his lady of the house, over-the-top sissyness, and premature departure from the film have left him overlooked by most film criticism. However, Nguyen argues that it is precisely through coming to terms with Anacleto's pronounced gender inversion that the protagonist, Penderton, fatefully decides to pursue his own homoerotic desire. In effect, Anacleto's retreat from the film reorients the film's trajectory. Chapter two broadens our understanding of the bottom beyond the sexual act and moves us into the realms of aesthetics, narratology, and affect. Additionally, Nguyen clarifies the stakes of his argument by way of Vito Russo's seminal text *The Celluloid Closet*, wherein Russo dismisses Anacleto as a regressive portrait of a gay man in the sexological tradition of the invert (73-74). The progressive post-Stonewall politics of gay liberation through greater visibility coincided with an intensification of butch masculinity, a masculinity Anacleto refused (79-80). Nguyen shows how once he disappears from the film, Anacleto's affects haunt us through what he calls an "anal vision" that Penderton adopts. This form of vision offers an alternative to film theory's notion of the male gaze that penetrates and masters objects but rather gives itself over to reflection and distraction. Aligning the titular "golden eye" to Anacleto, which then reflects upon Penderton, this "anal vision" names a passive way of seeing that honors desperation, hysteria, and vulnerability over modes of

³ Nguyen utilizes this concept from Yiman Wang's essay "The Art of Screen Passing: Anna May Wong's Yellow Yellowface Performance in the Art Deco Era."

⁴ The idea of "accented pornography" pays homage to Hamid Naficy's theory of an "accented cinema" in *An Accented Cinema: Exile and Diasporic Filmmaking*.

objectification more entrenched in stereotypical masculinity (104).

Chapter three, “*The Lover’s ‘Gorgeous Ass,’*” develops an extended analysis of the 1992 film *The Lover*, which tells the tale of a wealthy Chinese heir’s torrid romance with a young French girl in 1929 Saigon. Here Nguyen argues that “soft” masculinity is conferred upon and naturalized across Asian male sexual representation, queering even heterosexual men. In terms of production and filmic diegesis, this chapter moves outside of the explicit American idiom and into a French colonial era of Vietnam, but Nguyen reads its reception from within an American context to see how transnational circulations of Asian masculinity operate. Chapter three argues that the spectacularization of the male lead’s uncovered buttocks (that “gorgeous ass”) throughout the film operates as a fetish object for his unseen penis, but also as a site of vulnerability. Tracing the systemic logic of cinema’s emphasis on the male derriere, Nguyen parses distinctions in this substitution through a contrast with the fetishization of black men’s rear ends and penises (142-144). In contrast, the Asian men appear only to have butts. Chapter three compellingly interrogates interracial desire’s complicated relationship to colonial contexts and its navigation of racial and sexual shame, a concern Nguyen follows for the remainder of the monograph.

In the fourth chapter, “The Politics of Starch,” Nguyen engages further into the politics of interracial desire by restaging a debate between two camps of filmmaking: Asian diasporic documentaries on the one hand and queer experimental videos on the other. In the first camp, Nguyen argues that, in response to pornographic representations of Asian men in the 1990s, many documentary films undertook a project of “reeducating” gay Asian men’s desire, advocating against the objectification of Asian men in interracial pairings by instead promoting “sticky rice” (Asian-Asian) relationships (155).⁵ He complicates this position by presenting a group of queer experimental videographers who foregrounded the subjugating pleasures of bottoming, which he reads as a rebuke to the disciplinary call to intra-Asian desire. These experimental queer videos also question the previous camp’s privileging of “sticky rice” by enumerating a vast array of determinants that also inform the politics of desire. Ultimately, Nguyen cautions against universalizing progress narratives that saturate minoritarian politics, specifically trajectories from “shame to pride, from femininity to masculinity, from bottomhood to topness” as though topness, masculinity, and pride were equivalent and redemptive (190). Rather, Nguyen makes space for the possibility of dwelling in abject bottomhood to promote its disidentificatory affinities and alliances. The refusal of progress narratives disrupts the typical impulse to transform abjection into empowerment, objects into subjects, or in this case, bottoms

⁵ Nguyen makes use of “the reeducation of desire” from Richard Dyer’s essay “Idol Thoughts: Orgasm and Self-Reflexivity in Gay Pornography.”

into tops; Nguyen's project does not care for a future orientations as much as it dwells in and circles around the past, and in this regard, embraces Elizabeth Freeman's queer approach to temporality, which may prove challenging to more future-oriented critical tendencies within Asian American Studies.⁶

The conclusion to *A View From the Bottom* moves us away from film and video and into the realm of cruising websites and mobile apps. The book's primary intervention, which combats heteronormative protocols of strict gendered and racialized sexuality, here critiques the homogenizing violence of homonormativity. Citing from Juana Maria Rodriguez's conceptualization of the "butch femme," Nguyen "seek[s] to expand the boundaries of top-bottom to envelop multiple subject positions" (195). We move beyond the more static receptions of video and cinema and into the practices of everyday life. Here Nguyen reveals how gay Asian men navigate racism while cruising online with techniques like obfuscation, tactical masking, and self-satirizing screen names (198-203). These tactics lead Nguyen to conclude that "the Asian American male subject draws on the force of abjection and shame in his assumption of bottomhood; but he also productively harnesses the power of shaming mechanisms by performing to the hilt the 'improper joy' of Asian American male subjection" (204).

A View From the Bottom issues a major corrective to gay, white male criticism that dominated early queer theory, which becomes a fulcrum to the rest of Nguyen's project.⁷ In the introduction, Nguyen contends that queer theory reclaims the bottom position through a process of remasculinization, a process with which he takes issue.⁸ To Nguyen, remasculinization plays into the protocols of heteronormativity by distancing or denouncing the effeminate resonances of the bottom position. Within this camp of early gay male theorists, Leo Bersani receives the most attention for his groundbreaking essay "Is the Rectum a Grave?" but Nguyen's accusation that Bersani is remasculinizing elides some of the complexity of Bersani's argument and its relationship to the AIDS crisis.⁹ In fact, Bersani is less normative in his queer theory

⁶ Here I refer to Elizabeth Freeman's book *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*.

⁷ Nguyen names Guy Hocquenghem, Leo Bersani, D.A. Miller, Lee Edelman, and later Tim Dean and David Halperin within this camp (6 – 14).

⁸ Nguyen develops this term from Yvonne Tasker (1997), who introduces it to describe the manner in which martial arts star Bruce Lee (from whom the porn star Brandon Lee hopes to share allegiance with his nom de plume) stands in as a remasculinized figuration of Chinese national identity. Soft masculinity in essence transforms into hard masculinity through martial arts (33-35).

⁹ Nguyen cites feminist thinkers who have taken issue with Bersani's essay, notably Mandy Merck and Tania Modleski, who find Bersani's figuration men "behaving

than Nguyen gives credit, although certainly the essay is not unproblematic. Where Nguyen's argument could have found a stronger point of entry through this essay is in Bersani's sometimes uncomfortable comparison of the racially-unspecified gay subject's plight as more oppressed than the black subject's, which would have provided a generative site to reconsider the assumptions of race and the bottom position.

A View from the Bottom compellingly argues for an intersectional analysis of sexuality, but Nguyen's feminism also warrants attention, both for the manner in which it comes to arbitrate other fields, but also for how it fails to become a site of examination itself. In his introduction, Nguyen locates *A View from the Bottom's* core discourses as "Asian American studies, queer studies, and film studies" (2), but to make many of his most noteworthy arguments, Nguyen relies upon feminist critiques. It is, after all, the notion of the "butch femme" that helps to make the case for bottoming as capacious and revelatory precisely for its vulnerability. It is also a feminist critique of Bersani's essay "Is the Rectum a Grave?" that Nguyen harnesses to cast the earlier era of bottom theory as inadequate and remasculinizing. The mode of feminist thought invoked here appears to be "sex positive feminism," that branch of feminism which famously fought the sex wars in the 1980s and which empowered women "on their backs" (61), but *A View from the Bottom* fails to name it as such. I begin to wonder how the gay Asian bottom might illuminate or indeed reeducate a feminist epistemology, a question that could have helped to ground a project that is otherwise exceptionally attentive.

Every chapter in *A View from the Bottom* offers a discrete media analysis, but not every chapter attends to its medium as attentively as the next. Chapters 1, 4, and the Conclusion argue thorough an emphasis on medium specificity, but Chapters 2 and 3, by nature of the close readings of individual films, strain to develop broader insights into cinematic discourses and media forms. This fluctuation might be understood as part of the book's project, though. In his introduction, Nguyen notes, "the chapters of the book do not follow a chronological timeline in which feminizing bottom positioning is surmounted by masculine topness. Instead, they proceed on a messier, nonlinear course, one that is deliberately itinerant and meandering, thus refusing any neat and tidy evolutionary development from oppression to liberation, from marginalization to assimilation" (25). This position defends itself as low theory, deemed so for its eccentricity and emphasis on "low" cultural objects.¹⁰ Such a designation also suggests

like a woman" as presenting a kind of powerlessness and masochism altogether different from what women experience (12-13). Whether this interpretation compellingly argues Bersani remasculinizes the bottom is unclear.

¹⁰ Nguyen places his book in the company of Jack Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* (7).

affinities bind the figure of the top to high theory and the bottom to low theory in an illustration of the sexual valences of methodology and critique. The lasting intervention of *A View from the Bottom*, though, will be its illumination of the complexity of intersectional analysis and the revivification of thinking on race and gender alongside the category of sexuality without subsuming either thereunder. For that, Nguyen has expanded the kinds of conversations we can now have. *A View From the Bottom* offers us a new position from which to critique the ideologies of top/bottom and subject/object in sexual representation.

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Where the Wild Things Are

VEIT BRAUN

Eben Kirksey. *Emergent Ecologies*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2015. 312 pages.

Over the last couple of years, Eben Kirksey has been a major figure in carving out a niche for the fledgling field of multispecies ethnography somewhere in between human–animal studies, feminist science and technology studies, and ecology. If his *The Emergence of Multispecies Ethnography* (co-authored with Stefan Helmreich (Kirksey & Helmreich 2010)) was a manifesto for multispecies ethnography, *Emergent Ecologies* puts it into action. Drawing from roughly 20 years of fieldwork, Kirksey seeks to reframe the problems that have been haunting environmental conservation for decades: where does an ecosystem end? When is an alien species beneficial, when harmful – and to whom? Is conservation even possible, given the inherent dynamics of nature?

Of course all these problems have already been discussed at length within the philosophy of biology and the ethics of conservation. Kirksey's refreshing contribution lies in straying from those beaten tracks: while clearly interested in philosophical problems, he turns to ethnography to answer them. Going back and forth between Panama, Maine, Florida, Costa Rica, California, and New York, his case studies highlight how ecosystems are becoming increasingly intertwined, transformed, and populated by new inhabitants from all the kingdoms of life. *Emergent Ecologies* follows “ontological amphibians” who cross the boundaries of ecosystems—rhesus macaques in Florida, African clawed frogs in New York City, and ducks from Costa Rica to California—exploring the various ways in which species (including humans) mix or do not mix.

Kirksey stresses the importance of overcoming a form of ecology that has dominated 20th-century thought and revolved around, among other things, issues like the separation of humans and nature, the conservation of pristine ecosystems, or the fight against invasive species. His local case studies become arenas to contest these concepts; against such backgrounds, Kirksey asks if the 20th-century model of conservation can do justice to the multispecies communities that have found new ways of living together. To him, this is not a simple question of getting one's ecological theory straight, but one of understanding environmental practice as a form of political activity. Kirksey stresses that there are livelihoods, be they those of pythons, rice grass, or of humans, which depend on specific ecological assemblages. Environmental transformation, regardless of the aims and factors which drive it, transforms pre-existent

ways of living and shapes new communities in which there will be a place for some but not for others.

This understanding of political ecology is in line with many recent posthumanist books like Anna Tsing's (2015) *The Mushroom at the End of the World* or Jamie Lorimer's (2015) *Wildlife in the Anthropocene*. What makes Kirksey's book stand out among such others is that he does not stop at including plants, animals, and other organisms within the body politic. More than anyone else, he is driven by the question of what we can learn from these others. While many authors, even in the field of multispecies ethnography, content themselves with talking *about* other species, Kirksey tries to take their perspective by talking *to* them. His spectrum of inter-species communication methods is diverse: from relying on human interpreters to undertaking biological field trips with high-tech equipment to performance art projects.

While some of his experimental approaches might seem strange to a traditional conservationist, Kirksey is anxious to get his biology straight. Indeed, there may be few people in the field of multispecies studies who are so cautious when it comes to grounding their work in first-hand biological experience. *Emergent Ecologies'* eagerness in this respect is another refreshing element of the book; while there have been tendencies in posthumanist fields such as science and technology studies or new materialism to attack static or oversimplified theories from the natural sciences, an engagement with the objects of study themselves has often been lacking. If Kirksey confronts established ideas in conservation, ecology, philosophy, or biology, he always turns to the organisms themselves to get a more appropriate understanding. His account of Panamanian *Ectatomma* ants (pp. 17–35), for example, contradicts mechanistic and economic understandings of these animals as much as it does away with the sometimes all-too-harmonic picture that some posthumanist scholars seek to paint. It is precisely Kirksey's personal engagement with the insects, going back to his time as a biology undergrad, and his sincere interest in the ants' life history that makes his arguments more convincing than the simplistic ideas of any of the two sides.

If I do not give a brief outline of the contents of *Emergent Ecologies* it is because the book cannot really be boiled down to a single clear-cut argument. Instead, Kirksey has compiled his work as a *bricolage* of places, issues, and philosophies that are sometimes loosely, sometimes more strongly connected to each other. Along the way, he discusses an impressive crowd of authors and concepts, among them Peter Sloterdijk and his bubbles, Susan Leigh Star and torque, and Bruno Latour and the parliament of things, to name just a few. Kirksey's engagement with past and current theories is very broad and bears witness to the ambition of his book. He does not stop at reassembling ecology; philosophy, too, needs a makeover. The ideas of thinkers like

Heidegger, Uexküll, or Sloterdijk are too anthropocentric, Kirksey argues, to capture the extent to which the livelihoods of plants, fungi, humans, and other animals are mutually entangled. The singularity of human nature that is inscribed in such philosophies informs ecological theory and practise as much as it still forms the basis for critical response from the humanities. If we want to address the ecological issues of a world in which .

In more than one way, *Emergent Ecologies* is a rich book: rich with encounters, with insights, rich with approaches. Occasionally, however, this richness has left me wondering whether less might have been more. While the allusions to other works and authors will be welcomed by those who are familiar with such work, a large part of these references might be unknown to most readers. As the citations are usually eclectic, and Kirksey drops concepts as quickly as he takes them up, their ultimate significance for the book's argument often escaped me. This is not a major flaw, however, and is perhaps best understood as Kirksey's deliberate decision to understand the world ecologically, not economically. With *Emergent Ecologies*, we learn to look for connections, relations, and associations, not for divisions, boundaries, and separations.

Kirksey argues that we should say goodbye to old ideas of conservation that dream of a world where every species has its fixed place – and where aliens and foreigners should be removed for the sake of the natives and residents. *Emergent Ecologies* demonstrates that the distinction between native and foreign has become absurd in times of global trade and travel. At the same time, we should not hope for a world where the lion lies with the lamb: doing ecology will always require a decision for some species and against others. Embracing novel environments where introduced weeds, birds, and ecological practises is no less political “restoring” the same ecosystem by removing said alien species. To include one is always to exclude another. It is at this point, however, that the *bricolage* methodology and multi-sited ethnography of *Emergent Ecologies* become weaknesses as much as they have been strengths before – not because they are poorly executed, but rather because Kirksey employs them quite consistently and thoroughly throughout the book. It is not so much the author's arguments as the book's narrative style which detracts from its political message. While Kirksey points to the irreducible inconveniences of doing ecologies, exiting the scene in which they matter and to go somewhere else appears all too easy. But in following the author, we are also leaving behind those who are stuck, unable to escape the environment they are rooted in: exotic snakes in Floridian terrariums, Costa Rican peasants and conservationists, endemic frogs at the brink of extinction.

Emergent Ecologies is careful in giving those who live with and among the wild things in Costa Rica, Florida, or Panama a voice. In quickly jumping between times and

places, perspectives and situations, however, the book produces a certain relativistic effect: it becomes very hard to decide for or against a certain account, point of view, or species (the ninth chapter of the book, "Parasites of Capitalism," is paradigmatic in this respect). In itself, the absence of a unifying perspective that is easily able to reconcile all the contradictions of political ecology should be seen as a productive provocation for the environmental humanities: it could be a call to reflect on one's own position as much as it could be a critical resource to challenge some of the all too premature solutions that are proposed for the political and ecological dilemmas of our time. The reader of *Emergent Ecologies* can escape this irreconcilability by switching to a different place, story, and issue. In following the author's line of flight, she has the privilege to travel between distant places and the freedom to revisit her own conceptions of ecology, but is never really confronted with the inconveniences of being stuck in place.

While Kirksey's interest and concern for those who do ecological work in the places he visits are profound and genuine, I sometimes wondered what kind of book *Emergent Ecologies* would have become if, instead of the "ontological amphibians"-- those travellers between ecosystems and worlds -- he had focused more strongly on those who cannot travel as easily as ducks, rice grass, or ethnographers. Granted, in a time of global ecological change neozoa are a critical resource against the static categories of conservation and their susceptibility to technocracy, and *Emergent Ecologies* uses this resource masterfully. And yet, there is a blind spot in this approach, which will inevitably lead to the call to embrace novelty and let go of the idea of a state of nature that could be conserved. Since this approach is so fixed on doing away with the past, it does not provide any critical resource for telling the good novel ecosystems from the bad. Kirksey urges us to be careful in making such decisions, but will they thereby become easier, less painful, less political?

My uneasiness with some of its political implications should not obscure that *Emergent Ecologies* is a great and innovative book. It is especially Kirksey's experimental approach and his ignoring of disciplinary boundaries between biology, history, anthropology, and art while taking the methods of these fields very seriously that makes this book an important contribution to the body of literature on ecology and conservation. In its simultaneous appreciation of novel ecosystems and their inhabitants on the one hand and of the plurality of methods, theories, and perspectives on the other, *Emergent Ecologies* parts with the seemingly clear-cut concepts of traditional conservation as much as it leaves behind the comforting but deceptive certainties of established disciplines.

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Strategy and Experimentation in a Dangerous Present

GABRIEL PISER

McKenzie Wark, *Molecular Red: Theory for the Anthropocene*. Verso, 2015. 304 pp.

The contentious concept of the Anthropocene asks us to examine the role of human activity in transforming the earth. Beyond recognizing and understanding these transformations, however, the Anthropocene demands intervention on the level of everyday human practices. How ought one think about the production of knowledge in the radically new context of the Anthropocene and what forms of material practice are thereby indicated? In his book *Molecular Red: Theory for the Anthropocene*, McKenzie Wark offers an accessible and creative engagement with these questions. Against high theory as “a policing faculty flying high as a drone over all the others” Wark returns again to the concept of “low theory”, described as “interstitial, its labor communicative rather than controlling” (218). His text is dense with the introduction of new vocabulary seeking to enable new practices of collective action and new capacities to know and feel our imbrication in the earth’s material and informational systems. Its terminological emphasis enriches our situational analyses by providing a strategic view of the contemporary moment. Through his four main interlocutors Wark offers some useful tools to understand the present and strategize towards new futures. By focusing on the interactions between these thinkers, his book gains both the creativity and the insulation of a bench prototype.

In a work filled with great one-liners, Wark’s opening line is instructive. He revises Hippocrates by suggesting “disparate times call for disparate measures” (xi). In what follows he suggests that such measures ought to respond to the exigencies of today with an experimental interplay between existing and hypothesized forms of knowledge and action. This interplay appears to structure the text itself, as Wark’s book seems to model the practice of “*substitution*,” which he defines as “a kind of détournement, by which the formal properties of any given activity can become the experimental template for any other” (27). Substitution, one of a handful of concepts drawn from the first of his four authors, allows Wark to prototype experimental ways of knowing and being in the world from four seemingly disparate components. Wark clarifies the term, explaining that the attempt to link or combine disparate forms of knowledge is exemplified by Marx’s application of the concept of metabolism “from respiration in mammals to agricultural science to social-historical metabolism” (27).

Throughout the text, substitution serves as a generative framework for synthesizing experimental ways of knowing and being in the world.

Wark carries out this synthesis over the course of the book's two parts composed of two chapters each. Part one, "Labor and Nature", discusses the lesser-known Soviet theorist Alexander Bogdanov (Chapter One) and Soviet writer Andrei Platonov (Chapter Two). Part two, "Science and Utopia", engages American feminist philosopher of science, Donna Haraway (Chapter Three) and science fiction writer Kim Stanley Robinson, also American (Chapter Four). Wark holds up these four thinkers as important elements of the "intellectual knapsack" (119) necessary for our journey into an unfamiliar new age.

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In Chapter One, Wark explores Bogdanov's *tektology*, an attempt synthesize widely disparate fields of knowledge into a sort of unified model that could improve both our understanding of 'nature' and our systems of organizing human and non-human labor that shape it and are shaped by it. As Wark explains, "neither a theory or a science, *tektology* is a practice which generalizes the act of *substitution* by which one thing is understood metaphorically via another" (25). Wark rejects Bogdanov's tendency to think of *tektology* as imposing "a rather authoritarian" (25) relation between collective labor and nature. Instead he initially argues for thinking of nature as "a category without a content... simply that which labor encounters" and of labor as always operating both "in and against nature" (4). But, he cautions, "[b]efore a *tektology* of organizing the material world can apply," what Wark calls a "proletkult" (based on the Soviet institution of the same name) has to emerge "within which workers acquire for themselves the confidence to organize the world" (29). As *tektology* offers labor a new practice of knowledge, the *proletkult* offers labor its own "means of cultural development" (xvii). "*Tektology*" and "*proletkult*" mark an aspiration towards a new organization of knowledge and a new concept of cultural formation, which when taken together may help us develop new political and material practices.

Wark's second chapter offers a close look at writer Andrei Platonov whose "condensed emblems of the Soviet experience" (62) reflect the goals if not the institutional success of the *Proletkult*. Through this chapter Wark shows us Platonov as "the writer of the material practice of popular sense-making" (65). Wark describes Platonov's method as *détournement*, or "the collective labor of unmaking from below the language of those above" (MR 65) and how he achieved "critical purchase through attention to those personae closest to the struggle to wrest a surplus from nature" (69). Wark suggests that Platonov seeks not to mirror reality, but rather to shape it, a reading that evokes both Brecht and Nietzsche's hammers. Quoting Platonov, "words are just

social materials and they are very malleable and reversible" (110). The fundamental materiality of language is why both Bogdanov and Platonov care so deeply about the technical means by which these materials are produced, transformed, and distributed.

For Wark, Platonov's writing offers an intimate tektology of the "comradely" relations between human lives, inanimate matter, and broad socio-political and environmental systems. Unlike Bogdanov, who sought to map "the most advanced, general and complex forms of social activity" (27), Platonov engages the materiality, plasticity, and power of language for social struggle from the "labor point of view" in order to express the possibilities of "comradely life" between human and non-human life, technology, and the earth itself. Not one for naïve optimism, Platonov also writes from "below the below," highlighting the impediments to such comradely existence through his "barely proletarian" characters, "orphans, landless, wanderers..." (68).

From a position of critical distance he approaches the "barely proletarian" of today, seeking new permutations of "low theory" to help tell a new story of the Anthropocene. In an historical moment of largely unprecedented dispossession, indebtedness, and inequality, he suggests the importance of "new kinds of labor for a new kind of nature" understood as a "multi-species becoming-with" born of new affinities among human, more-than-human, and geological forces. This is a call to abandon the reductive imaginary of a pure Edenic nature sullied or exhausted by human activity, and embrace a relational analysis which understand human (re)productive practices as historically inextricable from their constitutive material, conceptual, and affective forces. In this view, the limits of human civilization are not the capacity for capital to extract value from exogenous and finite material stocks but the ways new "comradely alliances" might capture a surplus in service of a just and sustainable world. In chapter three, Wark turns to feminist scholars of science and technology to flesh out the comradely connections of Platonov's tektology. His central interlocutor here is Donna Haraway who, along with Karen Barad, helps him to explore the "metaphoric potentials of language" (xvii) as a malleable material technology enabling us "to sense a web of human and nonhuman agents" (147). By acknowledging the inseparability of human/ technology/language practices, Wark suggests we can increase our perceptive and experimental capacities. From the "labor point of view" developed in Part One, Wark guides us towards a "cyborgian point of view" in Part Two where humans are "at one and the same time a product of techno-science and yet inclined to think ourselves separate from it" (165). He advises us to avoid making a "fetish of either the thing or the body but to inquire as to the molecular relations in which such nodes emerge" (165). From the cyborg point of view, these nodes are contact zones between divergent knowledges, sensations, and practices. But if, as Wark suggests, "We are cyborgs, making a cyborg planet with cyborg weather...whose information and energy systems are out of joint," (180) our task is far more complex than the traditional

scientific practices of diagnostic and predictive analysis. Instead, the difficult task of the present is making new molecular relations into new forms of life

Wark's fourth chapter brings his readers into the space between a fraught present and an underdetermined future via the work of contemporary science fiction author Kim Stanley Robinson, and his monumental *Mars Trilogy*, in particular (*Red Mars* [1993], *Blue Mars* [1994], *Green Mars* [1996]) . Robinson's style of 'hard' science-fiction combines philosophical depth with an "alternative realism...formed by past experience, but not confined to it" (xxi). Robinson expresses in his trilogy both a tektology wherein multiple forms of knowledge and practice intersect in the practice of establishing a permanent Martian settlement, and a proletkult that probes the horizon of utopian possibility for new forms of social organization. Wark productively contrasts the "bourgeois prose" of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* with Robinson's *Mars Trilogy*, arguing that Defoe's prose represents a "precursor to capitalist realism" (183) by describing a world populated only by "potential tools and resources" with which the lone protagonist seeks to reproduce the world as it exists elsewhere. For *Crusoe*, the measure of successful practice is its capacity to reproduce existing society. In contrast, the divergent understandings of success pursued by the main characters of the *Mars Trilogy* are among its central animating conflicts. Wark notes, "As in *Platonov*, characters [in the *Mars Trilogy*] each bear out a certain concept of what praxis could be. Over the course of the three books...these positions will evolve, clash, collaborate, and out of their matrix form the structure not just of a new polity but of a new economy, culture, and even nature" (183-185). The trilogy narrates a familiar interplay between pragmatism and utopianism as these characters struggle with and against one another and the recalcitrant planet itself.

One focal point of conflict in Robinson's text is the question of terraforming, with some characters seeking to minimize human impact to preserve an original 'nature', while others seeking to transform the planetary environment to suit human needs as rapidly as possible. Wark's attention to this conflict allows him to discuss the reciprocal relationship of profound transformation between humans and their milieu. A character in *Red Mars* highlights the importance of this relationship, "Some of us here can accept transforming the entire physical reality of this planet, without doing a single thing to change ourselves or the way we live ... We must terraform not only Mars, but ourselves" (187). The machinery of transformation must certainly include technical and infrastructural concerns in the broadest sense, but also the concepts and affective attachments through which humans may come to live otherwise.

Robinson suggests that in order to be moved towards a utopian horizon "a new structure of feeling has to come into existence, not after but before the new world" (188). In Robinson we find a more explicitly cyborg tektology than in *Platonov*, one that

bridges scientific and artistic practices as forms of sense-making and world-making. Wark suggest that on Robinson's Mars "... the whole organization of the planet has become an artwork, although one heavily dependent on, and respectful of, scientific method" (209). Indeed, over the course of the series Robinson repeatedly contests a hard boundary between arts and science, suggesting instead that both be understood (in an ideal sense, and absent the distorting force of the profit motive) as the exploratory play of perception and action. But this open-ended understanding begs a challenging question. By what means can we adjudicate on the creative and open-ended practices of world-making and sense-making? As Haraway notes elsewhere "The point is to get at how worlds are made and unmade, in order to participate in the processes, in order to foster some forms of life and not others" (Haraway 62). Today, faced with a radically transformed earth, we cannot tacitly accept the forms of life out of which we cohere as subjects. Rather, to extend the machinic metaphor, we must 'hack' the multiple overlapping and interdependent systems of both violence and provision into which human/non-human lives and landscapes are uniquely imbricated.

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Humanity in general is not stuck between the perpetrating and preventing human effects upon an external 'nature' but rather between the creation and destruction of various forms of life as composed by the dynamic relations of human, more-than-human, and geological forces. For Wark, "the Anthropocene draws attention to androgenic climate change as an unintended consequence of collective human labor" (180). Thus two things must accompany the production of progressively more fine-grained catalogues of violence in the Anthropocene. First, tactical readings of the relations that capture collective human/non-human labor today; and second, compelling visions of collective multi-species and cyborg labor as a force for unmaking and remaking the world.

With *Molecular Red* Wark joins other authors examining the implications of the Anthropocene such as Timothy Morton, Claire Colebrook, Heather Davis, and Jason Moore each of whom pose crucial questions about the status of the human, about aesthetic and political practice, about knowledge, and about science. Wark attempts to formulate a "Theory for the Anthropocene" by outlining tools for a poetics of sense-making. These tools are valuable on the level of strategy, which is to say that they provide us with a vocabulary and a framework to articulate broad goals and to re-diagram the terrain of political struggle. Wark succeeds in theorizing alternative organizations of knowledge and signaling how they might be politically useful, while retaining a certain distance from really existing practices of tektology or the proletkult. As Wark highlights in his blog and other shorter-form writings, projects of

tektology and the proletkult are not just a horizon to which one might aspire. These projects exist here and now, some even partially inspired by Wark's previous writing on media, culture, and technology.

In his first chapter, Wark suggests Bogdanov is unable to “stop himself from engaging in a system-building that overshoots the limits of his own core principles” (29). Wark maintains, however, that Bogdanov made a “good case” for his philosophy “as the last necessary philosophy, and tektology as the beginning of something else” (29). Wark's text shows a similar tension. He makes a good case that traditional philosophy and critical theory needs to change in light of today's circumstances. While it provides a certain critical distance, his prototype's insulation also makes this “something else” seem nascent and yet-to-come. But the long tradition of philosopher-inventors, of *bricoleurs* hammering ideas and matter persists and Wark's text remains a timely and creative prototype. It provides new theoretical and utopian vocabulary while clarifying the challenging yet dire work ahead. If extant examples of tektology and the proletkult are not emphasized perhaps it is because Wark knows that the onus lies—as it must—on his readers; each of us who would experiment with new relations while uniquely situated within a precarious and hostile present.

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