

GEONTOLOGIES

A REQUIEM
TO LATE
LIBERALISM

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To *all* of us, karrabing or karrakal, gagathenibarru

SO LITTLE OF WHAT COULD HAPPEN DOES HAPPEN.
—SALVADOR DALI

Contents

Acknowledgments

1

The Three Figures of Geontology

2

Can Rocks Die? Life and Death inside the Carbon Imaginary

3

The Fossils and the Bones

4

The Normativity of Creeks

5

The Fog of Meaning and the Voiceless Demos

6

Downloading the Dreaming

7

Late Liberal Geontopower

Notes

Bibliography

Index

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THE THREE FIGURES OF GEONTOLOGY

The Figures and the Tactics

For a long time many have believed that Western Europe spawned and then spread globally a regime of power best described as biopolitics. Biopolitics was thought to consist of a “set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power.”¹ Many believe that this regime was inaugurated in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and then consolidated during the 1970s. Prior to this, in the age of European kings, a very different formation of power, namely, sovereign power, reigned. Sovereign power was defined by the spectacular, public performance of the right to kill, to subtract life, and, in moments of regal generosity, to let live. It was a regime of sovereign thumbs, up or down, and enacted over the tortured, disemboweled, charred, and hacked bodies of humans—and sometimes of cats.² Royal power was not merely the claim of an absolute power over life. It was a carnival of death. The crowds gathered in a boisterous jamboree of killing—hawking

wares, playing dice—not in reverent silence around the sanctity of life. Its figure, lavishly described at the opening of Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, was the drawn-and-quartered regicide.

How different does that formation of power seem to how we conceive of legitimate power now, what we ask of it, and, in asking, what it creates? And how different do the figures seem through which the contemporary formation of power entails its power? We do not see kings and their subjects, or bodies hacked into pieces, but states and their populations, individuals and their management of health, the Malthusian couple, the hysterical woman, the perverse adult, and the masturbating child. Sure, some social formations seem to indicate a return to sovereign power, such as the US and European security states and their secret rendition centers created in the wake of 9/11, 7/7, 11-M (the Madrid train bombings), Charlie Hebdo.... But these manifestations of a new hard sovereign power are deeply insinuated in operations of biopower—through the stochastic rhythms of specific algorithms and experiments in social media—something Foucault anticipated in his lectures on security, territory, and population.³ Is it such a wonder, then, that some believe a great divide separates the current regime of biopolitics from the ancient order of sovereignty? Or that some think that disciplinary power (with its figures of camps, barracks, and schools, and its regularization of life) and biopolitics (with its four figures of sexuality, its technological tracking of desire at the level of the individual and population, and its normation of life) arch their backs against this ancient savage sovereign *dispositif*?

Foucault was hardly the first to notice the transformation of the form and rationale of power in the long history of Western

Europe—and, insofar as it shaped the destinies of its imperial and colonial reach, power writ globally. Perhaps most famously, Hannah Arendt, writing nearly twenty years before Foucault would begin his lectures on biopower, bewailed the emergence of the “Social” as the referent and purpose of political activity.⁴ Arendt did not contrast the era of European kings and courts to the modern focus on the social body, but rather she contrasted the latter to the classical Greek division between public and private realms. For Arendt the public was the space of political deliberation and action carved out of and defined by its freedom from and antagonism to the realm of necessity. The public was the active exclusion of the realm of necessity—everything having to do with the physical life of the body—and this exclusion constituted the public realm as such. For Arendt, the space of necessity began leaking into the public during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, creating a new topology of the public and private. She termed this new spacing “the Social.” Rather than excluding bodily needs, wants, and desires from political thought, the liberal “Social” state embraced them, letting loose *homo economicus* to sack the public forum and establish itself as the *raison d’être* of the political. Ever since, the liberal state gains its legitimacy by demonstrating that it anticipates, protects, and enhances the biological and psychological needs, wants, and desires of its citizens.

If Foucault was not the first word on the subject of biopolitics he was also not the last. As lighthearted as his famous quip might have been that this century would bear the name “Deleuze,” he would no doubt have been pleased to see the good race that his concept of the biopolitical has run, spawning numerous neologisms (biopower, biopolitics, thanatopolitical, necropolitics, positive and negative forms of biopower, neuropolitics) and

spreading into anthropology, cultural and literary studies, political theory, critical philosophy, and history. Jacques Derrida and Donna Haraway would explore the concept of auto-immunity from the point of view of the biopolitical.⁵ Giorgio Agamben would put Arendt and Foucault in conversation in order to stretch the origins of the emergence of the biopolitical back to Greek and Roman law.⁶ Roberto Esposito would counter the negative readings of Agamben by arguing that a positive form of biopolitics could be found in innovative readings of Martin Heidegger, Georges Canguilhem, and Baruch Spinoza.⁷ Foucault's concept of biopolitics has also been battered by accusations of a narcissistic provinciality.⁸ This provinciality becomes apparent when biopolitics is read from a different global history—when biopolitics is given a different social geography. Thus many authors across the global south have insisted that it is impossible to write a history of the biopolitical that starts and ends in European history, *even when* Western Europe is the frame of reference. Achille Mbembe, for instance, argued that the sadistic expressions of German Nazism were genealogically related to the sadisms of European colonialism. In the colonial space “the generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations” were the experimental precursor for the extermination camps in Europe.⁹ And before Mbembe, W. E. B. Du Bois argued that the material and discursive origins of European monumentalism, such as the gleaming boulevards of Brussels, were found in the brutal colonial regimes of the Congo.¹⁰ This global genealogy of both the extraction and production of materiality and life has led Rosi Braidotti to conclude, “Bio-power and necro-politics are two sides of the same coin.”¹¹

But are the concepts of biopolitics, positive or negative, or necropolitics, colonial or postcolonial, the formation of power in which late liberalism now operates—or has been operating? If, paraphrasing Gilles Deleuze, concepts open understanding to what is all around us but not in our field of vision, does biopolitics any longer gather together under its conceptual wings what needs to be thought if we are to understand contemporary late liberalism?¹² Have we been so entranced by the image of power working through life that we haven't noticed the new problems, figures, strategies, and concepts emerging all around us, suggesting another formation of late liberal power—or the revelation of a formation that is fundamental to but hidden by the concept of biopower? Have we been so focused on exploring each and every wrinkle in the biopolitical fold—biosecurity, biospectrality, thanatopoliticality—that we forgot to notice that the figures of biopower (the hysterical woman, the Malthusian couple, the perverse adult, and the masturbating child; the camps and barracks, the panopticon and solitary confinement), once so central to our understanding of contemporary power, now seem not as decisive, to be inflected by or giving way to new figures: the Desert, the Animist, the Virus? And is a return to sovereignty our only option for understanding contemporary late liberal power? This introduction and the following chapters attempt to elaborate how our allegiance to the concept of biopower is hiding and revealing another problematic—a formation for want of a better term I am calling *geontological* power, or *geontopower*.

So let me say a few words about what I mean by geontological power, or geontopower, although its scope and import can only be known in the immanent worlds in which it continues to be made and unmade—one of which this book engages. The simplest way of sketching the difference between geontopower

and biopower is that the former does not operate through the governance of life and the tactics of death but is rather a set of discourse, affects, and tactics used in late liberalism to maintain or shape the coming relationship of the distinction between Life and Nonlife.¹³ This book argues that as the previously stable ordering divisions of Life and Nonlife shake, new figures, tactics, and discourses of power are displacing the biopolitical quartet. But why use these terms rather than others? Why not use meteorontological power, which might more tightly reference the concept of climate change? Why not coin the ill-sounding term “gexistent,” given that throughout this book I use the term “existent” to reference what might elsewhere be described as life, thing, organism, and being? Wouldn’t gexistence better semanticize my claim, elaborated below and in subsequent chapters, that Western ontologies are covert biontologies—Western metaphysics as a measure of all forms of existence by the qualities of one form of existence (*bios*, *zoe*)—and that biopolitics depends on this metaphysics being kept firmly in place? In the end I decided to retain the term *geontology* and its cognates, such as *geontopower*, because I want to intensify the contrasting components of nonlife (*geos*) and being (ontology) currently in play in the late liberal governance of difference and markets. Thus, geontology is intended to highlight, on the one hand, the biontological enclosure of existence (to characterize all existents as endowed with the qualities associated with Life). And, on the other hand, it is intended to highlight the difficulty of finding a critical language to account for the moment in which a form of power long self-evident in certain regimes of settler late liberalism is becoming visible globally.

Let me emphasize this last point. Geontopower is not a power that is only now emerging to replace biopolitics—biopower (the

governance through life and death) has long depended on a subtending geontopower (the difference between the lively and the inert). And, similarly to how necropolitics operated openly in colonial Africa only later to reveal its shape in Europe, so geontopower has long operated openly in settler late liberalism and been insinuated in the ordinary operations of its governance of difference and markets. The attribution of an *inability* of various colonized people to differentiate the kinds of things that have agency, subjectivity, and intentionality of the sort that emerges with life has been the grounds of casting them into a premodern mentality and a postrecognition difference. Thus the point of the concepts of geontology and geontopower is not to found a new ontology of objects, nor to establish a new metaphysics of power, nor to adjudicate the possibility or impossibility of the human ability to know the truth of the world of things. Rather they are concepts meant to help make visible the figural tactics of late liberalism as a long-standing *biontological orientation and distribution* of power crumbles, losing its efficacy as a self-evident backdrop to reason. And, more specifically, they are meant to illuminate the cramped space in which my Indigenous colleagues are forced to maneuver as they attempt to keep relevant their critical analytics and practices of existence.¹⁴ In short, geontopower is not a concept first and an application to my friends' worlds second, but a concept that emerges from what late liberal governance looks like from this cramped space.

To begin to understand the work of the concept of geontopower relative to biopower, let me return to Foucault's three formations of power and ask two simple questions, the answers to which might have seemed long settled. First, are the relations among sovereign power, disciplinary power, and

biopower ones of implication, distinction, determination, or set membership? And, second, did Foucault intend these modes of power to be historical periodizations, quasi-transcendent metaphysics of power, or variations within a more encompassing historical and social framework? Let's remember that for all our contemporary certainty that a gulf separates sovereignty from disciplinary power and biopower, Foucault seemed unsure of whether he was seeing a shared concept traversing all three formations of power or seeing three specific formations of power, each with their own specific conceptual unity. On the one hand, he writes that the eighteenth century witnessed "the appearance (*l'apparition*)—one might say the invention—of a new mechanism of power which had very specific procedures, completely new instruments, and very different equipment."¹⁵ And yet Foucault also states that the formations of power do not follow each other like beads on a rosary. Nor do they conform to a model of Hegelian *aufhebung*; sovereignty does not dialectically unfold into disciplinary power and disciplinary power into biopolitics. Rather, all three formations of power are always co-present, although how they are arranged and expressed relative to each other vary across social time and space.¹⁶ For example, German fascism deployed all three formations of power in its Holocaust—the figure of Hitler exemplified the right of the sovereign to decide who was enemy or friend and thus could be killed or allowed to live; the gas chambers exemplified the regularity of disciplinary power; and the Aryan exemplified governance through the imaginary of population and hygiene.

We can find more recent examples. President George W. Bush and his vice president, Dick Cheney, steadfastly and publicly claimed the right to extrajudicial killing (a right the subsequent president also claims). But they did not enact their authority in

public festivals where victims were drawn and quartered, but rather through secret human and drone-based special operations or in hidden rendition centers. And less explicit, and thus potentially more productive, new media technologies like Google and Facebook mobilize algorithms to track population trends across individual decisions, creating new opportunities for capital and new means of securitizing the intersection of individual pleasure and the well-being of certain populations, what Franco Berardi has called “semicapitalism.”¹⁷ These modern tactics and aesthetics of sovereign power exist alongside what Henry Giroux, building on Angela Davis’s crucial work on the prison industrial complex, has argued are the central features of contemporary US power: biosecurity with its panoply of ordinary incarceration blocks, and severe forms of isolation.¹⁸ But even here, where US sovereignty seems to manifest its sharpest edge—state-sanctioned, prison-based killing—the killings are heavily orchestrated with an altogether different aesthetic and affective ordering from the days of kings. This form of state killing has witnesses, but rather than hawking wares these witnesses sit behind a glass wall where a curtain is discreetly drawn while the victim is prepared for death—or if “complications” arise, it is quickly pulled shut. The boisterous crowds are kept outside: those celebrating kept on one side of a police barrier, those holding prayer vigils on the other side. Other examples of the co-presence of all three formations of power float up in less obvious places—such as in the changing public announcements to passengers as Qantas flights approach Australian soil. Whereas staff once announced that passengers should be aware of the country’s strict animal and plant quarantine regulations, they now announce the country’s strict “biosecurity laws.”

And yet across these very different entanglements of power

we continue to use the language of sovereignty, disciplinary power, and biopolitics as if these formations were independent of each other and of history. It is as if, when we step into their streams, the currents of these various formations pull us in different directions. On the one hand, each formation of power seems to express a distinct relation, aesthetic, and tactic even as, on the other hand, we are left with a lingering feeling that some unnamed shared conceptual matrix underpins all three—or at least sovereign power on the one side and disciplinary and biopower on the other. I am hardly the first to notice this. Alain Badiou notes that, as Foucault moved from an archaeological approach to a genealogical one, “a doctrine of ‘fields’ ” began to substitute for a sequence of “epistemological singularities” in such a way that Foucault was brought back “to the concept and to philosophy.”¹⁹ In other words, while Badiou insists that Foucault was “neither a philosopher nor a historian nor a bastardized combination of the two,” he also posits that something like a metaphysical concept begins to emerge in his late work, especially in his thinking about biopolitics and the hermeneutics of the self and other. For Badiou this concept was power. And it is exactly here that the difference between biopolitics and geontopower is staked.

Rather than power, I would propose that what draws the three formations together is a common but once unmarked ontological assertion, namely, that there is a distinction between Life and Nonlife that makes a difference. Now, and ever more globally, this assertion is marked. For example, the once unremarkable observation that all three formations of power (sovereign power, disciplinary power, and biopower) work only “insofar as man is a living being” (*une prise de pouvoir sur l’homme en tant qu’être vivant*) today trips over the space between *en tant que* and *tant*

que, between the “insofar as” and the “as long as.” This once perhaps not terribly belabored phrasing is now hard to avoid hearing as an epistemological and ontological conditional: all three formations work *as long as* we continue to conceptualize humans as *living things* and *as long as* humans *continue to exist*. Yes, sovereignty, discipline, and biopolitics stage, aestheticize, and publicize the dramas of life and death differently. And, yes, starting from the eighteenth century, the anthropological and physical sciences came to conceptualize humans as a single species subject to a natural law governing the life and death of individuals and species. And, yes, these new discourses opened a new relationship between the way that sovereign law organized its powers around life and death and the way that biopolitics did. And, yes, Foucault’s quick summary of this transformation as a kind of inversion from the right to kill and let live to the power of making live and letting die should be modified in the light of the fact that contemporary states make live, let die, *and* kill. And, yes, all sorts of liberalism seem to evidence a biopolitical stain, from settler colonialism to developmental liberalism to full-on neoliberalism.²⁰ But something is causing these statements to be irrevocably read and experienced through a new drama, not the drama of life and death, but a form of death that begins and ends in Nonlife—namely the extinction of humans, biological life, and, as it is often put, the planet itself—which takes us to a time before the life and death of individuals and species, a time of the *geos*, of soulessness. The modifying phrase “insofar as” now foregrounds the *anthropos* as just one element in the larger set of not merely animal life but all Life as opposed to the state of original and radical Nonlife, the vital in relation to the inert, the extinct in relation to the barren. In other words, it is increasingly clear that the *anthropos* remains an element in the set of life only

insofar as Life can maintain its distinction from Death/Extinction *and* Nonlife. It is also clear that late liberal strategies for governing difference and markets also only work insofar as these distinctions are maintained. And it is exactly because we can hear “insofar” that we know that these brackets are now visible, debatable, fraught, and anxious. It is certainly the case that the statement “clearly, x humans are more important than y rocks” continues to be made, persuade, stop political discourse. But what interests me in this book is the slight hesitation, the pause, the intake of breath that now can interrupt an immediate assent.

This is the formula that is now unraveling:

Life (Life {birth, growth, reproduction} v. Death) v. Nonlife.

The Concept and Its Territories

Many attribute the crumbling of the self-evident distinction between Life and Nonlife to the challenge that climate change poses in the geological era of the Anthropocene. Since Eugene Stoermer first coined the term “Anthropocene” and Paul Crutzen popularized it, the Anthropocene has meant to mark a geologically defined moment when the forces of human existence began to overwhelm all other biological, geological, and meteorological forms and forces and displace the Holocene. That is, the Anthropocene marks the moment when human existence became the determinate form of planetary existence—and a malignant form at that—rather than merely the fact that humans affect their environment. It’s hardly an uncontroversial concept. Even those geologists who support it do not agree on what criteria should be used to date its beginning. Many criteria and thus many dates have been proposed. Some place it at the beginning of the Neolithic Revolution when agriculture was

invented and the human population exploded. Others peg it to the detonation of the atomic bomb, an event that left radioactive sediments in the stratigraphy and helped consolidate a notion of the earth (Gaia) as something that could be destroyed by human action and dramatize the difference between Life as a planetary phenomenon and Nonlife as a coldness of space. Hannah Arendt's 1963 reflections on the launching of Sputnik and the lost contact "between the world of the senses and the appearances and the physical worldview" would be important here; as would be James Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis published two years later in the wake of the revolutionary Apollo 8 picture of earthrise, broadcast live on Christmas Eve 1968.²¹ Still others situate the beginning of the Anthropocene in the coal-fueled Industrial Revolution. While the British phrase "like selling coal to Newcastle" was first recorded in 1538, reminding us of the long history of coal use in Europe, the Industrial Revolution massively expanded the Lancashire, Somerset, and Northumberland coalfields in the eighteenth century, setting off a huge carbon bomb by releasing unheard-of tons of hydrocarbons into the atmosphere and resulting in our present climate revolution and, perhaps, the sixth great extinction.²² But the exploitation of the coalfields also uncovered large stratified fossil beds that helped spur the foundation of modern geologic chronology: the earth as a set of stratified levels of being and time. In other words, the concept of the Anthropocene is as much a product of the coalfields as an analysis of their formation insofar as the fossils within the coalfields helped produce and secure the modern discipline of geology and by contrast biology. But even as the coalfields helped create the modern disciplines of biology and geology, the carbon bomb it set off also slowly and then seemingly suddenly made these disciplinary distinctions

differences of a different sort. From the perspective of the planetary carbon cycle, what difference does the difference between Life and Nonlife make? What new disciplinary combinations and alliances are necessary under the pressure of Anthropogenic climate change? Moreover if industrial capital was the cause of the modern discipline of geology and thus the secret origin of the new geological era and its disciplinary supports, why didn't we name and shame it rather than the Human? Indeed, James Moore has suggested that what we are calling the Anthropocene might be more accurately called the Capitalocene—what we are really witnessing are the material conditions of the last five hundred years of capitalism.²³ In Dennis Dimick's poetic rephrasing, the Anthropocene and climate change reflect nothing so much as industrial capitalism's dependence on "ancient sunshine."²⁴ Other names proliferate: the Plantationocene, the Anglocene, the Chthulucene ...

How and why various scholars choose one geohistorical nomenclature or peg over another helps illuminate how geontopower is supported in, and supports, natural life and critical life, and the ways in which all specific forms of existence, whether humans or others, are being governed in late liberalism. As the authors of a recent piece in *Nature* note, changes to the earth system are heterogeneous and diachronous, diffused and differential geographies that only appear as instantaneous earth events when viewed from the perspective of millions of years of stratigraphic compression.²⁵ But while all stratigraphic markers necessitate a "clear, datable marker documenting a global change that is recognizable in the stratigraphic record, coupled with auxiliary stratotypes documenting long-term changes to the Earth system," the Anthropocene presents a specific problem insofar as it cannot rely "on solid aggregate mineral deposits ('rock') for the

boundary”; it is “an event horizon largely lacking fossils” and thus must find a different basis for a global boundary stratotype section and point (a GSSP) “to formalize a time unit that extends to the present and thereby implicitly includes a view of the future.”²⁶ What is the clearest, materially supportable, and socially disinterested evidence of this new geological age: the carbon layer left from the Industrial Revolution, the CO₂ from the changing climate, the atomic signature that followed the atomic bomb?

Contemporary critical theorists may scoff at the idea that any of these markers are disinterested facts in the ground, but we will see that, from a specific and important angle, critical theory iterates rather than contests key desires of the natural sciences. I take up this point in the next chapter. Here it is useful merely to point out how each way of marking the key protagonists in the drama of the Anthropocene results in a different set of ethical, political, and conceptual problems and antagonisms rather than any one of these exiting the contemporary dilemma of geontopower. For instance, from the most literal-minded point of view, the Anthropocene contrasts the human actor to other biological, meteorological, and geological actors. The Human emerges as an abstraction on the one side with the Nonhuman world on the other. When did *humans* become the dominant force on the *world*? This way of sorting the world makes sense only from the disciplinary logic of geology, a disciplinary perspective that relies on natural types and species logics. From a geological point of view, the planet began without Life, with Nonlife, out of which, somehow, came sorts of Life. These sorts evolved until one sort threatened to extinguish not only its own sort but all sorts, returning the planet to an original lifelessness. In other words, when the abstraction of the Human is cast as the

protagonist of the Anthropocene, a specific set of characters crowd the stage—the Human, the Nonhuman, the Dead, the Never Alive. These characters act out a specific drama: the end of humans excites an anxiety about the end of Life and the end of Life excites an anxiety about the transformation of the blue orb into the red planet, Earth becoming Mars, unless Mars ends up having life.... Just as things are getting frothy, however, someone in the audience usually interrupts the play to remind everyone that Life and Nonlife and the Human and the Nonhuman are abstractions and distractions from the fact that *humans* did not create this problem. Rather, a specific mode of human society did, and even there, specific classes and races and regions of humans. After this interruption the antagonism shifts and the protagonists are neither humans and other biological, meteorological, and geological forces, nor Life and Nonlife. The antagonism is between various forms of human life-worlds and their different effects on the given-world.

But none of these ways of narrating the protagonists and antagonists of geontopower provide a clear social or political solution. For example, if we keep our focus on the effect that a mode of human sociality, say liberal capitalism, is having on other forms of life should we democratize Life such that all forms of existence have a say in the present use of the planet? Or should some forms of existence receive more ballots, or more weight in the voting, than others? Take the recent work of the anthropologist Anna Tsing in which she mobilizes the matsutake mushroom to make the case for a more inclusive politics of well-being; a political imaginary which conceptualizes the good as a world in which humans and nonhumans alike thrive. And yet this thriving is, perhaps as it must be, measured according to specific human points of view, which becomes clear when various other

species of fungi come into view—for instance, those tree fungi that thrive in agricapital nurseries such as *Hevea* root fungal parasites: *Rigidoporus lignosus* and *Phellinus noxius*. I might not want plantation capitalism to survive, but *R. lignosus* and *P. noxius* certainly do. *P. noxius* is not noxious from the point of view of nowhere but because it can be understood as the companion species to a specific form of human social existence, agricapitalism. So will I deny *P. noxius* a ballot? What will it have to agree to do and be before I agree to give it one? What else will need to abide by my rule in this new war of the world—those minerals, lakes, air particles, and currents that thrive in one formation but not another? “Sustainability” can quickly become a call to conceive a mode of (multi)existence that is pliant to our desires even as political alliances become very confusing. After all, *P. noxius* may be the best class warrior we now have. It eats up the conditions of its being and it destroys what capital provides as the condition of its normative extension. True, it eats up a whole host of other forms of existence in the process. But class war is not a gentle affair.

When we become exhausted trying to solve this problem, we can swap our telescope for a set of binoculars, looking across the specific human modes of existence in and across specific social geographies. In other words, we can give up trying to find a golden rule for universal inclusion that will avoid local injustices and focus on local problems. Say, in the case of this book, I stake an allegiance with my Indigenous friends and colleagues in the Northern Territory of Australia. Here we see that it is not humans who have exerted such malignant force on the meteorological, geological, and biological dimension of the earth but only some modes of human sociality. Thus we start differentiating one sort of human and its modes of existence from another. But right

when we think we have a location—these versus those—our focus must immediately extend over and outward. The global nature of climate change, capital, toxicity, and discursivity immediately demands we look elsewhere than where we are standing. We have to follow the flows of the toxic industries whose by-products seep into foods, forests, and aquifers, and visit the viral transit lounges that join species through disease vectors. As we stretch the local across these seeping transits we need not scale up to the Human or the global, but we cannot remain in the local. We can only remain *hereish*.

In other words, the Anthropocene and its companion concept of climate change should not be seen merely as meteorological and geological events but as a set of political and conceptual disturbances that emerged in the 1960s—the radical environmental movement, Indigenous opposition to mining, the concept of Gaia and the whole earth—and these disturbances are now accelerating the problem of how late liberalism will govern difference and markets globally. My purpose is not to adjudicate which antagonisms and protagonists we choose but to demonstrate how the object of concern has taken residence in and across competing struggles for existence, implicating how we conceptualize scale, event, circulation, and being. No matter how geologists end up dating the break between the Holocene and Anthropocene, the concept of the Anthropocene has already had a dramatic impact on the organization of critical thought, cultural politics, and geopolitical governance in and across the global north and south. And this conceptual impact is one of the effects and causes of the crumbling of the self-evident distinction of Life and Nonlife, fundamental to biopolitics. As the geographer Kathryn Yusoff notes, biopolitics is increasingly “subtended by geology.”²⁷ The possibility that humans, or certain forms of

human existence, are such an overwhelming malignant force that Life itself faces planetary extinction has changed the topical foci of the humanities and humanistic social sciences and the quantitative social sciences and natural sciences.²⁸ The emergence of the geological concept of the Anthropocene and the meteorological modeling of the carbon cycle, the emergence of new synthetic natural sciences such as biogeochemistry, the proliferation of new object ontologies (new materialists, speculative materialists, speculative realists, and object-oriented ontologies), all point to the perforating boundary between the autonomy of Life and its opposition to and difference from Nonlife. Take, for example, the humanities.

As the future of human life—or a human way of life—is put under pressure from the heating of the planet, ontology has reemerged as a central problem in philosophy, anthropology, literary and cultural studies, and in science and technology studies. Increasingly not only can critical theorists not demonstrate the superiority of the human to other forms of life—thus the rise of posthumanist politics and theory—but they also struggle to maintain a difference that makes a difference between all forms of Life and the category of Nonlife. Critical theory has increasingly put pressure on the ontological distinctions among biological, geological, and meteorological existents, and a posthuman critique is giving way to a post-life critique, being to assemblage, and biopower to geontopower. What status should objects have in various Western ontologies? Are there objects, existents, or only fuzzy assemblages? Are these fuzzy assemblages lively too? Anthropologists have weighed in on these more typically philosophical questions by transforming an older interest in social and cultural epistemologies and cosmologies into a concern about multiple ontologies.²⁹ But

perhaps these academic disciplines are only catching up to a conversation begun in literature such as Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, and certainly in the literary output of Margaret Atwood, starting with *The Handmaid's Tale*, and continuing through her MaddAdam Trilogy. Now an entire field of ecoliterary studies examines fictional, media, and filmic explorations of the coming postextinction world.

And this leads to my second point. As we become increasingly captured by the competing claims of precarious natures and entangled existences, a wild proliferation of new conceptual models, figures, and tactics is displacing the conceptual figures and tactics of the biopolitical and necropolitical. For the purpose of analytical explication, I cluster this proliferation around three figures: the Desert, the Animist, and the Virus. To understand the status of these figures, two points must be kept firmly in mind. First, as the geontological comes to play a larger part in the governance of our thought, other forms of existence (other existents) cannot merely be included in the ways we have understood the qualities of being and life but will need, on the one hand, to displace the division of Life and Nonlife as such and, on the other hand, to separate themselves from late liberal forms of governance. In other words, these figures, statics, and discourses are *diagnostic and symptomatic* of the present way in which late liberalism governs difference and markets in a differential social geography. Therefore, the three figures of geontopower are, from one perspective, no different than Foucault's four figures of biopower. The hysterical woman (a hystericization of women's bodies), the masturbating child (a pedagogization of children's sex), the perverse adult (a psychiatrization of perverse pleasure), and the Malthusian couple (a socialization of procreative behavior): Foucault cared about

these figures of sexuality and gender not because he thought that they were the repressed truth of human existence but because he thought they were symptomatic and diagnostic of a modern formation of power. These four figures were both expressions of biopower and windows into its operation. Although, when presenting his lectures, compiled in *Society Must Be Defended*, Foucault discussed the insurrection of subjugated knowledges, understanding these figures as subjugated in the liberal sense of oppressed subjects would be wrong-headed. The problem was not how these figures and forms of life could be liberated from subjugation but how to understand them as indicating a possible world beyond or otherwise to their own form of existence—how to understand them as a way station for the emergence of something else. How might the hysterical woman, the masturbating child, the Malthusian couple, and the perverse adult become something other than what they were? And how could whatever emerged out of them survive the conditions of their birth? How could they be invested with qualities and characteristics deemed sensible and compelling before being extinguished as a monstrosity?³⁰

A similar approach can be taken in relationship to the Desert, the Animist, and the Virus. Each of these figures provides a mechanism through which we can conceive of the once presupposed but now trembling architectures of geontological governance. Again, these figures and discourses are not the exit from or the answer to biopolitics. They are not subjugated subjects waiting to be liberated. Geontology is not a crisis of life (*bios*) and death (*thanatos*) at a species level (extinction), or merely a crisis between Life (*bios*) and Nonlife (*geos, meteoros*). Geontopower is a mode of late liberal governance. And it is this mode of governance that is trembling. Moreover, and this is the

second point, because the Desert, the Animist, and the Virus are tools, symptoms, figures, and diagnostics of this mode of late liberal governance, perhaps most clearly apparent in settler late liberalism than elsewhere, they might need to be displaced by other figures in other places if these other figures seem more apparent or relevant to governance in these spaces. But it seems to me that at least in settler late liberalism, geontology and its three figures huddle just inside the door between given governance and its otherwises, trying to block entrance and exit and to restrict the shape and expanse of its interior rooms. Or we can think of these figures as a collection of governing ghosts who exist in between two worlds in late settler liberalism—the world in which the dependent oppositions of life (*bios*) and death (*thanatos*) and of Life (*bios*) and Nonlife (*geos, meteoros*) are sensible and dramatic and the world in which these enclosures are no longer, or have never been, relevant, sensible, or practical.

Take the Desert and its central imaginary Carbon. The Desert comprises discourses, tactics, and figures that restabilize the distinction between Life and Nonlife. It stands for all things perceived and conceived as denuded of life—and, by implication, all things that could, with the correct deployment of technological expertise or proper stewardship, be (re)made hospitable to life. The Desert, in other words, holds on to the distinction between Life and Nonlife and dramatizes the possibility that Life is always at threat from the creeping, desiccating sands of Nonlife. The Desert is the space where life was, is not now, but could be if knowledges, techniques, and resources were properly managed. The Carbon Imaginary lies at the heart of this figure and is thus the key to the maintenance of geontopower. The Carbon Imaginary lodges the superiority of Life into Being by transposing biological concepts such as metabolism and its key

events, such as birth, growth-reproduction, death, and ontological concepts, such as event, *conatus/affectus*, and finitude. Clearly, biology and ontology do not operate in the same discursive field, nor do they simply intersect. Nevertheless, as I argue more fully in the next chapter, the Carbon Imaginary reinforces a scarred meeting place where each can exchange conceptual intensities, thrills, wonders, anxieties, perhaps terrors, of the other of Life, namely the Inert, Inanimate, Barren. In this scarred space, the ontological is revealed to be biontology. Being has always been dominated by Life and the desires of Life.

Thus, the Desert does not refer in any literal way to the ecosystem that, for lack of water, is hostile to life. The Desert is the affect that motivates the search for other instances of life in the universe and technologies for seeding planets with life; it colors the contemporary imaginary of North African oil fields; and it drives the fear that all places will soon be nothing more than the setting within a *Mad Max* movie. The Desert is also glimpsed in both the geological category of the fossil insofar as we consider fossils to have once been charged with life, to have lost that life, but as a form of fuel can provide the conditions for a specific form of life—contemporary, hypermodern, informationalized capital—and a new form of mass death and utter extinction; and in the calls for a capital or technological fix to anthropogenic climate change. Not surprisingly then the Desert is fodder for new theoretical, scientific, literary, artistic, and media works from the *Mad Max* films and science fiction of Philip K. Dick's *Martian Time-Slip* to the poetics of Juliana Spahr's *Well Then There Now*.

At the heart of the figure of the Animist lies the imaginary of the Indigene. Whereas the Desert heightens the drama of constant peril of Life in relation to Nonlife, the Animist insists that the

difference between Life and Nonlife is not a problem because all forms of existence have within them a vital animating, affecting force. Certain social and historical populations are charged with always having had this core Animist insight—these populations are mainly located in settler colonies but also include pre-Christian and pre-Islamic populations globally, the contemporary recycling subject,³¹ new Paganism, actant-based science and technology studies, and certain ways of portraying and perceiving a variety of new cognitive subjects. For instance, the psycho-cognitive diagnosis of certain forms of autism and Asperger are liable to fall within the Animist. Temple Grandin is an exemplary figure here, not merely for her orientation to nonhuman life (cows), but also for her defense of those alternative cognitions that allow for an orientation to Nonlife forms of existence. The Animist has also animated a range of artistic explorations of nonhuman and inorganic modes of agency, subjectivity, and assemblage, such as Laline Paul's novel *The Bees* and in the Italian film *Le Quattro Volte*. The Animist is, in other words, all those who see an equivalence between all forms of life or who can see life where others would see the lack of life.

The theoretical expression of the Animist is most fully developed in contemporary critical philosophies of vitalism. Some new vitalists have mined Spinoza's principles of *conatus* (that which exists, whether living or nonliving, strives to persevere in being) and *affectus* (the ability to affect and be affected) to shatter the division of Life and Nonlife; although others, such as John Carriero, have insisted that Spinoza uncritically accepted that living things are "more advanced" than nonliving things and "that there is more to a cat than to a rock."³² The American pragmatist Charles Sanders Peirce has also inspired new vitalist scholarship—for instance, Brian Massumi

has long probed Peirce's semiotics as grounds for extending affect into nonliving existents.³³ To be sure the interest in "vital materialism," to quote from Jane Bennett's work, does not claim to be interested in life per se. Rather it seeks to understand the distribution of quasi-agencies and actants across nonhuman and human materials in ways that disturb the concepts of subject, object, and predicate. And yet it is right here that we glimpse the power of the Carbon Imaginary—the suturing of dominant forms of conceptual space in late liberalism by the reciprocal transpositions of the biological concepts of birth, growth-reproduction, and death and the ontological concepts of event, *conatus/affectus*, and finitude. The new vitalisms take advantage of the longstanding Western shadow imposition of the qualities of one of its categories (Life, Leben) onto the key dynamics of its concept of existence (Being, Dasein). Removed from the enclosure of life Leben as Dasein roams freely as a form of univocal vitality. How, in doing this, are we disallowing whatever Nonlife is standing in for to affect whatever Life is an alibi for? What are the traps that this strategic response sets for critical theory? How does this ascription of the qualities we cherish in one form of existence to all forms of existences reestablish, covertly or overtly, the hierarchy of life?³⁴

Finally, the Virus and its central imaginary of the Terrorist provide a glimpse of a persistent, errant potential radicalization of the Desert, the Animist, and their key imaginaries of Carbon and Indigeneity. The Virus is the figure for that which seeks to disrupt the current arrangements of Life and Nonlife by claiming that it is a difference that makes no difference *not because* all is alive, vital, and potent, nor because all is inert, replicative, unmoving, inert, dormant, and endurant. Because the division of Life and Nonlife does not define or contain the Virus, it can use

and ignore this division for the sole purpose of diverting the energies of arrangements of existence in order to extend itself. The Virus copies, duplicates, and lies dormant even as it continually adjusts to, experiments with, and tests its circumstances. It confuses and levels the difference between Life and Nonlife while carefully taking advantage of the minutest aspects of their differentiation. We catch a glimpse of the Virus whenever someone suggests that the size of the human population must be addressed in the wake of climate change; that a glacial granite mountain welcomes the effects of air conditioning on life; that humans are kudzu; or that human extinction is desirable and should be accelerated. The Virus is also Ebola and the waste dump, the drug-resistant bacterial infection stewed within massive salmon and poultry farms, and the nuclear power; the person who looks just like “we” do as she plants a bomb. Perhaps most spectacularly the Virus is the popular cultural figure of the zombie—Life turned to Nonlife and transformed into a new kind of species war—the aggressive rotting undead against the last redoubt of Life. Thus the difference between the Desert and the Virus has to do with the agency and intentionality of nonhuman Life and Nonlife. Whereas the Desert is an inert state welcoming a technological fix, the Virus is an active antagonistic agent built out of the collective assemblage that is late liberal geontopower. In the wake of the late liberal crises of post-9/11, the crash of financial markets, and Anthropogenic climate change, the Virus has been primarily associated with fundamentalist Islam and the radical Green movement. And much of critical thought has focused on the relationship between biopolitics and biosecurity in the wake of these crises. But this focus on biosecurity has obscured the systemic reorientation of biosecurity around geo-security and

meteo-security: the social and ecological effects of climate change.³⁵ Thus the Virus is also recognition's internal political other: environmentalists inhabiting the borderlands between activists and terrorists across state borders and interstate surveillance. But while the Virus may seem to be the radical exit from geontopower at first glance, to be the Virus is to be subject to intense abjection and attacks, and to live in the vicinity of the Virus is to dwell in an existential crisis.

As I am hoping will become clear, Capitalism has a unique relation to the Desert, the Animist, and the Virus insofar as Capitalism sees all things as having the potential to create profit; that is, nothing is inherently inert, everything is vital from the point of view of capitalization, and anything can become something more with the right innovative angle. Indeed, capitalists can be said to be the purest of the Animists. This said, industrial capital depends on and, along with states, vigorously polices the separations between forms of existence so that certain kinds of existents can be subjected to different kinds of extractions. Thus even as activists and academics level the relation between animal life and among objects (including human subjects), states pass legislation both protecting the rights of businesses and corporations to use animals and lands and criminalizing tactics of ecological and environmental activism. In other words, like the Virus that takes advantage but is not ultimately wedded to the difference between Life and Nonlife, Capital views all modes of existence as if they were vital *and* demands that not all modes of existence are the same from the point of view of extraction of value.

The Evidence, the Method, the Chapters, the Title

It might seem odd to some that this book begins with biopower. I have rarely, if ever, mobilized the concept of biopolitics or biopower to analyze settler late liberalism. This absence is not an absence of knowledge or a simple rejection of the concept itself. Nor have Foucault, Mbembe, and others so crucial to debates in necro- and biopower ever been far from my thought. Rather, and importantly, it was never clear to me whether the concept of biopolitics was the concept that was needed to analyze the expression of liberal governance in the settler spaces in which my thought and life have unfolded, namely, a thirty-plus year, family-based colleagueship with Indigenous men and women in the Top End of the Northern Territory, Australia.³⁶ Indeed, the biopolitical governance of Indigenous populations, while certainly present and conceivable, was always less compelling to me than the management of existents through the separation of that which has and is imbued with the dynamics of life (birth, growth, finitude, agency, intentionality, self-authored, or at least change) and that which settler liberalism treats as absolutely not. Do rocks listen and act intentionally on the basis of this sensory apparatus? The major actors within the settler late liberal state answer, “absolutely not.” Do certain populations within settler liberalism constitute themselves as safe forms of a cultural other by believing they absolutely do, and acting on the basis of this belief? Absolutely. Using the belief that Nonlife acts in ways available only to Life was a safe form of “the Other” because, for quite some time, settler liberalism could easily contain such a belief in the brackets of the impossible if not absurd. As geontopower reveals itself as a power of differentiation and control rather than truth and reference, it is not clear whether this same power of belief is so easily contained. In other words, I do not think that geontopower is simply the conceptual consequence

of a new Geological Age of the Human, namely the Anthropocene and climate change, and thus a new stage of late liberalism. Perhaps the Anthropocene and climate change have made geontopower visible to people who were previously unaffected by it. But its operation has always been a quite apparent architecture of the governance of difference and markets in settler late liberalism.

Instead of biopower or geontopower, I have for the most part been interested in how discourses of and affects accumulating around the tense of the subject (the autological subject) and societies (the genealogical society) act as forms of discipline that divide rather than describe social forms in late liberalism. And I have been interested in how specific discourses of and affects accumulating around a specific event-form—the big bang, the new, the extraordinary, that which clearly breaks time and space, creating a new Here and Now, There and Then—deflect liberal ethics and politics away from forms of harm more grudging and corrosive. In other words, I have been interested in the quasi-event, a form of occurring that never punctures the horizon of the here and now and there and then and yet forms the basis of forms of existence to stay in place or alter their place. The quasi-event is only ever *hereish* and *nowish* and thus asks us to focus our attention on forces of condensation, manifestation, and endurance rather than on the borders of objects. This form of eventfulness often twines itself around and into the tense of the other, impeding, redirecting, and exhausting the emergence of an otherwise. The barely perceptible but intense daily struggles of many people to remain in the realm of the extreme poor rather than slip into something worse, for instance, only lightly scratch the retina of dominant ethical and political discourse because the effort of endurance and its incredible creative energy appears as

nothing, laziness, sloth, and the unchanging—or, as two Republican candidates for the US presidency put it, getting free stuff.³⁷

I originally conceived this book as the third and last of a trilogy on late liberalism, beginning with *Empire of Love*, moving through *Economies of Abandonment*, and ending with *Geontologies*. In the end, however, I realized I was, in some serious and unexpected ways, rewriting my very first book, *Labor's Lot*, and thus completing a long reflection on governance in settler late liberalism. Indeed, throughout these chapters I make implicit and explicit reference to some of this much earlier work, including *Labor's Lot* and the essays “Do Rocks Listen?” and “Might Be Something.” Thus, this feels like the last chapter of a fairly long book begun in 1984 when I first arrived at Belyuen, a small Indigenous community on the Cox Peninsula in the Northern Territory of Australia. I was not an anthropologist then, nor was I a wannabe anthropologist. I had an undergraduate degree in philosophy under the tutelage of William O’Grady, a student of Hannah Arendt. Becoming an anthropologist became a trajectory for me at the request of the older residents of Belyuen who, at the time, were engaged in one of the longest and most contested land claims in Australia. The dictates of the land-rights legislation demanded that if they lodged a land claim then they had to be represented by both a lawyer and an anthropologist. Belyuen was originally established as Delissaville Aboriginal Settlement in the 1940s, a place in which various local indigenous groups could be interned. In 1976, the Delissaville Settlement was given self-government and renamed the Belyuen Community under the terms of the Land Rights Act. And the surrounding Commonwealth lands were simultaneously placed under a land claim. The claim was finally heard in 1989, but the

Land Commissioner found that no traditional Aboriginal owners existed for the area under claim. This judgment was challenged and the claim reheard in 1995 at which point a small subsection of the Belyuen Community was found to fulfill the legislative definition of a traditional Aboriginal owner as defined by the Land Rights Act.

Since then, I have engaged in countless little and larger projects with these older men and women, and now with their children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, great-great-grandchildren. But my academic life has primarily consisted not of producing ethnographic texts that explain their culture and society to others but of helping to analyze how late liberal power appears when encountered from their lives. My object of analysis, in other words, is not them, but settler late liberalism. As a result, the primary evidence for my claims comes from the kinds of late liberal forces that move through their lives and that part of our lives that we have lived together. Most recently these forces and forms of late liberalism accumulate around an alternative media collective, organized by the concept of “Karrabing.” As of the writing of this book, the primary media expression of the Karrabing is a film collective and three major film projects—but throughout this book, sketched out most fully in [chapter 6](#), I also refer to our original media project, a GPS/GIS-based augmented-reality project. Let me provide a little background to this uncompleted endeavor. In 2005 I began a discussion with elder Indigenous friends and colleagues of mine about what I should do with the massive archive slowly accumulating in various offices. Some suggested I work with the Northern Territory Library, which was helping communities start local “brick-and-mortar” digital archives—community-based archives stored on dedicated computers with software that

allowed members of local communities to organize viewership based on local gender, age, clan, and ritual-appropriate rules. The Northern Territory Library modeled these digital archives on Ara Irititja software developed in Pitjajarra lands to give local groups better control of the production and circulation of their audio, video, and pictorial histories. As we were better understanding how we might utilize this software, I also explored other GIS-based formats through new digital initiatives in the United States, in particular the journal *Vectors*.³⁸

But several women and men had another suggestion—burn it. If the form of existence recorded in my archive was only relevant as an archival memory, then this form of existence had been abandoned and should be given a *kapuk* (a form of burial). In other words, they thought my archive should be treated like all other remains of things that existed in one form and now would exist in another. A hole should be dug, sung over as the remains were burned, then covered with dirt and stamped down. For many years, some would know what this now traceless hole contained. Over a longer period of time, others might have a vague feeling that the site was significant. The knowledge would not disappear. Rather it would be transformed into the ground under our feet, something we stood on but did not attend to.

In January 2007, just as we were building up a good head of stream, a violent riot broke out in the community. The cause of the riot was socially complex, where personal grudges mixed with the legacy of a divisive land claim. I'll come back to this below as well as in [chapter 3](#). For now just note that having been beset by chainsaws and pickaxes, thirty people—the children and grandchildren of the key, then deceased, contributors to the archive—walked away from Belyuen and well-paying jobs. The riot was reported in the local press, and the local Labour

government, keen to demonstrate its commitment to Indigenous well-being and to avoid bad press, promised this group housing and jobs in their “traditional country” located some three hundred kilometers south at a small outstation with little existing infrastructure.

However, just two months after this riot of promises, the federal government forced the release of a report commissioned by the same Northern Territory government. The report, *Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle* (Little children are sacred), examined the social conditions of Indigenous children living in remote communities. While detailing an array of problems in Indigenous communities, one unquantified statement in particular set off a national sex panic that transformed the way the Australian federal government governed Indigenous people; namely, that in the worst situations Indigenous children suffered sexual abuse. The conservative federal government used this statement as grounds to justify an aggressive reorganization of the land rights era, including altering the powers of key pieces of legislation such as the Aboriginal Land Rights Act. Lands were forcibly acquired. Police were allowed to seize community computers. Doctors were ordered to undertake mandatory sex exams on children. And funding was frozen for or withdrawn from Indigenous rural and remote communities. If Indigenous people wanted funding for their cultural “lifestyle” then they would have to find it in the market. They could lease their lands to mining, development, and tourism. Or they could migrate to the cities and get low-paying jobs.

It was in the wake of this massive neoliberal reorganization of the Australian governance of Indigenous life, without any housing or jobs, and in the fragile coastal ecosystem of Northwest Australia, that my friends and I created the alternative

social project called Karrabing. In Emiyengal, *karrabing* refers to the point at which the tide has reach its lowest point. Tide out! There it will stay until it turns, making its way back to shore until it reaches *karrakal*. Karrabing does not have the negative connotations of the English phrase “low tide.” There is nothing “low” about the tide reaching karrabing. All kinds of potentialities spring forward. In the coastal region stretching from Nganthawudi to Milik, a deep karrabing opens a shorter passage between the mainland and islands. In some places, reefs rise as the water recedes. A road is revealed. While including me, Karrabing is a supermajority Indigenous group. Its governing rules state that all non-Indigenous members, unlike Indigenous members, including me, must bring tangible goods as a condition of membership. These rules are meant to acknowledge that no matter the affective relations between members, settler late liberalism differentially debits and rewards persons based on their location within the divisions of empire.

For the purpose of this book, perhaps the most important aspect of the Karrabing Indigenous Corporation is that it does not conform to the logics and fantasies of the land rights era. Indeed, Karrabing is an explicit rejection of state forms of land tenure and group recognition—namely the anthropological imaginary of the clan, totem, and territory—even as it maintains, through its individual members, modes of belonging to specific countries. Thus although most members of Karrabing are related through descent from and marriage into the family of Roy Yarrowin and Ruby Yarrowin, neither descent nor marriage defines the internal composition or social imaginary of Karrabing. Membership is instead shaped by an experientially immanent orientation, defined by who gets up for Karrabing projects. In other words, Karrabing has a constant improvisational relationship to late liberal

geontology. It continually probes its forms and forces as it seeks a way of maintaining and enhancing a manner and mode of existing. And it exists as long as members feel oriented and obligated to its projects.

It might surprise readers to find that none of the following chapters explicitly unfold around one or another of the three figures of geontopower. Across the book, geontopower and its three figures flicker and flash like phantom lights on ocean waters. The Indigenous Animist (the politics of recognition and its inversion), the Capitalist Desert (mining and toxic sovereignty), and the noncompliant Virus (the Karrabing) haunt the sense of governance of late liberalism explored herein. And yet I assert that each of these figures is what creates the restricted maneuverability of the Indigenous Karrabing. This should not be too surprising. After all, one of the first battlegrounds for Indigenous land rights in Australia was over bauxite mining on Yolngu country in Arnhem Land that threatened to transform verdant wetlands into toxic deserts. Wali Wunungmurra, one of the original signatories of the “Bark Petition” to the Australian parliament, which demanded that Yolngu people be recognized as the owners, said, “In the late 1950s Yolngu became aware of people prospecting for minerals in the area of the Gove Peninsula, and shortly after, discovered that mining leases had been taken out over a considerable area of our traditional land. Our response, in 1963, was to send a petition framed by painted bark to the Commonwealth Government.”³⁹ Over the course of the 1970s, significant legislative frameworks were put in place in order to mediate the relationship between Indigenous people, capital (initially primarily mining and pastoralism, but slowly land development and tourism), and the state through the figure of the Animist (Totemist).

Nevertheless, rather than organize this book around these three figures, I have organized it around my colleagues' engagement with six different modes of existence and their desire that the maintenance of them be the major focus of this analysis: forms of existence often referred to as Dreaming or totemic formations: a rock and mineral formation ([chapter 2](#)); a set of bones and fossils ([chapter 3](#)); an estuarine creek ([chapter 4](#)); a fog formation ([chapter 5](#)); and a set of rock weirs and sea reefs ([chapter 6](#)). Organizing my discussion in this way avoids an overly fetishized relationship to the figures, strategies, and discourses whose unity appears only across the difference modes of geontological governance. And it allows me to stand closer to how the maneuvers of my Karrabing colleagues provide the grounds for this analysis of geontopower.

The next chapter begins with a desecration case brought against OM Manganese for intentionally destroying part of Two Women Sitting Down, a rock and mineral Dreaming. I begin there in order to sketch out in the broadest terms the restricted space between natural life and critical life, namely, the Carbon Imaginary that joins the natural and critical sciences through the homologous concepts of birth, growth-reproduction, death, and event, *conatus/affectus*, finitude. Each subsequent chapter triangulates Karrabing analytics against a series of critical theoretical positions (object-oriented ontologies and speculative realisms, normativity, Logos, informational capital) not in order to choose one or the other or to allow the nonhuman modes of existence to speak, but to demonstrate the cramped space of maneuver in which both the Karrabing and these modes of existence are confined rather than found within the critical languages we have available. While all of the subsequent chapters model the relationship between geontopower and late

liberalism, [chapter 7](#) specifically speaks to how the management of existents creates and depends on the tense of existents and how an attachment to a form of ethical and political eventfulness mitigates a more crucial form of geographical *happening*, namely, the slow, dispersed accumulations of toxic sovereignties. Between now and then I examine the governance of difference and markets in late liberalism as the self-evident nature of the biontological Carbon Imaginary violently shakes and discloses its geontological foundations.

Because of the history of using totemic existence as a means of governing “totemic people,” let me provide a cautionary note on the object-figures organizing each of the following chapters. I have rarely, if ever, used the concept of animism or totemism (*durlg, therrawin*, Dreaming) to typologize the analytics of my Indigenous friends and colleagues. As Tim Ingold notes, an anthropological divide separates the Indigenous Australians from the North American Inuit on the basis of their “totemic and animistic tendencies.”⁴⁰ Indigenous Australians (totemists), he argues, see the land and the ancestors as the prior source of life whereas the Inuit (animists) focus on individual spirits as being able to perpetuate life and existence. However one slices the difference between them, it’s hard to find two more fraught terms in the history of anthropology than animism and totemism. These concepts were born from and operate within a (post)colonial geography in which some humans were represented as unable to order the proper causal relations between objects and subjects, agencies and passivities, organic and inorganic life, and thus control language and experience through self-reflexive reason. Because of this ongoing history, I have, throughout my work, attempted to demonstrate how these concept-ideas function as a mechanism of control and discipline even as I differentiate them

from the analytics of existence of my Indigenous colleagues.

Although I reject the practice of typologizing Indigenous lifeworlds, alongside my colleagues, I constantly struggle to find languages and practices for their analytics of existence. And this is because, as I tried to show in *Cunning of Recognition* and *Empire of Love*, settler late liberalism is not so much an inverted mirror as a funhouse mirror—distorting rather than reversing lifeworlds. There are in fact forms of existence that could be described as totems. Indeed, many of my friends use the word “totem” now as a translation of *durlg* (Batjemahl; *therrawin*, Emiyengal). And each of the following chapters does in fact pivot on a different form of *durlg* or *therrawin* existence—rock formation, estuarine creek, fog, fossil, and reef. But I do so in order to highlight how late liberalism attempts to control the expression and trajectory that their analytics of existence takes—that is, to insist they conform to the imaginary of the Animist, a form that has been made compatible with liberal states and markets. The purpose of these topological extensions and distensions is not to claim what existents *are* for *them* but how all my friends and their existents improvisationally struggle to *manifest and endure* in contemporary settler late liberalism.

It is this improvisation to which, in allegiance to the alternative nature of the social project itself, this book refers but refuses to define. And yet four principles will emerge as a sort of dirty manifesto to Karrabing analytics.

1. Things exist through an effort of mutual attention. This effort is not in the mind but in the activity of endurance.
2. Things are neither born nor die, though they can turn away from each other and change states.
3. In turning away from each other, entities withdraw care for

each other. Thus the earth is not dying. But the earth may be turning away from certain forms of existence. In this way of thinking the Desert is not that in which life does not exist. A Desert is where a series of entities have withdrawn care for the kinds of entities humans are and thus has made humans into another form of existence: bone, mummy, ash, soil.

4. We must de-dramatize human life as we squarely take responsibility for what we are doing. This simultaneous de-dramatization and responsabilization may allow for opening new questions. Rather than Life and Nonlife, we will ask what formations we are keeping in existence or extinguishing?

ONE FINAL NOTE: Why requiem? The book's title and organization are meant to indicate a certain affective tone but also a certain theoretical point. There have been and continue to be a variety of alternative arrangements of existence to the current late liberal form of governing existents. But whether any or none of these are adopted, the type of change necessary to avoid what many believe is the consequence of contemporary human carbon-based expansion—or the overrunning of all other forms of existence by late liberal capital—will have to be so significant that what we are will no longer be. This, of course, is not what late liberalism ever says. It says that we can change and be the same, nay, even more of what we already are. Thus a requiem: neither hopeless nor hopeful. It might be angry but it is not resigned. It is factual but also calculated to produce some affect. My friend, the poet Thomas Sleight, suggested the term for this intersection of affects: a requiem.

CAN ROCKS DIE?
LIFE AND DEATH INSIDE THE CARBON IMAGINARY

The Rat and the Bandicoot

In the far north of Australia, the Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority brought a gutsy desecration lawsuit against OM Manganese Ltd., a subsidiary of OM Holding, for deliberately damaging an Indigenous sacred site, Two Women Sitting Down, at its Bootu Creek manganese mine.¹ The suit seemed like a classic face-off between David and Goliath, a small underfunded state agency suing a large international corporation. The claimant, the Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority, was established in 1978 under the Northern Territory Sacred Sites Act (SSA) to preserve and protect such sites as part of a broader reconsideration of Indigenous culture in relation to national law. However progressive the initial idea, subsequent legislative amendments and hostile governments continually narrowed and underfunded its mandate. Nevertheless, for the first time in its history, under the leadership of Benedict Scambary, the Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority sued a major corporation—and then in 2013 it won. Scambary knew what the stakes were.

His dissertation had demonstrated that the lauded partnership between mining companies and Indigenous communities was heavily weighted toward long-term capital enrichment for the companies and short-term, quickly expended cash outcomes for Indigenous people.²

The legal case focused on a narrower question: did the mining company intend to damage Two Women Sitting Down, or, more narrowly, should they have known that in acting as they did that the consequence would have been this damage? The magistrate, Sue Oliver, noted, “There is no dispute that the geological feature [at] the subject of all these charges is a sacred site.” Nor was there any dispute about the Indigenous insights about its formation. Oliver cites a 1982 anthropology consultant’s report that Two Women Sitting Down consists of “two female dreamtime ancestors, a bandicoot and a rat. The bandicoot had only two children while the rat had so many the bandicoot tried to take one of the rat’s children, which caused them to fight. The manganese outcrops in this area, of which this Sacred Site is one, represents the blood of these ancestors.” It was Two Women Sitting Down’s blood that OM Manganese was after as it dug ever closer toward her edges. Manganese is the fourth most-used metal per tonnage in global manufacturing just behind iron, aluminum, and copper, and it is a critical component of various commodities ranging from high-quality steel production to pharmaceuticals. And Australian mining accounts for about 9–11 percent of global production.³ (At the beginning of the end of the mining boom in 2012, economic demonstrated resources [EDR] showed “manganese ore dropped by 5 percent to 187 million tons, mainly because of a fall in EDR at Groote Eylandt and Bootu Creek. But resources mined in other areas of Australia were being extracted at either the same or increasing rates.”⁴) Thus the

timing of the suit was interesting. In 2013 the mining industry was still being given credit for buffering Australia from the worst excesses of the global financial collapse of 2008. And a series of conservative state, territory, and federal governments were still encouraging the expansion of mines across Indigenous and non-Indigenous lands largely because the initial expansion of a mine demanded an intensive high-paying labor force during the construction period. The peak of the mining boom was just breaking when OM Manganese shattered Two Women Sitting Down.

Given that both the anthropological report and the legal judgment consider Two Women Sitting Down a geological formation *represented by* a human narrative, perhaps it goes without saying that the mining company's action within the lawsuit was not prosecuted as manslaughter, attempted murder, or murder but as a "desecration" under criminal liability law. The case pivoted on whether OM Manganese intentionally wrecked features of the site when it undermined its foundations. OM Manganese lost the case and became the first instance in which the destruction of a sacred site was successfully prosecuted under Australia law.⁵ But it is unlikely that the influence mining companies and other extractive industries have on government policy will be greatly diminished by this legal setback. The actual fine was relatively small (AU\$150,000), and the Indigenous custodians of the site received none of the money.⁶ It is far more likely that those with interests in decomposing Two Women Sitting Down will attack the foundations of such lawsuits than they will fundamentally alter their practices. Indeed, soon after the Authority's legal success, a conservative Northern Territory government sought to change the Authority's charter, abolishing its independent board and absorbing the Authority into an

existing cabinet portfolio. In Western Australia, the government proposed legislation that would restrict the meaning of *sacred* to “devoted to a religious use rather than a place subject to mythological story, song, or belief” and would charge AU\$100,000 compensation and twelve months’ imprisonment for damage to an Indigenous site as compared to AU\$1 million compensation and two years’ imprisonment for damage to a non-Indigenous site.⁷

Not surprisingly, given the amounts of money at stake, many Indigenous individuals and groups and their non-Indigenous supporters have not only signed contracts with mining companies but also actively advocated for mining on Indigenous lands as a means of advancing their welfare.⁸ And why not? People whom capital benefits are in fact enriched, at least in the short run. And as successive governments have reduced aid to Indigenous people and communities, mining is one of the few alternatives for landholding groups to sustain their homelands, if in an often severely compromised fashion—indeed, many have argued that this contraction of state aid is meant to force Indigenous groups to open their lands to mining.⁹ But the staunch opposition between some Indigenous people and extractive capital is also not surprising. The late Lang Hancock, the founder of one of the largest mining companies in the world, the Australian-based Hancock Prospecting Pty Ltd., was blunt about his opposition to Indigenous land rights, “The question of Aboriginal land rights and things of this nature shouldn’t exist.” And his daughter and heir, Gina Rinehart, the CEO of Hancock Prospecting, the wealthiest Australian and at one time the thirty-seventh richest person in the world, has vigorously resisted any Aboriginal claims impeding her efforts to extract minerals from anywhere she finds them and has opposed any and all carbon and mining

taxes. In order to promote her cause, Rinehart purchased a substantial stake in the Ten Television Network and Fairfax Media. Rinehart's public presence became so large that in May 2012 then Prime Minister Julia Gillard had to remind the Minerals Council of Australia, "You do not own the minerals. I don't own the minerals. Governments only sell you the right to mine the resources, a resource we hold in trust for a sovereign people."

Let's not be confused. The sovereign people to whom Gillard referred were not the Indigenous people who testified to the existence of Two Women Sitting Down and its surrounding lands, nor any other Indigenous group like them who testify about other such existences stretching across Australia. And Two Women Sitting Down was not the first and will not be the last formation destroyed by the contemporary ravenous hunger for mineral wealth. Indeed the demand on Indigenous people to couch their analytics of existence in the form of a cultural belief and obligation to totemic sites (a belief and obligation that is absurd from the point of view of geontopower and its figure of the Desert) is a crucial longstanding tactic wherein settler late liberalism attempts to absorb Indigenous analytics in geontopower. Take, for example, a scene I described nearly twenty years ago.

One hot, sticky November day in 1989, a large part of the Belyuen Aboriginal community was gathered on the coast of the Cox Peninsula, across from the Darwin Harbour, to participate in one of the last days of the Kenbi Land Claim. Five of us—myself, Marjorie Bilbil, Ruby Yarrowin, Agnes Lippo, and Ann Timber—stood back from the hustle of microphones and notepads and the hassle of nonstop

questions from government officials for as well as against our side. The other four women ranged in age from 38 to 70 (I was 27) and came from a variety of Dreaming (totemic) backgrounds. We stood listening to Betty Billawag describing to the land commissioner and his entourage how an important Dreaming site nearby, Old Man Rock, listened to and smelled the sweat of Aboriginal people as they passed by hunting, gathering, camping, or just mucking about. She outlined the importance of such human-Dreaming/environmental interactions to the health and productivity of the countryside. At one point Marjorie Bilbil turned to me and said, “He can’t believe, eh, Beth?” And I answered, “No, I don’t think *so*, not him, not really. He doesn’t think she is lying. He just can’t believe himself that that Old Man Rock listens.”¹⁰

The inability of the land commissioner and lawyers to believe is exactly what allowed them to enjoy “authentic difference” without fundamental changes to the metaphysics of the law—an experience of a form of difference that has been denuded of any threat to the hierarchy of governance in late liberalism. At the heart of this experience, what makes it work, are the presuppositions of geontopower. While human advocates for animal rights may well be slowly disturbing the consensus of what counts as a legally recognizable person and the new animism is extending Life into all entities and assemblages, Nonlife has remained fairly firmly sealed in its opposition to Life within extractive capital and its state allies.¹¹ The enjoyment of this scene, thus, indexes the safety of those transforming an Indigenous analytics of contemporary existence into a traditional cultural belief about subjects and objects and then assessing the

truth of those beliefs not on the basis of the potential truth of the analysis but on the basis of their more-or-less consistency with a past perfect pre-settlement form. Indeed, the solicitation of totemic stories such as seen in Two Women Sitting Down and Old Man Rock is not meant to challenge dominant geontologies on which capital depends but rather a means for the state to sort kinds of humans who are “stakeholders” in geontopower. Rocks separate, divide, and assess different humans based on how, or whether, they differentiate Life and Nonlife. Rocks are a means for colonized groups to gain access to some of the goods that were appropriated from them—or to gain access to some of the capital that will be generated from them. For instance, OM Manganese is required to pay native title royalties (a fixed-dollar amount per dry ton shipped) to the traditional owners of the country into which their mines tear—the Kunapa/Kurtinja/Mangirriji, Jalajirra, Yapa Yapa, and Pirrtangu groups.¹²

And here we see the connection between geontopower, the governance of difference and markets, and the figure of the Animist. In Australia, at least, Indigenous groups gain rights to fixed compensations through participating in land-claim hearings, during which they testified that they believe that specific features of the landscape such as Old Man Rock and Two Women Sitting Down are sentient, and equally important, that, as the human descendants of these still sentient sites, they are obligated to act on this belief.¹³ A fierce insistence that rocks listen creates an enjoyable kind of difference because it does not (or did not) unsettle the belief of those assessing these claims, and the majority settler public listening in, that rocks cannot perceive or intend or aim; that they are nonlife (*geos*), not life (*zoe* or *bios*). The rights that Indigenous groups receive from the state are not

the right to make their view the norm but to attach a small spigot in the larger pipeline of late liberal approaches to geontology. Thus, unsurprisingly, the nearly ten years between the Kenbi Land Claim and the suit against OM Manganese have seen little containment of mining in Australia.¹⁴ It has merely been “rationalized.”¹⁵ All of which takes us back to the sovereign people to whom Gillard referred.

The sovereign people of geontopower are those who abide by the fundamental separation of Life and Nonlife with all the subsequent implications of this separation on intentionality, vulnerability, and ethical implication. That is, what is sovereign is the division of Life and Nonlife as the fundamental ground of the governance of difference and markets. Where Indigenous people agree to participate as an Animist voice in the governmental order of the people they are included as part of this sovereign people. Where they do not, they are cast out. But what of Two Women Sitting Down? Does *it* have standing before the public, law, and market as a political subject? Are the subjects of politics now not merely humans and other forms of living labor and capital—corporations, miners, politicians, and Indigenous custodians, protected plant and animal species—but also the undead and never-have-lived? Is it possible to assert that Two Women Sitting Down and other existents like her should matter equally to or as much or more than a form of human existence? Or, riffing on Fredric Jameson, is it easier to think of the end of capitalism than the intentional subjectivity of Two Women Sitting Down and Old Man Rock?¹⁶ If not, on what basis do we allow or deny geological formations like Two Women Sitting Down an equal standing before the law? Is the manganese blood of Two Women Sitting Down as ethically burdened as the vital power of the human worker who extracts it? Doesn't the ability

of these miners to decompose Two Women Sitting Down show its vulnerability and precarity? Is it more important to keep Two Women Sitting Down in place than to support the lifestyle and well-being that most Australians have come to expect? And what about Indigenous people who wish to put their children through private school and look at sites like Two Women Sitting Down as potential capital with which to do so? From what, or whose, perspective should the answers to these questions be posed and answered—cultural, economic, ecological, literary?

The fight over the meaning and significance of the damaging of Two Women Sitting Down provides a perfect example of why a growing number of geologists and climate experts are urgently calling for new dialogues among the natural sciences, the social sciences, the philosophies, and humanities and the arts. The governance of Life and Nonlife is no longer, we hear, merely a matter of human differences nor of the difference between humans and nonhuman animals, but is now also a matter of the entire assemblage of Life and Nonlife. If we are to answer these questions, and by answering them, alter the coming crisis of an overtaxed and overburdened planet, we are told that we need to reopen channels of communication across the natural sciences and critical humanities and social sciences. This multidisciplinary perspective is crucial for making sense of the standing that places like Two Women Sitting Down and Old Man Rock should have in the contemporary governance of difference and markets in late liberalism. Indeed, a new interdisciplinary literacy is the only hope for finding a way to square our current arrangement of life with the continuation of human and planetary life as such. Scientists, philosophers, anthropologists, politicians, political theories, historians, writers, and artists must gather their wisdom, develop a level of mutual literacy, and cross-pollinate their

severed lineages. The pressing nature of such discussions is glimpsed in the shadow cast by dinosaur-sized mining trucks carving away at the foundation of the Bandicoot and Rat. In the massive twilight of these gigantic earthmovers it is hard not to be seduced by the figure of the Desert, not to imagine that the Anthropocene, the geological age of the Human Being, will be the last age of humans and the first stage of Earth becoming Mars, a planet once awash in life, but now a dead orb hanging in the night sky. By squaring the difference between the natural sciences and the critical humanities and social sciences we might be able to decide whether it makes sense to say that OM Manganese murdered Two Women Sitting Down—or that “the site” was (merely) desecrated. In other words, honest, considered, but hard-hitting interdisciplinary reflection is the only way we will find the right foundation for a decision about whether it is appropriate to say that such and such happened to Two Women Sitting Down—and whether we should refer to it as “that,” “it,” or “they” (a demonstrative, a third nonperson, or two subjects).

But what if we looked at this conversation between the natural sciences and critical humanities and social sciences differently? What if we asked not what epistemological differences have emerged over the years as the natural sciences of life and the critical sciences have separated and specialized, but what common frameworks, or *attitudes, anxieties, and desires*, toward the lively and the inert have been preserved across this separation and specialization? What unacknowledged agreements were signed long before the natural and critical sciences parted ways? In subsequent chapters I look at how the analytics of existence of my Indigenous colleagues are apprehended across specific theoretical, social, and capital environments. Here I begin by outlining the key features of the propositional hinge that joins the

natural and critical sciences and that creates the differences between them. I call this hinge the Carbon Imaginary. The Carbon Imaginary is the homologous space created when the concepts of birth, growth-reproduction, and death are laminated onto the concepts of event, *conatus/affectus*, and finitude. As I noted in the introductory chapter of this book, the Carbon Imaginary is the central imaginary of the figure of the Desert. It seeks, iterates, and dramatizes the gap between Life and that which is conceived as before or without Life. And, while certainly central to the Desert, the Carbon Imaginary informs far broader conceptual and pragmatic attempts to overcome it—such as the Animist extension of vitalisms across all existents and assemblages.

I am clearly adapting the concept of a “propositional hinge” from Ludwig Wittgenstein, who argued that propositional hinges function as axles around which an entire apparatus of practical and propositional knowledge about the world turns rather than a set of propositions about the state of the world.¹⁷ Put another way, propositional hinges aren’t truth statements. They are nonpropositional propositions, a kind of statement that cannot be seriously doubted, or, if doubted, the doubt indicates the speaker is or is doing something other than making a truth statement—she is being provocative or is a lunatic or expressing her cultural difference. For Wittgenstein one either remains within the axial environment of a hinged world or one converts to another. In the kind of conversion Wittgenstein proposes one is not merely repositioned in the space established by an axial proposition but moves out of one space and into another, from one kind of physics into another, from one metaphysics into another.¹⁸ But, hinge and axle rod also seem, as metaphors, too smooth an imaginary joint. The image of the scar would probably be a better

image of the homologous productivity of the space between natural life and critical life and the nature of the Carbon Imaginary.¹⁹ The Carbon Imaginary would then be the pulsing scarred region between Life and Nonlife—an ache that makes us pay attention to a scar that has, for a long time, remained numb and dormant, which does not mean unfelt.

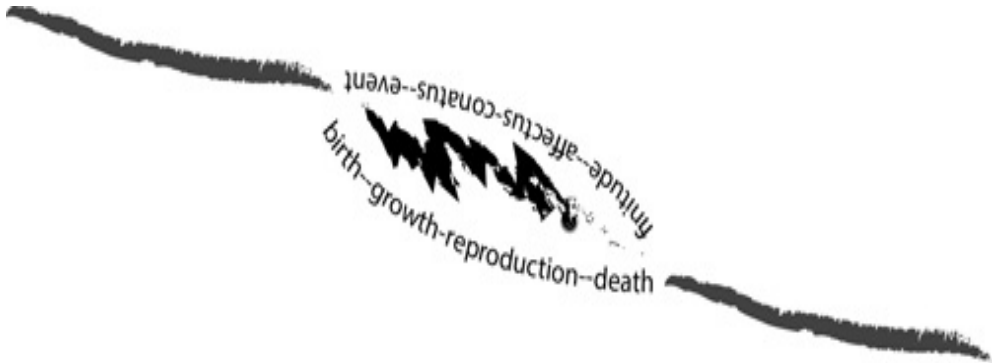


FIGURE 2.1 · A scarred homology.

Natural Life

The distinction between Life and Nonlife is, of course, foundational to the separation of the geosciences and the biosciences, geochemistry and biochemistry, geology and biology. This distinction is based on a series of evolving technical experiments and mediated by highly specialized vocabularies. For instance, a standard contemporary biochemical definition of life is “a physical compartmentation from the environment and self-organization of self-contained redox reactions.”²⁰ Redox is shorthand for a series of reduction-oxidation reactions in which electrons are transferred between chemical species. For those not conversant in contemporary

chemistry, oxidation occurs when an element loses one or more oxygen electrons; reduction is a gain of the same. Redox reactions are instances when these electrons are simultaneously transferred. Take, for instance, the creation of pure iron in the following instance of redox: $3C + [2Fe_2O_3] \rightarrow [4Fe] + [3CO_2]$. To create pure iron, one electron of oxygen is transferred from iron oxide $[2Fe_2O_3]$ to $[3C]$, creating three molecules of carbon dioxide $[3CO_2]$. In order to accomplish this transfer, a certain amount of energy needs to be added to $2Fe_2O_3$, energy usually derived from carbon sources such as coal. But various forms of natural oxidation/reduction occur all around us. For instance, combustion is a redox reaction that occurs so rapidly we experience it as heat and light. Corrosion is a redox reaction that occurs so slowly we perceive it as rust and moisture.

But redox reactions are not themselves the basis of the distinction between biology and geology. Rather, the distinction between biological redox and geological redox is that the former is considered to be relatively self-organized, self-oriented, and self-contained whereas geological redox reactions are not. Biological redox depends on, as Karen Barad has argued in other contexts, conceiving some existences as capable of performative boot-strapping—a molecularly based self-oriented sovereignty.²¹ This performative power is situated in a cell's metabolic function.²² And metabolism is the full range of chemical and mechanical processes that all organisms (all life) use to grow, reproduce, and maintain their integrity. It consists of all the biochemical processes that emerge from and are directed toward creating and sustaining a certain kind of intentional substance—that is, a substance that is goal-directed at every and all levels and whose final end, or goal, is to sustain and reproduce a version of itself. And it is this imaginary of sovereign metabolic

performativity that separates biological redox from geological redox.

The concept of metabolic function, in other words, allows us to consider each and every part of the living being as having its own very narrow and contained goals and yet still be part of a living being's broader purpose. The goal of an enzyme catalyst, for instance, is to transfer electrons and to be able to continue to transfer electrons. That the enzyme has an intention beyond this (contributing to the larger goal of producing and reproducing the organism) isn't necessary for it to function as an efficient causal agent. Most consider the final goal of each and every part of an organism to be whatever higher independent life form it supports (such as the individual body or the species being). But defining life as a self-directed activity works best when biochemical processes are viewed from the standpoint of the organism's so-called final membrane. The final membrane of the animal cell is usually considered to be its lipid surround, a membrane that links and separates it from its environment. The final membrane of an individual human is usually thought of and experienced as skin. The final membrane of the human species is situated in its reproductive encounters and regulations. It is only from the point of view of these different kinds of skins that we can claim a larger, or final, cause—the production and reproduction of this particular kind of skinned existent. This epidermal point of view provides us with the grounds for thinking and experiencing the facts and ethics of birth and death and for evaluating a well-lived life and good death. This is exemplified in the fact that cells, the smallest units of life, are said to experience “birth” by metabolizing nutrients outside themselves and to suffer death. And lest one think “suffer” is a strong word to use, it might help to know that biologists give cellular death an ethical inflection.

Cells are said to have a proper and improper death—in a good death, a tidy death, the cell self-destructs; in an untidy death it swells, leaks, explodes—what biologists call respectively apoptosis as a programmed form of cell death and necrosis as an unordered and unintended form of cell death. Our vocabulary for changes in rock and mineral formations such as Two Women Sitting Down and Old Man Rock have a very different event imaginary, one of accretion, of the residual, of schistosity, of seismic gaps—external forces that cause a change rather than self-activated or self-oriented goals and intentions that can fail to work.

But these days the more we press on the skin of life the more unstable it feels for maintaining the concept of Life as distinct from Nonlife, let alone the existence of any particular life form. Take, for example, the biochemical reactions that have allowed biologists to understand the distinctions between and interdependencies of metabolic processes across the categories of life, namely, the two major forms of biological redox: plant-based photosynthesis and animal respiration. Plant-based photosynthesis uses solar (light) energy to convert carbon dioxide, its source of carbon, and water into glucose ($C_6H_{12}O_6$), its source of internal energy. The chemical equation is $6CO_2 + 6H_2O + \text{light energy} \rightarrow C_6H_{12}O_6 + 6O_2$. The glucose is stored in plants and, as enzymes remove hydrogen from the glucose, is used as energy for growth and reproduction. Animal-based life uses organic compounds such as plants as its source of carbon and uses redox reactions as its energy source. Its cells consume organic compounds containing stored and processed carbon, $C_6H_{12}O_6 + 6O_2$, and then expel $6CO_2 + 6H_2O$ through a series of redox reactions based on respiration. An online ChemWiki (produced by the University of California, Davis) provides a

simple example of the role redox plays in metabolic function. When we guzzle our soft drinks or sip them slowly, the body converts the original form of sugar, disaccharide sucrose, into glucose. Enzyme-catalyzing reactions then transfer the electrons from glucose to molecular oxygen, oxidizing the carbon molecule to produce carbon dioxide (our exhalation) and reducing the O_2 to H_2O , or the moisture in breath that we exhale.²³ Respiration is, indeed, one of the fundamental qualities of living things —“respiration” in humans is a mode of bringing oxygen into the system and expelling carbon dioxide, a form of taking in and getting rid of that indicates a self-oriented aboutness if not consciousness.

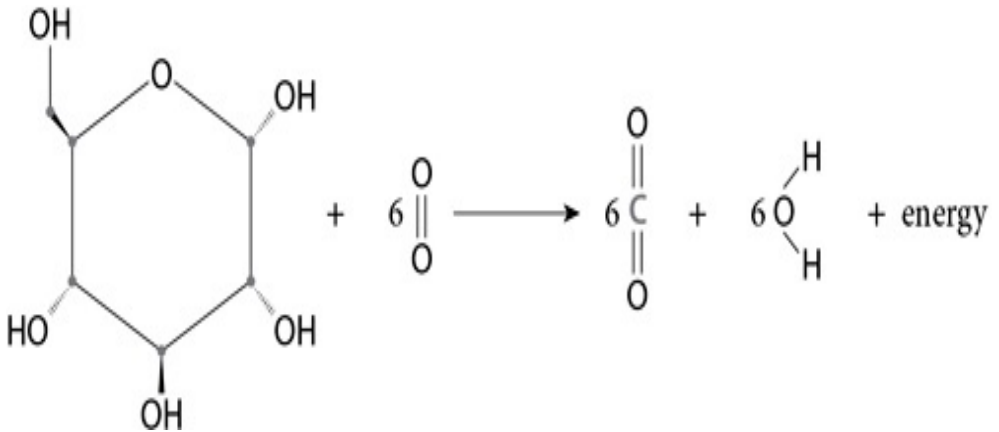


FIGURE 2.2 · Coca-Cola chemistry.

But this same can of Coca-Cola is, under the pressure of Anthropogenic climatic consciousness, becoming symptomatic and diagnostic of a broader assemblage of existents that is irrevocably altering the integrity of Life and of the way we produce a good life. That is, when I wrote above, “the more we

press on the skin of life the more unstable it feels for maintaining the concept of life, let alone the existence of any particular life form,” I should have first asked, “What is causing the natural sciences to place ever more pressure on the skin of life, shredding this fragile membrane in the process?” The answer takes us to the increasingly unavoidable entanglements of Life and Nonlife in contemporary capitalism. Let’s stay with our can of Coca-Cola. The political left and right have long struggled to model and transform the manner in which industrial capital extracts value from human labor. But vast networks of Life *and* Nonlife are created and mobilized for the creation of the cans of Cokes we guzzle daily. Plants make the sugars for some Coca-Cola products, but genetically modified bacteria make the sweetness of others. Aspartame, the primary “artificial sweetener” in sodas, is a biological product—it is made through the accumulation and processing of amino acids produced from genetically modified bacteria. Most studies examine the effect of aspartame on the health of humans or other life forms as it accumulates in the environment. But *Two Women Sitting Down* might assess its effects from a different point of view: the amount of coal, steel, and copper needed to compose the global factories that compose the can and produce the aspartame. And these globally distributed factories gobble up aquifers, leaving local communities starved for water as they create waste products that are returned, one way or another, into the environment.²⁴

It is this larger breathing, drinking, and perspiring public that is left out of the online chemistry lesson but is now an increasingly unavoidable factor in global life as every aspect of industrial based production and consumption is related back to the planetary carbon cycle. Eating, drinking, breathing: these activities provide virtual glimpses of the Viruses operating within

the technical divisions of Life and Nonlife. The same techniques that allow the natural sciences to distinguish between categories of life also demonstrate not merely the interdependent entanglements of Life and Nonlife but the irrelevance of their separation. Animals and minerals, plants and animals, and photoautotrophs and chemoheterotrophs are extimates—each is external to the other only if the scale of our perception is confined to the skin, to a set of epidermal enclosures. But human lungs are constant reminders that this separation is imaginary. Where is the human body if it is viewed from within the lung? The larger, massive biotic assemblage the lungs know intimately—including green plants, photosynthetic bacteria, nonsulfur purple bacteria, hydrogen, sulfur and iron bacteria, animals, and microbes—is now what is thought to produce the metabolism of the planetary carbon cycle, which may be on the verge of a massive reorganization due to human action. Indeed, the shift of scale entailed in the study of Anthropogenic climate change is what allows biologists to link the smallest unit of life and death to planetary life and death (the planetary carbon cycle). And this shift in scale allows the thought of extinction to scale up from the logic of species (species extinction) to a planetary logic (planetary extinction). What wonder that we are hearing a potential shift in our political discourses from Logos to *πνεῦμα τοῦ στόματος* and from the demand “listen to me” to the statement, “I can’t breathe.”²⁵

Given the Möbius nature of geochemistry and biochemistry, it should come as no surprise that some in the natural sciences are attempting to perforate the clean separation of biochemistry and geochemistry, biology and geology, through the concepts of biogeochemistry and geomorphology and physics. Biochemists and geochemists long ago had to confront the fact that although

to be “life” a living thing must be structurally and functionally compartmentalized from its environment, nothing can remain alive if it is hermetically sealed off from its environment. Thus rather than focusing on the difference between Life and Nonlife, many within the natural sciences are rethinking “the link between the geochemistry of Earth and the biochemistry of life.”²⁶ To be sure, some geologists have long thought that although rocks cannot exactly die and definitely cannot be murdered, they do come into existence. Indeed, their origins are the basis of rock classification. Igneous rocks are made up of a small range of crystalline minerals formed from the molten interior of the planet. Most rocks, however, are sedimentary: they are composed as water moves around composite pieces of eroded igneous material, carbonated animals and plant material, and siliceous bits of marine microfauna, and these composites are slowly cemented together by gravity. Others have concentrated on far stranger metabolic and symbiotic relationships between geological and biological substances. Many bacteria do just fine in environments deprived of oxygen because they breathe rocks (*geos*) rather than oxygen.²⁷ And bacteria may well be the origin of certain rock formations and minerals now essential and potentially toxic to other forms of life. For instance, manganese, the material OM Holding was mining near Two Women Sitting Down, is a sedimentary rock found in purer or more contaminated forms but typically mixed with other rocks, pre-rocks, and rock debris. Some geochemists believe it is the by-product of a specific living organism, namely the bacteria *Roseobacter* sp. Azwk-3b.²⁸ But if this bacteria (a form of life) is responsible for the formation of certain forms of manganese (a form of nonlife), manganese is in turn an “essential toxic element” for organic life; it is essential to plants for photosynthesis and to all organisms that process

elemental oxygen such as humans, *and* it is toxic to both groups if absorbed in large concentrations.

But what has come together can be taken apart if enough resources are in play. Rocks and minerals formed by eons of compression can be transformed into other forms. The entire point of mining Two Women Sitting Down, after all, was to transform her from one form of existence into another so that wealth could be created via commodity trade. The rich deposits of the manganese blood of Two Women Sitting Down is turned into purer forms of manganese, which is then united with other ores to form steel through the intervention of coal, an organic sedimentary rock formed mainly by plant debris. When manganese pyrolusite (MnO_2)—found in large abundance in Australia—and rhodochrosite (MnCO_3) are processed into manganal steel through coal fire burning, they then release dust and fumes that can more easily be absorbed into life-forms at high levels and toxically disrupt molecular and cellular processes. The *Guardian*, for instance, reported in 2009 that thirteen hundred Chinese children suffered serious lead poisoning through exposure to the fumes and dust of a nearby manganese-smelting factory, ores which might well have originated in Australia.²⁹ And here we see, once again, that the perspective and scale from which we examine the relationship between Life and Nonlife creates *and* undermines the distinctions between Life and Nonlife. Life and Nonlife breathe in and breathe out. And if Nonlife spawned Life, a current mode of Life may be returning the favor.

These new directions in the natural sciences have not, however, completely fractured the drama of Life and the abjection of Nonlife. Indeed the very sciences that seem to be deconstructing the divisions of Life and Nonlife most

dramatically—say, climate science—also rely on a certain drama and mystery of Life. As Earth (Gaia) becomes, in its totality, a biosphere, the question of how this vibrant living planet emerge out of the vast expanse of Nonlife is intensified. How did something emerge out of the nothing? The one out of zero? Gaia stripped of life is a tragedy, the final dramatic conclusion of the drama of life and death on Earth. In other words, the scaling of extinction from a species level to a planetary level depends on the dramatization of the difference between Life and Nonlife. Indeed, extinction as a form of mass death is something that only Life can experience. Only Life has a self-oriented intention and potentiality, and thus only Life can fail, die, and cease to be. Only Life has the potential to be or make something that is not yet—a more developed form of itself, a reproduction of itself, an absence of itself. And this seems as self-evident as gravity. Leave aside the perspective that Life's dynamism is a dull repetition—the endless cycle of birth and death. Focus instead on the fact that Nonlife is affect without intention and is affected without the intentional agency to affect. Focus on Nonlife as inert, no matter the force with which it hurtles itself through space or down a hill. If we focus on these opposing qualities of Life and Nonlife, then we can linger over the miracle of bootstrapping metabolism. We can dramatize how this amazing something (Life) come from nothing (Nonlife). What conditions of a prebiotic broth led to the first cellular process? What are the geochemical conditions in which the break from Nonlife to Life emerged, absent a God who declared that it be so? If we focus on the difference between Life and Nonlife we won't be tempted to wonder what if the miracle was not Life, the emergence of a thing with new forms and agencies of potentiality, but Nonlife, a form of existence that had the potential not merely to be denuded of life but to produce what

it is not, namely Life? Nonlife has the power self-organize or not, to become Life or not.³⁰ In this case, a zero-degree form of intention is the source of all intention. The inert is the truth of life, not its horror.

Round and round we go. The natural sciences are now running in an ever faster loop around an ever deeper understanding of how Nonlife extruded Life and Life absorbs and extrudes Nonlife. When biological life brings too much or a kind of nonlife inside itself, it risks its structural and functional form and integrity (i.e., manganese poisoning). And when biological life extrudes itself into its environment it risks radically altering the environment from which it must ingest what sustains it. But this is also true of nonbiological entities. Rocks extrude into their environment, changing wind patterns and leaving soil deposits, and they ingest the living that changes their geochemical imprint. A textbook in “biogeochemistry,” for instance, notes the dynamic relationship between biochemistry and geochemistry, arguing that “the influence of life” on most surface features of the earth make the study of biochemistry necessary to any study of geochemistry and vice versa. “Indeed, many of the Earth’s characteristics are only hospitable to life today because of the current and abundance of life on this planet ... liquid water, climate, and a nitrogen-rich atmosphere, are at least partially due to the presence of life.”³¹ Once existent, life makes the conditions in which it can flourish. But note how, once again, the distinction between Life and Nonlife reemerges even as we are cautioned to understand their symbiotic relationship. Life shapes its Nonlife environment but it is absolutely distinguishable from it.

Swallow, digest, breathe out, then cut away the outside coming in and the inside going out. These excisions are becoming more difficult as the carbon cycle, where forms of

existence produce themselves as atmosphere, is interrupted by the consumption of carbon to produce and expand one form of existence: late liberalism. But the gyrations sweeping Life and Nonlife have not yet, it seems, deeply shaken the hold of late liberal geontopower. The court considering the desecration of Two Women Sitting Down did not consider what the sacred site desired or intended as a living or vital matter. They did not seem to care whether it wished to stay in place, to commit suicide as a political statement, or to suffer a transformation so that settler Australians could accumulate more capital from Indigenous lands. They simply assumed that Nonlife has no capacity to intend, desire, or seek. They simply assumed that the Indigenous men and women had a cultural belief about things rather than a probing analytics of their existence.

Critical Life

The rhetoric surrounding Anthropogenic climate change and capital markets suggests that the work to bring the natural and critical sciences into a mutually intelligible framework will be long and hard. But will it? Has a common consensus already been quietly reached beyond, or under, or stretched across their different discourses and methods? Let's take, as example, a domain within political theory that would appear to oppose starkly the epistemological assumptions and methodological approaches of the natural sciences of biochemistry and geochemistry and thus be of assistance to Two Women Sitting Down and Old Man Rock, namely, critical theories of potentiality and vitalism. If there is a scarred homology between the biological concepts of birth, growth, and reproduction, and death and the critical philosophical concepts of event, *conatus/affectus*,

and finitude, it is in the concepts of potentiality and vitalism that we might begin to see them.

A common ancient name and text provides a useful place to begin thinking about the scarred homology between contemporary natural life and critical political life; the name is Aristotle and the text is “On the Soul.”³² In “On the Soul,” Aristotle argues that both biological *and* nonbiological substances are self-reflexive forms—things endowed with the sovereign quality of *thishereness*. But whereas all things are sovereign, not all sovereign things are alike. Within the sovereign order of substance lies a crucial division between those things that are saturated with actuality when they arrive in existence (Nonlife, inanimate things) and those things defined by an inner dynamic potentiality at birth (Life, animated things). The source of the dynamic potentiality of life, and thus the key to the division between sovereign substances, is the soul. The legal discussion of Two Women Sitting Down makes Aristotle’s distinction clear. For him, both Two Women Sitting Down and any two human women looking at it are things. But only the “actual” women have souls; Two Women Sitting Down does not. “Actual” women are defined by the dynamic potentiality that courses through them. Nothing courses through Two Women Sitting Down that it itself mobilizes or actualizes. For Aristotle, Two Women Sitting Down is, and will always be, a soulless saturated actuality. To be sure, he notes that most souled things do little more with their potentiality than flick it on and off. For example, humans have the capacity to be thinking creatures, but they activate that capacity only intermittently. As a result, Aristotle must introduce a division within the domain of dynamic potentiality, that between the actual (*energia*, ἐνέργεια) and actualization (ἐντελέχεια). (An aside: you might wonder why

fully actualized entities such as rocks, metal, gas, and heroin aren't considered the highest form in Aristotle's metaphysical hierarchy. After all, they beat souled things to the goal line by achieving full and complete saturated actualization while we struggle on. (One answer is the drama of the struggle is more important than the actual end of the struggle.) For Aristotle it is a sad but true fact that most humans spend their lives laboring to be actual rather than ever achieving true and complete actualization. But these gaps provide him with an ethical ruler with which he can sort and measure a hierarchy of beings. The truth of human existence can be measured by how much people have actualized their potential from the point of view of their end. If Aristotle were called to testify at the trial of OM Manganese, he would probably state that the rock has no such measure. Whereas rocks are sovereign *thiserethings* they are not living things with inner gaps and possibilities, the condition and measure of ethical action. They are saturated nonethical actuality. As a consequence they can kill us accidentally. We can destroy their form or reform them for our own purposes, say, in order to accumulate capital through the mining of Indigenous lands. But they do not die nor can they purposefully murder us. And we cannot murder them except by metaphorical extension—because we cannot take away a soul they never had.

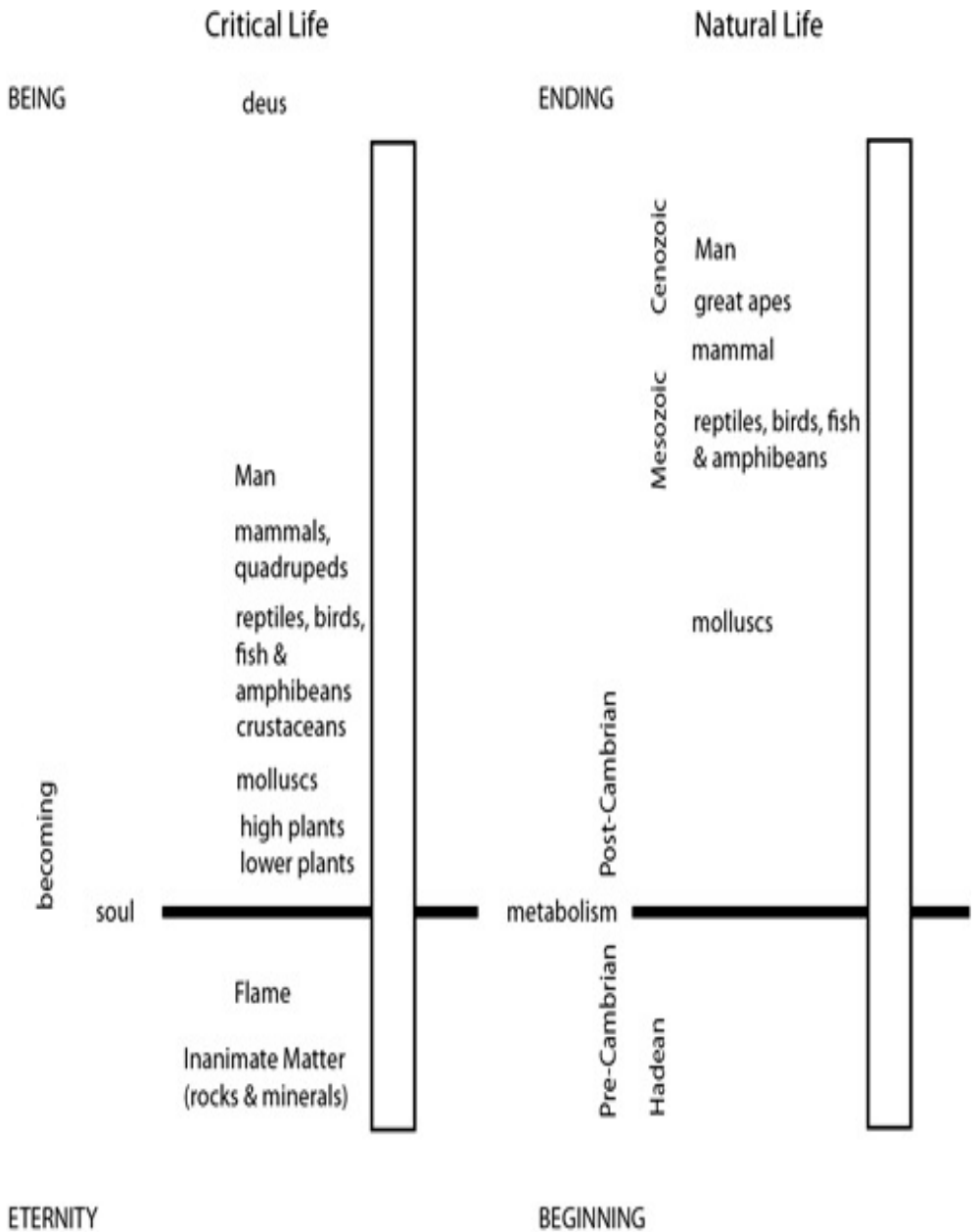


FIGURE 2.3 · Natural life and critical life.

A contemporary biochemist might agree with Aristotle that Two Women Sitting Down exists as a sovereign *thishereness*, as do the miners that carved into her sides, until some more powerful force dislodges or decomposes them. But this same biochemist would probably disagree with how Aristotle distinguished living and nonliving things, namely, by the presence or absence of a soul. The philosopher Michael Frede has a reassuring answer to this biochemical skepticism. Frede sees the disagreement between Aristotelian and biological categories as not so much about a chasm of causal explanation separating modern biological science and Aristotelian metaphysics, but simply a matter of terminology. For Frede, the soul is the concept-thing that simply and “essentially distinguishes a living body from an inanimate body.”³³ The soul, in other words, is the ancient understanding of carbon-based metabolism insofar as carbon-based metabolism is what provides the inner vitality (potentiality) that defines Life as absolutely separate from Nonlife.³⁴ Certainly Frede’s is not the only perspective on the relationship between Aristotle and contemporary biology. And the purpose of my evocation of Aristotle is not intended to draw an unbroken line of thought running from the history of metaphysics to the contemporary natural sciences and critical humanities. Rather this brief reminder of the Aristotelian metaphysics is meant to provide a background to a set of problematics that continues to haunt critical theory when its focus turns to the governance of Life and Nonlife (exemplified in the case of Two Women Sitting Down and Old Man Rock). In other words, these problematics are meant to point to the scarred homology between natural life and critical political life, restricting the space for new modes of practical and analytical (analysis as a practice of) existence.

So let me start with a simple question. Does the concept of potentiality consign Two Women Sitting Down and Old Man Rock to a form of existence that can only be used or abused by humans in a battle over who will survive and thrive and who will not—about which *human lives* matter? This is a crucial question that the bulk of this book examines. But to untangle the answer to this question, wrapped as it is around the tactics of geontopower, I need to begin with the status of Two Women Sitting Down and Old Man Rock in two regions of contemporary theory that seem most appropriate to lend them support: a debate among theorists of potentiality working within the broad field of biopower on the one hand, and the emergence of biophilosophy and new vitalism on the other hand. In relation to the first field, the obvious contemporary reference is Giorgio Agamben, who has, over his long career, carefully mined the works of Aristotle and Heidegger in order to rethink the foundations and dynamics of Foucauldian biopolitics.³⁵ Perhaps most well-known is Agamben's recuperation of the Greek distinction between *zoe* and *bios* in order to demonstrate how contemporary biopower works.³⁶ Instead of beginning with the absent term *geos* in his critical political theory, let's begin with a distinction within *bios* that separates human potentiality from all other forms of potentiality. Agamben takes Aristotle's distinction between those sovereign things saturated with actuality and those sovereign things endowed with an inner dynamic potentiality, and he creates another. As opposed to other forms of life, humans have two forms of potentiality. They possess the *generic potentiality* that Aristotle identified, a form of potentiality that is exhausted when it is actualized. And they possess *existing potentiality*, namely, the capacity *not* to do what one actually has the capacity to do and *not* to be what one already actually is. To be sure, if living

things, in Aristotle's work, are ethically evaluated at their death on the basis of how much of their potential they had actualized, Heidegger grounded the same judgment not on the fact of death as such but the concept of finitude as initiating an active stance in life—the decision to become authentic. Dasein transforms an existing negative potentiality (“humans, like all living things, will die”) by actively becoming a subject that thinks from its point of view (“what will I have been”; “what stance will I take in the unfolding of what I am and am becoming”).³⁷ This negative form of potentiality absolutely differentiates human life from all other forms of life even as life is defined as that which has the potential to be or not to be what it is potentially. Finitude *skins* Dasein and allows it to find and differentiate itself from the other forms of Life and provides it with the political and ethical dynamism of the coming community. Any other animal, or form of life, that wishes to walk into Heidegger or Agamben's Open must conform to this form of doubled potentiality.³⁸ It is very unclear how Two Women Sitting Down would do so. The Rat and the Bandicoot seem not merely to have failed to finish the race—they were never allowed to get to the starting line.³⁹ In the presence of Two Women Sitting Down, ontology's claim to provide a general account of beings reveals a biological bias.

Agamben is hardly our only source for critical approaches to potentiality and politics and their political and ethical capture of Two Women Sitting Down and Old Man Rock. Take, for example, Roberto Esposito's critique of Agamben's approach. As his student, Timothy Campbell, puts it, Esposito provides a way of “thinking life beyond merely zoe and bios.”⁴⁰ The life one finds if one moves beyond Agamben's negative biopolitics is a pure positive pulsing interval between what is and what is not and beyond what is to what could be. For instance, in the chapter

“Biopolitics and Potentiality,” Esposito reminds his reader that, for Nietzsche, “the human species is never given once and for all time, but is susceptible in good and evil, to being molded in forms.”⁴¹ Humans are always a “form of life” that has at its origins only an interval between itself and its origins. Thus, the human is not in itself; its body is always also against itself and others. As a consequence, one does not preserve life through ridding oneself of conflict. Nor does one merely survive by preserving and expanding one’s form. The will to power seeks an expansion but this power is not seeking to expand a particular form but the interval between this particular form and its past and coming forms. “Identifying life with its own overcoming means that it is no longer ‘in-itself’—it is always projecting beyond itself.”⁴² “Life doesn’t fall in an abyss; rather, it is the abyss in which life itself risks falling. Not in a given moment, but already at the origin, from the moment that the abyss is not other than the interval of difference that withdraws from every identifying consistency.” Thus at the heart of man, in his essence, is the otherwise, the beyond. For Esposito, humans are not “a being as such, but a becoming that carries together within itself the traces of a different past and the prefiguration of a new future.”⁴³ The power (*potenza*) of potentiality is the positivity within biopower, within Life.

Life. Humans. How might these contemporary theories of biopower and potentiality might help Two Women Sitting Down? Can Nonlife find a narrow crevice into which its massive bulk and granular nature could infiltrate critical Life as certainly as it has already infiltrated the lungs, water, and air of the humans performing the critique? Thinking about Life as something that is not in-itself but always beyond-itself seems to take us back to the unraveling of the significance of the difference between Life and

Nonlife in some subdisciplines of the natural sciences. Once again the lung seems the most appropriate organ for the Anthropogenic climate change era because it points to the openness of all beings to their surroundings. Several strands of contemporary critical theory might agree. Perhaps the best-known, powerful, and insightful works in this domain are those of Eugene Thacker and Jane Bennett. Thacker, for instance, has pushed sharply and concisely against the epidermal imaginary, and its immunological implications, of “the body politic.”⁴⁴ For Thacker the nested ordering of parts and wholes of bodies creates the conditions for the medical-political immunological response—the creation of an outside of the body and the defensive attack of any outside part or whole seen as a threat to its functionality. In order to counter this aggressive foundation of the body politic, Thacker has outlined a new biophilosophy. He begins with a clearing gesture, claiming that Western ontologies can be sorted by how they account for the self-organization of being—a self-organization that has “an inward-turning and an outward-turning aspect.” He observes, in other words, something similar to what I am calling the biontological nature of Western ontology in order to found a new biontology.

The inward-turning divides, orders, and interrelates species and types; the outward-turning manages boundaries and positions the living against the nonliving, making possible an instrumentality, a standing-reserve. The inward-turning aspect is metabolic, in that it processes, filters, and differentiates itself internally; it is the breakdown and production of biomolecules, the organization of the organs, the genesis of species and races. The outward-turning aspect is immunologic, for it manages boundaries,

exchanges, passages; it is the self-nonsel self distinction, the organism exchanging with its environment, sensing its *milieu*, the individual body living in proximity to other bodies.

Thacker argues that if we wish to interrupt the constant immunological response of the body politics and substitute for it new vital forms of existence, biophilosophy must abandon “the concept of ‘life itself’ that is forever caught between the poles of nature and culture, biology and technology, human and machine” and develop “concepts that always cut across and that form networks.”⁴⁵ When the focus of the ontology of self-organized being is shifted from the search for essences to the desire for events, from sharp epidermal boundaries to fuzzy and open borders, and from simple local bodies to complex global patterns, the following emerge as exemplary ontological objects: weather systems, carbon cycles, computer routing systems. Timothy Morton’s concept of hyper-objects seems relevant here.⁴⁶

This movement away from epidermally enclosed, self-oriented and -organized entities and toward the event horizons of assemblages likewise characterizes Bennett’s model of a post-biopolitics grounded in the concepts of actants, affects, and events rather than in the processes of Life and their difference from Nonlife. As Bennett notes, actants are defined by their ability to intrude into the course of other actants—the classic bump in the road; the biochemical trigger that alters the typical expression of a sequence of DNA; the thought that comes when the lights are switched on—even as the extimate relation between agencies, actants, and materialities makes differentiating one actant from another, this one from that one, a fool’s errand. As Bennett notes, and was noted above, even within the natural

sciences the closed, self-organized body is at best a working fiction. Our “flesh is populated and constituted by different swarms of foreigners ... the bacteria in the human microbiome collectively possess at least 100 times as many genes as the mere 20,000 or so in the human genome.... We are, rather, *an array of bodies*, many different kinds of them in a nested set of microbiomes,” but not merely biological bodies.⁴⁷ And what support our bodies are other equally distributed agencies such as “the wiring and transformers and fingers that regulate the computer regulations.” Wherever we look we find “a swarm of vitalities” in play, from the wiring of touchpads and cooling systems, to the hum of nuclear power stations and power grids, to the shimmering fetid heat of peat bogs and waste dumps, and beyond.⁴⁸

The task becomes to identify the contours of the swarm, and the kind of relations that obtain between its bits ... this understanding of agency does not deny the existence of that thrust called intentionality, but it does see it as less definitive of outcomes. It loosens the connections between efficacy and the moral subject, bringing efficacy closer to the idea of the power to make a difference that calls for a response.⁴⁹

Central to both Thacker’s and Bennett’s works is a deep and creative engagement with Gilles Deleuze’s idea of the assemblage and event. This gravitation to Deleuze and his longtime partner, Félix Guattari, is hardly surprising. Not only does their approach demand that we see the potential for actualization, deactualization, and reactualization in any arrangement of existence, they do so through a language that

draws on geological, ecological, and geometrical metaphors more than biological ones, and thus appear to provide critical theory an exit from the prisonhouse of biontology. Moreover, by grounding ontology in univocal multiplicity, Deleuze seems to liberate critical theory from the drama of the zero and the one and from the question of how Being emerged from Nothingness. And yet what of this fixation with the event? And how discrete a phenomenon are we making the assemblage? As is well known, Deleuze and Guattari proposed three modes of thought in which eventfulness occurred: *philosophy*, which produces concepts, or *multiplicities*, that do *not* interpret the world of essences and appearances but connect existing intensities on the plane of immanence into new actualities; *art*, which produces affective intensifications of the concept, creating, as Deleuze and Guattari put it in *What Is Philosophy?* “a bloc of sensation, that is to say, a compound of percepts and affects”; and *science*, which produces functional matrixes that fix and refashion our frame of reference.⁵⁰ For instance, in *The Logic of Sense*, the event is a differential geometrical concept that demands we cease opposing the singular to the universal and start understanding that the opposite of the singular is the ordinary. Take the square. The lines of the square are composed of multiple points, all of which can be considered ordinary with respect to each other. The event is what takes place at the joints, the singularity of the transition, the differential, between the directionality of one line and the directionality of the other. Space is such an event even as events are understood geographically. The Battle of Waterloo, for instance, is a multiplicity of exchanges and intensities between forms of embodiment without self-evident borders. The concept does not interpret or represent what is already there but configures it—it is *rhetorical* in the sense of a nexus between

conceptual and material configuration. And by the time we get to *A Thousand Plateaus*, sense itself is made a minor actor on the plane of geological experimentation. The artist tries out an intensification of affect. The scientist tests a matrix. The philosophy invests a concept. But across these modes of thought lie a radical, nonmilitant, infelicitous desire; a pulse of constant becoming; a nonintentional intensity that explores a multitude of modes, attributes, and connections and produces new territorializations.

On the one hand, these ecological, geological, and geometrical models of the virtual, potentiality, and eventfulness seem to open new avenues beyond the Carbon Imaginary, the scarred region is ripped open and sutured to some pretty inappropriate parts. But what I want to press on here by way of transition to the next chapter, a pressure that I hope builds as the chapters progress, is a strange penumbral homology that begins to form when contemporary biophilosophy and vibrant matter turn to the event, when they embrace the *conatus* and *affectus* of assemblages, and when they engage Deleuze's infamous infatuation with monstrosity.⁵¹ Thatcher and Bennett agree with Deleuze that the point isn't to find the essence of a (or "the") thing, but to probe the possible existence of another thing.⁵² And in this way they agree with a vital question of immanent critique: not merely what activates an event but, of all the possible events that may occur, which event will decisively disrupt the current organization of the actual. From this perspective, truth is a particular kind of event, an event that disturbs the current territorialization of existents, say the territorializing of *Two Women Sitting Down* according to the regulatory concepts of Nonlife (*geos*) and Life (*bios* and *zoe*). Truth is measured, in other words, not by propositional consistency or logic, but by its link to a monstrous interruption, a

seismic shift. Deleuze wagered that the more monstrous the emergent entity, the more event-full it is, and thus the more “true” (the more it maximally transverses the given reality). A Deleuzian political slogan might be, “Free yourself from the domination of the apparatus of meaning—the signifier and signified, the logos and the phonos, and the body-with-organs. Turn the sense-meaning into event-making.” For Foucault and Michel Serres the rallying call might be “Exercise your noise.”⁵³ But each of these theorists also acknowledged to be an event is a dangerous proposition. The more event-full, the more unlikely the event will survive its “birth.” If the transversality of freedom as potential existence is a practice of becoming otherwise, then the freer the becoming the higher the phenomenological risk to the emergent being. Put another way, the purer the event, the more existential the risk. Certainly for Deleuze the pure event was unrealizable but, perhaps more importantly and tellingly, even impure events were usually not survivable.⁵⁴

The question that will haunt this book—and continue to haunt theory and politics in the coming decades—is how our fixation on the politics of the event and the vibrancy of the assemblage is reiterating rather than challenging the discourse and strategy of geontopower. How far are we distancing ourselves from the scarred space between the biological concepts of birth, growth/reproduction, and death, and the critical philosophical concepts of event, *conatus/affectus*, and finitude? Do we desire the virtual and ceaseless becoming because they allow us to escape what is worse than death and finitude, namely, absolute inertness? And insofar as we do, are we simultaneously extending the qualities and dynamics of one form that we believe existence takes (Life) onto the qualities and dynamics of all forms of existence? When we do this are we denying the ability of other

forms (the not-Life not-Nonlife) to undefine, redefine, and define us? The Animist says, Life no longer needs to face its terror—the lifeless, the inert, and the void of being—because we can simply refuse to acknowledge any other way of existing than our own. We can simply extend those attributes that some regions of human existence define as the most precious qualities of life (birth, becoming, actualization) to all forms of existence, to existence as such. We can saturate Being with familiar and reassuring qualities. We do not have to face a more arduous task of the sort Luce Irigaray phrased as moving from being the other of the same to becoming (being) the other of the other.⁵⁵

And thus with Two Women Sitting Down and those who support them and others like them: The event of becoming might have been the claim that Two Women Sitting Down did not die, was not murdered, and was not desecrated. What she did was turn her back on the world as it is being organized by becoming something that will potentially extinguish that world and the way we exist in it. This claim was not made in the court of law. Moreover, if this claim had been made it is unlikely that the court would have legally metabolized it. But as the foundations of geontopower continue to crumble such claims may come to be made and may gain hold.

THE FOG OF MEANING AND THE VOICELESS DEMOS

Might Be Something

In 2006, while working with Karrabing at Belyuen on a potential but as-of-yet incomplete GPS/GIS-based virtual library, I remembered an event that had happened maybe ten years earlier. I was camping at the coastal outstation Bulgul with five or six of our aunts and mothers, Yilngi, Nuki, Binbin, Bilawag, and Alanga. We had gone there to hunt for freshwater turtles, visit relatives living nearby, and add texture to the long run of our days. Everyone agreed that we had been “locked up” at Belyuen for too long and needed to stretch our legs. Of course, no one had been locked up on the Belyuen Community in the sense that they had been legally imprisoned. Since the 1970s, but only since the 1970s, Aboriginal men and women were free to move around the nation and consume within the nation on the same legal if not actual footing as other Australian citizens. Indeed, very little formal state policing intruded on their lives. Some Indigenous communities had permanent police stations, such as Wadeye, then called Port Keats, some four hundred kilometers to the south

of Belyuen as the crow flies. But at Belyuen, for the most part, day-to-day, week-to-week policing occurred within local modes of getting, taking, and distributing from various kinds of environments, something I outlined in *Labor's Lot*.

And as for stretching our legs—we hardly walked to Bulgul. After a four-hour drive on a rough, gutted dirt road in a flatbed truck, our legs and backs were in much worse shape than they had been when we started. In 1996 Bulgul was much further away from Belyuen in an experiential sense than it was in 2006; ditto Belyuen from Darwin. In abstract kilometers the distances are about the same, but infrastructural changes have made the trip faster and smoother. Roads connecting the Belyuen Community to Darwin are now sealed, as are long stretches of the road between Belyuen and Bulgul. The ferry to Darwin, which once took an exhaust-choked hour, now takes only fifteen minutes. Other infrastructural changes have lessened other kinds of distances. In the mid-1980s when I first arrived at Belyuen, the community's electricity came from a local power plant that provided free if sometimes flickering power. Television reception was bad at best. And there was only one phone for the Community, located in the community office. Radios and tape decks were de rigueur. I never saw a newspaper. And the food was canned, powdered, or rotten. People hemorrhaged out of the Community into nearby beaches during the weekends to camp, drink, and hunt. Now food selection at the community store is quite expensive but healthier. Many homes have satellite televisions. The power plant is switched off and abandoned. People pay for their electricity off the grid by purchasing disposable swipe cards: a hugely expensive endeavor, though supplemented by solar panels. This supplement has grown more expensive too as state and territory governments, squeezed in

peak rates by wind and solar, demand ever more charges for grid use.¹

We also did not use cheap disposable tents in the 1980s and 1990s—that started in the mid-2000s. And it was this memory—camping and living at outstations before tents—that prompted the memory of a conversation ten years before. It was morning, thus time to make a fire for breakfast and tea. Being August and this being Bulgul, the morning fog, or *tjelbak*, was heavy and thick. Still the mosquitoes were out in numbers, which at Bulgul has an otherworldly feel about it. Mosquitoes breed in the vast swamps surrounding the coastline, reinforced by a Mosquito Dreaming in the mouth of the large estuarine creek that defines the coastal ecosystem. They are huge in body size and swarm in such thick numbers that even with industrial repellent they form vibrating exoskeletons around any breathing mammal. Back then you were lucky if you had a decent mosquito net. Many people just wrapped themselves in thick blankets and slept as close to a smoking fire as possible, no matter the heat. I was told by the oldest men and women I first met in 1984, who had been born at the turn of the century just fifteen-plus years after the first substantial settlement in Darwin, that this mode of sleeping through mosquito season was much preferable to sleeping within paperbark huts. Once the older women and I made such a hut, and they pushed me into it for a little while just so that I would have some small sense of what it was like.

In any case, on that morning, I was tasked with emerging from my mosquito net to make the morning fire. The firewood we had collected on the way down to Bulgul was drenched from the *tjelbak*. So I had to strip away the bark to get to the dry wood underneath. Two of my moms, Yilngi and Nuki, having awoken early, sat under their respective nets, watching the mosquitoes eat

me alive. As I danced around, I insisted that I be allowed to crack the casing of a plastic Bic lighter and use the petrol inside as a quick lighting fluid. But Yilngi and Nuki insisted I do it the right way, making a small fire from the dry parts of the bark and then building it into a larger fire that dried as it burned the wood. They insisted partly to punish me because that's what older people did with younger people back then for fun, partly to encourage my education, partly from the enjoyment of watching a young white woman be saddled with a nasty chore, and partly because they were thinking about the cigarettes they'd want to light later in the day with that Bic lighter.

Maybe to make the task seem something other than a heinous chore—and certainly because she always supplemented tasks with such information—Yilngi pointed to a thick tubular layer of fog moving around a nearby hill and said, “You know, that thing im live.” What thing? I asked. “That thing where im look snake, im live. You go there, im smellbet you, kingmenena ninega, im come le you. Must be im smellimbet you now.” The part of the *tjelbak* that Yilngi was pointing to was moving in the form and manner of a huge snake, leaving in its wake the flat striated layers of fog soaking our mosquito nets, blankets, and bodies and making my life a misery. I had seen this form of *tjelbak* many times before, cylindrical and undulating, moving along the edges of hills and on top of riverbanks. And I was hardly surprised that the primary sense apparatus Yilngi ascribed to the *tjelbak* snake was smell or that she said the *tjelbak* snake was very sensitive and reactive to differences between human smells. Smell was the primary sensory system of most forms of existence that she and her cohort discussed. And most forms of existence used smell to discern what people were proper to what country—reacted positively to those whose smell was correct and negatively to

those whose smell wasn't. Logos was also involved—these forms of existence responded when they were addressed in the correct language. But human language was one of a multiplicity of semiotically mediated sensoria. (Again, I had outlined this in a book ten years before making this trip.²)

I had no intention of testing out what this *tjelbak* snake thought about my smell or of getting eaten alive by mosquitoes any longer than I had to, so I hurried to finish the fire and stand inside its smoke. Having a good laugh at my expense, Yilngi reassured me that the wind would pick up soon and drive the *tjelbak* snake away and with it the mosquitos. She didn't have to say which wind, because by then I knew that there are three winds: *medawak*, *perk*, and *kunaberruk*, each reflecting the different directions and intensities of wind and each evoking different forms of activity and affect. It was August so the *medawak* were shifting to *perk*. We were leaving behind *medawak*'s powerful southeasterly winds, which drive the fires that scorch the grasslands and signal the beginning of the dry season. We were entering *perk*'s northwesterly breezes, foreboding the coming of the hot build-up and the cyclone *kunaberruk*. I also knew that these winds have a cousin, *thimbilirr*, or whirly wind (also whirlpool). And all these kinds of winds were also extremely sensitive to olfactory stimuli. These things I knew and most adults living at Belyuen then also knew.

What I could not remember as we sat around talking about the GIS/GPS library was whether I had asked Yilngi if this *tjelbak* snake had a specific place nearby (*theme-tjelbak-therrawin-nene*, "where-Tjelbak-Dreaming-at"). I knew that the *tjelbak* was generally found around hills and where water brokers the barrier of earth and air. And I also knew that this type of fog was more prevalent in August and September as the southeasterly *medawak*

gives way to the northwesterly *perk*. But I couldn't remember for certain if I asked whether there was a specific local place, say, a waterhole or a tree or a cave, out of which this particular *tjelbak* snake emerged. As a rule of thumb, when a certain kind of existent is found with a certain degree of regularity or density somewhere, the possibilities of a site-specific *durlg* (Dreaming, *therrawin*) nearby increase. If this *tjelbak* snake had such a place, we would want to know about it—not merely so we could put it in our GPS/GIS library but so that we could treat it in the right way when we physically encountered it and they could make use of it socially, such as reinforcing a claim to the area based on knowledge of it. Since the 1976 passage of the Aboriginal Land Rights Act, Indigenous territorial rights were based on an inert form of descent from and responsibility for Dreamings, totemic sites like the *tjelbak*, if the Dreaming manifested as a permanent unchanging place or thing in the country, say, a rock, a creek, a waterhole, a tree, a sandbar. Indigenous people became traditional owners if they could demonstrate a common spiritual affiliation to such sites within specific, bounded territories. All the adults working on the GPS/GIS project had participated in one way or another in various land claims, so we put our individual heads together, collectively remembering everything everyone had been told about the *tjelbak*.

But not all of the entities that one encounters have a spot nearby that one can point to and say, “This is *tjelbaktherrawinnena*” (This is the dreaming place of fog). For instance, two cousins of *tjelbak*, the two rainbow types *therrawin* (a different kind of existence than a sea monster *therrawin*) and *balaibalai*, were associated with regions rather than a specific place in or near it. When her kids and I had asked Yilngi where the saltwater *therrawin* place was, the answer she gave was

“Everywhere le Banagula.” And ditto for freshwater rainbows, *balaibalai*, which marked the ground after they emerged from it but didn’t seem to have a specific place. But as Yilngi made clear to me that morning at Bulgul and to her family over the course of their lives, existents like the *tjelbak* snake govern people and places not merely through inert location but also by dynamic reaction. They are not primarily markers in the ground but interlocutors in the world. In other words, we fundamentally misunderstand the shadow that *tjelbak* snakes cast on our political thought if we think that they are sites where the settler state and Indigenous people fight over land and goods. The problem these other existents present to the late liberal demos is not a problem that *cultural recognition* will solve—indeed, cultural recognition is designed to dissolve the problem by translating the dynamic order of human-land relations into the given political order. If the Indigenous people who look after Two Women Sitting Down, *tjelbak* snakes, and other forms of existents are anything like the Indigenous people whom I know, they are not conveying a cultural narrative when they testify about the importance of existences like *tjelbak*. They are rather engaged in an “analytics of entities”: namely, a detailed examination of existences like *tjelbak* so as to determine their nature, structure, or essential features and, by extension, the features of the world in which they emerge as such. The way these existents *are* is what they seek to know. *Tjelbak* snakes were active and reactive—they didn’t seek to do harm but, when pricked by a nasty smell, they bit. And so it was also with the wind and rainbows. A person needed, therefore, to watch and smell and listen to how one was being watched and smelled and heard. Everything could be a sign pointing to something else, which interpreted the other thing. All things, actions, and

qualities meant something relative to all other things, actions, and qualities: they were indicative manifestations and what they meant as a sign was discerned by placing them in the complex field of previously agreed-upon signs. It was within the field of interpretation that any one sign could reveal that all the previously understood signs, and thus the foundation of interpretation itself, had to be rethought.³

Tjelbak snakes and all the other geological and ecological existences this book has discussed so far (Two Women Sitting Down, Old Man Rock, *durlgmö*, and Tjipel) are particularly good examples of the general problem that late liberal geontopower is facing as these existents are allowed into the “conversation” about the destiny of other planetary existents—and the planet as an existent. It might be seductive to translate Yilngi’s caution for me to watch out for that *tjelbak* as “listen to what the country is saying.” Or to say that meteorological existents in the country, like the *tjelbak*, ecological existents like Tjipel, or geological existents, like Two Women Sitting Down and Old Man Rock, should have an equal say in legal, political, and ethical debates in late liberalism. Of course, it is not just Two Women Sitting Down, Old Man Rock, *durlgmö*, Tjipel, *tjelbak*, and *thimbilirr*: a multitude of geological and meteorological modes of existence have prompted people to demand an ethical and political reconsideration of who and what should have a voice in local, national, and planetary governance. The dissensus of nonhuman existence seems to be intensifying globally as states and capital become ever more focused on the quest to secure minerals, oil, and gas in the shadow of climate change. Take for example the Bolivian Law of the Rights of Mother Earth (Ley de Derechos de la Madre Tierra) and the relational ontologies that Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and Eduardo Kohn describe in greater

Amazonia. Can a set of literatures seemingly oriented to disruptions of the consensual background support entities such as *tjelbak* snakes as they enter and confront late liberal geontopower? Put another way, is the nature of the dissensus of Two Women Sitting Down, *durlgmö*, Tjipel, and *tjelbak* snakes apprehendable through the dialectic of *phonos* and Logos, noise and linguistic sense, muteness and voice? Are other semiotically mediated and unmediated sensoria able to disturb the policing of the political order? Or are we hearing something other than Logos as the disorganizing principle of a postclimate politics: something more like “I can’t breathe” than “Listen to me.”

A Part of It

In a recent working paper, the British anthropologist Martin Holbraad asks two beguilingly simple questions: first, might there be “a sense in which things could speak for themselves?” and if so, “what might their voices sound like?”⁴ His questions emerge out of a broader shift in critical theory from epistemological to ontological concerns, or, as Graham Harman and others in the object-oriented ontology school put it, from the question of how humans perceive things to a return to the object itself. This return to the object seeks, among other things, to level radically the distinction between all forms of existence. In such a world what political role will nonhuman, nonliving things play? And how will they govern and be governed? Holbraad’s call for us to listen to what things say is one answer.

When viewed from a certain angle, a political theory of voice seems exactly what is needed to understand the challenge that these geological and meteorological existents and the Indigenous men and women supporting them pose to geontopower in late

liberalism. If this is the question there seems no better theorist to help us answer it than Jacques Rancière. After all, Rancière defines politics as the emergence of a dissensus within the given distribution of the sensible (“the common”) that will produce a new form of consensus (the coming common). Politics is the moment when what we had in common is no longer common but no new consensus has of yet been established. It is the moment when “all of us” become “only some of us.” The part *within the actual arrangement of any given common* rises up and says, “This common is your common, not mine.” What *ours* will be when *mine* becomes the basis of a new form of collective belonging—a new “us,” a new “we, the people”—is not yet known. In other words, for Rancière, in the beginning there is one word that constitutes the core political subjectivity of the demos, the governance of and by the people, and that word is “not” (us). Politics is the acknowledgment of the coexistence of “we who are” (“P”) and “we who are not” (“p”). And, crucially, this political consciousness is defined by language: a movement from the attribution of noise to an entity’s way of speaking, and thus its exclusion from the Logos of the demos, to a comprehension of the excluded entity as being capable of articulate language and thus its inclusion within the Logos of the demos. It is useful to quote Rancière at length.

Apparently nothing could be clearer than the distinction made by Aristotle in Book I of the *Politics*: the sign of the political nature of humans is constituted by their possession of the logos, the articulate language appropriate for manifesting a community in the aisthesis of the just and the unjust, as opposed to the animal *phone*, appropriate only for expressing the feelings of pleasure and displeasure. If

you are in the presence of an animal possessing the ability of the articulate language and its power of manifestation, you know you are dealing with a human and therefore with a political animal. The only practical difficulty is in knowing which sign is required to recognize the sign; that is, how one can be sure that the human animal mouthing a noise in front of you is actually voicing an utterance rather than merely expressing a state of being? If there is someone you do not wish to recognize as a political being, you begin by not seeing them as the bearers of politicalness, by not understanding what they say, by not hearing that it is an utterance coming out of their mouths. And the same goes for the opposition so readily invoked between the obscurity of domestic and private life, and the radiant luminosity of the public life of equals. In order to refuse the title of political subjects to a category—workers, women, etc ...—it has traditionally been sufficient to assert that they belong to a ‘domestic’ space, to a space separated from public life; one from which only groans or cries expressing suffering, hunger, or anger could emerge, but not actual speeches demonstrating a shared aisthesis. And the politics of these categories has always consisted in re-qualifying these places, in getting them to be seen as the spaces of a community, of getting themselves to be seen or heard as speaking subjects (if only in the form of litigation); in short, participants in a common aisthesis. It has consisted in making what was unseen visible; in getting what was only audible as noise to be heard as speech; in demonstrating to be a feeling of shared “good” or “evil” what had appeared merely as an expression of pleasure or pain.⁵

Wouldn't it be simple enough to place *tjelbak* snakes within the list of those who are a vital part of the demos but play no part in its governance because they are thought to lack linguistic reason: "one from which only groans or cries expressing suffering, hunger, or anger could emerge"? There is little doubt about the part geological and meteorological existents play in late liberalism. Take Two Women Sitting Down, discussed in [chapter 2](#) of this book. Two Women Sitting Down is composed of manganese, and manganese is crucial to the production of iron and steel, dry cells, aluminum, copper, et cetera. In playing a part in global steel manufacturing, Two Women Sitting Down also plays a part in what is causing *tjelbak* to turn into smog and choke off some forms of existence over Beijing and what is causing *thimbilirr* to turn into super tornados and wreck other forms in the US Midwest. And all of these phenomena—Two Women Sitting Down, *tjelbak*, and *thimbilirr*—are part of the emergent state and international security order. For instance, the Australian Parliament has commissioned reports and issued papers about the security risks of climate change and mineral resources. One such paper argues that Australia is particularly vulnerable to population displacements and conflicts from its immediate northern Asian neighbors, who have limited resources to adapt to climate change.

Of course, the need to secure resources in order to profit from and respond to climate change isn't simply an Australian matter. The link between minerals and economic and political security has a much longer history. As far back as 1947, political scientists discussed minerals in strategic terms, including the manganese that composes Two Women Sitting Down.⁶ More recently, the US Department of Defense noted that "while climate change alone does not cause conflict, it may act as an accelerant

of instability or conflict, placing a burden to respond on civilian institutions and militaries around the world. In addition, extreme weather events may lead to increased demands for defense support to civil authorities for humanitarian assistance or disaster response both within the United States and overseas.”⁷ New political alliances are emerging as states and emerging states strategize about how they will secure access to various commodity chains in order to capture profit at as many junctures as possible.⁸ The US Department of Defense’s radar is currently centered on China.⁹ As a result, the Northern Territory of Australia, and especially the Top End around Darwin to Katherine, is playing a crucial role in the US Department of Defense’s shift from Europe and the Middle East to the Asian Pacific. Today as one drives from Belyuen to Bulgul, one often passes US and Australian troops engaged in war games. We have parked on the side of a dirt road to watch the Apache helicopters swoop up and down across the landscape.

In other words, entire networks of wealth and power are implicated when states weigh the choice between insisting that existents like Two Women Sitting Down, Tjipel, and *tjelbak* snakes are either mere things that fuel contemporary capital or subjects that inhabit a shared Logos in the global demos of climate change. The conservative prime minister of Australia, Tony Abbott, made clear his opinion about what choice needs to be made during a trip to Canada and the United States in 2014. In the shadow of Barack Obama’s announced plan to cut carbon emissions by 30 percent by 2030, Abbott told reporters, “It doesn’t make much sense, though, to impose certain and substantial costs on the economy now in order to avoid unknown and perhaps even benign changes in the future.”¹⁰ What the future will be, of course, depends on what the present does. And

the Abbott government and his political and business allies are making certain forms of environmental protest criminal. In June 2014 a conservative pro-development Tasmanian government guillotined parliamentary debate so that a vote could be had in the Lower House to pass legislation fining the protesting of old growth logging, up to \$10,000 with a three-month mandatory jail sentence for repeat offenders.¹¹ This was within the same month that the UNESCO World Heritage Committee expressed alarm over the Australian federal government's plan to dredge parts of the Great Barrier Reef in order to build the Abbot Point deepwater coal port.¹²

Even when state and capital lock horns over the ownership and use of these geological resources and over the likelihood of serious meteorological consequences—say, when the former Australian prime minister Julia Gillard battled the mining tycoon Gina Rinehart over the relationship between land, capital, and the state—not many politicians or capitalists are likely to consider Two Women Sitting Down, *tjelbak* snakes, or any of the other Nonlife existents that this book discusses capable of smelling humans, of having intentionally based actions, or of actively interpreting their environments. I would wager that for most non-Indigenous people manganese is not thought capable of uttering “groans or cries expressing suffering, hunger, or anger” in a factual sense. When pushed they would probably admit that they thought Two Women Sitting Down, *durlgmö*, Old Man Rock, Tjipel, and *tjelbak* are fictional existences, narrative overlays to underlying real phenomena. Non-Indigenous people may appreciate these narratives as rhetorically provocative ways of conceiving the world but they are unlikely to consider them to carry the weight of truth, let alone compel states to treat these existents in an ethically and politically equivalent way to how

they treat humans. These entities are considered either inert or incapable of actualizing their internal possibilities. They are not subjects. They are subject to the dynamic nature of *human* subjectivity. Sure, human actions can have unintended consequences. For example, climate change may be the unintentional result of humans mobilizing carbon-based fuels to drive capital expansion. But the shape of the climate depends on the consequences of the coming decisions about climate control treaties and carbon emissions schemes and their unintended consequences, which are being made by humans in cities around the world beginning with Berlin in 1996 (the year we drove to Bulgul). Abbott and Gillard played a part in these conversations. They took input from various sectors of the national public, weighed the various pros and cons of acting on climate change, given the nature of current knowledge and the impact of acting on this knowledge when it comes to the wealth, health, and livelihood of various parts of the citizenry.

And yet, in contrast to Gillard and Abbott, Rancière does not view the common as referring to a set of shared material goods, territorial attachments, or populations—the common is not the inert territory defined by *tjelbak* snakes or Two Women Sitting Down, if we understand them as static territorial markers; or by the land and sea borders that Australia invokes when turning economic and political refugees away; or by whether carbon taxes or cap and trade schemes lead to better or worse population vitality. For him the unremitting pressure on my friends to define themselves and other existents vis-à-vis the state-backed anthropological notion of clan (a descent group and its territory defined by reference to a group totem) is not what defines the common any more than the current federal policy regarding boat-based refugees would define the Australian common. Instead the

common is the aesthetic, rhetorical, and reasoned “system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions in [the common].”¹³ It is defined by who moves toward the fire’s smoke to avoid the *tjelbak*’s nose; who knows one *should* move toward the smoke whether they do or do not; and those who don’t move at all because they have no idea what is about to hit them.

We could easily give an account of this distribution of the common at Bulgul in 1996. For the women with whom I made the trip to Bulgul, nonliving existents had to be approached like any other existent. The more you encountered them, the deeper your sense of both the range of behavior they were capable of expressing and their tendencies to do one thing rather than another in any given context. When asking about the meaning or significance of something, their children and I were constantly “urged to turn” our “queries to experience” and to be open to the quirky nature of nonhuman existents. We were not to treat these existents as stochastic aggregates or processes in which random phenomena evolve over time.¹⁴ Rather we were to consider them dynamic personalities like any person or nonperson has a personality—they have a tendency to behave in certain ways but can also surprise a person. And so people sought out others they knew who had long experience with specific forms of existents like *tjelbak* or Bulgul; put their heads together in often competitive, status-enhancing, or diminishing conversations; and added up all the potential variables for why something might be doing something. This was then called a “joinimup story” in the local creole. This way of making sense also made the makers of this way of making sense into a common form of existence: it created a social interiority and exteriority as women commented

on the strange alternative ways in which others made sense of human and nonhuman differences inside and outside their Indigenous worlds. And insofar as those of us working on the GPS/GIS library were competitively sharing, we iterated this mode of making and holding onto a common in the world in which we now found ourselves. We were not simply adding content to our virtual library, we were making ourselves into a form of library making—moving a potential way of being into an actual experience.

For Rancière, the distribution of the sensible so apparent in this account of the world of the women sitting at Bulgul does two things at once. First, it constitutes what the people share in common—that is, it establishes the “we, the people” vis-à-vis this common shared element. And, second, it establishes the divisions of space, time, and forms of activities within this common simultaneously establishing the mandatory and exhaustive modes and relations of participating within it and being excluded from it. The common, in other words, consists of the parts that various people are assigned to play in any given division of the sensible: my role in the heinous chore of making the fire in a mosquito windstorm; Ruby’s in teaching me; hers in being the exemplary Indigenous subject during the years of state-based self-determination, mine the anthropologist; my Karrabing colleagues as subject to a flood of behaviorally based fines (like drinking or driving when Indigenous), my passing freely. But, again, and this is important, every assignment of parts, roles, and modes of sense excludes other parts, roles, and modes. In other words, for Rancière, consensus creates an immanent—or virtual—dissensus; every common has a *coming common*, or the dissensus created by the consensus, the disruptive irruption of a part within this distribution of parts that has, of yet, played no part in its

governance. The making common makes simultaneously a police and a potential politics. The police “structures perceptual space in terms of places, functions, aptitudes, etc. to the exclusion of any supplement.”¹⁵ But politics is always within the police, consisting of “the set of acts that effectuate a supplementary ‘property,’ a property that is biologically and anthropologically unlocatable, the equality of speaking beings.”¹⁶

If we view politics and policing in this way, how is the invitation for nonhuman meteorological, biological, and geological worlds to have a say in the governance of the earth a *policing* rather than a *political* act—or vice versa? Is the welcome mat we are extending already defined in such a way that any deep disturbance of geontopower has already been disallowed? In other words are we witnessing, and contributing to, a repetition of the cunning of late liberal recognition in which the modes, qualities, forms, and relations that already exist are merely, or primarily, extended to others? Is the call to recognize the liveliness of the (in)animate other another version of the call in liberal recognition to recognize the essential humanity of the other, as long as the other can express this otherness in a language that does not shatter the framework of the liberal common?

The Altersenses of Logos

“Biologically and anthropologically unlocatable ... speaking beings.” It seems simple enough to insert *tjelbak* snakes in the long list of existents whose voice is finally recognized in the governance of difference within the late liberal demos. They have a part so give them a part. Let them speak! The nonhuman animal, the rock, the river, the beach, the wind, and soil: let them

be heard, be represented and representable in the governance of the earth. They have language too. They are agents too. We need a parliament of things so that the full range of actant Logos can make its part be heard.¹⁷ But if we are to understand the significance of the dissensus of existents such as *tjelbak* snakes and Two Women Sitting Down, then we will need to begin with what we mean by voice, by speech (*parole*), and by language (*langue*), thus the governance of the gift of speech that we are extending to them. And we need to understand how we are affecting these forms of existence by demanding that they be given a voice in the current *consensus* of late liberalism. How blithely should we extend the features of human subjectivity in language to all other existents? What covert categories of human language models the call to let the inanimate speak, to having their voices heard? We can begin with how Rancière articulates speech and politics.

For Rancière, the movement between policing and politics is made possible by the movement in enunciation of elements within a given political arrangement from object designation to subject designation: the movement in speech (*parole*) from the linguistic category (*langue*) of the demonstrative object (*that; det; tha*) or third-nonperson pronoun (*he, she, it, they; im; nga, na*) to the linguistic category of first- and second-person pronouns (I, you, we). Those who have previously been referred to only through demonstrative and third-person pronouns insist that they have a claim on the play of subjectivity. In other words, the dynamic political topology of the demos (governance based on the “we” of “we, the people”) is inextricably related to the dynamic movement of subjectivity in language.¹⁸ And this is why Rancière writes that there is “no democratic politics outside of the constant struggle to define the subject” (*le sujet politique*).

Some might balk at the linguistically reductive nature of this reading, pointing to the broader nature of Rancière's common. After all, Rancière defines the common as the distribution of the *sensible* rather than simply the distribution of the *linguistic*. Doesn't Rancière open the common to the full range of sensory experience that is pulled into the distribution of subjectivity and truth? Yes and no. Yes, the entire range of experiencing the truth of included and excluded elements supports the policing of the common. But the coming into Logos—the movement of the experience of noise (*phonos*) into the experience of sense (Logos)—has a clear linguistic basis. It is the movement from considering the excluded element as a third nonperson or demonstrative (it, that) to considering the excluded element as included in the subjective exchange of me and you.

From a superficial vantage it might seem that Rancière shares with Michel Foucault an interest in immanent subjectivity and *paraseia* (*vrai dire*, speaking truth) and with Gilles Deleuze an interest in the dynamic between the virtual (dissensus) and actual (consensus). But not only does Rancière refuse Foucault's understanding of the contemporary demos as a biopolitical order, but he recognizes that Foucault and Deleuze seek to invert the relationship of Logos and *phone* or displace it altogether. Indeed, it is exactly the grounding of politics in the Logos of subjectivity that causes Rancière to resist the conflation of his understanding of the political with those of Foucault and Deleuze. In providing an alternative to Rancière's Logos-based political theory, might Foucault or Deleuze help us support *tjelbak*, Tjipel, *durlgmö*, or Old Man Rock?

As we know, beginning with his Collège de France lecture, *Abnormal*, Foucault attempted to understand, on the one hand, the formations and figures outside the dominant image of

sovereign power and, on the other hand, the emergence of subjugated knowledges, figures, and forces from within any given formation of power. This conceptual distinction between population and people is absolutely crucial to understanding the *topos* of Foucault's political imaginary. The population, *not* the people (demos), is the collective political subject of Western liberal democracies. The population is the living vitality that biopower conjured and then governed. Thus, in celebrating the emergence of "we, the people" in eighteenth-century Europe, political theorists made a fundamental category mistake. For Foucault, the US and French constitutions would have been more accurate if they were penned in the name of "we, the population" rather than "we, the people." And if political theory had focused on governance through the population, Europe might have avoided the genocidal time bomb of the Nazi Holocaust described at the end of *Society Must Be Defended*.

Even though he refused the people as the basis of the demos, Foucault nevertheless kept the people in his thought. Initially the people are for him a particular kind of event that might break the consensus of modern biopower. The people are "those who conduct themselves in relation to the management of the population, at the level of the population, as if they were not part of the population."¹⁹ As Rancière took issue with this biopolitical rendering of the demos, Foucault himself became less interested in the difference between the population and the people than in understanding how something came to know itself as a someone who must speak truth. Sometimes Foucault focused more on speech, sometimes more on conduct. Sometimes Foucault seemed to be saying that some people exit the common (Logos) to become noise (*phonos*). Sometimes he seemed to be saying that some people are structured as noise within the common.

Sometimes activity and speech seemed to coincide. For example, across *Government of Self and Others* and *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, Foucault explored the sources and governance of the people as a political otherwise existing within the population.

In other words, Foucault seems to have been less interested in the categorical distinctions between population and people than in re-describing freedom as a form of critique that demands a new formation of self (*sapere aude*) through a specific kind of speech act (speaking truth, *dire vrai*). His concern was not to find some position that was freed from governance *entirely* but that asked to be governed differently. Foucault's answer may appear tautological: the transition from being a residual within the population to an instance of a people depends on a sort of person who is capable of hearing, feeling addressed, and acting on the command to exit this inert position and actively differ. This differing transformed their Logos into Phonos. The sort of person he imagined as exiting (*sortie*) her inertia is not generated from within but is produced and capacitated in a stranger form of looping, from outside to in and inside to out.²⁰ But even if this person has been so capacitated, she must still be willing to put herself in danger and at risk, no matter that no one else seems willing to do so. And this risk is not simply her injury or death. It is a broader disruption of a given intersection of subject, referent, and world, as these three are the artifacts of existing social institutions and relations.²¹ In short, the point of (becoming) critique was not to become Logos but to maintain oneself as *noise*, as an irritant, as a buzzing swarm of mosquitos just outside the range of a swatting hand or a spray can filled with DDT.

In the shadow of Anthropogenic climate change, several critical theorists are putting explicit pressure on this exclusively (human) linguistic understanding of thought and social

governance, even those engagements like Foucault's that move from articulate speech to rearticulating noise. In *How Forests Think*, a nod to Levi Bruhl's *How Natives Think* and Marshall Sahlins's *How "Natives" Think*, the anthropologist Eduardo Kohn moves from an anthropological account of the epistemological frames through which Ecuadorans view the forest, their mode of culture, to an anthropology of nonhuman living thought. Deploying ecosemiotic readings of the American pragmatist Charles S. Peirce, Kohn claims that thought—a semiotic process of mutual and coconstituting interpretation—is a characteristic of all life and is, in fact, what differentiates Life from Nonlife. Because semiosis is not merely the provenance of the human (human *linguistics* is merely one form of semiotics) we can vote yes to semiosis and no to Logos; we can vote to uncouple the commonsense binding of human forms of life and thought and see all life as a mode of thinking. All living things are like us, if we understand that our dominant mode of semiosis, language, is just one of many kinds of semiosis. Thus rather than merely allowing those whose speech has previously been understood only as noise into the demos of things, Kohn argues that those whose semiotic communication has been excluded, because it is not linguistically based, be allowed in. Rather than letting forms of existence speak, we must let them semiotize!

While Kohn aligns thought with the division of Life and Nonlife, Peirce's cosmological semiotics may have been much weirder and thus more open to considering something like *tjelkal* to think. For Peirce, mind (thought) is constituted by and evidenced in three modes of interpretation—the affective, energetic, and logical. Rather than to understand the play of the signifier and signified, Logos and noise, Peirce pressed these modes of thought into his broader understanding of the

fundamental semiotics of cosmology. Briefly, for Peirce a sign is some thing (sign) that stands to somebody (interpreter) in some respect or capacity to something (object). In other words, the object and interpretant are merely two correlates of the sign, “the one being antecedent, the other consequent of the sign.”²² But objects and interpretants are themselves bundles of signs—and the bundles are the result of a phenomenologically specific history whereby signs and interpretants are associated (correlated) with objects or which prompt us to reevaluate the nature and status of an object. Perhaps what we thought was an object was merely a mistaken habit of associating parts of other more pertinent entanglements. (It is little wonder that Deleuze was increasingly drawn to Peirce’s work when thinking through his concept of assemblage.²³) As Paul de Man noted, “The interpretation of the sign is not, for Peirce, a meaning but another sign; it is a reading, not a decodage, and this reading has, in its turn, to be interpreted into another sign, and so on ad infinitum.”²⁴

Insofar as interpretation is the production of new forms to know an existent like *tjelbak* demands constant attention to it, because correct interpretation depends on continued testing of how an interpretation of an existent correctly apprehends the existent: whether it remains the same or has altered itself in response to a change somewhere else (see also [chapter 3](#)). A sign is more or less correctly coordinated to an object if the sign is always present when the existent is present, is present only sometimes, with some people, some conditions. Thus, when I moved toward the smoke to hide my smell from the *tjelbak* and mosquitos, the action was an energetic interpretant in the sense that my movement linked an object (or a set of objects: the *tjelbak* snake; Yilngi; me) and a sign (or a set of concepts:

danger, knowledge, consequences) through a reaction (or a set of reactions: the movement of my body toward the smoke; the movement of the smoke). But the *tjelbak* snake wending its way around the hill is also an energetic interpretant linking one object-sign and sign-object. For Peirce, the movement of my body and the *tjelbak* are energetic interpretants. Neither is equivalent to propositional logic of the sort seen in the proposition “one should move into the smoke.” Propositional logics of this sort are, for Peirce, a kind of logical interpretant. Logical interpretants link an object (*tjelbak* snake) and a sign (“danger”) through a proposition (“one should move into the smoke”). Affective interpretants link an object and sign through what Peirce calls emotions, say, a blush of embarrassment. But however *tjelbak* snakes link (interpret) the sign and object, they could not be doing so through human linguistic forms.²⁵

Note that all these interpretants are doing something rather than merely representing something. All sign activity *does something*—this doing something is what signs are, what interpretation is, whether this doing is producing anxiety, shaping embodiment, or modifying consciousness.²⁶ And insofar as signs do rather than represent, they support the endurance of a given formation of existence or they weaken it.²⁷ In a crude sense this constant, multilevel interpretive re-formation can be seen in the way the *tjelbak* was becoming one thing and unbecoming another from the period I first encountered it and the present. From 1996 to 2006, for instance, the *tjelbak* was slowly becoming composed of things that it had not been composed of before. And this was causing *us* to interpret its world and intentionality in new ways. In 1996, the *tjelbak* was composed partly of the smoke from the fires that burned throughout the dry season—great vast bushfires that cleaned up the grass, allowed certain plants to germinate, and

prompted animals to appear in full view—and partly of the incipient ozone hole emerging in the atmosphere. By 2006 a new form of *tjelbak* was emerging if one looked carefully or had a sensitive nose. It had new colors and a different olfactory flavor—it was greenish, sometimes yellowish, depending on where one encountered it. It was slightly astringent. Fog was becoming smog, a term Hadej Voeux coined in 1905 for the sulfur dioxide clouds covering European manufacturing cities, clouds responsible for the great smog of London in 1952 that caused about twelve thousand deaths. The skies over Europe are now often clear; the smog has moved elsewhere. But the major causes of smog remain coal burning and transportation emissions of carbon monoxide, nitrogen oxides, sulfur dioxide, and hydrocarbons. And these emissions account for what one Chinese official in 2014 called Beijing’s “nuclear winter.”²⁸ The winds have also changed. The *medawak* and *kunaberruk* that would chase the *tjelbak* away have a new form and intensity—they are the sandstorms that engulfed Tehran on June 3, 2014, killing four and plunging the city into the dark, and that swept through Onslow Western Australia on January 11, 2014, stripping skins off trees and the flesh off bones. *Thimbilirr* are also growing and multiplying in the US Midwest.²⁹ But changes in fog and wind are not usually registered in catastrophic events. They accumulate in a series of condensed and coordinated quasi-events. Most of these accumulate below technologically unmediated human modes of perception. But other modes of existence register these changes even if we do not. And increasingly, in the wake of climate change, the natural sciences are seeking to hear and feel and smell these nonhuman sensoria—to jack into different bodies in order to see what is happening all around them but outside their unmediated field of vision.³⁰

To be sure, others have emphasized those points in Peirce's writing where he seems committed to something like what Sandra Harding, elaborating the work of Donna Haraway, has called "strong objectivity": that a state of existence or truth exists independent of human observation. We find evidence of this belief when Peirce differentiates between the immediate object, "the idea which the sign is built upon," and the real object, "that real thing or circumstance upon which that idea is founded, as on bedrock."³¹ But this real thing, the bedrock of semiosis, is hardly real in a way most people would understand the real. If all things are signs in the sense that they are habits of material associations, these histories affect and are affected by the kinds of signs available in a person's mind (interpretants) at any given time. And while all sign activity does something, the logical interpretant (which Peirce makes equivalent to the intellectual concept) modifies consciousness.³² This modification of consciousness is critical for Peirce. Again: Thought does something; it assembles and correlates; it does not represent something. And it is right here that we confront the impossible heart of Peirce's reading of the logical interpretant: the height of semiotic reason is not the decoding of existents but the formation and coordination of the habits of beings, which are continually becoming otherwise in the act of formation and coordination. Peirce saw matter itself—such fundamental laws of nature like gravity—to be the result of a sort of conceptual habit he was describing. Brian Massumi calls them "habits of mass."³³ In short, all concepts, all truths, all acts of truth telling are radically immanent and radically material habits governed by the figural and metafigural formations at hand at any given time. Peirce saw the material world—human and otherwise—as unfinished not merely because our mind had not yet succeeded in categorizing it

like scientists now sequence DNA but because in attending to it in a certain way we pull it into being in a way it was not before we did so.

Thus, where and what this future is remains an open question. The future depends on the kinds of connections that are made in, and made possible by, the world that exists and the differential forces that keep it in place or move it. That is, the future is not a place somewhere or sometime else. Nor have its truths already happened—they are not just there waiting for us to catch up to them. Intellectual concepts and the truths they support are a “tendency” to behave in a similar way under similar conditions, produced by the combination of muscular and nonmuscular effort on the fancies and the percepts not merely now but as an orientation—a kind of future making unless serious effort is made to reorient the fancies and the percepts.³⁴ The object corresponding to the logical interpretant is the “would-acts” of “habitual behavior”—a tendency of the mind to link this and that—to think and say that one should move into the smoke to avoid being smelled by the *tjelbak* snake. They are “true” insofar as they continue to work. Here again we see that the *tjelbak* snake is also engaged in a mode of truth making—how it interprets is true as long as the way in which it constitutes itself and interprets (makes linkages) between various sign-objects works.

However much Peirce’s model of semiosis might help *tjelbak* enter, and disturb, the current organization of the demos, it is not in and of itself a political theory. There are no antagonisms that organize who the protagonists might be. It is here that William James rather than Peirce, Rancière, or Kohn might ultimately find a place next to us at Bulgul. James understood Mind, with a capital “M,” as well as particular minds and their mental contents, to be the result of an embodied history of effort and

exhaustion, striving and succeeding, striving and failing, all occurring in a socially concrete and differentiated world, an “unfinished world” that “has a future, and is yet uncompleted.”³⁵ Human history, in other words, is an ongoing moral experiment in which the moral philosopher participates but cannot surmount and cannot even necessarily best represent or understand. The mind is not merely radically empirical and plural, so is the world—mind and world co-emerge in their mutual unfinished potentiality and thus also do new and subjugated knowledges. As a result mind, world, and truth are radically open questions whose answer takes us back into the world. If one wishes to know from where dominant and subjugated knowledge and truth emerge, one must turn away from “abstraction and insufficiency, from verbal solutions, from bad a priori reasons, from fixed principles, closed systems, and pretended absolutes and origins” and turn toward “concreteness and adequacy, towards facts, towards action, and towards power.”³⁶ Thus rather than doctrine, propositional truth, or certainty, James endlessly tried things out. Some seemed to make a difference in the world, such as the emergence of Alcoholics Anonymous from his metapsychology; some did not, such as spirit mediumship (at least not yet).³⁷

Effort was key. Thus in the condensed 1892 version of *Psychology (Briefer Course)*, James published a chapter, “Will,” in which he outlined the relationship between mind and effort.³⁸ He notes in the first sentence that desire, wish, and will are usually considered states of mind. Mind is usually seen as a kind of substance that can be qualified with attributes, states, and qualities. To counter this dominant view, James zeroes in on will, noting that the end of willful intention seems to be action—a movement of the body or thought. And this, for James, is key: willful action, as opposed to automatic and reflex action, is the

outcome of intentional thought. But if willful action is the outcome of intentional thought, thought (ideas) is the outcome of will understood as an “effort of attention.”³⁹ By effort of attention, he means the struggle to stay focused, to keep one idea at the front and center in a commodious field of actual and immanent ideas. It is through an effort of attention that thoughts emerge and come to be lodged stably in the mind. Indeed, effort and will become, for James, the preconditions of all mental phenomena and concepts. James hopes that what might appear to be a tautology will do something in our ways of thinking and thus our being in the world.

Sergio Franzese, who carried on the long Italian interest in James’s pragmatism, argued that to understand James, to move beyond apology for his inconsistencies and summary dismissals of his project, one must understand that at the heart of his project lay a philosophy of force as “the very texture of life.”⁴⁰ As Franzese puts it, James seeks an ethics of energy by which he means “an ethics that organizes energy, as well as an ethics that stems out of energy.” This ethics of energy is the basis for the achievement of personal and aesthetic ideals.⁴¹ What wonder then that an American reviewer of Franzese’s work notes the resonances between James’s thinking about effort and energy and Michel Foucault’s about asceticism.⁴² When mind is understood as an effect of an effort of attention, fundamental terms change their meaning (including the meaning of meaning), and some hoary distinctions become difficult to maintain. Even the distinction between intentional and unintentional thought loses its grip, as intention is itself an effect of a series of efforts of attention to cultivate a thought that will provide the background of thought and action. In other words, effort is the precondition of ideas, action, and subjectivity (mind, practice, and personhood) and

thus provides the conditions for reflexive and instinctual action. And because mind and world are never finalized, this will/effort is a life work, a *travail éthique* in Foucault's terms.

James concludes "Will" with a section on the ethics of effort. There he juxtaposes the standards of strength, intelligence, and wealth that seem to be "but externals which we carry" to "the sense of the amount of effort which we can put forth," which "seems to belong to an altogether different realm, as if it were the substantive thing which we are."⁴³ James is at his most dramatic here: "Some of the tests we meet by actions that are easy, and some of the questions we answer in articulated words. But the deepest question that is ever asked admits of no reply but the dumb turning of the will and tightening of our heart-strings as we say, 'Yes, I will even have it so!'"⁴⁴ James's command, like Kant's, was politically formulated and addressed to a public. He lectured to and wrote for a variety of publics, foregrounding his deep political opposition to American imperialism and commitment to economic justice. For James, there was no separation between his philosophical psychology and these political and economic concerns. What wonder then that the first essay in *Pragmatism* culminates with an account of the corrosive effects of structural poverty on actually living human beings? The way in which these actually existing worlds exist makes a mockery of "a whole host of guileless thorough fed thinkers" who are busy explaining away "evil and pain"; the socially organized, enervating condition of millions of American workers is reality.⁴⁵

It was true in general that an effort in attention might bend the very material fabric of the world, but it was equally true that very few people were willing to do so. Instead most persons demanding a new self (*sapere aude*) through a specific kind of

speaking truth (*dire vrai*) either find themselves different and will to become the same or never confront the effort it takes to re-coordinate the habits of mind and become different too exhausting or a *sign* that they are behaving, believing, and desiring wrongly. And lest we think at least James believed only philosophers like he and Charles Peirce could or would do so, James notes, “It is the personal experience of those most qualified in all our circle of knowledge to *have* experience, to tell us *what is*.”⁴⁶ These persons were not philosophers, but those who lived in the kinds of exhausted conditions Giorgio Agamben describes. And no wonder: James and Peirce also remind us of the risk that Foucault saw in this kind of truth telling—the kind that seeks to dislodge, to fortify doubt, to refuse given systematizations of logical interpretants (*savoir*). Everything is at stake—one should not change the tendencies of gravity and expect to remain the same. And if you wish to remain as an object affected by gravity, then what?

So what accounts for this differential between individuals who “may be equally capable of performing a task without being equally able to perform it”?⁴⁷ James and Peirce were deeply influenced by post-Darwinian ideas about the diversification of life and so would believe that humans were by nature diverse in their capabilities and abilities. If some persons are strong willed and others are not, the conditions of this differential must come from the world of experience and the worlds as differentially structured experiences. But these differential capabilities and abilities did not reside in persons as essences. They lay within them as potentials that the actual world assessed and treated in different ways. Thus when James thought about endurance the first thing he noticed was that some forms endure while others did not. James had ample examples of each in his family. And

yet, rather than trying to provide the final answer to why this particular person did or did not, James insists that thought has a profound limit in accounting for that world in its specificity. Why one person kills himself, his wife, and his children but another person starts a movement for social justice cannot be accounted for in the specific even though he claims this specificity is all most people really care about, really want a political theory to account for. They want to know why her, him, me, us: this specific world as it appears to me? One cannot answer this question. One can only do something about it. And so when thinking about thought James continually referred back to the world as it was materially organized and distributed as energizing and enervating specific social projects, social thoughts, and social experiments. Although many have the capability for obstinate curiosity, “few may be called to bear its burdens” and fewer are able to bear them because many people are crushed by the mere task of surviving, given organizations of power.⁴⁸ They can or cannot hear and bear the burden not because they have acquired the proper ontology of potentiality, but because they have somehow solved the difference between being in the space of radical potential where the actual and possible reach exhaustion and the practices of surviving the exhaustion of these spaces.⁴⁹

If we transpose James’s philosophy of effort and endurance onto the entanglement of existences at Bulgul (the *tjelbak*, the mosquitos, the Bic lighter, the human women), a strange spacing within the sensible arrangement of the demos appears. It is not *tjelbak*’s voice that must be allowed to play a part. It is that voice is a very minor player in the broader effort of events of figuring interpretation. The massive meteorological phenomena that tie Two Women Sitting Down to Beijing to the *tjelbak* snakes at Bulgul are not omens of a Last Wave, they are the culmination of

all the little waves that led to them—including the truck that drove us to Bulgul; the factory that made our cheap, disposable Bic lighters, mosquito nets, and tents; and our clicking of these lighters and stringing up these nylon homes with nylon rope. They are small events and quasi-events like the appearance of tar roads that allow our bones to hurt less when we hurtle down them, or the carbon dioxide-belching graders we salute when we see them smoothing the hard dirt ruts caused by the road trains hauling cattle, or the drops of diesel that miss our tanks when we stop to fuel. And it is not just the air and geology that have changed shape, smell, and sound. We have changed as well, little by little, and then a lot. As our diets have changed—the diet of the women (and of their ancestors) whom I was camping with changed perhaps most dramatically in the short time from 1890 to 1970, from fish, shellfish, and yam to canned and salted meat and sweets and, of course, the ubiquitous tobacco, smoked and dipped, that would give emphysema to two of the women sitting with us and oral cancer to another two. And the bodies of those of us working on the GPS/GIS library too—we began to smell differently, though differentially so, depending on whether our teeth or toes had rotted from too many Coca-Colas; on what forms of medications we were on for high blood pressure, cholesterol, diabetes; on whether we smoked dope or drank too much; whether we reeked of chlorine from swimming. Our stink stinks differently than our parents and their grandparents did—as does the *adjewa* (piss) and *wun* (shit) we circulate into our environment. The *tjelbak* snakes and we locked noses and wondered what smelled so funny. What was the *tjelbak* when it turned green, and how were people related to it if they turned rancid or pharmaceutically fit?

If critical theories of the Logos and the demos and the *phonos*

and the event are to have any sway in the coming debates about geontopower, then their political topologies must allow existents that are not biologically and anthropologically legible or do not speak to disrupt the Logos of demos rather than simply to be allowed to enter into it. The generosity of *extending* our form of semiosis to them forecloses the possibility of them provincializing us. That is, Two Women Sitting Down, Tjipel, *tjelbak* snakes, *thimbilirr*, and *therrawin* must be allowed to challenge the very foundation of human, articulate language. After all the question is not *whether* these meteorological and geological forms of existence are playing a part in the current government of the demos. Clearly they already do, economically, politically, and socially. The question is what role has been assigned to them as they emerge from a low background hum to making a demand on the political order. As the drama of climate change accelerates and the concept of the Anthropocene consolidates, will existents such as the *tjelbak* be absorbed into the policing of Life and Nonlife, markets and difference, Logos and phonos? Or will they disrupt the material and discursive orders that prop up these forms of governance? Do the concepts of Logos and subjectivity place a limit on the kind of noise that can enter the dialectic of the demos, who can speak and who can only be spoken for (Spivak, *darstellen* and *verstellen*)? Or will other sensory interpretants become the norm—the olfactory rather than linguistic, the ephemeral quasi-event rather than a concrete and enduring major explosion of change? Does noise need to go to Logos, or is it Logos that must first be decentered by noise in order to become something else?