

# New Materialisms

*Ontology, Agency, and Politics*

EDITED BY

DIANA COOLE AND SAMANTHA FROST

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To our children, Lucien, Simon, and Madeleine,  
who are growing up in a new materialist world, and  
to Shirley Margaret Coole (1923–2009) and Michèle  
A. Moriarty (1952–2009), who did not see the end of  
the project but live on in memory.

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unsort entirely — once these mixings and remixings have occurred — exactly what contribution is made by one “side” or “the other.” Even the painter, alert to his powers of perception, is not “able to say (since the distinction has no meaning) what comes from him and what comes from things, what the new work adds to the old ones, or what it has taken from the others.” “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,” 58–59.

24 Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and Invisible*, 13, my italics. That text also deepens our experience of “the flesh” in ways which extend all the points made about the sensorium discussed above. But we cannot pursue that pregnant topic here.

25 Kelly, “Seeing Things in Merleau-Ponty,” 86 and 92.

26 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 25.

27 For a review of the neuroscience literature on bodily and cultural elements in the formation of sight, see Zeman, *Consciousness*, chaps. 5 and 6.

28 In April of 2005, *The Johns Hopkins Gazette* released the following bulletin: “Continuing its efforts to enhance the security of students, faculty and staff, the university has installed a state of the art closed-circuit TV system. The system can be programmed to look for as many as 16 behavior patterns and to assign them a priority score for operator follow-up. . . . The cameras are helping us to make the transition to a more fully integrated ‘virtual policing’ system.”

29 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 172.

30 Heath, *The Hidden Power of Advertising*, 67. Heath is not speaking of subliminal inserts here; he is talking about advertisements that distract attention from themselves and encourage viewers to be distracted too as the advertisements insert connections between affect, words, and images.

31 Hansen, *New Philosophy for New Media*, 198.

32 *Ibid.*

33 It is pertinent to emphasize that the “attachment to this world” spoken of here is not to existing injustices, class suffering, dogmatism, repression of diversity, and the like but to the human existential condition itself as it finds expression in a world in which some zones of life proceed at a more rapid tempo. The wager is that the enhancement of attachment to this world increases the energy and will to oppose the dangers and injustices built into it.

34 Deleuze, *Cinema II, The Time Image*, 172.

35 I review specific strategies, both individual and collective, to rework tacit dispositions to perception and sensibility in chapters 4, 5, and 6 of *Neurophilosophy* and in “Experience and Experiment.”

Rosi Bruidotti

## The Politics of “Life Itself” and New Ways of Dying

This essay focuses on contemporary debates on the politics of life itself, with special emphasis on the shifting boundaries between life and death. As a starting assumption, I want to suggest here that we understand biopower not only in the sense of the government of the living but also with relation to practices of dying. By extension, this means that our relationship to pain, loss, and practices of mourning needs to be reconsidered in the light of biopolitical concerns.

Generally speaking, “the politics of life itself” refers to the extent to which the notion of biopower has emerged as an organizing principle for the proliferating discourses and practices that make technologically mediated “life” into a self-constituting entity.<sup>1</sup> Living matter itself becomes the subject and not the object of inquiry, and this shift toward a biocentered perspective affects the very fiber and structure of social subjects.<sup>2</sup> One of the manifestations of this materialist shift toward what could be called a genetic social imaginary is the changing roles and representations of the human body.<sup>3</sup> As a result of information and biogenetic technologies, bodily materialism is being revised in ways that challenge accepted social constructivist notions. The matter of the body and the specific materiality of bodies have come to the fore with more prominence, for example, in stem-cell research and

in everyday media-driven dissemination of "gene-centric" images and representations. Contemporary social and cultural examples of this shift are practices linked to genetic citizenship as a form of spectatorship, for instance, the visualizations of the life of genes in medical practices, popular culture, cinema, and advertising. Another social aspect to this trend concerns the uses of genetics in political debates on race, ethnicity, and immigration. Yet another example is the rhetoric of "life" or living matter in public debates from abortion and stem-cell research to new kinship and family structures. This development pertains to a trend that is becoming known as neovitalism and vital politics.<sup>4</sup> Considering the problematic nature of vitalism in European thought and modern history, in view of its link with the organicist philosophies of fascism, I shall not pursue it further in this essay.

### The Current Situation

These social discourses about "life" are often taken as indicating the return of "real bodies" and real materiality: an ontology of presence after so much postmodernist deconstruction. I refer to this return of a neorealist practice of bodily materialism as *matter-ialism*, or radical neomaterialism. This trend has caused both the neoliberal<sup>5</sup> and the neo-Kantian thinkers to be struck by high levels of anxiety about the sheer thinkability of the human future.<sup>6</sup> Technology is central to this matter-ialistic debate.

Claudia Springer argues, for instance, that this discourse celebrating the union of humans and electronic technology is currently circulating with equal success among the scientific community and in popular culture.<sup>7</sup> It can therefore be seen and, to a certain extent, dismissed today as a dominant mode of representation. The work of Donna Haraway is of seminal importance here. The cyborg as a technologically enhanced body-machine is the dominant social and discursive figuration for the interaction between the human and the technological in postindustrial societies. It is also a living or active, materially embedded cartography of the kind of power-relations that are operative in the postindustrial social sphere. Scott Bukatman argues that this projection of the physical self into an artificial environment feeds into a dream of terminal identity outside the body, a sort of "cybersubject" that feeds into the New Age fantasies of

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cosmic redemption through technology.<sup>8</sup> New Age spirituality or technomysticism form part of this trend.

This affects the question of death and makes possible new ways of dying. A rather complex relationship has emerged in the cyber universe we inhabit: one in which the link between the flesh and the machine is symbiotic and therefore can best be described as a bond of mutual dependence. This engenders some significant paradoxes when it comes to the human body. The corporeal site of subjectivity is simultaneously denied, in a fantasy of escape, and strengthened or reinforced. Anne Balsamo stresses the paradoxical concomitance of effects surrounding the new posthuman bodies as enabling a fantastic dream of immortality and control over life and death. "And yet, such beliefs about the technological future "life" of the body are complemented by a palpable fear of death and annihilation from uncontrollable and spectacular body-threats: antibiotic-resistant viruses, random contamination, flesh-eating bacteria."<sup>9</sup>

In other words, the new practices of "life" mobilize not only generative forces but also new and subtler degrees of extinction. This type of vitality, unconcerned by clear-cut distinctions between living and dying, opposes the notion of *zoë* as a nonhuman yet affirmative life-force. This vitalist materialism has nothing in common with the postmodern emphasis on the inorganic and the aesthetics of fake, pastiche, and camp simulation. It also moves beyond "high" cyber studies, into post-cyber-materialism.

Through these practices, the traditional humanistic unity of the embodied human is dislocated by a number of social forces, driven by the convergence of information, communication, and biotechnologies.<sup>10</sup> This engenders a variety of social practices of extended, fragmented, enhanced, or prosthetically empowered embodiment. In my previous work on nomenclature and feminist theory, I have extensively analyzed this phenomenon, which I do not assess necessarily in a negative mode. In this essay, I want to test the hypothesis that the emphasis on life itself has some positive sides because it focuses with greater accuracy on the complexities of contemporary technologically mediated bodies and on social practices of human embodiment.

This marks a shift away from anthropocentrism, in favor of a new emphasis on the mutual interdependence of material, biocultural, and



symbolic forces in the making of social and political practices. The focus on life itself may encourage a sort of biocentered egalitarianism,<sup>11</sup> forcing a reconsideration of the concept of subjectivity in terms of “life-forces.” It dislocates but also redefines the relationship between self and other by shifting the axes of genderization, racialization, and naturalization away from a binary opposition into a more complex and less oppositional mode of interaction. Biopolitics thus opens up an ecophilosophical dimension of reflection and inaugurates alternative ecologies of belonging both in kinship systems and in forms of social and political participation. I would like to explore the possibility that these “hybrid” social identities and the new modes of multiple belonging they enact may constitute the starting point for mutual and respective accountability and pave the way for an ethical regrouping of social participation and community building.

I would like, in other words, to defend the politics of “life itself” as a form of active ethical citizenship. Social examples of biocitizenship as a technology of the self are the emphasis currently placed on the responsibility for the self-management of one’s health and one’s own lifestyle in the case of medical insurance, or the social drive toward eternal youth, which is linked to the suspension of time in globally mediated societies and can be juxtaposed to euthanasia and other social practices of assisted death. Also relevant to this discussion are contemporary embodied social practices that are often pathologized: addictions, eating disorders, and melancholia, ranging from burnout to states of apathy or disaffection. I want to approach these phenomena in a nonnormative manner as social manifestations of the shifting relation between living and dying in the era of the politics of “life itself.”

### Biopower Revisited

Issues of power and power relations are central to this project. The notion of “life itself” lies at the heart of biogenetic capitalism as a site of financial investments and potential profit.<sup>12</sup> Technological interventions neither suspend nor automatically improve the social relations of exclusion and inclusion that historically had been predicated along the axes of class and socioeconomic, as well as along the sexualized and racialized lines of demarcation of “otherness.” Also denounced as “biopiracy,” the ongoing technological revolution often intensifies patterns of traditional discrimi-

nation and exploitation.<sup>13</sup> We have all become the subjects of biopower, but we differ considerably in the degrees and modes of actualization of that very power.

This has three major consequences: the first is conceptual and, as I anticipated earlier, focuses on the more negative aspects of the politics of “life itself,” namely, the new practices of dying in contemporary society. “Life” can be a threatening force, which engenders new epidemics and environmental catastrophes, blurring the distinction between the natural and the cultural dimensions. Another obvious example of the politics of death is the new forms of warfare and specifically terrorists’ use of suicide bombers. Equally significant are the changes that have occurred in the political practice of bearing witness to the dead as a form of activism, from the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo to the Chechnya war widows. From a posthuman perspective, there is also the proliferation of viruses that travel back and forth between humans and animals — and between computers and other digital devices through the internet. Relevant cultural practices that reflect this changing status of death can be traced in the success of forensic detectives in contemporary popular culture. The corpse is a daily presence in global media and journalistic news, while it is also an object of entertainment. The dislocation of gender roles in relation to death and killing is reflected in the image of women who kill, from recent stage productions of *Medea* and *Heaven* to the character of Lara Croft. It might also be interesting to analyze the currency granted to both legal and illegal drugs in contemporary culture, which blurs the boundaries between self-destruction and fashionable behavior and forces a reconsideration of what is the value of “life itself.”

The second consequence concerns the status of social and political theory itself. It is urgent to assess the state of the theoretical debates on biopower after Foucault, especially in terms of its legal, political, and ethical implications. Several positions have emerged in recent biopower research. Some thinkers stress the role of moral accountability as a form of biopolitical citizenship, thus inscribing the notion of “life” as “*bios*,” that is to say, an instance of governmentality that is as empowering as it is confining.<sup>14</sup> This school of thought locates the political moment in the relational and self-regulating accountability of a bioethical subject and results in the radicalization of the project of modernity.

The second grouping takes its lead from Heidegger and is best ex-

emplied by Giorgio Agamben.<sup>15</sup> It defines “*bios*” as the result of the intervention of sovereign power as that which is capable of reducing the subject to “bare life,” that is to say “*zoē*.” The being-aliveness of the subject (*zoē*) is identified with its perishability, its propensity and vulnerability to death and extinction. Biopower here means Thanatos-politics and results, among others, in the indictment of the project of modernity.

A third important group is formed by feminist, environmentalist, and race theorists who have addressed the shifting status of “difference” in advanced capitalism in a manner that respects the complexity of social relations and critiques liberalism, while highlighting the specificity of a gender and race approach.<sup>16</sup> These critical thinkers approach biopolitical analyses from the angle of the greed and ruthless exploitation that marks contemporary globalized capitalism. The notion of biopiracy is significant in this respect.<sup>17</sup>

A fourth significant community of scholars works within a Spinozist framework and includes Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, Edouard Glissant, Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd, Etienne Balibar, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, and myself.<sup>18</sup> The emphasis falls on the politics of life itself as a relentlessly generative force. This requires an interrogation of the shifting interrelations between human and nonhuman forces. The latter are defined both as inhuman and posthuman.<sup>19</sup>

The third consequence is methodological. If it is indeed the case that all technologies have a strong “biopower” effect, in that they affect bodies and immerse them in social and legal relations of power, then a higher degree of interdisciplinary effort is needed in social and political thought to come to terms with our historical predicament. This challenge requires a methodology that focuses on processes and interconnections. Moreover, the speed of transformations induced by technology displaces established conventions of thought and moral certainties. In culture at large, technological changes are received with a mixture of fascination and horror, euphoria and anxiety.<sup>20</sup> This raises serious ethical issues. I would like to assess the hypothesis that, far from being merely a “crisis” of values, this historical situation presents us with new opportunities. Renewed conceptual creativity and a leap of the social imaginary may be needed in order to meet the challenge. I want to explore accordingly a postanthropocentric approach to the analysis of “life itself” as a way of broadening the sense of community. Examples of this are the new global environmentalism, which

assesses allegedly “natural” catastrophes as an interesting hybrid mix of cultural and political forces. Also significant to this discussion is the return of evolutionary discourses in contemporary social theory, as is the revival of a vitalist Spinozist political theory. The state of the debates on these issues in fields as diverse as political, legal, social, environmental, feminist, and technology theories, to name just a few, shows a range of positions that need to be assessed critically. This essay aims to elaborate sets of criteria for a new social and political theory that steers a course between humanistic nostalgia and neoliberal euphoria about biocapitalism. Social and political practices that take life itself as the point of reference need not aim at the restoration of unitary norms or the celebration of the master-narrative of global profit, but rather at social cohesion, the respect for diversity, and sustainable growth. At the heart of this project lies an ethics that respects vulnerability while actively constructing social horizons of hope.

### The Emergence of *Zoē*

Life is half animal, *zoē* (zoology, zoophilic, zoo) and half discursive, *bios* (biology). *Zoē*, of course, is the poor half of a couple that foregrounds *bios* defined as intelligent life. Centuries of Christian indoctrination have left a deep mark here. The relationship to animal life, to *zoē* rather than *bios*, constitutes one of those qualitative distinctions upon which Western reason erected its empire. *Bios* is almost holy, *zoē* is certainly gritty. That they intersect in the human body turns the physical self into a contested space and into a political arena. The mind-body dualism has historically functioned as a shortcut through the complexities of this in-between contested zone. One of the most persistent and helpful fictions that is told about human life is its alleged self-evidence, its implicit worth. *Zoē* is always second best, and the idea of life carrying on independent of, even regardless of, and at times in spite of rational control is the dubious privilege attributed to the nonhumans. These cover all of the animal kingdoms as well as the classical “others” of metaphysically based visions of the subject, namely the sexual other (woman) and the ethnic other (the native). In the old regime this used to be called “Nature.”

Traditionally, the self-reflexive control over life is reserved for the humans, whereas the mere unfolding of biological sequences is for the non-



humans. Given that this concept of “the human” was colonized by phallogocentrism, it has come to be identified with male, white, heterosexual, Christian, property-owning, standard-language-speaking citizens. *Zoē* marks the outside of this vision of the subject, in spite of the efforts of evolutionary theory to strike a new relationship to the nonhuman. Contemporary scientific practices have forced us to touch the bottom of some inhumanity that connects to the human precisely in the immanence of its bodily materialism. With the genetic revolution, we can speak of a generalized “becoming inhuman” of *bios*. The category of “*bios*” has cracked under the strain and has splintered into a web of interconnected “bits-of-life” effects.

With the postmodern collapse of the qualitative divide between the human and his (the gender is no coincidence) others, the deep vitality of the embodied self has resurfaced from under the crust of the old metaphysical vision of the subject. *Zoē*, this obscenity, this life in me, is intrinsic to my being and yet so much “itself” that it is independent of the will, the demands and expectations of the sovereign consciousness. This *zoē* makes me tick and yet escapes the control of the supervision of the self. *Zoē* carries on relentlessly and gets cast out of the holy precinct of the “me” that demands control and fails to obtain it. It thus ends up being experienced as an alien other. Life is experienced as inhuman because it is all too human, obscene because it lives on mindlessly. Are we not baffled by this scandal, this wonder, this *zoē*, that is to say, by an idea of life that exuberantly exceeds *bios* and supremely ignores *logos*? Are we not in awe of this piece of flesh called our “body,” of this aching meat called our “self” expressing the abject and simultaneously divine potency of life?

Classical philosophy is resolutely on the side of a dialogue with the biological. Nomadic subjectivity is, in contrast, in love with *zoē*. It’s about the posthuman as becoming animal, becoming other, becoming insect—trespassing all metaphysical boundaries. Ultimately, it leads to becoming imperceptible and fading—death being just another time sequence. Some of these “bits-of-life” effects are therefore very closely related to that aspect of life that goes by the name of death, but is nonetheless an integral part of the *bios/zoē* process. The *bios/zoē* compound refers to what was previously known as life by introducing a differentiation internal to this category. By making the notion of life more complex, this distinction implies the no-

tion of multiplicity. This allows for a nonbinary way of positing the relationship between same and other, between different categories of living beings, and ultimately between life and death. The emphasis and hence the mark of “difference” now falls on the “other” of the living body following its humanistic definition: *thanatos*—the dead body, the corpse or spectral other.

### Of Limits as Thresholds

One other concern that prompts this essay is the awareness of the vulnerability of many humans, including those who are committed to pursuing change and making a difference. Progressive thinkers are just as human as others, only considerably more mortal. The issue of suffering, pain, and loss raises its disturbing head.

We lost so many of its specimens to dead-end experimentations of the existential, political, sexual, narcotic, or technological kind. Although it is true that we lost as many if not more of our members to the stupefying inertia of the status quo—a sort of generalized “Stepford wives” syndrome—it is nonetheless the case that I have developed an acute awareness of how difficult changes are. This is not meant as a deterrent against them, on the contrary: I think that the current political climate has placed undue emphasis on the risks involved in pursuing social changes, playing ad nauseam the refrain about the death of ideologies. Such a conservative reaction aims at disciplining the citizens and reducing their desire for the “new” to docile and compulsive forms of consumerism. Nothing could be further removed from my project than this approach. I simply want to issue a cautionary note: processes of change and transformation are so important and ever so vital and necessary that they have to be handled with care. The concept of ethical sustainability addresses these complex issues. We have to take pain into account as a major incentive for, and not only an obstacle to, an ethics of changes and transformations. We also need to rethink the knowing subject in terms of affectivity, interrelationality, territories, ecophilosophical resources, locations, and forces. The nomadic ethico-political project focuses on becoming as a pragmatic philosophy that stresses the need to act, to experiment with different modes of constituting subjectivity and different ways of inhabiting our corporeality. Accordingly, nomadic ethics is not about a master theory but

rather about multiple micropolitical modes of daily activism. It is essential to put the "active" back into activism.

*Zoē*, or life as absolute vitality, however, is not above negativity, and it can hurt. It is always too much for the specific slab of enfleshed existence that single subjects actualize. It is a constant challenge for us to rise to the occasion, to catch the wave of life's intensities and ride it, exposing the boundaries or limits as we transgress them. We often crack in the process and just cannot take it anymore. The sheer activity of thinking about such intensity is painful: it causes intense strain, psychic unrest, and nervous tension. If thinking were pleasurable, more humans might be tempted to engage in this activity. Accelerations or increased intensities, however, are that which most humans prefer to avoid.

Crucial to this ethics of affirmation or affirmative compassion (as opposed to moral pity) is the concept of limit. For Spinoza-Deleuze the limit is built into the affective definition of subjectivity. Affectivity in fact is what activates an embodied subject, empowering him or her to interact with others. This acceleration of one's existential speed, or increase of one's affective temperature, is the dynamic process of becoming. It follows that a subject can think/understand/do/become no more than what he or she can take or sustain within his or her embodied, spatiotemporal coordinates. This deeply positive understanding of the human subject posits built-in, bioorganic limitations.

Thus the ethical challenge, as Nietzsche had recommended, consists in cultivating joyful modes of confronting the overwhelming intensity of *bios-zoē*. This implies approaching the world through affectivity and not cognition: as singularity, force, movement, through assemblages or webs of interconnections with all that lives. The subject is an autopoietic machine, fuelled by targeted perceptions, and it functions as the echoing chamber of *zoē*. This nonanthropocentric view expresses both a profound love for Life as a cosmic force and the desire to depersonalize subjective life-and-death. This is just one life, not *my* life. The life in "me" does not answer to my name: "I" is just passing.

To live intensely and be alive to the nth degree pushes us to the extreme edge of mortality. This has implications for the question of the limits, which are built-in to the very embodied and embedded structure of the subject. The limits are those of one's endurance—in the double sense of lasting in time and bearing the pain of confronting "Life" as *zoē*. The

ethical subject is one that can bear this confrontation, cracking up a bit but without having its physical or affective intensity destroyed by it. Ethics consists in reworking the pain into a threshold of sustainability, when and if possible: cracking, but holding it, still.

### *Bios/Zoē* Ethics and Thanatos

My understanding of "life" as the *bios-zoē* ethics of sustainable transformations differs considerably from what Giorgio Agamben (1998) calls "bare life" or "the rest" after the humanized "bio-logical" wrapping is taken over.<sup>21</sup> "Bare life" is that in you which sovereign power can kill: it is the body as disposable matter in the hands of the despotic force of power (*potestas*). Included as necessarily excluded, "bare life" inscribes fluid vitality at the heart of the mechanisms of capture of the state system. Agamben stresses that this vitality, or "aliveness," however, is all the more mortal for it. This is linked to Heidegger's theory of Being as deriving its force from the annihilation of animal life.

The position of *zoē* in Agamben's system is analogous to the role and the location of language in psychoanalytic theory: it is the site of constitution or "capture" of the subject. This "capture" functions by positing—as an a posteriori construction—a prelinguistic dimension of subjectivity which is apprehended as "always already" lost and out of reach. *Zoē*—like the prediscursive in Lacan, the *chora* of Kristeva, and the maternal feminine of Irigaray—becomes for Agamben the ever-receding horizon of an alterity which has to be included as necessarily excluded in order to sustain the framing of the subject in the first place. This introduces finitude as a constitutive element within the framework of subjectivity, which also fuels an affective political economy of loss and melancholia at the heart of the subject.<sup>22</sup>

In his important work on the totalitarian edge of regimes of "biopower," Agamben perpetuates the philosophical habit, which consists in taking mortality or finitude as the transhistorical horizon for discussions of "life." This fixation on Thanatos—which Nietzsche criticized over a century ago—is still very present in critical debates today. It often produces a gloomy and pessimistic vision not only of power but also of the technological developments that propel the regimes of biopower. I beg to differ from the habit that favors the deployment of the problem of *bios-zoē*



on the horizon of death or of a liminal state of not-life or in the spectral economy of the never-dead. Instead, I prefer to stress the generative powers of *zoē* and to turn to the Spinozist political ontology defended by Deleuze and Guattari.<sup>23</sup> I propose to extend this positive approach to the discussion of death as well.

Speaking from the position of an embodied and embedded female subject, I find the metaphysics of finitude to be a myopic way of putting the question of the limits of what we call "life." It is not because Thanatos always wins out in the end that it should enjoy such conceptual high status. Death is overrated. The ultimate subtraction is after all only another phase in a generative process. Too bad that the relentless generative powers of death require the suppression of that which is the nearest and dearest to me, namely myself, my own vital being-there. For the narcissistic human subject, as psychoanalysis teaches us, it is unthinkable that Life should go on without my being there. The process of confronting the thinkability of a Life that may not have "me" or any "human" at the center is actually a sobering and instructive process. I see this postanthropocentric shift as the start for an ethics of sustainability that aims at shifting the focus toward the positivity of *zoē*. As Hardt and Negri suggest, Agamben fails to identify the materialist and productive dimension of this concept, making it in fact indifferent.<sup>24</sup>

### The Question of Limits

I want to end this section with the suggestion that one of the reasons why the negative associations linked to pain, especially in relation to political processes of change, are ideologically laden is that it fits in with the logic of claims and compensations which is central to advanced capitalism. This is a form of institutionalized management of the negative that has become quite common also in gender and antiracism politics.

Two more problematic aspects need to be raised as a consequence. The first is that our culture tends to glorify pain by equating it with suffering, and it thus promotes an ideology of compensation. Contemporary culture has encouraged and rewarded a public morality based on the twin principles of claims and compensation. As if legal and financial settlements could constitute the answer to the injury suffered, the pain endured, and

the long-lasting effects of the injustice. Cases that exemplify this trend are the compensation for the Shoah in the sense of restitution of stolen property, artworks, bank deposits; similar claims have been made by the descendants of slaves forcefully removed from Africa to North America,<sup>25</sup> and more recently there have been claims for compensation for damages caused by Soviet communism, notably the confiscation of properties across eastern Europe, both from Jewish and other former citizens. A great deal of contemporary mainstream feminism has also moved in the direction of claims and compensation. This makes affirmative ethics of transformation into a struggle against the mainstream. It also makes it appear more counterintuitive than it actually is.

The second problem is the force of habit. Starting from the assumption that a subject is a sedimentation of established habits, these can be seen as patterns of repetitions that consolidate modes of relation and forces of interaction. Habits are the frame within which nonunitary or complex subjects get reterritorialized, albeit temporarily. One of the established habits in our culture is to frame "pain" within a discourse and social practice of suffering which requires rightful compensation.

Equally strong is the urge to understand and empathize with pain. People go to great lengths in order to ease all pain. Great distress follows from not knowing or not being able to articulate the source of one's suffering, or from knowing it all too well, all the time. The yearning for solace, closure, and justice is understandable and worthy of respect.

This ethical dilemma was already posed by J. F. Lyotard and, much earlier, by Primo Levi about the survivors of Nazi concentration camps,<sup>26</sup> namely, that the kind of vulnerability we humans experience in the face of events on the scale of small or high horror is something for which no adequate compensation is even thinkable. It is just incommensurable: a hurt, or wound, beyond repair. This means that the notion of justice in the sense of a logic of rights and reparation is not applicable. For the post-structuralist Lyotard, ethics consists in accepting the impossibility of adequate compensation — and living with the open wound.

This is the road to an ethics of affirmation, which respects the pain but suspends the quest for both claims and compensation and resists the logic of retribution or rights. This is achieved through a sort of depersonalization of the event, which is the ultimate ethical challenge. The displacement of the "zoē"-indexed reaction reveals the fundamental meaningless-

ness of the hurt, the injustice, or injury one has suffered. "Why me?" is the refrain most commonly heard in situations of extreme distress. This expresses rage as well as anguish at one's ill fate. The answer is plain: actually, for no reason at all. Examples of this are the banality of evil in large-scale genocides like the Holocaust and the randomness of surviving them.<sup>27</sup> There is something intrinsically senseless about the pain, hurt, or injustice: lives are lost or saved for all and no reason at all. Why did some go to work in the World Trade Center on 9/11 while others missed the train? Why did Frida Kahlo take that tram which crashed so that she was impaled by a metal rod, and not the next one? For no reason at all. Reason has nothing to do with it. That's precisely the point. We need to delink pain from the quest for meaning and move beyond, to the next stage. That is the transformation of negative into positive passions.

This is not fatalism, and even less resignation, but rather a Nietzschean ethics of overturning the negative. Let us call it: *amor fati*: we have to be worthy of what happens to us and rework it within an ethics of relation. Of course repugnant and unbearable events do happen. Ethics consists, however, in reworking these events in the direction of positive relations. This is not carelessness or lack of compassion but rather a form of lucidity that acknowledges the meaninglessness of pain and the futility of compensation. It also reasserts that the ethical instance is not that of retaliation or compensation, but rather it rests on active transformation of the negative.

This requires a double shift. First, the affect itself moves from the frozen or reactive effect of pain to the proactive affirmation of its generative potential. Second, the line of questioning also shifts from the quest for the origin or source to a process of elaboration of the questions that express and enhance a subject's capacity to achieve freedom through the understanding of its limits. Biocentered egalitarianism breaks the expectation of mutual reciprocity that is central not only to liberal individualism but also to a poststructuralist ethics of otherness. Accepting the impossibility of mutual recognition and replacing it with one of mutual specification and mutual codependence is what is at stake in postsecular affirmative ethics. The ethical process of transforming negative into positive passions introduces time and motion into the frozen enclosure of seething pain. It is a postsecularist gesture of affirmation of hope, in the sense of creating the conditions for endurance and hence for a sustainable future.

What is an adequate ethical question? One that is capable of sustaining

the subject in his or her quest for more interrelations with others, that is, more "Life," motion, change, and transformation. The adequate ethical question provides the subject with a frame for interaction and change, growth and movement. It affirms life as difference-at-work. An ethical question has to be adequate in relation to how much a body can take. How much can an embodied entity take in the mode of interrelations and connections, that is, how much freedom of action can we endure? Affirmative ethics assumes, following Nietzsche, that humanity does not stem from freedom but rather freedom is extracted from the awareness of limitations. Postsecular ethics is about freedom from the burden of negativity, freedom through the understanding of our bondage.

### The Case of Intergenerational Justice

The last aspect of the postsecular ethics of affirmation I want to spell out is the generational time-lines — in the sense of the construction of social horizons of hope, that is, sustainable futures.

Modernity, as an ideology of progress, postulated boundless faith in the future as the ultimate destination of the human. Zygmunt Bauman quotes one of my favorite writers, Diderot, who stated that modern man is in love with posterity. Postmodernity, on the other hand, is death-bound and sets as its horizon the globalization process in terms of technological and economic interdependence. Capitalism has no built-in teleological purpose, historical logic, or structure but rather is a self-imploding system that will not stop at anything in order to fulfil its aim: profit. This inherently self-destructive system feeds on and thus destroys the very conditions of its survival: it is omnivorous, and what it ultimately eats is the future itself.

Being nothing more than this all-consuming entropic energy, capitalism lacks the ability to create anything new: it can merely promote the recycling of spent hopes, repackaged in the rhetorical frame of the "next generation of gadgets." Affirmative ethics expresses the desire to endure in time and thus clashes with the deadly spin of the present.

The future today is no longer the self-projection of the modernist subject: Eve and the New Jerusalem. It is a basic and rather humble act of faith in the possibility of endurance, as duration or continuity, which honors our obligation to the generations to come. It involves the virtual unfold-



ing of the affirmative aspect of what we manage to actualize here and now. Virtual futures grow out of sustainable presents and vice-versa. This is how qualitative transformations can be actualized and transmitted along the genetic or time line. Transformative postsecular ethics takes on the future affirmatively, as the shared collective imagining that goes on becoming, to effect multiple modes of interaction with heterogeneous others. Futurity is made of this. Nonlinear evolution: an ethics that moves away from the paradigm of reciprocity and the logic of recognition and installs a rhizomic relation of mutual affirmation.

By targeting those who come after us as the rightful ethical interlocutors and assessors of our own actions, we are taking seriously the implications of our own situated position. This form of intergenerational justice is crucial. This point about intergenerational fairness need not, however, be expressed or conceptualized in the social imaginary as an Oedipal narrative. To be concerned about the future need not result in linearity, that is, in restating the unity of space and time as the horizon of subjectivity. On the contrary, nonlinear genealogical models of intergenerational decency are a way of displacing the Oedipal hierarchy.

These models of intergenerational decency involve a becoming-minoritarian of the elderly, the senior, and the parental figures, but also the de-Oedipalization of the bond of the young to those who preceded them. The process also calls for new ways of addressing and solving intergenerational conflicts — other than envy and rivalry — for joining forces across the generational divide by working together toward sustainable futures and practicing an ethics of nonreciprocity in the pursuit of affirmation.

An example: the older feminists may feel the cruel pinch of aging, but some of the young ones suffer from envy of the time period of the 1970s. The middle-aged survivors of the second wave may feel like war veterans or survivors but some of generation Y, as Iris van der Tuin taught me, call themselves “born-again baby boomers!”

So who’s envying whom?

We are in *this* together, indeed. Those who go through life under the sign of the desire for change need accelerations that jolt them out of set habits; political thinkers of the postsecular era need to be visionary, prophetic, and upbeat — insofar as they are passionately committed to writing the prehistory of the future, which is to say, to introducing change in the

present so as to affect multiple modes of belonging through complex and heterogeneous relations. This is the horizon of sustainable futures.

Hope is a sort of “dreaming forward,” it is an anticipatory virtue that permeates our lives and activates them. It is a powerful motivating force grounded in our collective imaginings indeed. These collective imaginings express very grounded concerns for the multitude of “anybodies” (*homotantum*) that compose the human community lest our greed and selfishness destroy or diminish it for generations to come. Given that posterity per definition can never pay us back, this gesture is perfectly gratuitous.

Against the general lethargy, the rhetoric of selfish genes and possessive individualism on the one hand, and the dominant ideology of the melancholic lament on the other, hope rests with an affirmative ethics of sustainable futures, a deep and careless generosity, the ethics of nonprofit at an ontological level.

Why should one pursue this project?

For no reason at all. Reason has nothing to do with this. Let’s just do it for the hell of it and for love of the world.

## Notes

- 1 Rose, “The Politics of Life Itself.”
- 2 Fraser, Kember, and Lury, eds., *Inventive Life*.
- 3 Franklin, Lury, and Stacey, *Global Nature, Global Culture*.
- 4 For “neovitalism,” see Fraser, Kember, and Lury, eds., *Inventive Life*, and for “vital politics,” see Rose, “The Politics of Life Itself.”
- 5 Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future*.
- 6 Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature*.
- 7 Springer, *Electronic Eros*.
- 8 Bukatman, *Terminal Identity*, 187.
- 9 Balsamo, *Technologies of the Gendered Body*, 1–2.
- 10 Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*.
- 11 Ansell-Pearson, *Viroid Life*.
- 12 Parisi, “For a Schizogenesis of Sexual Difference.”
- 13 Shiva, *Biopiracy*.
- 14 Rabinow, *Anthropos Today*; Esposito, *Bios*.
- 15 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*.
- 16 Haraway, *Modest\_Witness@second\_Millennium*; Gilroy, *Against Race*; Ben-



- habib, *The Claims of Culture*; Butler, *Precarious Life*; Braidotti, *Metamorphoses*; Grosz, *The Nick of Time*.
- 17 Shiva, *Biopiracy*.
- 18 Deleuze, *Spinoza et le problème de l'expression*; Deleuze, *Logique du sens*; Deleuze, "Limmanence"; Guattari, *Chaosmosis*; Glissant, *Poétique de la relation*; Gatens and Lloyd, *Collective Imaginings*; Balibar, *Politics and the Other Scene*; Hardt and Negri, *Empire*.
- 19 Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*.
- 20 Braidotti, *Metamorphoses*.
- 21 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*.
- 22 Braidotti, *Metamorphoses*.
- 23 Deleuze and Guattari, "Capitalisme éurgumène"; Deleuze and Guattari, *Mille plateaux*.
- 24 Hardt and Negri, *Empire*.
- 25 Gilroy, *Against Race*.
- 26 Lyotard, *Le Différend*.
- 27 Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.

## ECONOMIES OF DISRUPTION