

SICK, SAD WORLD: HOLISM AND LESS-THAN-HUMAN THOUGHT

By Harper Shalloe

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This dissertation by Harper Shalloe is accepted in its present form
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**introduction:
of viruses and vitalists**

Let us begin with a curious text that crystallizes many of this dissertation's concerns. In the 2001 hybrid live-action/animation film *Osmosis Jones*, directed by Rhode Island's own cinematic masterminds Bobby and Peter Farrelly, Bill Murray plays Frank, a slovenly zookeeper whose poor diet and antipathy to exercise are of paramount concern to his daughter Shane. Shane attributes her mother's recent death to her parents' dubious dietary decisions, and indeed it is an act of supremely suspect snacking that opens the film and catalyzes its narrative arc. Standing in front of a monkey enclosure, Shane rebukes her father for dousing a hard-boiled egg in mayonnaise after having just finished a corndog; Frank retorts that Shane need not fret over high cholesterol: "They have medicine for that now. You can get an angioplasty, it'll all clear out." Frank personifies the picture of mainstream medicine painted by holistic health practitioners, bodying forth the 'treat the symptom, not the cause' paradigm (a focus of chapter one) that critics argue serves paradoxically to ensure sickness's proliferation. And in some ways Shane serves as Frank's functionalist foil, aligning herself with alternative medicine by preventing him from purchasing deodorant, which she claims "causes cancer," and by insisting, to his chagrin, that diet is the root cause of disease.

Frank also embodies the specter of degeneration (a focus of chapter three), of man's fall from the pinnacle of the great chain of being. In this opening scene the film intercuts shots of Frank and a monkey scratching their respective asses as Shane informs her father that the fruit-and-vegetable-rich monkey diet is in fact "much more evolved than our own," extending the parallel editing's postulation of man-monkey equivalence to claim the latter's orthogenetic superiority. Ironically, then, the monkey proceeds to purloin Frank's well-doused egg, and a vicious fight for the mayonnaise-y treat ensues. Frank ultimately prevails, taunting "Now who's evolved!" after

wresting the egg from his simian antagonist's mouth and popping it smugly into his own. As Frank consumes his revolting prize, the film switches from live action to animation, and we are thrust into Frank's inner world (a focus of chapter two).

At this point the film also becomes a buddy-cop crime drama, with mouth-patrolling police helicopters discussing the fate of this fetid egg over the radio. We are introduced to Osmosis Jones, voiced by Chris Rock: a renegade white blood cell from the "wrong side of the digestive tract" who would rather be "out in the veins fighting disease" than trawling "the mouth on tartar control." In Frank's inner city-state, sickness is a crime; the "illegal organisms" that rode in on the egg are ordered to surrender, but they evade the mouth unit's capture. Outside of their jurisdiction, the intruders are "immunity's problem now," but as the character trope demands, Jones cannot help but defy his captain's orders and pursue the menacing microbes at his peril.

As it turns out, these fugitive germs are red herrings, and the real threat—a demonic, dreadlocked virus named Thrax, voiced by Laurence Fishburne—lurked in Frank's mouth while Jones went on his fool's errand. Delving deeper into Frank undetected, Thrax attempts to recruit some armpit-dwelling gangster germs for a "big score"—killing Frank by destroying his capacity for thermoregulation—but is summarily dismissed: "Look who thinks he's the Ebola virus," taunts the boss of this microbial Cosa Nostra. These references to Ebola and to lethal fever figure the danger to Frank as vaguely African and significantly more sinister than the trifling diseases of the mafia, the don of which Thrax proceeds to whack.

And yet an even greater threat is posed by Mayor Phlemming, Frank's corrupt head (of state), voiced by William Shatner. We find Phlemming in the throes of a reelection run against Tom Colonic, a candidate campaigning on diet and exercise and promising to make Frank's deindustrialized bowels "a vital center of activity" again. Eager to stave off accusations of ill-

health (and to assure Frank's attendance at a chicken-wing festival, a central tension in the live-action narrative), the mayor manually "override[s]" Frank's conscious mind when Shane tries to make him a doctor's appointment, using Frank's voice as a kind of loudspeaker. "On second thought," Phlemming and Frank say in turn, "perhaps I'll take a cold pill." The lag between these utterances, as well as Frank's ambivalence about the chicken-wing festival that Phelmming so desperately wants (him?) to attend, emphasizes the difference between Frank and himself, the real and irreparable split between Frank qua Bill Murray and Frank qua William Shatner that psychoanalysis calls the unconscious.

Frank takes the cold pill, which appears in the animated world as an affable robot named Drix whom Jones is assigned to assist in quelling Frank's nascent flu-like symptoms (caused, we eventually discover, by Thrax). Drix initially concurs with the other inflammation fighters that Frank is suffering from a "routine sore throat," but eventually comes to share Jones's hunch that there something more nefarious is afoot. The two track down and attempt to expel Thrax, but they humiliate Frank in the process (forcing a zit on his forehead to burst onto Shane's principle, played by Molly Shannon), and Phlemming promptly fires Jones and sends Drix packing.

A dejected Jones sulks over to the Dreamplex, a theater whose glittery marquee promises "Live Dreams." A sort of smut show, Jones takes a seat between a sleeping sot and an indecorously intimate couple and watches a sleeping Frank's dream on the silver screen. At the same time, Thrax infiltrates the hypothalamus, sabotaging it and causing Frank to overheat. As police storm the brain, Thrax escapes through the door to the subconscious, where a slew of smaller screens project black-and-white footage of unpleasant reminiscences. The convoluted, multi-level maze of memories makes Thrax dizzy, and he inadvertently penetrates the dream that Jones is watching in the theatre, tinting it red. Thrax frantically flees Frank's subconscious, quipping "this cat was sick

before I even got here” as he shuts the door behind him. Realizing that Thrax is in the brain, Jones runs to the bladder to beg Drix to stay and help him fight the deadly virus. Drix tells Jones that he’s not designed to stave off infections, but Jones assures him that he’s “known sugar pills who’ve cured cancer just because they believed they could!” Drix resolves to help Jones, throwing off the label that would delimit his function. The duo successfully vanquishes Thrax (in the live-action world, Frank dies of hyperpyrexia but is resuscitated); Jones is reinstated to the police force; and Drix decides to stick around, despite his “work visa” having expired. The film ends with Frank reluctantly eating a carrot.

Osmosis Jones forms part of a turn-of-the-twenty-first-century constellation of children’s media that takes up, through animation, what Georges Canguilhem described in 1955 as “a very old, still unresolved problem, that of the relations between the life of the organism and the life of a society.”¹ The very same comparative “temptation” that Canguilhem queries—offering nineteenth-century physiological discourses of “the division of labor concerning the cells, the organs, and the devices [*appareils*] that make up a living body,” in particular Claude Bernard’s concept of “the ‘social life’ of cells,”² of the complex organism as “a city with its own special seal,”³ as but two examples of the longstanding analogic proclivity—is manifest in moving-image media like *Osmosis Jones* and the aesthetically akin television series *The Magic School Bus*, which aired on PBS from 1994 to 1997. Indeed several episodes of *The Magic School Bus* depict a group of elementary schoolers and their intrepid teacher Ms. Frizzle (voiced by Lily Tomlin) venturing inside of various pupils in pursuit of immersive learning. In “For Lunch”—a clip of which the

¹ Georges Canguilhem, “The Problem of Regulation in the Organism and in Society,” in *Writings on Medicine*, trans. Stefanos Geroulanos and Todd Meyers (New York: Fordham UP, 2012), 67.

² Canguilhem, “The Problem of Regulation,” 86. The preceding quotations in this sentence are from the same page.

³ Claude Bernard quoted in Georges Canguilhem, “Cell Theory,” in *Knowledge of Life*, trans. Stefanos Geroulanos and Daniela Ginsburg (New York: Fordham UP, 2008), 48.

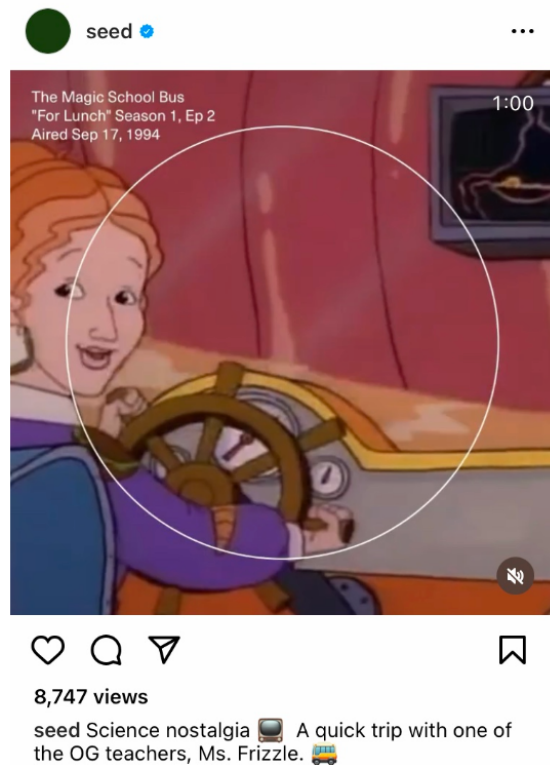


Figure 0.1: Screenshot of Seed Instagram post (September 14, 2021) of a clip of *The Magic School Bus* “For Lunch” episode.

probiotic peddler Seed, one of chapter two’s protagonists, posted on Instagram—the class and their shapeshifting bus hitch a ride with a cheese puff that Arnold, a student, is eating. Most of the episode takes place in Arnold’s gastrointestinal tract, in an animated but reasonably verisimilar rendering of human morphology (as opposed to the elaborate municipality that we encounter in *Osmosis Jones*), but a curious intertext—a promotional video for “United Digestion”—takes a different tact. In this video, narrated by a hardhat- and coveralls-clad student holding a clipboard, we

see a variety of fruits and vegetables—“the raw material”—travel along a conveyor belt. As the food reaches the mouth, represented by two rectangular plates propelled up and down by springs, it is crushed and pushed down the “esophagus line” to the stomach, where invisible laborers “add acids and other chemicals” before nutrients are placed on trucks and carted away, delivered to various parts of the body.

Interspersed with the episode’s cartoon-realist representation of Arnold’s “*milieu interne*”—Bernard’s concept of the organism’s “internal environment”—through which the miniaturized school bus travels, then, is an extra-diegetic industrial film that represents the body as a very particular social formation—the factory.⁴ And while the digestive system is somewhat surprisingly identified with manufacturing in both *The Magic School Bus* and *Osmosis Jones*

⁴ Walter Cannon, *The Wisdom of the Body* (New York: Norton, 1963 [1932]), 38. Cannon would make Bernard’s *milieu interne* the seat of his concept of *homeostasis*—a term he coins in this book.

(recall mayoral candidate Tom Colonic's plan to revitalize Frank's industrially abandoned large intestine), the immune system is quite predictably likened to policing. Products of the historical transmutation of *immunity* as a political and juridical concept into a medical one (and its paradoxical tethering to a rather different political concept, *self-defense*) that Ed Cohen chronicles in *A Body Worth Defending*, *Osmosis Jones* and *The Magic School Bus* portray immunity as a kind of repressive state apparatus. In "Inside Ralphie," another field trip involving a passably sober representation of the immune system (non-anthropomorphized white blood cells eat their "enemies") is offset by a sequence in which Galactic Empire-inspired fighter aircraft fire repeatedly on a rocket in outer space. In *Osmosis Jones*, "illegal organisms" are "immunity's problem," and at the end of the film Drix becomes Jones's partner on the "immunity force" even though his "work visa's expired." Like the fugitive germs from the first animated scene, Drix is a foreign agent whose presence in Frank is illegal, but this violation serves to shore up Frank's immune system. Drix represents immunity's logic of "exclusionary inclusion"⁵: as Roberto Esposito demonstrates in *Immunitas*, a kind of theoretical complement to Cohen's historical account, immunity is not simply a matter of bolstering and defending the boundaries of the body, but of neutralizing, by incorporating, a quantum of that which is foreign to it.

Like the factory for digestion, immunity qua defense "is not a *natural choice of images* for our ability to live as organisms"⁶—but what would be? Though we will have more to say about it in chapter two, we are not interested in claiming the spuriousness of the organism-society analogy on the grounds that the organism actually harbors some more organic (read: better) form of organization that these ideologically insidious media texts undermine in order to aver the

⁵ Roberto Esposito, *Immunitas: The Protection and Negation of Life*, trans. Zakiya Hanafi (Malden: Polity, 2011), 8.

⁶ Ed Cohen, *A Body Worth Defending: Immunity, Biopolitics, and the Apotheosis of the Modern Body* (Durham: Duke UP, 2009), 3. Emphasis in original.

naturalness of the capitalist mode of production or the sovereign city-state (though this was, to be sure, our initial impulse). Indeed, to liken the living being to various social institutions is to install as many assumptions about those institutions (viz. their immutability, their coordinated support of the greater good or the “exigencies of the Whole,”⁷ etc.) as about the living being, our concepts of whose functioning are no less contrived. If we insist that *The Magic School Bus* naturalizes the capitalist division of labor by representing the digestive system as a factory, then we of necessity naturalize digestion itself, claim for it an extra-social and extra-symbolic status against which the unnaturalness of the factory system can be set—an operation we consider epistemically misguided. We might recall here the geneticist J.B.S Haldane’s claim that “for about fifteen years until [he] read Lenin” he suffered from gastritis, for which “the *Daily Worker* can effect a permanent cure”⁸—the organism cannot naturalize, by being compared to, an economic or political system, because there is no way to set the organism apart from such a system in the first place (and so manufacturing and militarism, as formations in which the speaking being is incompletely ensnared, may be no less appropriate visual metaphors than any others). Or else, the analogy *and its critique* serve as much to safeguard a fantasy of the body’s pre-given, symbolically inviolable biological substrate as they do to shield contingent social configurations, like the factory or the state, from revolutionary intervention (inadvertently or otherwise). As we will argue in chapter one, the conceit that ‘the body does not lie’—that the body is excepted from, or does not form part of, the signifying chain, characterized as it is by the impossibility of signifiers ever verifying their own claims—surreptitiously establishes the body as an optimizable (because whole) system and authorizes a different set of problematic equivalences that we will take up in chapter two.

⁷ Canguilhem, “The Problem of Regulation,” 74.

⁸ J.B.S. Haldane, *On Being the Right Size and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1985), 151.

Though predictable in its representation of poor health as moral depravity and troubling in its racialization of disease qua invasion, *Osmosis Jones* takes the organism-society analogy in a surprising direction, depicting the body's biological processes as corruptible, prone to error, and quite literally culturally constructed. Rather than make a claim for social self-regulation, as Canguilhem argues the comparison so often does, the film positions the organism as a thoroughly social entity: the product of conflictual rather than harmonious cooperation; the pawn of desires that run counter to the dictates of well-being, and that cannot even be said to be one's own; the puppet of intimate but alien forces, or "something strange to me, although it is at the heart of me."⁹ Read generously, *Osmosis Jones* gestures toward the splitness of the subject, the sexuality of the unconscious, and the somatic consequences of the social-symbolic world—psychoanalytic concepts that this dissertation marshals against the conceit of holism and the phenomena that bear its name.

This dissertation stages an encounter between psychoanalysis and holism in their theoretical and therapeutic guises. It queries the curious allure of systems thinking for contemporary wellness culture and critical thought, demonstrating that these seemingly disparate domains meet in an indiscriminating embrace of concepts like complexity and microbial community that authorizes an understanding of ecological entanglement as an a priori ethical, political, and therapeutic good. It offers the psychoanalytic concept of the not-whole or not-all, developed at length in several of Jacques Lacan's later seminars, as an urgent reminder of the unassailability of antagonism on the levels of the subject and the world. Through theoretical exegesis and textual analysis (*Osmosis Jones* is, we fear, only the tip of the iceberg), it suggests that the paltry communalism of holism is

⁹ Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book VII*, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: Norton, 1997), 71.

laid bare by holistic health culture, a poor response to the failings of biomedicine that positions optimal wellbeing as a personal responsibility and a superegoic imperative, and that obscures the truly systemic causes of chronic illness by recasting individuals as ecosystems unto themselves. With its attention of the social etiology of symptomaticity, the irreparable rupture of sexuation, and the ethical challenge of non-relation, psychoanalysis delivers a crucial rejoinder to the pursuit of self-optimization (the holism of health), and to the dogma that contesting the differential distribution of life chances depends on our appreciation of a larger whole (the holism of the humanities).

Holism is widely associated with the dubiously Aristotelian dictum that ‘the whole is more than the sum of its parts’; what this *more* can be said to consist of has been a sore spot for proponents and detractors alike. Is *life*, the preeminent object of holistic inquiry, not ultimately the upshot of mechanical processes, determined in the last instance by physical laws? Or does some supra-material supplement slip in as we wait for His Majesty the Mechanism, perceptible only to biologists of a metaphysical proclivity?¹⁰ Is life the exception to an otherwise clockwork universe, differentiated by *élan* or *entelechy* (this is what Canguilhem calls the “excessive modesty”¹¹ of classical vitalism), or is it an expression of the activity, contingency, and creativity common to all things, what Jane Bennett has hailed the “vitality of matter”?¹² If the latter approach has become customary as part of a larger effort to sweep difference under the rug of immanence and exalt the totalizing force of entanglement, then perhaps we want to insist on a particular and admittedly

¹⁰ Here we are riffing on Althusser’s jocular claim, in “Contradiction and Overdetermination,” that “the economic dialectic is never active *in the pure state*; in History, these instances, the superstructures, etc.—are never seen to step aside respectfully when their work is done or, when the Time comes, as his pure phenomena, to scatter before His Majesty the Economy as he strides along the royal road of the dialectic. From the first moment to the last, the lonely hour of the ‘last instance’ never comes.” We will have more to say about the lonely hour of the last instance in chapter one. Louis Althusser, “Contradiction and Overdetermination: Notes for an Investigation” in *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 2005), 113.

¹¹ Georges Canguilhem, “Aspects of Vitalism,” in *Knowledge of Life*, 70.

¹² Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke UP, 2010), ix.

peculiar version of the former argument: that life is characterized not by its possession of a supplementary principle, a special sauce, but by its proneness to mistake, its unfailing failure to mesh with either itself or its world. In Joan Copjec's formulation, which might be said to express a kind of negative vitalism, "life is what errs."¹³ We want to insist, in other words, that there is something in life (and in the life of the speaking subject in particular¹⁴) that sets it permanently apart from its milieu, from every other living and non-living thing, including itself, and that this something is nothing other than its not-wholeness, its incompleteness at the level of ontology. It is life's failure to be whole that renders it neither optimizable (the subject of chapter one), nor scalable (chapter two), nor adaptable (chapter three).

The term holism was coined in 1926, when the South African statesman Jan Christian Smuts defined it as "the fundamental feature of wholeness in the world"¹⁵ in his book *Holism and Evolution*. Why he chose not to spell it *holism* and not *wholism* this dissertation unfortunately does not determine. The concept was already brewing in Smuts's 1895 manuscript *Walt Whitman: A Study in the Evolution of Personality* (passed on by all of the publishers he solicited), in which Smuts submits that the hallmark of Whitman's poetry is its fidelity to "the life itself which pervades the body and the products of the mind," to "an orderly and harmonious whole."¹⁶ Whitman's poetry, he argues, is "the vital outcome of his total personality," a reflection of Whitman's "whole and harmonious manhood" which is itself a reflection of the wholeness of nature.¹⁷ Presciently for our purposes here, Smuts proceeds to pit holism *avant la lettre* against psychoanalysis: contrasting

¹³ This was the title of a course that Copjec taught in Fall 2024 at Brown University.

¹⁴ On the question of the so-called non-human animal, we will say only this: as all pet owners well know, every animal has an unconscious, but this unconscious is not structured like a language, and so psychoanalysis is not prepared to say anything about it.

¹⁵ Jan Christian Smuts, *Holism and Evolution* (London: Macmillan, 1936), 85.

¹⁶ Jan Christian Smuts, *Walt Whitman: A Study in the Evolution of Personality*, ed. Alan L. McLeod (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1973), 32, 34.

¹⁷ Smuts, *Whitman*, 44, 26.

the “analytic” approach to psychology that “divide[s] the mental of psychic phenomena of human life into the unconscious and the conscious” with his own “synthetic” method, Smuts writes that in “ceas[ing] to divide [the mind’s] phenomena [...] we arrive at undifferentiated and unanalysed mental life.”¹⁸ As Smuts’s son writes of the Whitman book in his biography of his father, “The angle of approach to the subject was a new one and the concept not dissimilar to that which brought fame later to Sigmund Freud. But it differs from the textbook psychoanalysts in that it does not split personality into the conscious, subconscious [*sic*], and so on, but considers it as one integrated whole.”¹⁹ Smuts claims that “studying mental life as a whole”²⁰ will actually grant us greater insight into the unconscious; we have our doubts. Our claim is that, valiant efforts of the gestaltists and proponents of “the total personality and other nonsenses”²¹ aside, psychoanalysis remains—and should remain—wholly anathema to holism.

A thoroughgoing introduction to holism would have to account for Cartesian mechanism, chaos, complexity, cybernetics, ecology, embryology, German romanticism, Marxist totality, the Mont Pelerin Society, the New Age, non-equilibrium thermodynamics, organicism, process philosophy, ‘synergy,’ and the various and variegated vitalisms, to offer a non-exhaustive list. We will spare ourselves this impossible task (admitting that incompleteness, though ineluctable, is not necessarily pleasant) and focus our attention on a few particularly pertinent aspects of holism: its humanist embrace, its regrettable political record, and its articulation to health in the mid-twentieth century.

¹⁸ Smuts, *Whitman*, 32–33.

¹⁹ Jan Christian Smuts quoted in Alan L. McLeod, “Foreword” to *Whitman*, 17.

²⁰ Smuts, *Whitman*, 33.

²¹ Jacques Lacan, *The Ego in Freud’s Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book II*, trans. Sylvana Tomaselli (New York: Norton, 1991), 63. It would seem that the concept of “total personality” developed in Franz Alexander’s *The Psychoanalysis of the Total Personality* (at which Lacan’s jab is addressed) was derived independently of Smuts’s work on the subject, but more historical work would need to be done to say this with certainty.

That the new materialisms arose in reaction to the apparent shortcomings of psychoanalysis and its epistemic compatriots is well known, but underacknowledged is the extent to which this ‘corrective’ is predicated on an uncritical uptake of the systems sciences. Much of this happens under the banner of *complexity*, which we would claim is holism’s most prominent contemporary guise. As Melanie Mitchell writes in *Complexity: A Guided Tour*, “the antireductionist catchphrase, ‘the whole is more than the sum of its parts,’ takes on increasing significance as new sciences such as chaos, systems biology, evolutionary economics, and network theory move beyond reductionism to explain how complex behavior can arise from large collections of simpler components.”²² Non-linearity, emergence, self-organization, metastability, and far-from-equilibrium conditions are all hallmarks of complexity, in many ways the successor of a mid-century systems science concerned predominantly with negative feedback, self-regulation, and homeostasis, and with its own irksome and incessantly argued over relation to the humanities—cybernetics.²³

Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers’s *Order out of Chaos: Man’s New Dialogue with Nature*, first published in English in 1984 (with a preface written by Newt Gingrich’s longtime friend Alvin Toffler), sparked the humanist hanky-panky with complexity. With vitalist flair, Prigogine and Stengers describe the necrosis of Newtonian mechanics: the conceit of a closed clockwork universe presumed a “dead, passive nature”; “a science that leads to alienation,” it

²² Melanie Mitchell, *Complexity: A Guided Tour* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009), x.

²³ See Jeremy Walker and Melinda Cooper, “Genealogies of resilience: from systems ecology to the political economy of crisis adaptation,” *Security Dialogue* 42, no. 2 (2011): 145–146; Orit Halpern, Robert Mitchell, and Bernard Dionysius Geoghegan, “The Smartness Mandate: Notes toward a Critique,” *Grey Room* 58 (2017): 110; and Bruce Braun, “New Materialisms and Neoliberal Natures,” The 2013 Antipode RGS-IBG Lecture, *Antipode* (2014): 4, on complexity’s succession of cybernetics. See Bernard Dionysius Geoghegan, “From Information Theory to French Theory: Jakobson, Lévi-Strauss, and the Cybernetic Apparatus,” *Critical Inquiry* 38, no. 1 (2011): 96–126 (a monograph-length version of which was published in 2023); Céline Lafontaine, “The Cybernetic Matrix of ‘French Theory,’” *Theory, Culture & Society* 24, no. 5 (2007): 27–46; and Lydia Liu, “The Cybernetic Unconscious: Rethinking Lacan, Poe, and French Theory,” *Critical Inquiry* 36, no. 2 (2010): 288–320, on the relationship between so-called French theory and cybernetics.

“dehumanized” and “debased everything it touched,” reducing the wonders of the natural world to programmable and predictable automata.²⁴ What’s more, this deterministic, “disenchanted world” was one “liable to control and manipulation,” malevolent mechanists ready to master and exploit the nature from which they imagined themselves separate.²⁵ But the times they are a-changin’, and with the shift from the reversibility of classical physics to the time-dependence of non-equilibrium thermodynamics we arrive at a “new view of matter in which matter is no longer the passive substance described in the mechanistic world view but is associated with spontaneous activity.”²⁶ Entropy is not the enemy of evolution or “becoming” (the book contains lengthy excursions on Bergson and Whitehead), but its begetter: open and chaotic systems frequently spin off surprising, creative, and orderly effects.²⁷ As Katherine Hayles summarizes the (to her profoundly problematic) tome, the “universe [is] rich in productive disorder, from which self-organizing structures spontaneously arise and stabilize themselves,” such that Prigogine and Stengers’s schema offers “‘the ultimate free lunch’—a gourmandizing delight where the pot is never empty, and where the flow of time leads to increasing complexity rather than decay.”²⁸

It is no wonder that new and vital materialists would latch onto this empirically endorsed metaphysics, which negates negativity and promises a horizontal, indeed *wholesome* orientation to the non-human and inorganic world. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost’s introduction to the anthology *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* is unfortunately perfect fodder for assembling a straw man here. Concurring with Prigogine and Stengers that “the Cartesian-Newtonian understanding of matter [...] yields a conceptual and practical domination of nature,”

²⁴ Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers, *Order out of Chaos: Man’s New Dialogue with Nature* (New York: Bantam, 1984), 6, 7, 31, 6.

²⁵ Prigogine and Stengers, *Order out of Chaos*, 32.

²⁶ Prigogine and Stengers, *Order out of Chaos*, 9.

²⁷ The shift “from being to becoming” is a major theme of the book, and the title of its third section.

²⁸ N. Katherine Hayles, *Chaos Bound: Orderly Disorder in Contemporary Literature and Science* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1990), 114.

Coole and Frost locate in complexity “a posthumanist sense of material agency and a limitation of humans’ agentic efficacy,” the impropriety of Man’s domination providentially giving way to its impossibility, or at the very least its stymieing.²⁹ Coole and Frost caution that “there can be no simple passage from natural to social science theories,” and that “scientific theories cannot simply be imported into philosophy,” offering two disclaimers that still do not sufficiently disclaim the multiple subsections of their introduction allocated to chaos and complexity theory and the attendant epistemic shift toward indeterminacy, self-organization, and resilience, which they endow with a palpable sense of political optimism.³⁰ They propose “a new vitalism,” one that “discern[s] emergent, generative powers (or agentic capacities) even within inorganic matter, and [...] eschew[s] the distinction between organic and inorganic, or animate and inanimate, at the ontological level” (sweeping difference under the rug of immanence, as we have already suggested).³¹ This razing of the ontological field appears to authorize their profoundly disturbing claim that “tumbleweeds, animal species, the planetary ecosystem, global weather patterns, but also new social movements, health and crime, and economics are all amenable to the kind of explanation developed by complexity theorists.”³² Gainsaying any structural or organizational difference between the weather and the economy, Coole and Frost come frighteningly close to affirming something like the invisible hand of the market.

Though their ham-fistedness is exemplary, Coole and Frost are hardly alone in cozying up to the systems sciences. Jane Bennett claims, both in *Vibrant Matter* and her contribution to the *New Materialisms* anthology, that Dreisch’s “vitalistic holism”³³ and Bergson’s *élan vital*

²⁹ Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, “Introducing the New Materialisms,” in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, ed. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (Durham: Duke UP, 2010), 8, 14.

³⁰ Coole and Frost, “Introducing the New Materialisms,” 5, 13.

³¹ Coole and Frost, “Introducing the New Materialisms,” 9.

³² Coole and Frost, “Introducing the New Materialisms,” 13–14.

³³ Jane Bennett, “A Vitalist Stopover on the Way to a New Materialism,” in Coole and Frost, *New Materialisms*, 60.

approximate her own “fabulously vital materiality.”³⁴ And in her earlier *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, she devotes an entire chapter to “Complexity and Enchantment,” arguing that Ilya Prigogine “affirms the fabulous ‘diversity and natural becomings’ of nonhuman things” and offering “his account of physical systems at far-from-equilibrium states as another example of how the complexity of the material world can enchant.”³⁵ Rosi Braidotti writes frequently about autopoiesis and self-organization as tenets of posthumanism, describing nomadic subjectivity as “the social branch of complexity theory.”³⁶ Patricia Clough proposes that “the turn to affect points [...] to a dynamism immanent to bodily matter and matter generally—matter’s capacity for self-organization in being informational—which [...] may be the most provocative and enduring contribution of the affective turn,” and describes the “openness, emergence, and creativity” of far-from-equilibrium systems as “the political gain of the affective turn,” though she adds that these characteristics have already become “the object of capitalist capture.”³⁷ If a largely indiscriminate rehearsal of various developments in twentieth-century systems thinking is the “most provocative and enduring contribution of the affective turn,” then perhaps we had better think seriously about turning around.

Coole and Frost claim to be “summoning a new materialism in response to a sense that the radicalism of the dominant discourses which have flourished under the cultural turn is now more or less exhausted”—a cultural turn that was itself the upshot of “the exhaustion of once popular materialist approaches, such as existential phenomenology or structural Marxism.”³⁸ Restaging a

³⁴ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 63.

³⁵ Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001), 92.

³⁶ Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: polity press, 2019), 87.

³⁷ Patricia Clough, “The Affective Turn: Political Economy, Biomedicine, and Bodies,” in *The Affect Theory Reader*, eds. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham: Duke UP, 2010), 206–207, 224.

³⁸ Coole and Frost, “Introducing the New Materialisms,” 6, 3.

version of Bruno Latour's argument for critique's having run out of steam,³⁹ Coole and Frost warn that "radical constructivism" has left us ill-equipped to deal with global crises in general and climate change in particular, and they identify an "allergy to 'the real' that is characteristic of [constructivism's] more linguistic of discursive forms," which "has had the consequence of dissuading critical inquirers from the more empirical kinds of investigation that material processes and structures require."⁴⁰ The scare quotes they place around "'the real'" are curious indeed, for *the real* is, of course, a central concept of just that empiricist-hating linguistic theory that we are told cannot help us think planetary imperilment—and a concept that cautions against precisely this kind of taking for granted of reality's pre-givenness. Coole and Frost's entreaty exudes what Alenka Zupančič describes as the "redemptive charm of a project that promises again to break out in to the great Outside, to reinstate the Real in its absolute dimension, and to ontologically ground the possibility of radical change"—at the risk of overlooking "the Real that is already *right here*," the missing thing that is *not given*, and that prevents language or discourse from forming a whole that could then be transcended or gotten Outside of.⁴¹ It is because there is no such thing as a metalanguage—because there is the real—that we have no easy empirical access to "material processes and structures" misunderstood as the extra-discursive. We will have more to say about this in chapter one.

For Coole and Frost, critical theory is enfeebled, beset by allergies and fatigue, and the cure is systems theory. With complexity we are promised both a "reenchantment"⁴² of humanity and dismantling of Man, a democratic extension of vitality and an ethics based on worldly

³⁹ See Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (2004): 225–248.

⁴⁰ Coole and Frost, "Introducing the New Materialisms," 6.

⁴¹ Alenka Zupančič, *What Is Sex?* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017), 76. Emphasis in original.

⁴² See the conclusion of *Order Out of Chaos*, subtitled "The Reenchantment of Nature."

imbrication. But is an ontology of relationality—a recognition that there is no sovereign subject, that being is always being-with (two insights that psychoanalysis, of course, also supplies)—really a way through the impasses of the present? Indeed, complexity serves as a critique of paranoid reading and of planned economy; a lynchpin of posthumanism and of preemptive warfare; a framework for radical political action and for neoconservative resilience planning. It opens new political horizons for both the left and the right, offering democratic pluralism for William Connolly⁴³ and “zoe-egalitarianism”⁴⁴ for Braidotti, as well as complex adaptive economics for the Bank of England⁴⁵ and climate resilience for the first Trump administration.⁴⁶

In *Life as Surplus*, Melinda Cooper argues that we are witnessing the rise of a “libertarian, free-market vitalism”⁴⁷ that wields complexity theory’s concept of dissipative emergence to claim that there can be no limits to economic growth because markets, like cells, are lively and self-organizing. Here cycles of crisis and perturbation are not detrimental but rather crucial to economic development, and this “philosophy that celebrates capitalism as a catastrophic life principle, a biological and economic law of crisis-ridden yet relentless growth” is associated above all with “arch neoliberal theorist Friedrich von Hayek.”⁴⁸ For Cooper, the *neo* of neoliberalism signifies the abandonment of neoclassical theories of economic equilibrium for the far-from-equilibrium models of the 1970s. Hayek cut his teeth on general equilibrium theory but eventually became one of its sharpest critics; perhaps ironically, *life* was the final nail in equilibrium’s coffin, what led

⁴³ William Connolly, *Facing the Planetary: Entangled Humanism and the Politics of Swarming* (Durham: Duke UP, 2017).

⁴⁴ Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 103.

⁴⁵ See Melinda Cooper, “Complexity Theory After the Financial Crisis,” *Journal of Cultural Economy* 4, no. 4 (2011): 371–385.

⁴⁶ See Thomas Pringle, “The Ecosystem Is an Apparatus: From Machinic Ecology to the Politics of Resilience,” in *Machine* (Lüneberg: meson press, 2019), 49–103.

⁴⁷ Melinda Cooper, *Life as Surplus: Biotechnology and Capitalism in the Neoliberal Era* (Seattle: U of Washington P, 2008), 18.

⁴⁸ Cooper, *Life as Surplus*, 44, 43.

Hayek to trade its “essentially physical and mechanical premises”⁴⁹ for emergence and self-organization: “the social sciences, like much of biology and unlike most fields of the physical sciences, have to deal with structures of *essential* complexity,” whose “spontaneous ordering,” Hayek writes, is only impeded by attempts at oversight and predictive planning.⁵⁰ Hayek corresponded with Ilya Prigogine and Herman Haken throughout the 1970s, both of whom published books on self-organization in 1977.⁵¹ Cooper and Jeremy Walker argue that as homeostasis fell out of fashion, and fantasies of predictability and regulation along with it, *resilience* emerged as a corrective to the conceit of stable states and the managerial oversight that maintaining them required, bringing Hayek and the ecologist C.S. Holling into uncertain accord. Indeed Holling’s critique of the doctrine of maximum sustained yield—an industrially imposed limit to how much of a given resource could be harvested each year to guarantee an ecosystem’s ability to restore it to previous levels—in favor of an approach based on partial knowledge and openness to the unexpected closely mirrors Hayek’s critique of central planning and its potentially deleterious blindness to the economy’s “self-generating order.”⁵²

Hayek ultimately saw indeterminacy and unpredictability as crucial features of systems writ large, alighting on a “complex systems ontology, one whose unpredictable instantiation (social, economic, or natural) cannot detract from the essential unity of all systems.”⁵³ At stake in this ontology of complexity is, again, a leveling of difference, such that systems whose macro-level outcomes seem, quite predictably, to benefit some at the expense of others are rendered

⁴⁹ Cooper, “Complexity Theory after the Financial Crisis,” 376.

⁵⁰ Friedrich Hayek, *New Studies in Philosophy, Politics, Economics, and the History of Ideas* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 26, 34. Emphasis in original.

⁵¹ As John Barkley Rosser argues, Hayek was a part of a constellation of early complexity theorists—the Prigoginians at the Free University in Brussels and the Haken clique at Stuttgart University, both of which Hayek visited—whose work prompted the 1984 foundation of the Santa Fe Institute. See J. Barkley Rosser, “On the Complexity of Complex Economic Dynamics,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 13, no. 4 (1999): 169–192.

⁵² Hayek, *New Studies*, 124.

⁵³ Cooper and Walker, “Genealogies of resilience,” 150.

functionally equivalent to weather patterns. Systems theorists (and particularly those associated with the Santa Fe institute) may confidently claim that “different complex systems in nature, such as insect colonies, immune systems, brains, and economies, have much in common,”⁵⁴ or that “the fate of all complex adaptive systems in the biosphere—from single cells to economies—is to evolve a natural state between order and chaos,”⁵⁵ but we should expect cultural critics to dispute such spurious equivalences, not to affirm that, yes, indeed, “tumbleweeds, animal species, the planetary ecosystem, global weather patterns, but also new social movements, health and crime, and economics are all amenable to the kinds of explanation developed by complexity theorists.”

Orit Halpern, Robert Mitchell, and Bernard Dionysius Geoghegan have also flagged the biopolitical function of resilience, arguing that a nascent discourse of *smartness* aims to produce a resilient population able to withstand a variety of functionally equivalent catastrophes, from terrorist attacks to financial crises to natural disasters, through optimization and self-organization. “Resilience [...] functions in the discourse of smartness,” they argue, “to collapse the distinction between *emergence* (something new) and *emergency* (something new that threatens), and does so to produce a world where any change can be technically managed and assimilated while maintaining the ongoing survival of the system rather than of individuals or even particular groups. The focus of smartness is thus the management of the *relationships between* different populations of data, some of which can be culled and scarified for systemic maintenance.”⁵⁶ In neoliberal necropolitics and the new materialisms alike, relationality is paramount, and certain nodes of a network may be sacrificed for the sake of the topological cohesion of the whole.

⁵⁴ Mitchell, *Complexity*, 4.

⁵⁵ Stuart Kauffman, *At Home in the Universe: The Search of Laws of Self-Organization and Complexity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 15.

⁵⁶ Halpern, Mitchell, and Geoghegan, “The Smartness Mandate,” 122–123.

Of course it is not only with the move to complexity that the political utility of holism starts to cut both ways. As Slavoj Žižek writes, “the greatest mass murders and holocausts have always been perpetuated in the name of man as harmonious being.”⁵⁷ Jan Smuts was a repressive Prime Minister and a “philosophical architect of apartheid,”⁵⁸ and he theorized holism in strictly hierarchical terms. As Peder Anker puts it in *Imperial Ecology*, for Smuts “every organism is a whole but some organisms are more ‘significant wholes’ than others. The master stroke of this argument is that it allows Smuts to differentiate between high and low species on the great chain of being, while at the same time saying that every organism itself represents a perfect whole.”⁵⁹ This differentiation was crucial to Smuts’s colonial administration; he “used his ecological theory of holism to defend territorial segregation between white and native ‘wholes,’ and argued that evolution of blacks could only occur under white trusteeship.”⁶⁰

Holism was also, as Anne Harrington’s *Reenchanting Science* deftly details, an ideological tenet of National Socialism, which identified Jewish peoples with a mechanistic materialism anathema to Aryan wholeness and vitality and pioneered a system of alternative medicine known as New German Therapy, encouraging “the use of supposedly natural, folk therapeutic approaches, such as herbal remedies, massage, fasting, and special diets of raw vegetables and fruits.”⁶¹ To be sure, Harrington cautions that holism’s Nazism was not a foregone conclusion; “for a while,” she argues, “the intellectual field of holistic life and mind science was able to accommodate a range of political solutions to the tension between modernity and nostalgia, mechanism and wholeness,

⁵⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 2008), xxviii.

⁵⁸ Thomas Pringle, “The Tech Ecosystem and the Colony,” *Heliotrope*, May 12, 2021, <https://www.heliotropejournal.net/helio/the-tech-ecosystem>.

⁵⁹ Peder Anker, *Imperial Ecology: Environmental Order in the British Empire, 1895-1945* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2001), 71.

⁶⁰ Anker, *Imperial Ecology*, 127.

⁶¹ Anne Harrington, *Reenchanting Science: Holism in German Culture from Wilhelm II to Hitler* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996), 186.

science and spirit, Technik and Kultur,”⁶² countenancing Canguilhem’s claim that “one can no more honestly reproach a biology concerned with its autonomy for having been utilized by Nazism than one can reproach arithmetic and the calculation of compound interests for having been utilized by capitalist bankers or actuaries.”⁶³ (For what it’s worth, we are not completely convinced that the calculation of compound interests is above reproach.)

Even more avowedly left-leaning holisms, like the U.S. mid-century counterculture, wound up espousing a subtly stratified notion of nested systems. In his seminal text *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism*, Fred Turner traces the uptake of systems thinking by the return-to-the-land movement that he dubs the New Communalism. The New Communalists, Turner argues, transformed wartime research that strategically razed difference to make possible prediction and preemption—Norbert Wiener and Julian Bigelow’s antiaircraft predictor, which incorporated man and machine into a single informational system capable of self-regulation through negative feedback, serves as the preeminent example of this servomechanical dream—into an ideology of non-hierarchical and harmonious coexistence between heterogeneous elements in a whole. And yet, as Turner puts it, “the seeming openness of the [Whole Earth] Catalog’s cybernetic embrace of the whole masked a series of exclusions within its pages and a deeply conservative strand within the politics of consciousness.”⁶⁴ And as this dissertation will suggest, discourses and practices of holistic wellness evince longstanding investments in optimal health and personal longevity over and against common welfare. For all its talk of (microbial) diversity, community, and complexity, the

⁶² Harrington, *Reenchanted Science*, xx.

⁶³ Canguilhem, “Aspects of Vitalism,” 72–73.

⁶⁴ Fred Turner, “The Politics of the Whole Circa 1968—And Now,” in *The Whole Earth: California and the Disappearance of the Outside* (Berlin: Haus der Kulturen der Welt and Sternberg Press, 2013), 45.

individual—if now conceived as a multiplicity unto herself—reigns supreme in the holistic health imaginary. Relationality does not a radical politics make.

It is no coincidence that the failed horizontality of holistic health reflects that of the mid-century “cybernetic ideology of holism,”⁶⁵ because this was the moment of the former’s consolidation. In 1966, Michio and Aveline Kushi opened Erewhon—now a luxury health-food emporium dubbed “L.A.’s Hottest Hangout”⁶⁶—as a macrobiotic grocery store in a Brookline, Massachusetts basement. Macrobiotics is a dietary philosophy based on the proper balance of yin and yang foods (which, in a pinch, can be accomplished by just eating brown rice) as the crux of somatic, spiritual, and social wellbeing; Michio and Aveline “taught that entire societies could become disharmonious and aggressive from eating meat and processed foods, undermining world peace” (we will have more to say about this in chapter two).⁶⁷ From 1967 to 1969 Erewhon was managed by Bill Tara and Paul Hawken, two macros fresh from San Francisco, where they and a handful of Merry Pranksters had lived in the warehouse that hosted Ken Kesey’s acid test graduation on Halloween of 1966—attended, of course, by *Whole Earth Catalog* founder Stewart Brand.⁶⁸ Hawken frequently contributed to the *Whole Earth*-offshoot *Co-Evolution Quarterly*, and he sat on the board of the Portola Institute, which published the *Catalog*.⁶⁹ Brand himself would appear on the cover of a 1976 issue of *East/West Journal*, one of several macrobiotic magazines that the Kushis published.

⁶⁵ Turner, “The Politics of the Whole Circa 1968,” 46.

⁶⁶ Max Berlinger, “How Erewhon Became L.A.’s Hottest Hangout,” *The New York Times*, February 17, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/17/style/erewhon-los-angeles-health-food.html>.

⁶⁷ Douglas Martin, “Aveline Kushi, 78, Advocate of Macrobiotic Diet for Health,” *The New York Times*, July 23, 2001, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/07/23/us/aveline-kushi-78-advocate-of-macrobiotic-diet-for-health.html>.

⁶⁸ See *History of Erewhon—Natural Foods Pioneer in the United States (1966–2011)*, ed. William Shurtleff and Akiko Aoyagi (Lafayette, CA: Soyinfo Center, 2011), 141, 273, 280, 281.

⁶⁹ See Fred Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2006), 128.



Figure 0.2: Cover of *East/West Journal* vol. 6 no. 7 (July 1976). NMAC.AC.0619 box 81, folder 9.

The macrobiotic movement was, unsurprisingly, plagued by many of the same political pitfalls as was the New Communalism. In April 1979 Erewhon employees voted to affiliate with the Service Employees International Union Local 925, incurring Kushi's ire. That year Richard Warren Eivers wrote in *New Age*, a competing periodical founded by erstwhile *East/West* editors Eric Utne and Peggy Taylor, that "Erewhon employees cite as a major reason for the unionizing effort—in addition to concerns about wages,

working conditions, and medical benefits—their feelings that behind Erewhon's New Age image lay the reality of an uncaring and unresponsive management willing to exploit them just as any 'straight' business might,"⁷⁰ reiterating Paul Hawken's claim, in a much-maligned 1973 article in *East/West*, that Erewhon's near constant turbulence was "caused by thinly veiled ambition clothed in a stylishly cut suit of concern for our biosphere and guts."⁷¹ The unionization effort was seen as an affront to the store's own harmonious balance; an 1984 article in *East/West* notes that though it eventually failed, "the cost, in legal fees, was a quarter of a million dollars, and in time, energy, and harmony, almost incalculable."⁷² Kushi's staunch anti-labor attitude and his insistence to Erewhon's organizers that they were "unhappy because their personal health was bad, not because

⁷⁰ Richard Warren Eivers, "From Alternative to Big Business: The Story Behind Erewhon's Unionization Effort," *New Age Journal* (November 1979): 31–40.

⁷¹ Paul Hawken, "Erewhon: A Biography. The View Within," *East/West Journal* 3, no. 8 (August 1973): 11–16.

⁷² Ronald E. Kotzsch, "Natural Foods Pioneer Erewhon: An Industry Leader's Tough Fight to Survive," *East/West Journal* (1984), 24–29. Emphasis added.

working conditions were inadequate” belies a vision of unity without unions, of metaphysical but not material collectivity.⁷³

Our inquiry here is animated by a version of Turner’s guiding question: “How did a social movement devoted to critiquing the technological bureaucracy of the cold war come to celebrate the socio-technical visions that animated that bureaucracy?”⁷⁴ How, that is, do holistic health practitioners, positioning themselves against the Western medical establishment and its ardent refusal of the whole person, come to rely on the very systems-theoretical discourse of orthodox U.S. science, the military industrial complex, and contemporary biopolitics (characterized, as Nikolas Rose argues in *The Politics of Life Itself*, by molecularization, optimization, and an ethical injunction to care for oneself)?⁷⁵ How do those seeking alternatives to biomedicine and those critical of its epistemic hegemony find themselves invested in categories produced by another scientific mainstream, in the guise of subjugated knowledge?⁷⁶ And how can we square the anti-reductionist, reparative bent of holistic wellness—its purported attention to the social, psychic, and environmental dimensions of malaise, its desire to inhibit iatrogenesis and to take seriously complaints that are too often dismissed—with its emphasis on optimal health as personal responsibility and moral imperative, its disdain for neurodiversity, and its affinity with conspiracy theory?⁷⁷ By demonstrating that these contradictions bedevil holism from the very start, whose

⁷³ David Armstrong, *A Trumpet to Arms: Alternative Media in America* (Boston: South End Press, 1981), 279-280.

⁷⁴ Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*, 39.

⁷⁵ See Nikolas Rose, *The Politics of Life Itself: Biomedicine, Power, and Subjectivity in the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2007).

⁷⁶ Christopher Lawrence and George Weisz’s anthology *Greater Than the Parts: Holism in Biomedicine, 1920–1950* demonstrates that many if not most early twentieth century critiques of biomedical reductionism and proposals for holistic approaches to healing did not come from “various movements perceived as ‘alternative’ and hostile to orthodox medical elites,” but from “within mainstream medicine.” See their introduction, “Medical Holism: The Context” in *Greater than the Parts* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998), 1-22.

⁷⁷ The “wellness to QAnon pipeline” is surprisingly well-documented. See Laura Nelson, “COVID adds to California yoga and wellness QAnon Problem,” *L.A. Times*, June 23, 2021, <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2021-06-23/covid-adds-to-california-yoga-wellness-qanon-problem>, on what the author calls the “woo-Anon” phenomenon; and Charlotte Ward and David Voas, “The Emergence of

disciples would do better to acknowledge the ineluctability of contradiction than continue vainly wishing it away.

You are enough: a holistic platitude as irritating as it is instructive for the rift it reveals between pop-therapeutic discourse and psychoanalysis. For if the former tells the complaining subject that she really lacks nothing, that she is complete unto herself, the rejoinder of psychoanalysis is that of course she is not enough—and what’s more, that she is at the same time *too much*. Not enough, too much, and never, ever just right: psychoanalysis deals a death blow to the Goldilocksian fantasy of a harmonious fit between the subject and her world, and indeed between the subject and herself. And if the new materialisms belabor our more-than-humanness, our constitutive entanglement with all manner of lively matter, psychoanalysis insists on just the opposite: our less-than-humanness, our failure to be fully human, or better, the failure in being that *the human* indexes. As Zupančič puts it, “the speaking being is neither part of (organic) nature, not its exception (nor something in between), but its *Real* (the point of its own impossibility, impasse). The speaking being is the real existence of an ontological impasse.”⁷⁸ Not excepted from the world (the “human exception” that would allow the natural world to form a totality demarcated by its absence), but not simply included in it either, the speaking subject is in fact what gives the lie to the ontological plentitude of the *it* in which its inclusion is debated: the human betrays the inexistence of an internally consistent, self-identical natural world, or else, it guarantees that “Nature as a meaningful whole does not exist.”⁷⁹ We are therefore obliged to pursue a

Conspiratoriness,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 26, no. 1 (2011): 103–121, for a broader analysis of the overlap between New Age philosophy or “the holistic milieu” and conspiracy theory.

⁷⁸ Zupančič, *What Is Sex?*, 93.

⁷⁹ Zupančič, *What Is Sex?*, 93.

psychoanalytically informed *hole-ism*, one attentive to “the hole in the system, that is, to the site at which the real passes through you.”⁸⁰

At this point we might say a few words about the rest of the dissertation’s title. “Sick, Sad World” is the name of a tabloid talk show in the diegetic world of the *Beavis and Butt-Head* spin-off *Daria*, which aired on *MTV* from 1997 to 2002. The ‘content’ of this show-within-a-show (of which there is very little beyond its iconic title card) has absolutely no bearing here, but the name nicely captures the holistic diagnosis of a sick society, which we will discuss in chapter two, and its pathologization of negative affect, which we will take to task in chapter one. Indeed “Sick, Sad World” could well be a macrobiotic description of our late-modern condition, which would emphasize the reflective and reciprocal relations between physical and psychic wellbeing and environmental and social malaise.

The nod to *Daria* is also apt insofar as this is, in some ways, a work of cultural studies. It began with an almost prurient, pseudo-ethnographic interest in a strand of wellness culture that flourished on Instagram in the mid-to-late 2010s, with high-profile influencers like Jeannette Aranda (@shutthekaleup), Bethany (@lilsipper), Nicole Bruno (@nobread), Rachel DeVaux (@rachelsgoodeats), Nicole Keshishian (@kalejunkie), and Lee Tilghman (@leefromamerica, the indisputable flagbearer of this movement, whose book *If You Don’t Like This I Will Die: An Influencer Memoir* is forthcoming from Simon & Schuster) at its center. These figures popularized phenomena, products, and practices like candida overgrowths,⁸¹ free radicals, gluten intolerance, grain-free, infrared saunas, intermittent fasting, keto, leaky gut, lymphatic drainage, MCT oil, mouth taping, paleo, vaccine skepticism, and 5G detoxes, and provided the first indication that

⁸⁰ Jacques Lacan, *...or Worse: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XIX*, trans. A. R. Price (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), 6.

⁸¹ This is hilariously parodied in Patricia Lockwood’s 2021 novel *No One Is Talking About This*.

self-care and systems theory could—and should—be thought together. And though this dissertation ultimately focuses more on the systems-biological precepts of wellness culture than on any of its sordid details, it remains centrally concerned with discourses of the whole that circulate in popular culture and on social media.

Our intention is not, to be clear, to dismiss alternative medicine as quackery—or perhaps more damningly, as a biopolitical technology of nefarious neoliberal normalization that we must reflexively Resist. Many of the critiques of biomedicine and the medical-industrial complex mounted by holistic practitioners and patients are shrewd and indispensable—and not dissimilar to those found in disability studies and the sociology of medicine—if the alternatives proposed, oriented as they are toward optimal wellbeing, tend to fall wide of the mark. Though our tone may suggest otherwise, we are fundamentally sympathetic to the enterprise of alternative medicine—and as is well known, the difference between critique and love is a minimal one.

Though we part ways on matters of methodology, the sociology of medicine provides critical context for our inquiry into holistic health culture. In their seminal 2003 article “Biomedicalization: Technoscientific Transformations of Health, Illness, and U.S. Biomedicine,” Adele Clarke and colleagues identify a sea change in the domain of medicine, underway since 1985, necessitating a new conceptual category. Whereas medicalization, per Irving Zola, describes the process by which phenomena previously surveilled and managed by legal, religious, or other institutions are brought under the purview of biomedicine, *biomedicalization* designates the reshaping of that very biomedicine—its “organizations, infrastructures, [and] knowledges”⁸²—by technoscience and computing and information technologies. What’s more, biomedicalization

⁸² Adele E. Clarke, Janet K. Shim, Laura Mamo, Jennifer Ruth Fosket, and Jennifer R. Rishman, “Biomedicalization: Technoscientific Transformations of Health, Illness, and U.S. Biomedicine,” in *Biomedicalization: Technoscience, Health, and Illness in the U.S.*, ed. Adele Clark, Laura Mamo, Jennifer Ruth Fosket, Jennifer R. Fishman, and Janet K. Shim (Durham: Duke UP, 2010), 53.

emphasizes health rather than (just) illness, installs an ethical imperative to constantly pursue it, and sets up industries dedicated to enhancing and optimizing it—for a price. As Jonathan Metzl puts it, biomedicalization names the process “whereby biomedicine and technoscience conspire to define health as a moral obligation, a commodity, and a mark of status and self-worth.”⁸³

In his 1980 article “Healthism and the Medicalization of Everyday Life,” Robert Crawford identifies “healthism” as a preoccupation with personal health as the sole arbiter of the good life, describing a crucial tenet of what Clarke et al. call biomedicalization. Exemplified by “the new health consciousness and movements—holistic health and self-care,” which have individual behavior as their axis of intervention, healthism “reinforces a privatization of the struggle for generalized well-being.”⁸⁴ Crawford presciently chides holistic health for its impoverished holism and its ideological accord with incipient neoliberal policy, which he would consider more explicitly in his later work; here he aptly remarks that holism “remains locked in a prison of reductionism, despite its apparent broadening.”⁸⁵ As we will see in chapter one, this is precisely what plagues the concept of ‘root cause’ in current holistic health discourse, which installs a paradoxical determinism that belies the very conceit of the body as a complex system on which holism’s epistemic and therapeutic claims rely.

A recent article by Steven Epstein and Stefan Timmermans builds on the insights of both Clarke et al. and Crawford to examine the increasing cultural authority of alternative medical modalities. Taking up Paul Starr’s distinction between the social and cultural authority of medicine—the former describing the control exerted by physicians, the latter the more diffuse

⁸³ Jonathan M. Metzl, “Introduction: Why ‘Against Health’?” in *Against Health: How Health Became the New Morality*, ed. Jonathan M. Metzl and Anna Kirkland (New York: NYU Press, 2010), 6.

⁸⁴ Robert Crawford, “Healthism and the Medicalization of Everyday Life,” *International Journal of Health Services* 10, no. 3 (1980): 365.

⁸⁵ Crawford, “Healthism,” 375.

power of particular epistemologies of health and illness—Epstein and Timmermans argue that in light of the shift “from ‘medicine’ to ‘health,’”⁸⁶ the comparatively neglected cultural authority of health as a “meaningful social practice”⁸⁷ accrues new significance. Epstein and Timmermans’s remarks are worth quoting at length:

With the mushrooming of health and wellness industries that speak to an investment in health and well-being as a moral virtue, the boundaries of cultural authority increasingly exceed the biomedical. A varied assortment of authorities, invoking New Age ideas, pop psychology, nutritional and dietary strategies, self-help philosophies, and fitness regimens, now comment on fundamental aspects of existence: What substances should people consume, and what practices should they engage in, to stay well? What makes life meaningful, and when is it not worth living?⁸⁸

Epstein and Timmermans go on to articulate a paradox wherein lay health advocates and influencers both chide biomedicine and rely on it for cultural capital; “extend[ing] the sway of ‘health’ (or the ideology of healthism) while challenging the influence of medical professionals.”⁸⁹

This passage is particularly useful because it signals the extent to which health has become inextricable from matters of subjectivity at the same time as it has been largely divorced from the domain of medicine. Holistic health practitioners often remark that wellness is a way of life, a “state of being,”⁹⁰ “an enriching, lifelong journey,”⁹¹ an interminable, all-encompassing process

⁸⁶ Steven Epstein and Stefan Timmermans, “From Medicine to Health: The Proliferation and Diversification of Cultural Authority,” *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 62, no. 3 (2021): 241.

⁸⁷ In “Health as a meaningful social practice,” Crawford shows that biomedicine has in fact always failed to contain “the irrepressible proliferation of meanings associated with health,” and compellingly argues that health offers a powerful metaphor for bootstrapping self-reliance: “health is the language of a class that, even as it disintegrates, continues to believe in its self-making salvation.” Robert Crawford, “Health as a meaningful social practice,” *Health: an Interdisciplinary Journal for the Social Study of Health, Illness, and Medicine* 10, no. 4 (October 2006): 401, 419.

⁸⁸ Epstein and Timmermans, “From Medicine to Health,” 244–245.

⁸⁹ Epstein and Timmermans, “From Medicine to Health,” 244–245.

⁹⁰ @thewell, November 15, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CHnlOahMw-1/?igsh=MWg3eGdrODhuOGc4Zw%3D%3D>.

⁹¹ Amanda Chantal Bacon, *The Moon Juice Cookbook: Cosmic Alchemy for a Thriving Body, Beauty, and Consciousness* (New York: Pam Krauss/Avery, 2016), 21.

best pursued to the side of biomedicine, which is derided as “sick care,”⁹² “disease care,”⁹³ “symptom management,”⁹⁴ and other epithets that bespeak its ill-suitedness to the cultivation of health.

The final sentence of the above quote—when is life not worth living?—also signals the need for a disability critique of holistic wellness. Work in Black feminist disability studies and crip-of-color critique, including Jina B. Kim’s forthcoming *Care at the end of the World*, Julie Avril Minich’s *Radical Health*, and Sami Schalk’s *Black Disability Politics* (the “holistic”⁹⁵ methodology of which we find rhetorically unfortunate) informs this dissertation’s critique of holistic wellness as a deeply short-sighted, if not entirely misguided, response to the failings of biomedicine that obscures the truly systemic causes of chronic illness by locating the system to be altered or transformed inside the individual subject. This work exposes the racism of healthism and takes to task discourses of personal responsibility that render Black and brown communities “*radically unwell* by eliding structural determinants of health,” tracing the disabling effects of late-twentieth-century neoliberal ideology and economic policy in particular.⁹⁶ These thinkers are critical of a certain strand of disability studies that rejects wholesale disability’s biomedical construction and discourses of and desires for ‘cure’ along with it, overlooking historical and ongoing practices of medical racism that bar certain subjects from accessing the very treatments

⁹² Will Bulsiewicz repeatedly refers to biomedicine as “sick care” in *Fiber Fueled: The Plant-Based Gut Health Program for Losing Weight, Restoring your Health, and Optimizing your Microbiome* (New York: Avery, 2020).

⁹³ Frank Lipman contrasts what he calls “New Medicine” to “Old Medicine” or “disease care.” See @franklipmanmd, June 17, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Ce6ms9PBhVF/?igsh=ZHc1MThxbmxybjE4>.

⁹⁴ David Perlmutter argues that “The basic operating system underlying the practice of medicine in America today is myopically focused on treating our ills with highly profitable remedies directed at symptom management” in his wildly popular *Grain Brain: The Surprising Truth about Wheat, Carbs, and Sugar—Your Brain’s Silent Killers* (New York: Little, Brown Spark, 2013), 4.

⁹⁵ See Sami Schalk, *Black Disability Politics* (Durham: Duke UP, 2022), 15–17, on the “holistic nature of Black disability politics.”

⁹⁶ Julie Avril Minich, *Radical Health: Unwellness, Care, and Latinx Expressive Culture* (Durham: Duke UP, 2023), 3. Emphasis in original.

and cures that have now been exposed as technologies of normalization and assimilation. At the same time, they look beyond what Jasbir Puar describes as “the normative (white, male, middle-class, physically impaired) subjects that have historically dominated the field”⁹⁷ to consider how debility and chronically diminished life chances accrue to bodies and populations that are not hailed as disabled, without “necessarily center[ing] traditional disability rights language and approaches, such as disability pride or civil rights inclusion.”⁹⁸

This work also provides a crucial rejoinder to the fanciful concept of indeterminacy flung around in the environmental humanities. Rather than the vague dependence of every living thing on a vast web of unspecified, nonhuman others, Kim and colleagues elaborate to the social and material networks of interdependence that sustain human life across spectrums of ability, at the same time as they recognize “the limitations inherent in a utopian discourse of interdependence” and refuse to “frame this value as a cure-all for contemporary crises of care.”⁹⁹

Though it benefits tremendously from the insights of disability studies, this dissertation is not a contribution to it, and we have reservations about the continued utility of the increasingly unwieldy category of disability, which encompasses afflictions that vary so drastically in severity, duration, and treatability that it is unclear what we stand to gain from grouping them together. Interestingly, while *sickness* is a common category of experience for wellness influencers like Nicole Cogan and Amanda Chantal Bacon, these figures avoid the language of disability like the plague. They frame sickness as something felicitously overcome, something that ‘no longer defines them,’ because they have contrived a behavioral system for continuously staving it off. It is striking that the experience of bodily failure can be identified either with wellness or disability;

⁹⁷ Puar, *The Right to Maim*, xix.

⁹⁸ Schalk, *Black Disability Politics*, 5.

⁹⁹ Jina B. Kim, “Crippling the Welfare Queen: The Radical Potential of Disability Politics,” *Social Text* 148 (2021): 96.

that individuals with the same complaints might describe themselves as sick, disabled, chronically ill, healthy, balanced, or well. We are reminded here of Canguilhem's staunch commitment to individuality and normativity, which might appear rather outmoded in today's thoroughly relational, anti-normative theoretical milieu. Canguilhem insisted on the individual's experience of disease in response to the tendency of positivist physiology to render pathology a quantitative deviation from a stable norm, which made it possible to speak of "sickness without a sick person."¹⁰⁰ While the existence of vital norms cannot, Canguilhem maintains, be denied—life has preferences, a stake in how it is lived; it is in no way "indifferent to the conditions in which it is possible"—these norms are not imposed on it from without, they are not statistical measures or abstract values determined by medical judgement.¹⁰¹ The norm is the product of an organism's ongoing negotiation with itself and its milieu; it is a qualitative, absolutely singular state, never identical to that of any other organism. Above all, "it is the patients who most often decide—and from very different points of view—whether they are no longer normal or whether they have returned to normality."¹⁰² Pathology is in the eye of the beholder. What's more, pathology has its own norms, different from those of health, to be sure, but norms nonetheless: "diseases are new ways of life,"¹⁰³ and organisms learn to live with them, have preferential experiences of them, develop new norms as well as new understandings of having departed from them. The difference, for Canguilhem, is not between health-norm and disease-deviation, but between an organism's capacity, in health, to create and change its norms, its normative *plasticity*, and its comparative

¹⁰⁰ Georges Canguilhem, *The Normal and the Pathological*, trans. Carolyn R. Fawcett and Robert S. Cohen (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 92.

¹⁰¹ Canguilhem, *The Normal and the Pathological*, 126.

¹⁰² Canguilhem, *The Normal and the Pathological*, 119.

¹⁰³ Canguilhem, *The Normal and the Pathological*, 100.

constraint in disease, its less flexible attachment to a particular norm and its diminished tolerance for variations in its milieu.

We see much of value in Canguilhem's theory of normativity, which accords the individual the freedom to define their well-being as they see fit, and makes the goal of medicine the restoration of living beings to their own norms—whether those of sickness or of health—and on their own terms. It is this “radical, even an-archic, antifoundationalist concept of individuality,”¹⁰⁴ lost in both holism's redemptive endeavors (the individual melting into the ooze of oneness, immanence, Relation) and its punitive projects (the individual chasing the criteria of optimal wellbeing), that psychoanalysis enjoins us not to surrender.

The first chapter of this dissertation, “hysteric: of systems and symptoms,” examines two axioms of holistic health culture: that the subject is a whole system, and that this system can and should be optimized. In recent years claims for an epidemic of general malaise—for feeling intermittently shitty as a population-level pathology—have snowballed among U.S.-based proponents of functional medicine, a moralizing medical modality that masquerades as subjugated knowledge. The first part of the chapter brings together the renegade psychoanalyst Georg Groddeck, the macrobiotic philosopher George Ohsawa, and a selection of functional physicians (Jeffrey Bland, Mark Hyman, and Frank Lipman), all of whom share an orientation to the symptom that we call vulgar Freudianism. We argue that the holistic insistence on harmonious equilibration as the route to unpleasure's total privation is grounded in a concept of gender as the complementary coupling of metaphysical and morphological opposites, and that this bisexual fantasy subtends the concept of ‘the root cause,’ which inadvertently betrays holistic medicine's own systems theoretical bent.

¹⁰⁴ Stefanos Geroulanos and Todd Meyers, “Introduction: Canguilhem's Critique of Medical Reason,” in Canguilhem, *Writings on Medicine*, 7.

In the second part of the chapter we trace a nascent negative turn in trans studies, inaugurated by Cameron Awkward-Rich, Andrea Long Chu, and Hil Malatino, which troubles the transition-as-cure narrative (a kind of holism incognito) and thinks with madness, maladjustment, and misery as forces compounded by, but not reducible to, the contingent disallowance of trans life. Supplementing this work on trans negativity with the Lacanian concept of sexual difference—as a difference internal to the subject, a painful opening that precludes the possibility of wholeness—we argue that cleaving gender from harmony obliges us to surrender optimal well-being and invest instead in practices of palliative care.

The second chapter, “holobiont: of microbes and monists,” scrutinizes the scalar logic of the subject conceived as a multi-species assemblage. Tracing the probiotic company Seed’s concept of a causal and microcosmic relationship between the organism, the community, and the biosphere to the mid-century macrobiotic movement and the cybernetic holism in which it was mired, we argue that contemporary programs of microbiome management render (eco)systemic transformation a problem of self-regulation. Holistic health discourse relocates the sick system to be repaired inside the individual and claims that bolstering microbiome diversity and resilience will have commensurate effects on a global scale. Extending recent critiques of uncritical ecocriticism by Axelle Karera and Dixia Ramírez-D’Oleo to the humanities’ microbiome mania, in which the subject is recast as a symbiotic community and symbiotic community as an epistemopolitical salve for late liberalism, we argue that relationality cannot be an end in itself: interconnection portends no particular ethical consequences.

The third chapter, “human: of plasticity and prehistory,” queries the pride of place given to prehistory in both psychoanalysis and holistic health. The latter takes the form of the paleo movement, which posits an original intimacy of the human and its milieu through a fantasy of raw,

unfettered masculinity conjured to counterbalance the excesses of feminine plasticity. Enjoining the dupes of capitalist modernity to rediscover their species-being through a kind of recapitulation in reverse, the paleo movement pines for a truer form of humanness that it claims can be regained through environmental modification. Contrasting the reappraisal of Jean-Baptiste Lamarck in recent evolutionary theory, on which the paleo promise of genetic plasticity leans, with Freud's abiding interest in the French naturalist, we argue that Freud's concept of archaic inheritance is ultimately unassimilable to the epigenetic paradigm. For psychoanalysis, as for the kindred paleontology of André Leroi-Gourhan, the human subject does not adapt but instead invents tools that compensate, if never completely, for its ill-fitted-ness to environment and its Other milieu—the unconscious. At the same time, Freud's phylogenetic musings on the omnipotence of thoughts strikes an unease accord with certain precepts of the paleo movement, forcing us to reassess the relationship between psychoanalysis and alternative medicine.

If nothing else, our hope is that this dissertation makes plain that a critique of holism lies at the heart of Lacan's theoretical edifice, the (we won't say vital) importance of which the ongoing abnegation of negativity in critical thought has not yet managed to diminish. To the heralds of holism, we will respond: *pas toute!*

1. hysteric: of systems and symptoms

This chapter considers two superficially similar but ultimately quite distinct couplings of pathology as common plight. In the holistic health imaginary, sickness is a (de)base(d) condition, a perverse normativity to be overcome through the identification and eradication of its root cause, the kernel of pathological truth at once concealed and revealed by the subject's symptoms. In the psychoanalytic schema, by contrast, sickness is ineluctable in its existence if variable in its expression, and the endgame, as it were, is not exactly pathology's extirpation, but the subject's finding a way to live with it. For the holists—upholders of an unexpectedly deterministic program of paranoid reading—the seed of iniquity qua infirmity is some variety of imbalance or dysregulation, and its symptoms fatigue, brain fog, irritation, anxiety, and melancholy, among others; righting the former necessarily entails allaying the latter. This nascent pathological explosion—in which scores of young, hot, white women insist that feeling intermittently shitty indexes a treatable chronic health condition—can be described as a flourishing of hysteria, somewhat rightly and somewhat wrongly (though here I risk incurring the ire of some reluctant hysterics): rightly insofar as “you may quite well say that we are all ill,”¹ beset by the incurable condition of being a subject; wrongly insofar as hysteria is mistakenly identified with a kind of mass delusion, and psychoanalysis with a depraved version of symptomatic or depth reading. Make no mistake: psychoanalysis does not deny the reality of the subject's symptoms. But its taking seriously of the symptom does not imply its rubber-stamping of the kind of root cause analysis—with its curative connotations—advanced by the holists, despite, again, some cursory similarities between the two interpretive practices. The radical incompatibility of holistic health and psychoanalysis is thrown into relief by each's theory of sex: the former's one of harmony or complementarity, the latter's one of impossibility or impasse. Indeed, it is precisely sex's status in psychoanalysis as negative or absent cause that precludes the possibility of health understood as balance or, as we will see, affectlessness. But despite our condemnation of the holistic paradigm, we will certainly not come down on the side of symptom management in its Western biomedical and psychotherapeutic forms (behavioral therapy, for instance, with its structural elision of the unconscious—which, it is true, cannot be disclosed and thereby dealt with in the mode expounded by the holists, but neither can it simply be ignored!). A third option must be pursued, with the help of trans studies—a field that has also found, in negativity, a way forward.

“Uh Oh! This COVID Survey Needs You to Say You Haven't Felt Fatigue in the Last Two Weeks,”² reads a January 2022 headline from the satirical news site *Reductress*. The article's protagonist, the second person *you*, is thrust into an ethical dilemma upon encountering a COVID questionnaire at the dentist's office. Should you claim, disingenuously, to have spent a fortnight

¹ Sigmund Freud, “The Paths to the Formation of Symptoms,” lecture XXIII of *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis (Part III)*, SE vol. XVI, trans. and ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1963), 358. Emphasis in original.

² “Uh Oh! This COVID Survey Needs You to Say You Haven't Felt Fatigue in the Last Two Weeks,” *Reductress*, January 13, 2022, <https://reductress.com/post/uh-oh-this-covid-survey-needs-you-to-say-you-havent-felt-fatigue-in-the-last-two-weeks/>.

free of fatigue, and thereby proceed with your teeth cleaning, or should you confess that “you feel fatigued more often than not,”³ and risk jeopardizing your appointment? Things only become more complicated as the questionnaire asks about additional symptoms: “‘Of course I’m nauseated, headachy, and have semi-regular diarrhea,’ you say. ‘Isn’t that just the burden of existence?’”⁴

This is a question on a substantial swath of lips. Is vague malaise a sign of disease, a harbinger of ill health, or “just the burden of existence”? Of course it is the former view that has accrued—though not for the first time—countercultural clout, hence the article’s humorous invocation of the latter. From ever more mainstream advocates of alternative medicine, we are told that ordinary fatigue and its bedfellows are not, in fact, ordinary at all, but problems requiring urgent redress, usually in the form of personal behavioral modification. Two commanding figures in the milieu of functional medicine,⁵ Mark Hyman and Frank Lipman, frequently denounce fatigue as deviant: “It might surprise you to learn that it’s *not normal* to feel tired all the time,”⁶ writes Hyman in an Instagram post from 2022; “You’re not supposed to feel like shit! As a doctor, I continually see patients walking around feeling tired, and bloated, and puffy, or worse, and they accept this as normal,”⁷ bemoans Lipman in an advertisement for a boutique cleanse that same year. Lengthening the list of pathological manifestations masquerading as quotidian complaints, preeminent wellness influencer and central character in the Goop expanded universe Amanda Chantal Bacon begins her 2016 therapeutic treatise *The Moon Juice Cookbook* with the claim that “before I began to cook and eat in a way that allowed me to thrive cosmically, my thyroid was slow, allergies were rampant, and I had the general feeling that I wasn’t optimizing this life and

³ “Uh Oh! This COVID Survey Needs You to Say You Haven’t Felt Fatigue in the Last Two Weeks.”

⁴ “Uh Oh! This COVID Survey Needs You to Say You Haven’t Felt Fatigue in the Last Two Weeks.”

⁵ The boundaries between “functional,” “integrative,” “complimentary,” and simply “alternative” medicine are not clearly drawn, and attempting to distinguish between them here would be as fruitless as it would difficult.

⁶ @drmarkhyman, September 20, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Ciur1hksMot/>. Emphasis in original.

⁷ @thewell, January 9, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CYhIy0XIY5b/>.

the body I was traveling in.”⁸ Crucially, Bacon’s experience of sickness was not that of disease or disability, but that of “general” discontent or suboptimal coenesthesia. In addition to her aforementioned hay fever, Bacon was “experiencing a host of other symptoms, from anxiety to temper flare-ups”; “Low energy, allergies, skin conditions, and fluctuating moods felt normal” to her.⁹ Hardly alone in suffering from unexceptional health, the self-proclaimed father of functional medicine Jeffrey Bland notes in his 2014 tome *The Disease Delusion: Conquering the Causes of Chronic Illness for a Healthier, Longer, and Happier Life* that being “not wholly sick but not wholly well”¹⁰ has become an epidemic in the twenty first century US.

For comparison,¹¹ here is how George Ohsawa, founder of the mid-twentieth century macrobiotic movement, characterizes health in his 1965 book *You Are All Sanpaku*: health is, among other things, freedom from fatigue (“a healthy person never feels tired”); “good humor” (“a healthy man never gives way to anger; he is cheerful and pleasant even under the most trying circumstances”); and sexual satisfaction.¹² Ohsawa’s exegesis of this last is especially significant, alighting on what is, for us, a crucial conundrum: “A man or woman who has no sexual desires or takes no pleasure from their satisfaction is estranged from the infinite order of the universe.”¹³ How are we to understand this unpleasurable satisfaction, this satisfaction that produces no pleasure? Here Ohsawa conjures, only to spirit away in the name of sickness, the rift between

⁸ Bacon, *The Moon Juice Cookbook*, 9.

⁹ Bacon, *The Moon Juice Cookbook*, 17, 18.

¹⁰ Jeffrey Bland, *The Disease Delusion: Conquering the Causes of Chronic Illness for a Healthier, Longer, and Happier Life* (New York: HarperWave, 2014), 18.

¹¹ Bacon does cite her program’s debt to Ayurvedic and Traditional Chinese medicine (the latter of which shares many metaphysical precepts with macrobiotics), but she misspells the former, which says a lot about hegemonic holism’s parasitic relationship to the subjugated knowledges it invokes.

¹² George Ohsawa, *You Are All Sanpaku*, trans. William Dufty (New York: University Books, 1965), 62–63. The other three criteria of health are “sound sleep,” “good memory,” and “precision in thought and action.”

¹³ Ohsawa, *You Are All Sanpaku*, 62.

pleasure and satisfaction that psychoanalysis calls *jouissance*, residue of the rift proper to the subject as such.

At this point we can pause to ask how health (or cosmic thriving) became commensurate with—to call it what it is—affectlessness: an absence of anger, an unfluctuating mood, a deficit of fatigue, an unproblematic experience of desire; in short, a total privation of unpleasure. If this sounds like Freud’s provisional conception of the death drive as the pleasure principle’s natural extension, as the pursuit of equilibrium qua absolute tensionlessness, it should—there is a curious kinship between the alternative medicines that advocate optimal wellbeing and a psychoanalysis quite askew, a kinship that this chapter will chart and controvert.

Briefly (our task will be to bear this out): health becomes equivalent to affectlessness on the condition that the body is conceived as a whole system, rather than a system with a hole in it—as incomplete, internally rent, and radically non-optimizable. Or else, the holists offer (despite their explicit claims to the contrary) what psychoanalysis equips us to call a de-sexed definition of health—one that is ultimately of very little use to us. The inexorability of the subject’s sexual division is wished away with reference to “optimal hormonal harmony”¹⁴ or to “balancing our feminine and masculine energy”¹⁵—neutered visions of the whole. Holism recoils before negative affect, before the intractability of the symptom, which turns out to be the subject’s sole buttress. Psychoanalysis, by contrast, presumes a patient stubbornly attached to negativity, both ontologically and perhaps also in disposition; holism, as a theory of the subject and a practice of its care or cultivation, seeks to obviate this negativity at its peril. What is urgently needed, given

¹⁴ Frank Lipman, “12 Tips to Help Combat Estrogen Dominance—And Help Keep Hormones Balanced,” *Dr. Frank Lipman* (blog), July 11, 2022, <https://drfranklipman.com/2022/07/11/12-tips-to-help-combat-estrogen-dominance-and-help-keep-hormones-balanced/>.

¹⁵ Rena Satre Meloy, “Balancing Our Feminine and Masculine Energy,” *Pause Meditation* (blog), n.d., <https://www.pausemeditation.org/single-post/balancing-feminine-masculine-energy>.

the gusto with which an ethical enjoinder to self-optimize is currently being embraced (under cover of holistic healing or repair; we might recall here that legal restitution or the disbursal of damages is sometimes described as “making whole,” a convention that similarly scrambles the registers of moral-judicial requirement and metaphysical good), is a concept of wellbeing suited to the subject that psychoanalysis elucidates: one strictly unable to live without unpleasure. This chapter situates the subject’s non-wholeness in terms of sex, cause, and (dis)harmony to argue that displeasure’s dearth hardly a metric for health makes; the next will take this not-wholeness up alongside questions of regulation, relationality, and scale to contest the ascendancy of ecology as an ethical and therapeutic paradigm.

We will proceed in the following manner. In the first place, we suggest that despite some cursory similarities, the holistic concept of the symptom (as message to be deciphered or sign of a deep-seated truth) is a far cry from the psychoanalytic concept of the same, though a careless reading—one supplied to us by erstwhile analyst Georg Groddeck—might make it seem like Freud is in cahoots with the holists, promising to articulate and thereby eliminate a symptom’s unconscious cause. Fortunately Lacan dispels us of this imagined hermeneutic kinship: interpretation does not resolve or remove the symptom, but rather runs up against the kernel of non-sense at the heart of the subject—an unrecoverable because originally repressed signifier that forms “a foundational hole.”¹⁶ The symptom persists beyond interpretation simply because it is necessary; the subject is responsible not for quelling it, but for knowing what to do with it, for devising a creative way of dealing with it.

In the (shorter) second part, we examine more closely holism’s erroneous articulation of affectlessness to optimization, asking how we develop a concept of wellbeing grounded in an

¹⁶ Jacques Lacan, *The Sinthome: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XXIII*, trans. A. R. Price (Cambridge: Polity, 2018), 25.

acknowledgement that sex guarantees the subject's symptomaticity. New work in trans studies on the ubiquity of bad feelings (by Cameron Awkward-Rich, Andrea Long Chu, and Hil Malatino, among others) attests to something like the shittiness of sex, not as the 'wrong' body vis-à-vis the 'right' mind, but as the unassailable wrongness that pervades both body and mind. Pursuing an affinity between psychoanalysis and trans studies on this point, we argue that affectlessness as a somatic ideal and an ethical imperative is not just theoretically wrongheaded but politically pernicious, replacing as it does the materialism of the hole with the metaphysics of the whole.

From functional medicine's vulgar Freudianism...

It is hard not to glimpse something of a parallel between the hysteria of Freud's day and the niggling pathology of our own. In both cases we find wealthy white women beset by non-specific symptoms without empirical etiologies; in both we see those women seek experimental and often expensive treatments in hopes of relief. It is certainly no coincidence that some of today's most popular alternative physicians work under the moniker of functional medicine, since "functional" has become a controversial catch-all for disorders—psychogenic and otherwise—lacking clear or consistent biomarkers, including what is now called "conversion disorder."¹⁷ Indeed Freud faced largely the same challenge as today's functionalists: how to treat a symptom that evades traditional biomedical scrutiny (laboratory analysis, medical imaging, etc.); how to help people who truly seem to be suffering from nothing. Ultimately, however, the analysts and the holists will contrive very different solutions to this challenge: the former will hear the subject's complaints and affirm that she may well be suffering from nothing, from a constitutive and unassailable hole in her being,

¹⁷ See Edward H. Reynolds, "Hysteria, Conversion and Functional Disorders: A Neurological Contribution to Classification Issues," *The British Journal of Psychiatry* 201, no. 4 (2012): 253–254, for a brief survey of the terminological morass surrounding hysteria's successor.

and will advocate coping with that hole creatively, making something out of it; the latter, by contrast, will plumb the subject's depths to find not a hole but a positive cause, a remediable rift that, once exposed, can be repaired. Unfortunate, then, that psychoanalysis will come to be associated with certain tenets of the functional schema—with homeostasis, with symptomatic or depth reading, and with cure.

This section first gathers together renegade psychoanalyst Georg Groddeck, macrobiotic philosopher George Ohsawa, and a smattering of functional physicians (Jeffrey Bland, Mark Hyman, and Frank Lipman) to sketch the contours of a pervasive and longstanding approach to the symptom that we will call vulgar Freudianism.¹⁸ We will then show that a particular theory of bisexuality sustains this interpretive qua curative program, before outlining a critique of holism latent in Lacan and Althusser as a corrective.

Preliminarily (we will elaborate on each of these points in turn), these three holisms see the subject as a totality comprised of interconnected systems; whose normal qua optimal state is one of balance, equilibrium, or harmony within and between those systems; who is herself responsible for any disruption to that harmony, and for whatever disagreeable symptoms manifest as a result; and who should solicit a physician capable of deciphering those symptoms and prescribing a remedy for her particular variety of disharmony, the so-called root cause of her suffering.

A few remarks on periodization are due. Despite Hyman's curious declaration of this model's novelty in his foreword to Bland's *Disease Delusion*—"Medicine is the youngest science. There is no theory of medicine. There are no organizing principles that help us navigate the territory of chronic disease. Functional medicine is that breakthrough theory, the biggest

¹⁸ Of course, the seeds of this approach long precede Freud, but insofar as the practitioners discussed here are all working in his wake, the neologism seems justified.

breakthrough idea in medicine since the discovery of the microbe and antibiotics”¹⁹—physiologists and philosophers have been elaborating a functional concept of the organism and its failings since at least the eighteenth century, which saw the flourishing of a “functional vitalism”²⁰—a theory of life that thematized structure, organization, and economy, rather than vital force—at the medical school in Montpellier. Indeed the first few pages of George Canguilhem’s 1943 classic *The Normal and the Pathological*—“an excellent book,”²¹ in Lacan’s estimation—disabuse us of Hyman’s claims. Not only are there at least two extant theories of medicine, but functional medicine is among the earliest of them, appearing well before the quite disparate discoveries of the microbe (late seventeenth century) and of antibiotics (early twentieth century):

Greek medicine, in the Hippocratic writings and practices, offers a conception of disease which is no longer ontological, but dynamic, no longer localizationist, but totalizing. Nature (*physis*), within man as well as without, is harmony and equilibrium. The disturbance of this harmony, of this equilibrium, is called disease. In this case, disease is not somewhere in man, it is everywhere in him; it is the whole man. [...] Medical thought has never stopped alternating between these two representations of disease, between these two kinds of optimism, always finding some good reason for one or the other attitude in a newly explained pathogenesis. Deficiency diseases and all infectious or parasitic diseases favor the ontological theory, while endocrine disturbances and all diseases beginning with *dys-* support the dynamic or functional theory.²²

¹⁹ Mark Hyman, “Foreword” to *The Disease Delusion*, x. I would be hard pressed to believe that Hyman is not familiar with Ohsawa, if not also Groddeck; in an episode of his podcast *The Doctor’s Pharmacy*, Hyman discusses reading Alan Watts (who himself cited Groddeck on at least one occasion), majoring in “Asian Studies in Buddhism” at Cornell, and attending a protest with Allen Ginsburg; it is difficult to imagine Hyman being immersed in the East Coast counterculture of the 1970s, interested in medicine and non-Western medical traditions, and somehow still unaware of macrobiotics and its critique of symptomatic medicine; his failure to ever mention macrobiotics is more likely the result of a desire to maintain the absolute novelty of functional medicine, and not of actual ignorance. Hyman, “How Our Food System Harms Humans and the Planet,” *The Doctor’s Pharmacy* with Mark Hyman, February 19, 2020, 78 min., <https://drhyman.com/blogs/content/podcast-ep94/>.

²⁰ Charles T. Wolfe, “Models of Organic Organization in Montpellier Vitalism,” *Early Science and Medicine* 22, no. 2–3 (2017): 237.

²¹ Jacques Lacan, *Transference: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book VIII*, trans. Bruce Fink (Cambridge: Polity, 2017), 69.

²² Canguilhem, *The Normal and the Pathological*, 39–41.

A functional epistemology of illness is hardly new, nor are its concepts of harmony and wholeness the sole province of the New Age; functional medicine is less the breakthrough theory that Hyman heralds than the bastard child of a diverse array of holistic discourses, including macrobiotics and (Groddeck's version of) psychoanalysis. Groddeck makes multiple references to functional disease in his 1923 epistolary treatise *The Book of the It*, comprised of thirty-three letters from the analyst "Patrik Troll" to, we assume, his lover; he claims in one instance, which nicely captures the odd little book's intervention, that "the repressed wish is to be seen in every sickness, whether it be organic or functional, whether it is called pneumonia or melancholia."²³ And in a prescient 1959 article titled "High-Level Wellness for Man and Society," credited with coining the concept of wellness itself, the biostatistician Halbert L. Dunn notes that "a great range of neurotic and functional illnesses, which seldom destroy life but which interfere with living a productive and full life, are on the increase."²⁴

This article is worth dwelling on for another moment: not only does Dunn hone in on precisely the same plight as the functionalists—bothersome but not life-threatening malaise, à la Bland's "not wholly sick but not wholly well"—he also sees holism as indispensable to overcoming this suboptimal state. Rebuking "Western culture" for its "deep cleavage [...] between the realm of the spirit and that of the body," a fissure that has heretofore hampered high-level wellness, Dunn promises that "harmony will result when the fact is faced that man is a physical, mental, and spiritual unity."²⁵ Or else, "High-level wellness can never be achieved in fragments, ignoring the unity of the whole."²⁶ Dunn's identification of "peak wellness"—neither a baseline

²³ Georg Groddeck, *The Book of the It*, trans. V.M.E. Collins (New York: Vintage Books, 1949), 97–98.

²⁴ Halbert L. Dunn, "High-Level Wellness for Man and Society," *American Journal of Public Health* 49, no. 6 (1959): 787. For Dunn's role in the consolidation of the wellness concept, see Anna Kirkland, "Introduction: What is Wellness Now?," *Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law* 39, no. 5 (2014): 959–960.

²⁵ Dunn, "High-Level Wellness," 789.

²⁶ Dunn, "High-Level Wellness," 789.

state nor a simple absence of disease, but something to “reach out toward” and “fight for”—with wholeness has become convention in various and varied alternative medical milieus: optimization is the holist’s calling card.²⁷ As the director of the Center for Functional Medicine at the Cleveland Clinic puts it, “Functional Medicine uses a unique operating system and personalized therapeutic interventions to support individuals in achieving optimal wellness.”²⁸ Or, in Bacon’s less sober style, “Every Moon Juice, milk, or cookie should taste extraordinary as it works synergistically to heal and nourish your physical form, brain function, and spirit at the deepest level.”²⁹ No deep healing without holism, no optimization without the subject understood as a whole system.

Indeed, the term “functional” signals first and foremost a systemic approach to the subject.

As Bland writes,

What do I mean by ‘functional medicine’? As you know, the body is a network of systems. [...] It takes a lot for each of these systems to continue to work smoothly and at peak performance. In addition, the systems interact with one another via complex networks; this adds yet more intricacy to the dynamics of all the biological functioning going on. [...] Yet our current medical model – the way health-care professionals are trained and the strategy of therapy they apply – is not based in such systems thinking. Precisely because it derives from the germ theory, it is based in reductionist thinking [...]. As brilliantly as the model works in providing acute care, it does nothing to restore or maintain balance among functional systems or the networks that connect them. But functional medicine does exactly that.³⁰

Or, as the Institute for Functional Medicine puts it, “Functional medicine is a systems-biology based approach that focuses on identifying and addressing the root cause of disease.”³¹ And in Hyman’s words, functional medicine “seeks to identify and address the root causes of disease, and

²⁷ Dunn, “High-Level Wellness,” 787, 788.

²⁸ Patrick Hanaway, “Form Follows Function: A Functional Medicine Overview,” *The Permanente Journal* 20, no. 4 (2016): 125.

²⁹ Bacon, *The Moon Juice Cookbook*, 10.

³⁰ Bland, *The Disease Delusion*, 4–5.

³¹ See <https://www.ifm.org/functional-medicine/what-is-functional-medicine/>. Accessed November 15, 2024.

views the body as one integrated system, not a collection of independent organs divided up by medical specialties. It treats the whole system, not just the symptoms.”³² The holistic subject may be open to various inputs, but she is structurally complete: she lacks for nothing.

It should be obvious that through their invocations of complexity, integration, reductionism, and systems biology, the functionalists are installing themselves on one side of an enduring debate over the organism’s ontological status, one that purports to privilege organic wholes over artificially isolated parts; that this debate is more a matter of philosophical posturing than meaningfully differentiated practice is equally worth emphasizing. This privileging is positioned as a move away from mechanism and its terminological accomplice, reductionism; the organism is not a machine (whether a clock, a steam engine, a computer, or whatever the metaphor du jour may be) that can be understood by being broken down into its constitutive parts. The functionalists may even go so far as to say that there aren’t even any parts, only relations, such that, as Donna Haraway has it, “the relation is the smallest possible unit of analysis.”³³ Or, as Haraway writes in a gloss on organicism, the dominant twentieth-century framework for systems theoretical developmental biology, “The fundamental unit of biology is the whole individual organism.”³⁴ The organism qua whole system is indivisible, both theoretically and therapeutically.

Like Bland and company, Ohsawa chides the reductionism of the biomedical model; he describes this base form of medicine as “palliative, physical, violent cure. This is symptomatic,

³² See <https://drhyman.com/about-functional-medicine/>. Accessed November 15, 2024.

³³ Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm, 2003), 24. In his foreword to the reprint of Haraway’s book on embryological systems thinking, Scott Gilbert writes that “one of the most important precepts in her most recent pamphlet—namely that ‘the relation is the smallest possible unit of analysis’—can be traced directly to the embryological science analyzed in this 1976 volume.” “Foreword” to Donna Haraway, *Crystals, Fabrics, and Fields: Metaphors that Shape Embryos* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2004), xi.

³⁴ Haraway, *Crystals, Fabrics, and Fields*, 37.

animal, or mechanical medicine.”³⁵ Macrobiotic medicine, by contrast, “restores both the health and the harmony of soul, mind, and body”³⁶; it “acknowledge[s] the wholeness of the problem of health.”³⁷ Macrobiotics is based on the Chinese philosophy of yin-yang complementarity (Ohsawa emphasizes that his is simply a retranslation of five-thousand-year-old-“Oriental” teachings); Ohsawa calls this the “Unique Principle” or the “order of the universe.”³⁸ And macrobiotics is remarkably uncomplicated, as Ohsawa repeatedly stresses: “All disease, unhappiness, crime, and punishment results from behavior that violates the order of the universe. The cure is, therefore, infinitely simple! Merely stop violating that order and allow nature to do her miraculous work.”³⁹ Symptomatic medicine loses itself “in a maze of details,” seeking knowledge “by means of analytical techniques” and with the aid of “corps of specialists”; macrobiotic medicine heeds instead “the general appearance and performance of the whole man. The truth is whole.”⁴⁰

Groddeck too insisted on treating the patient as a whole, and to Freud’s chagrin; in one of their earliest correspondences, Freud takes Groddeck to task for his ill-conceived unification of the psychic and the somatic (we will have more to say about Freud’s distinctive dualism in the next chapter): “Why do you jump from your beautiful basis into mysticism, cancel the distinction between mental and somatic, commit yourself to philosophical theories which are not called for? [...] I am afraid that you are also a philosopher and of the monistic inclination which discards all the beautiful differences in nature in favor of the temptation offered by unity. Can we get rid of differences like that?”⁴¹ Groddeck maintains that we can and must. The “It”—approximately (but

³⁵ George Ohsawa, *Zen Macrobiotics*, Fifth Edition (Chico, CA: George Ohsawa Macrobiotic Foundation, 2013), 24.

³⁶ Ohsawa, *Zen Macrobiotics*, 10.

³⁷ Ohsawa, *You Are All Sanpaku*, 99.

³⁸ See, in particular, Chapter 1, “Macrobiotics and Oriental Medical Philosophy,” in *Zen Macrobiotics*.

³⁹ Ohsawa, *Zen Macrobiotics*, 23.

⁴⁰ Ohsawa, *You Are All Sanpaku*, 80.

⁴¹ Sigmund Freud, June 5, 1917 letter to Georg Groddeck, in Georg Groddeck, *The Meaning of Illness: Selected Psychoanalytic Writings Including his Correspondence with Sigmund Freud* (London: Hogarth, 1977), 38.

ultimately not at all) analogous to the unconscious, despite Freud's initial usurping of the German *das Es* from Groddeck—is also called “the All”; Groddeck claims, against Freud's cautioning, that “at the present time we are trying to recover the earlier conception of a unit, the body-mind, and make it the foundation of our theory and action. [...] We understand man better when we see the whole in each of his parts, and we get nearer to a conception of the universe when we look upon him as part of the whole.”⁴²

Though infrequently cited as a proponent of what would be coined *holism* by Jan Smuts just three years after *The Book of the It*'s publication, Groddeck outlines a theory and a program for recovering a patient's “harmony within himself.”⁴³ In his introduction, Lawrence Durrell admits that “in medicine he might be considered simply another heretical Vitalist, for whom the whole is something more than the sum of its parts.”⁴⁴ It seems to me is that Groddeck's heresy is not only medical but philosophical; his insistence on “the It units and the It wholes”—it emerges some two hundred pages into *The Book of the It* that there are, “as a matter of fact, two It units, a male and a female,” and that “every human It includes within itself at least two It beings, which, bound as they are into some sort of unity, are yet in certain ways independent of each other” (we will return to the matter of the It's bisexuality momentarily) – at odds with the properly psychoanalytic concept of dualism qua division.⁴⁵ Indeed Groddeck and his “general theory of

⁴² Groddeck quoted in Lawrence Durrell, “Introduction” to *The Book of the It*, vii, xxiv. Freud claimed to be “following Groddeck in calling the other part of the mind, into which this entity extends and which behaves as though it were *Ucs.*, the ‘id.’” *The Ego and the Id*, SE vol. XIX, trans. and ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1961), 23. Both Groddeck and Freud used *das Es*, but the former's is translated as *the It*, and the latter's as *the id*; the decision to translate them differently was felicitous for reasons that should become clear. As James Strachey clarifies in his introduction to *The Ego and the Id*, “the term was adapted by Freud to a different and more precise meaning than Groddeck's.” “Editor's Introduction,” 7. See also Mark Poster, Galina Hristeva, and Michael Giefer, “Georg Groddeck: ‘The Pinch of Pepper’ of Psychoanalysis,” *The American Journal of Psychoanalysis* 76 (2016): 161–182, for a thorough accounting of Freud and Groddeck's relationship.

⁴³ Groddeck, *The Book of the It*, 3.

⁴⁴ Durrell, “Introduction,” xxii.

⁴⁵ Groddeck, *The Book of the It*, 240, 221–222.

disease”⁴⁶ (recall Hyman and Ohsawa’s condemnations of medical specialization) are favorably appraised in Franz Alexander’s *The Psychoanalysis of the Total Personality*, about which Lacan has this to say: “Man cannot aim at being whole (at the ‘total personality,’ another premise with which modern psychotherapy veers off course).”⁴⁷ But we are getting ahead of ourselves; let us turn, first, to the problem of the patient’s responsibility.

The functional practitioner, the macrobiotic philosopher, and the misguided analyst all assume that the patient is responsible for her own sickness, unknowingly or otherwise, and all believe that what catalyzes cure is precisely a kind of consciousness raising, whether literally bringing to consciousness what was ostensibly unconscious (the repressed wish that caused the symptom to appear), or laying bare the behaviors that thrust one into illness unawares (poor diet, lack of exercise, unmanaged stress, etc). Bland and Hyman belabor that lifestyle is the locus of illness and that on which healing hinges, such that only “changes to lifestyle, diet, and environment can bring our core physiological processes back into balance.”⁴⁸ Groddeck, for his part, was fond of asking his patients why they had made themselves sick (or, in one comical instance involving a patient who slipped on a banana peel, why she broke her own arm), urging them to realize their role in their suffering; in his view, “The very existence of the disease proves, in the face of all the assurances, complaints and endeavors of the conscious man, that this man wishes to be ill. This is important, dear. A sick man wishes to be sick, and he struggles against the healing.”⁴⁹ As Canguilhem puts it in a damning commentary on Groddeck, “Cure became the sign of the patient’s rediscovered capacity to finally be done with his own difficulties. A cure was no longer

⁴⁶ Franz Alexander, *The Psychoanalysis of the Total Personality*, trans. Bernard Glueck and Bertram D. Lewin (New York: Nervous and Mental Disease Publishing Co., 1930), xviii.

⁴⁷ Jacques Lacan, “The Signification of the Phallus,” in *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2006), 581.

⁴⁸ Bland, *The Disease Delusion*, 264.

⁴⁹ Groddeck, *The Book of the It*, 108.

commanded externally; it became an initiative recuperated by the patient, insofar as the illness was no longer treated as an accident, but rather as a failure of conduct, if not as a conduct of failure.”⁵⁰ Susan Sontag would also chide Groddeck for his “moralistic and punitive” conception of disease as “an expression of the inner self.”⁵¹

Ohsawa also sees disease as the product of either ignorance or indolence: “The unhappiness, disease, and crime of man come from within himself. His own blindness to life and ignorance of the structure of the universe are the root of all his suffering.”⁵² Ohsawa’s comment about crime here is hardly a throwaway; *Zen Macrobiotics* contains multiple references to Samuel Butler’s 1872 novel *Erewhon*, a caricature of colonial expedition in New Zealand named for a native (but not Māori) community discovered by the British narrator in which ill-health constitutes a criminal offense.⁵³ (Recall that sickness is a crime in *Osmosis Jones* as well.) For Ohsawa, *Erewhon* is a “paradise”; since disease is a violation of natural law qua the order of the universe, it amounts to a moral failing all but indistinguishable from, say, murder—and indeed an excess of either yin or yang can result in “violence, cruelty, and murderous explosiveness.”⁵⁴ Notably, in 1993 Ohsawa’s student Michio Kushi (who, with his wife Aveline, opened a grocery store called *Erewhon*) established a program at Graterford Prison in Pennsylvania called F.L.A.V.O.R—Food,

⁵⁰ Georges Canguilhem, “Is a Pedagogy of Healing Possible?,” in *Writings on Medicine*, 54–55.

⁵¹ Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978), 46.

⁵² Ohsawa, *Zen Macrobiotics*, 24.

⁵³ It is perhaps worth mentioning that Deleuze and Guattari applaud Butler for overcoming the impasse “between vitalism and mechanism” and for theorizing desiring-machines “where the whole is itself produced alongside the parts, as a part apart, or, as Butler would say, ‘in another department’ that fits the whole over the other parts” in *Erewhon*—I cannot parse these claims (or understand how D&G they arrived at them), but the holistic (sub)text is notable. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (New York: Penguin, 2009), 284, 287. It is also worth mentioning that Ohsawa wrote a novella (and possibly more than one, though the publication history is sketchy) about two *Erewhonians* who find themselves lost in the “jungle of civilization.” See *Jack et Madame Miti En Occident* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1991).

⁵⁴ Ohsawa, *Zen Macrobiotics*, 35, 149. In an excellent piece on *Erewhon* the grocery store, Kerry Howley writes that “describing *Erewhon* as a ‘utopia in which individuals are responsible for their own health’ is like describing Orwell’s *Oceania* as a ‘utopia in which individuals are responsible for their own information security.’” “*Erewhon’s* Secrets,” *New York Magazine*, November 6, 2023, <https://www.thecut.com/article/erewhon-smoothie-boston-los-angeles-history.html>.

Learning of Agriculture for Vocation and Optimum Rehab—in which inmates “received instruction in biodynamic gardening techniques and vegetarian meal planning,” and which led one enthusiastic participant to write to Kushi that “perhaps, many of the ills that we as a world community have, such as the state of our mind, body and soul are directly related to what we consume.”⁵⁵ Suboptimal nutrition begets sickness begets crime, which is itself a social ill (we will return to this notion of a sick society in the next chapter); Hyman similarly suggests that “behavior problems,” “violence” and “violent crime” are all products of poor diet.⁵⁶ If true health is sought, the subject must first acknowledge “the cause of his disease: Mea culpa... my crime.”⁵⁷ Imbalance is pathology bordering on criminality.

But before cure can be achieved, and even before culpability can be assigned, the root cause—the patient’s particular ilk of imbalance—must be ferreted out. Ohsawa, Groddeck, and the functionalists all reserve special ire for a medical model that focuses primarily on treating a patient’s symptoms, rather than on seeking the underlying cause of her complaint. Ohsawa calls this model “symptomatic medicine”: failing to see the symptom for what it really is—“a divine warning, a message from nature seeking to guide us to the correct path”—symptomatic medicine shoots the messenger, as it were, “jamming the fire-alarm system without getting near the cause of the fire.”⁵⁸ Macrobiotic medicine, by contrast, “does not attack the symptoms of disease, but applies itself to the origin of the illness.”⁵⁹

A few decades prior, Groddeck mounted a remarkably similar critique:

Generally speaking, people have been content with this method of treatment, called ‘symptomatic treatment’ because it deals with the

⁵⁵ From various documents in Kushi Foundation Prison Project, 1993-1996, NMAH.AC.0619, box 21, folder 14, Michio and Aveline Kushi Macrobiotics Collection, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Washington, D.C.

⁵⁶ @drmarkhyman, January 15, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/p/C2IINcYulGE/?igsh=cmcwYnVtNDBod252>.

⁵⁷ Ohsawa, *Zen Macrobiotics*, 28.

⁵⁸ Ohsawa, *You Are All Sanpaku*, 78, 98, 148.

⁵⁹ Ohsawa, *You Are All Sanpaku*, 78.

phenomena of disease, the symptoms. And nobody will assert that they were wrong. But we physicians, because we are compelled by our calling to play at being God Almighty, and consequently to entertain overwhelming desires, long to invent a treatment which will do away not with the symptoms but with the cause of the disease. We want to develop causal therapy, as we call it.⁶⁰

And Hyman, still touting functional medicine's sea change, credits Bland with inaugurating a "fundamental paradigm shift from medicine by symptom to medicine by cause, from medicine by disease to medicine by system," and for devising a "personalized method for getting to the root of symptoms and restoring balance."⁶¹ "Medicine by symptom" is a stopgap measure that all but guarantees the symptom's (indeed any symptom's) recurrence; the only path beyond fleeting relief is "medicine by cause." Discerning the root cause is the sole way to decisively eliminate not just the patient's symptoms but the very fact of her symptomativity.

Indeed, the concept of the symptom has come to serve as shorthand for the holistic critique of biomedicine's failings and as the crux of its curative clapback. The entire enterprise can be said to rest on a kind of symptomatic reading: rather than treating the outward manifestations of malaise, that from which the patient professes she suffers, the holists endeavor to unearth the innermost kernel of illness so as to quell it decisively—which would be fine and well were symptoms in fact reliable indices of invisible but positive imbalances (positive in the sense of existence, not value), and were imbalances contingent misfortunes rather than ontological guarantees.⁶² In this vertical model of malady, symptoms are significant only insofar as they convey, by concealing, a deeper truth, one that must be excavated through interpretation: Bland

⁶⁰ Groddeck, *The Book of the It*, 243.

⁶¹ Hyman, "Foreword," x, xii. Even in 1916, it was well known that "physicians attach importance to distinguishing the symptoms from the disease and declare that getting rid of the symptoms does not amount to curing the disease." Freud, "The Paths to the Formation of Symptoms," 358.

⁶² A note of terminological caution: this is not symptomatic reading as Althusser conceives it; rather, this is the very interpretive paradigm that he challenges with the concept of symptomatic reading.

repeatedly likens functional medicine to “detective work” in the literary sense, since the practitioner should “retell the patient’s story” or “elicit that story in a new way,” should draw from the patient “a narrative of the physical and social environment in which [they] live.”⁶³ “You have to peel back the layers and look at things you wouldn’t look at,”⁶⁴ in Hyman’s words. As (often thinly disguised) dispatches from the seat of disease, symptoms have no value in and of themselves, and their subsiding is of ultimately secondary importance; the real intervention – in the sense of both treatment and the difference that this medical modality is said to make – lies in the practice of interpretation.

While the functionalists invest in a plethora of potential etiologies and stress the importance of uncovering the patient’s precise brand of imbalance, “the right cause” (the rightness of which will ostensibly be borne out by the symptom’s abatement), Ohsawa takes a more totalizing approach to what is called simply “The Cause.”⁶⁵ A disproportionate doling out of yin and yang is the source of all suffering, and its correction—secured with a rigorous macrobiotic diet of nothing but brown rice and small amounts of water—“The Cure.”⁶⁶ For Osawa, *sanpaku*—a raising of the iris such that the white of the eye is visible not only on either side of it, but underneath it as well—is the symptom par excellence, the surest sign of one’s violation of the Unique Principle, since “any sign of sanpaku meant that a man’s entire system – physical, physiological and spiritual—was out of balance.”⁶⁷ Illness itself is “merely a symptom of a deeper malady,” a signifying disease that “may temporarily injure the part but ultimately benefit the whole,” provided the patient heeds its warning and restores herself to a state of yin-yang equilibrium.⁶⁸ And “the body does not

⁶³ Bland, *The Disease Delusion*, 91, 92, 93.

⁶⁴ Mark Hyman, “A Functional Medicine Approach To The Root Causes Of Endometriosis,” The Doctor’s Farmacy with Mark Hyman, June 25, 2021, 30 min., <https://drhyman.com/blog/2021/06/25/podcast-hc62/>

⁶⁵ Ohsawa, *You Are All Sanpaku*, 97.

⁶⁶ Ohsawa, *You Are All Sanpaku*, 97, 105.

⁶⁷ Ohsawa, *You Are All Sanpaku*, 70.

⁶⁸ Ohsawa, *You Are All Sanpaku*, 98.

lie,”⁶⁹ as Ohsawa was fond of saying: the symptom always conveys the truth of the subject’s disharmony. Symptomatic reading (in sharp contradistinction to what is condemned as symptomatic medicine, which shirks interpretation and opts instead for suppression) makes health possible by revealing the source of the subject’s affliction, but it remains up to them to heal.

Assuming that the functional patient or macrobiotic adherent does take it upon herself to get well, what can she expect? A life of favorable affect, a life sans symptom. Amanda Chantal Bacon promises that anyone who swaps sweet treats for fermented vegetables “will immediately notice brain clarity, elevated energy, tamed inflammation, glowing skin, and access to a steady, calm happiness.”⁷⁰ Indeed it is no coincidence that the acronym for the much maligned Standard American Diet is SAD—bad food precipitates bad feeling. Ohsawa tells us that “there is no incurable disease in all the world if we apply [the macrobiotic] method correctly”; acting in accordance with the order of the universe will guarantee boundless wellbeing, in the form of freedom from fatigue, from dreams (talk about symptomlessness!), “from anger, fear, or suffering,” and so on.⁷¹ The functionalists promise much the same thing (Bland and Hyman are particularly insistent on the reversibility of type 2 diabetes), and they emphasize ad nauseam the avoidability of depression, anxiety, and other disorders of affect. As Lipman writes in 2022, “Food can have a powerful impact on mood and mental health. If, as the pandemic wanes, you’re finding mood swings, anxiety, depression and other emotional disorders are still taking a toll, take a closer look at what you’re putting in your system.”⁷² For Lipman et al., emotional disorders should be treated not as distinctly psychic phenomena, but as offshoots of physiological imbalances, basically indistinguishable from heart disease or hypertension. Though the functionalists see

⁶⁹ George Ohsawa, *You Are All Sanpaku*, 64, 69, 131, etc.

⁷⁰ Bacon, *The Moon Juice Cookbook*, 31.

⁷¹ Ohsawa, *Zen Macrobiotics*, 24, 37.

⁷² @franklipmanmd, June 11, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CfFArZgBkFu/>.

psychic ills as secondary phenomena of somatic systems gone awry, and Groddeck physical illnesses as the product of psychic disturbances, it ultimately matters very little which is conceived as the cause, and which the effect; the crucial point of continuity is that if the symptom can be interpreted, its root cause can be cured, and one need never feel bad (tired, cranky, blue, etc.) again. All symptoms are structurally identical in the holistic health imaginary: the specificity of their form is negligible, and since total symptomlessness is both the norm and the ideal, any symptom is as bad as any other, a singular symptom just as pathological as a whole panoply.

For Groddeck, every symptom is a herald of the It, a message no less clear for not being given in words: “Sickness is also a symbol, a representation of something going on within, a drama staged by the It, by means of which it announces what it could not say with the tongue.”⁷³ The It traffics in a fairly straightforward system of symbolization—certainly more so than that discovered by Freud, in which the meaning of a symptom or dream undergoes displacement, condensation, and other mechanisms of translation that turn out to be far more interesting than the latent content of the symptom or dream ever was—such that a broken arm signals the repressed desire to do something illicit with it (“perhaps theft or masturbation”⁷⁴), or morning sickness the desire for an abortion. Even better, this interpretive practice is the only prerequisite for the symptom’s petering away: in the case of nauseated pregnant women, vomiting will “disappear when one brings the mother to realize her unconscious desire for the child’s death.”⁷⁵ If analysis is successful in revealing the repressed wish, the symptom will vanish almost immediately (whereas for the functional or macrobiotic patient, the big reveal must precipitate behavioral changes that will, in turn, stamp the symptom out). The It sufficiently dealt with, the symptom recedes, dispossessed

⁷³ Groddeck, *The Book of the It*, 101.

⁷⁴ Groddeck, *The Book of the It*, 101.

⁷⁵ Groddeck, *The Book of the It*, 22.

of its purpose (again: conveying, through masking, the mystified kernel of malaise). If the symptom lingers, the patient remains racked with repressed desires awaiting enlightenment: inconceivable to Groddeck is a symptom that would have no cause, or a desire that could not be articulated.

The body does not lie, except for when it does: in pseudocyesis or phantom pregnancy, in the “hysterical prostate”⁷⁶ that afflicts the protagonist of Richard Russo’s *Straight Man*. Indeed the historical and literary records are replete with instances of symptoms that persist beyond interpretation and without explanation. The functionalist excuse here is that optimal health is never acquired once and for all: it must be constantly sought, shored up, subjected to further refinement. As Dunn puts it, “since the nature of this goal is ever changing and ever expanding, we will probably never be able to reach it in absolute terms.”⁷⁷ The self-optimizing subject endeavors to inoculate herself against all manner of unpleasantness (which is, ironically, very close to Canguilhem’s definition of pathology, which takes its cue from Kurt Goldstein’s nominally holistic theory of neurology), but falters before an ever more remote objective.⁷⁸ This is, of course, the logic of the superego: an increasingly insatiable agency, a limit that can never be reached. If the symptom remains, it’s because one is still not—and never will be—well enough. The Lacanian explanation is that the symptom persists because it has to—but we will return to this in due course.

Let us follow an example of Groddeck’s—one that lies somewhere between an hysterical prostate and a phantom pregnancy—to see how his “causal therapy” plays out. Groddeck cites numerous

⁷⁶ Richard Russo, *Straight Man* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 377.

⁷⁷ Dunn, “High-Level Wellness,” 788.

⁷⁸ For Canguilhem, pathology is characterized by a constricted milieu, an inability to adapt to novel and potentially unfavorable circumstances, an intolerance of inconsistency or change. See *The Normal and the Pathological*, 181–201. Though he stages a thoroughgoing repudiation of the mechanistic and isolationist concept of *reflex* (also the subject of Canguilhem’s dissertation), the holism of Goldstein’s project would be all but unrecognizable to the holists of today.

cases of “male pregnancies,” including his own, a tumor on his neck that disappeared once he came to appreciate this symptom’s significance: “my view is that the wen disappeared because my It learned to understand, and my conscious mind also, that I am just as other men in having a bisexual nature and life, and that it is unnecessary to emphasize this fact by means of a swelling.”⁷⁹ Indeed, Groddeck insists that “it is an indubitable scientific fact that man is formed by both man and woman, although in thought and argument we ignore this as we do many another simple truth. And so in the being we call a man there lives also a woman, in the woman too a man.”⁸⁰ But this bisexuality can lead to a debilitating doubleness, to an It “clogged by doubt” as to its sex, and this is what produces the “quite common” phenomenon of men’s “symbolic pregnancies.”⁸¹ Groddeck recounts his analysis of a foster child whose appendicitis was contrived in order that he might be castrated (“Three attacks of appendicitis he has had, to my knowledge. In all three could be discovered the wish to be a woman”), and of another who “long lay ill with pericarditis, a fancied pregnancy of the heart.”⁸² As in the case of the wished-for abortion, these symptoms “disappear without fail when the unconscious stimuli of this symbolic expression are revealed.”⁸³ Want to be a woman laid bare by the annals of association, Groddeck and his young analysands can conclude that, being bisexual already, they need not fantasize about gestation, and watch their symptoms wane.

Not just the buried desire qua “indubitable scientific fact” of Groddeck and his patients, bisexuality is, in fact, the logic that undergirds the heterogeneous holisms we have been surveying. Indeed the supposed symmetry and complementarity of the sexes—whether this refers to the two

⁷⁹ Groddeck, *The Book of the It*, 16, 15.

⁸⁰ Groddeck, *The Book of the It*, 14.

⁸¹ Groddeck, *The Book of the it*, 14, 16.

⁸² Groddeck, *The Book of the It*, 15.

⁸³ Groddeck, *The Book of the It*, 16.

halves of the heterosexual couple, or to the two opposing poles (hormonal, energetic, or unconscious) within each of those halves—is the lynchpin of what we are almost prepared to set forth as vulgar Freudianism.

For Ohsawa, the yin-yang distinction maps directly onto sexual difference—“Man and woman are opposites, antagonistic and complimentary”—and the dulling of this difference portends planetary sickness: “The erosion of sexual polarity—with women becoming more male and men becoming more female—has already become the most destructive and pernicious of all threats to the order of the Universe.”⁸⁴ Unsurprisingly, diet makes all the difference, such that an excess of feminine/yin foods like fruit makes men asexual and unhappy (though men may also “inherit a Yin nature from the faulty diet of their mothers”⁸⁵), while an excess of masculine/yang foods like meat induce women to “become homosexual or love animals to an extreme degree,”⁸⁶ *and* makes them unhappy; but men may also become too yang, and women too yin, the tendencies proper to each taken to their pathological limits. The correct proportion of these “antagonistic and unifying”⁸⁷ forces between every couple and within each its components is paramount.

Hyman makes almost exactly the same argument as Ohsawa, if somewhat less hyperbolically, and using the lexicon of estrogen rather than energy: too much estrogen is responsible for “emotional swings and mood issues”; it makes women “irritable,” “cranky,” and “out of balance,” which has accrued the status of affect in and of itself.⁸⁸ Negative affect is the effect of sexual imbalance, of an endocrine scale tipped toward feminine excess, and this surplus plagues men as well:

⁸⁴ Ohsawa, *You Are All Sanpaku*, 126, 122.

⁸⁵ Ohsawa, *You Are All Sanpaku*, 126.

⁸⁶ Ohsawa, *Zen Macrobiotics*, 144.

⁸⁷ Ohsawa, *You Are Sanpaku*, 86.

⁸⁸ Mark Hyman, “The Underlying Causes and Solutions for Women’s Hormonal Balances with Dr. Elizabeth Boham,” *The Doctor’s Pharmacy with Mark Hyman*, April 10, 2020, 31 min., <https://drhyman.com/blog/2020/04/10/podcast-hc6/>

There is this phenomenon, estrogen imbalance in our population. [...] We live in an estrogen dominant universe. [...] Because the very things that drive excess estrogen production in the body are the very things that are the dominant features of our society. High sugar and starch, alcohol, low fiber diet, stress, environmental toxins. [...] And that's why men who are really overweight or eat a lot of starch and sugar have beer bellies, they'll get man boobs and they lose the hair on their chest, the hair on their legs. It's just a real estrogenation of men from the same phenomenon.⁸⁹

Hyman laments the feminization wrought by sexual disproportion; Ohsawa the masculinization (“when *all* women develop hair on their bodies, that will signal the end of the world – a tragedy more cataclysmic than thermonuclear destruction”⁹⁰); for both, wellbeing is a bisexual balancing act. Indeed, health for the holists seems to hinge on sexual difference conceived as sexual harmony, on two halves of a whole system held in delicate equilibrium. We can hear, here, echoes of Aristophanes’ tongue-in-cheek myth of originally orb-like human beings, “spherical in themselves and in their gait” (they moved, of necessity, by rolling around) because of their planetary begetters: men were the offspring of the Sun, women those of the Earth, and the androgynous “third sex”—from whence sprung heterosexuality—those of the Moon.⁹¹ Sparking much spherical indignation, a vindictive Zeus split each of these orbs in two, requiring them thereafter to seek their complement, the other half that would make them whole; thus, Aristophanes concludes, “Eros is a name for the desire and pursuit of wholeness,” the desire “to become one from two.”⁹² Its offer of an origin story for lesbians and “lover[s] of boys”⁹³ notwithstanding (presumably passed over by

⁸⁹ Mark Hyman, “A Functional Medicine Approach To The Root Causes Of Endometriosis.” It should be said that estrogen dominance is not recognized as a pathological condition by the mainstream biomedical community, which is not to say that it isn’t one; the point is not to adjudicate the reality of this affliction but to elaborate its discursive position. We will return to the question of estrogen dominance in the third chapter.

⁹⁰ Ohsawa, *You Are All Sanpaku*, 122. Emphasis in original.

⁹¹ Plato, *The Symposium*, The Dialogues of Plato, Volume 2, trans. R. E. Allen (New Haven: Yale UP, 1993), 131.

⁹² Plato, *The Symposium*, 133.

⁹³ Plato, *The Symposium*, 133. It does seem odd, given the speech’s extended discussion of homosexuality, that Freud would write “The popular view of the sexual instinct is beautifully reflected in the poetic fable which tells how the original human beings were cut up into two halves – man and woman – and how these are always striving to unite again in love. It comes as a great surprise therefore to learn that there are men whose sexual object is a man

a number of its promulgators), this myth has come to serve as the allegorical correlate of the concept of psychic bisexuality toyed with by Freud and ardently rejected by Lacan.⁹⁴

Freud conjures Aristophanes' speech in a footnote in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (and elsewhere⁹⁵), writing that "man is an animal organism with (like others) an unmistakable bisexual disposition. The individual corresponds to a fusion of two symmetrical halves, of which, according to some investigators, one is purely male and the other female."⁹⁶ But this is offered as support for "the view expressed above," which is none other than that of man's spoiled sexual rapport: "The sexual life of civilized man is notwithstanding severely impaired. [...] Sometimes one seems to perceive that it is not only the pressure of civilization but something in the nature of the function itself which denies us full satisfaction and urges us along other paths."⁹⁷ Here Freud takes up the

and not a woman, and women whose sexual object is a woman and not a man." *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, SE vol. VII, trans. and ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1953), 136.

⁹⁴ For a detailed account of Freud's engagement with the concept of bisexuality, see Patricia Gherovici, *Please Select Your Gender: From the Invention of Hysteria to the Democratizing of Transgenderism* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 67–75. Crucial for our purposes here is Gherovici's conclusion that "For Freud, bisexuality is, as Fleiss proposed, universal, although bisexuality is not bilaterality or complementarity." *Please Select Your Gender*, 75. It should also be said that in his seminar-length exegesis of the *Symposium*, Lacan emphasizes that Aristophanes' speech is first and foremost a jab at his host, that "Aristophanes' discourse derides Plato's *sphairos* [sphere] as it is articulated in the *Timaeus*." *Transference*, 93.

⁹⁵ Freud also refers to Aristophanes' speech in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, seeing in it support for his hypothesis that sexual *qua* life instincts are – through a mechanism as yet unclear to him, though myriad will be proposed – linked to "a need to return to an earlier state of things," which would be, in this case, a oneness or wholeness of being. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, SE vol. XVIII, trans. and ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1955), 57. In an almost functionalist identification of wholeness with affectlessness, the "death instincts" drag the pleasure principle's impetus to "keep constant or to remove internal tension" to its logical conclusion – to death as a state of absolute equilibrium, "an abolition of chemical tensions." *Beyond*, 55. We will discuss this crucial text in more detail in the next chapter, but for now suffice it to say that Freud's identification of the pleasure principle with the death instinct is ultimately propitious, since it allows us to understand that the "beyond" in which he is interested refers, in fact, to neither – this beyond cannot be "the principle of constancy" or conservation, whether we call it the pleasure principle or the death instinct. *Beyond*, 9. And in this (what we might cautiously call *superficial*) formulation, Alenka Zupančič argues, "the death drive is not so much a drive as an *ontological fatigue* as a fundamental affect of life"; or else, the "magnetism of the inanimate" is "of the modality of the *fatigue*, and not of the drive proper." *What is Sex?*, 97, 100, emphasizes in original. This identification of ontological fatigue with the pursuit of equilibrium *qua* inanimacy is significant, insofar as it contravenes the functionalist insistence on (phenomenological, to be sure) fatigue as the avoidable offshoot of disequilibrium. A more thorough consideration of the interplay of these two registers of fatigue and their relation to the drives is needed.

⁹⁶ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, SE vol. XXI, trans. and ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1961), 105n3.

⁹⁷ Freud, *Civilization*, 105.

Aristophanian model of sexual complementarity only to identify it a source of profound dysfunction, not as the consequence of social resistance or secondary repression—this is Groddeck’s understanding: bisexuality manifests symptomatically because it repressed, but capable of being (re)admitted into consciousness—but of the fact that bisexuality itself constitutes a stumbling block, an impasse from which stem inner conflict and interpersonal strife: “If we assume it as a fact that each individual seeks to satisfy both male and female wishes in his sexual life we are prepared for the possibility that those [two sets of] demands are not fulfilled by the same object, and that they interfere with each other unless they can be kept apart and each impulse guided into a particular channel that is suited to it.”⁹⁸ The obstacle posed by bisexuality is not some essential incompatibility of personality—Freud maintained that neither sex could be granted any positive psychological characteristics, nor reduced to the qualities of activity and passivity (though he flirted with this possibility occasionally); that “psycho-analysis cannot elucidate the intrinsic nature of what in conventional or in biological phraseology is termed ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’: it simply takes over the two concepts and makes them the foundation of its work”—but because bisexuality pulls the subject in different directions, renders her beholden to desires that “interfere with each other,” and thereby thwarts, from within, the possibility of sexual fulfillment.⁹⁹ At this point in the footnote, the fusion of bisexuality gives way to the split of sexual division, to the crack or fissure of sexuality as such, as a split internal to the subject: it is not that she is the amalgam of two sexes, but that she is torn between them, or, with a more Lacanian inflection, that she is the product of this tearing. For Freud bisexuality ultimately entails not the felicitous union of two

⁹⁸ Freud, *Civilization*, 106.

⁹⁹ Sigmund Freud, “The Psychogenesis of a Case of Female Homosexuality,” *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 1, no. 2 (1920): 148.

complementary halves, but the inexorable frustration at the heart of every human being; the bi- of sexuality signals not the two of symmetry, but the two of one split.

Lacan is even more vehement in his critique of bisexuality, of two sexes that would fuse into one. His position, in essence, is this: not only is there no (complimentary) relation between the two sexes, but there aren't even those two sexes!

One of Lacan's most notorious rejoinders to Aristophanes' spherical parable arrives, in the eleventh seminar, in his counter-myth of the lamella, the "extra-flat," "amoeba"-like organ-form of the libido.¹⁰⁰ This organ of dubious ontological status "is precisely what is subtracted from the living being by virtue of the fact that it is subjected to the cycle of sexed reproduction,"¹⁰¹ that is, by virtue of the unavoidable mingling of life and death in sexual reproduction (as opposed to asexual reproduction, since amoebae, among other unicellular organisms, can divide, replicate, and—under optimal conditions—never die). The libido understood as pure life instinct, as "an essence that would tend toward making One from two,"¹⁰² is forever lost to the subject, who must content herself with the various "*objets a* [that] are merely its representative," with partial drives that never coalesce.¹⁰³ What the subject seeks is not the other half from which she was severed, but the very libido or life drive, that which, were it not lost—or, to put a slightly finer point on it, were it not itself severed, shot through with death, such that, as Lacan repeatedly emphasizes in this seminar, "The *ganze Sexualstrebung*, the representation of the totality of the sexual drive, is

¹⁰⁰ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XI*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1998), 197.

¹⁰¹ Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 198. And the fact that so many species reproduce asexually "shows how little it is part of nature's intentions that [the sexual relation] form a whole, a sphere." *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XVII*, trans. Russell Grigg (New York: Norton, 2007), 33.

¹⁰² Jacques Lacan, *or Worse*, 91.

¹⁰³ Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 198. As Zupančič puts it, "In the Lacanian myth the libido is thus this loss, constitutive of sexuality, that finds its way back (through 'the defile of the signifier') and haunts the subject in the form of the drive. It fragments the subject from within. Partial objects of the drive are all beings of this loss/lack." *Why Psychoanalysis? Three Interventions* (NSU Press & Nordiskt Sommaruniversitet, 2014), 22.

not to be found”¹⁰⁴—would make the sexual relation (understood as the fusion of two into one) possible. Thus, “To [Aristophanes’] mythical representation of the mystery of love, analytic experience substitutes the search by the subject, not of the sexual complement, but of that part of himself, lost forever, that is constituted by the fact that he is only a sexed living being, and that he is no longer immortal.”¹⁰⁵ Being a “sexed living being” comes at the cost of irremediable incompleteness (though you get, as change, surplus *jouissance*, which does not fill this gap, but makes it somewhat more tolerable).

But it is not only the fact of sexual reproduction that ruins the sexual relation, since other species whose continuation also requires chromosomal combination appear unfettered by this failure. In his nineteenth seminar Lacan describes “bisexuality” as an “animal image of copulation” (though he goes on to doubt whether such a model of oneness even applies to animals), one whose function among speaking beings is purely phantasmatic.¹⁰⁶ And to this “animal model” he relates the very relation set out by yin and yang:

The Chinese have long called upon two fundamental essences that are respectively the feminine essence, which they call Yin, in opposition to the Yang that I have written, doubtless not by accident, underneath. Were there such a thing as relation that could be articulated on the sexual plane, were there such a thing as relation that could be articulated in the speaking being, the question is whether it would have to be stated of all those of one same sex with respect to all those of the other. This is obviously the idea that is suggested to us, at the point we’ve reached, in reference to what I’ve called the animal model, which is the aptitude, if I may say so, of

¹⁰⁴ Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 188, 206. During a September 10th, 2011 event commemorating the 30th anniversary of Lacan’s death, Jacques-Alain Miller said, when asked to comment on ...*or Worse* and particularly on the enigmatic *Yad’lun* that makes its first appearance there, that “that there is precisely no sexual One, there is no Aristophanian One which supposes that two halves fit together. This One does not exist – the fusional One. This is what the ‘there is no such thing as the sexual relation’ means. No Aristophanian myth”; he also cites the “harmony between Yin and Yang” as a figure of what Lacan says does not exist. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KWgPziYb1Aw>.

¹⁰⁵ Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 205.

¹⁰⁶ Lacan, *or Worse*, 81.

each of those on one side to be valid for all the others on the other side.¹⁰⁷

Lacan's target is not only this model's insistence on sexual complementarity (specified here as equinumerosity or one-to-one correspondence, since he is developing his critique via set theory), but—and what amounts to the same thing—the consistency of “all those of one same sex”; the very possibility of counting those of one (or rather, the other) sex as “all.” What is at issue, in other words, is the ability of sex to serve as a universal proposition, to *say something* positive and unequivocal about its members. This is borne out by Lacan's formulas of sexuation, reproduced below, which he submits to logical scrutiny in order to show that in no case can a relationship between the two sides be maintained (nor can the self-identity of either side).

male side

female side

$\exists x. \overline{\Phi x}$

$\exists x. \overline{\Phi x}$

$\forall x. \Phi x$

$\forall x. \Phi x$

Briefly, the male side indicates that all men are castrated (castration is designated by the phallic function, the Phi that signi-phis, Lacan puns), bar (at least) one; the female side that not all (of) women are castrated, but that not even one escapes it. It should be emphasized that the side on which one falls “does not involve the body but what results from a logical exigency in speech”—for Lacan sexual difference has nothing to do with anatomy and everything to do with symbolic positioning (and more precisely, with how one occupies and copes with the shortfalls of the

¹⁰⁷ Lacan, *or Worse*, 81–82. Picking up this thread, Mladen Dolar contrasts “the Taoist yin-yang symbol” – as an image that insists “there is a sexual relation” – with the Maoist dictum that “one divides into two, but two doesn't merge into one,” “One Divides Into Two,” *e-flux* 33 (2012).

symbolic world); “one ultimately situates oneself” on one side or the other “by choice.”¹⁰⁸ The lower level formulas divulge a first point of dissymmetry: on the male side castration is a necessity (all are submitted), while on the female side it is only a contingency (not all are submitted); what applies to all men universally—though only because at least one man has been excepted, or rather included as a “negative possibility,” so this is a “peculiar” kind of universal—cannot do the same for women, since it is precisely the all of women that is negated here.¹⁰⁹ The strange, quasi-totality of men does not correspond to or complement the *pas toute* of women, the impossibility of their forming a whole on the basis of castration; there is “no parallelism, no symmetry” to be had here, only “discord,” only the failure of either sex to function as a universal in the traditional philosophical sense of the term.¹¹⁰ And when it comes to “the level on which sexual relation would stand a chance,” the upper level where the phallic function is negated, we find only one sex (the one excepted, the one who “naysays”) and none of the other.¹¹¹ So we have, on the bottom, two sexes that are neither symmetrical nor self-identical, and on the top, no possible relation between them, because here they are no longer even two, here one has fallen out, “leav[ing] the place empty for the inscription of speech.”¹¹² If there were such a thing as a sexual relation, there could only be one sex, because not one woman would appear here; there isn’t any such thing, and yet the sexes still cannot be counted as two, because woman is “not wholly”¹¹³ submitted to that which

¹⁰⁸ Jacques Lacan, *Encore: On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XX*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 1999), 10, 71.

¹⁰⁹ Lacan, *or Worse*, 180, 92.

¹¹⁰ Lacan, *or Worse*, 93, 87.

¹¹¹ Lacan, *or Worse*, 89, 178, 184.

¹¹² Lacan, *or Worse*, 89. Here Lacan seems to equivocate somewhat on the matter of woman’s identification with the lack in/of the Other, writing that the not-even-one-ness of the upper level formula “is on no account necessarily a special privilege of the feminine sex”; “the vanishing existence, of one of the partners, which leaves the place empty for the inscription of speech, is not at this level the special privilege of any one side,” opening up the possibility that ‘either’ of the ‘two’ sexes could occupy the position of the one missing (though this possibility is not taken up in *Encore*). *or Worse*, 89.

¹¹³ Lacan, *Encore*, 74. In *or Worse* and most other places, *pas tout(e)* is translated as “not-all,” but in *Encore* it is rendered as “not-whole.” A. R. Price writes that Bruce Fink’s argument for the latter translation “is as flimsy as it is

precludes it: “*Yad’lun*, or else, *pas deux*, *not twain*, which for us is immediately interpreted—there is no such thing as sexual relation.”¹¹⁴ There are not two sexes, there is one—one that is the signifying order itself, and which has, as its crucial corollary, one less, or one signifier missing—and two ways of dealing with this one.¹¹⁵ In Andrea Long Chu’s reworking of Lacan’s formulas, “Everyone is female, and everyone hates it,” but “how one *cope*s with being female”¹¹⁶ determines one’s gender, and this requires a reformulation of the narrative of transition: “I don’t want what you have, I want the way in which you don’t have it.”¹¹⁷ Sex in the Lacanian schema signals not two halves that make a whole, but two ways in which wholeness founders, two ways of withstanding the hole in the symbolic universe, the signifier that is “missing its mate.”¹¹⁸

Ultimately it is saying that constitutes the sexual relation’s impediment, though whether it is speech that causes sexuality’s misfiring, or this misfiring that causes speech, Lacan refuses, indeed, to say. The bottom line (of the formulas) is this: you cannot have your cake (signifiers) and eat it too (the sexual relation, the couple comprised of two complementary sexes). As Lacan puts it in his seventeenth seminar, “Signifiers are not made for sexual relations. Once the human being is speaking, it’s stuffed, it’s the end of this perfection, this harmony, in copulation.”¹¹⁹ This is how we can understand Lacan’s claim, in seminar eleven, that “two lacks overlap here”¹²⁰: the lack of the lamella qua the split proper to the subject of the drives, and the lack of the other (the

unprecedented”; unencumbered by a firm grasp (any grasp, really) on Aristotelian logic, we see no problem in toggling between the two. See *The Sinthome* 229n3.

¹¹⁴ Lacan, *or Worse*, 162.

¹¹⁵ In the recording cited above, Miller says that Lacan “simplified what he had previously called the symbolic by saying *Yad’lun*.”

¹¹⁶ Andrea Long Chu, *Females* (London: Verso, 2019), 11–12, emphasis in original.

¹¹⁷ Andrea Long Chu, “The Pink,” *n+1* 34 (2019). This tracks nicely with Žižek’s claim that “if woman does not exist, man is perhaps simply a woman who thinks that she does exist.” *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 2008), 82.

¹¹⁸ Lacan, *or Worse*, 155.

¹¹⁹ Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, 33. Emphasis mine.

¹²⁰ Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 204.

one signifier missing), which is to say, the categorical non-totality of language, our inability to transcend it so as to speak about it, or to verify its claims; the fact that truth can only ever be half told. It is for this same reason that the two dicta—"there is no such thing as a sexual relation" and "there is no such thing as a metalanguage"—are posed together at the outset of seminar nineteen.¹²¹ The lack of the symbolic and the lack of the sexual relation are, strictly speaking, coextensive; the "two" sexes are, rather, two ways of assuming this (lack of) one, "two ways in which the constitutive minus of the signifying order is inscribed in this order itself, and dealt with."¹²²

Here the properly Lacanian concept of the two begins to take shape: not the two of addition, achieved by adding one and one and then stopping, arbitrarily—though when it comes to sexual difference (mis)understood as two ones of equal existential consistency, it doesn't really matter whether we stop at two, or continue counting¹²³—but the two of division; in Mladen Dolar's words, "the two heterogenous to the one and recalcitrant to the progression of ones into infinity," the two that "would be able to break the spell of One, in particular its complicity with totality, with forming a whole."¹²⁴ Hence Lacan's contrasting of the yin-yang model of "bisexuality" with that of "heterosexuality," which actually "bears the right name," insofar as it insists on the heterogeneity or incommensurability of the two sexes which, not being two at all, amounts to an insistence on the non-identity of sex (to) itself.¹²⁵ Sex is hetero- in that it is other than – split from – itself. There are not two sexes, but there are "two ways to make the sexual relationship fail";¹²⁶ there are not

¹²¹ Lacan, *or Worse*, 4.

¹²² Zupančič, *What is Sex?*, 49.

¹²³ As Zupančič writes, "Even when this onto-logy abandons the principle of complementarity and embraces that of gender multiplicity, this in no way affects the ontological status of entities called genders. They are said to be, or to exist, and emphatically so." *What is Sex?*, 44. Joan Copjec delightfully describes this fallacy as the "Oprah Winfrey theoretical gift of sex: 'You get a sex and you get a sex and you get a sex.'" "The Sexual Compact," *Angelaki* 17, no. 2 (2012): 32.

¹²⁴ Dolar, "One Divides Into Two."

¹²⁵ Lacan, *or Worse*, 81.

¹²⁶ Lacan, *Encore*, 56–57.

two sexes, but there is one, neither the numerical one (which, it should be said, only emerges on the basis of this other one, this one of lack) nor the one of harmonious wholeness, but the one that emerges from “the hole in the system.”¹²⁷ There is only something, some one, because (and where) there is something missing; one can only come out of “a bag with a hole in it,” or a vase, a closed ring of string, even “macaroni, because it is a hole with something around it.”¹²⁸

This is why we suggested, in the introduction, that discourses of masculine and feminine balance are neutered, bereft of sex understood as that which dashes any hope for harmony, that which guarantees the subject’s imbalance qua incompleteness. The upshot of the inexistence of the sexual relationship is, of course, hysteria: as Patricia Gherovici puts it, “Hysteria [...] appears as a symptom of the discontinuity of between the sexes, it emerges as the pathologization of the nonrapport.”¹²⁹ Indeed Freud concludes the fourth chapter of *Civilization and Its Discontents* with bisexuality’s thwarting of the sexual relation, and begins the fifth with the symptom’s compensatory function: “Psycho-analytic work has shown that it is precisely these frustrations of sexual life which people known as neurotics cannot tolerate. The neurotic creates substitutive satisfactions for himself in his symptoms...”¹³⁰ To be sexed is to be symptomatic; there is no sex as such to be had in the bisexuality thesis, with its fantasy of affectlessness achieved through sexual balance. What’s more, it is precisely the inexistence of the sexual relation that gives the lie to the conceit of a remediable root cause.

We are now in a position to demonstrate the paucity of the root cause concept. Our argument is this: in repudiating symptomatic treatment and peddling (their version of) symptomatic reading instead, in maintaining that symptoms are surface-level manifestations of

¹²⁷ Lacan, *or Worse*, 6.

¹²⁸ Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 121.

¹²⁹ Gherovici, *Please Select Your Gender*, 49.

¹³⁰ Freud, *Civilization*, 108. I do not distinguish between hysteria and obsessional neurosis in this chapter.

deep-seated imbalances, and that there is a continuous and identifiable link between those superficial symptoms and their submerged causes, the former determining the latter directly and completely, the holists are doing something like dime-store psychoanalysis or vulgar Freudianism. The latter formulation emphasizes this program's epistemological kinship with vulgar Marxism—most basically, the belief that the economy is determinate in the last instance.¹³¹ This model of systemic causality is the theoretical foundation of the holistic health in its functional, macrobiotic, and fallaciously psychoanalytic guises, and it is, at the end of the day, profoundly reductionist, beholden to precisely the theory of cause that holism is conjured in order to avoid. But rather than bemoan (or in addition to bemoaning) holism's failure to be sufficiently holistic, we will want to insist that the psychoanalytic embrace of *indeterminacy*—its contention, articulated best by Althusser, that this last instance never arrives—does not, therefore, qualify it more holistic than holism, though it does offer a more compelling approach to the problem of the symptom, one that might be described as hole-istic.

In the first place it must be said (albeit more schematically than would be ideal) that the problem with vulgar Marxism and by extension vulgar Freudianism is precisely that of totality, of how we think the whole. The conceit that the economy is the root cause of all superstructural phenomena, phenomena which are merely symptoms of economic activity (this terminological transposition will be justified) relies on a theory of expressive causality that Althusser identifies with both Leibniz and Hegel, though the latter receives the lion's share of his scorn; a considerable portion of Althusser's work is devoted to drawing out “the distance which radically separates the *Marxist type of unity* from the Hegelian type of unity, of the Marxist totality from the Hegelian

¹³¹ For additional context, vulgar Marxism is sometimes also called, with whatever degree of imprecision, economism, mechanistic materialism, or reflection theory; it is unclear which (if any) Marxists actually hold this position, and if it seems to be more a floating object of critique than a concept anyone actually defends, it nevertheless retains its usefulness as a structural parallel to the theory of cause advanced in holistic health discourse.

totality.”¹³² This involves not only differentiating expressive causality from the properly Marxist concept of structural causality, but also (and at the same time) the process of empirical knowledge ‘production’ from that of symptomatic reading proper.

As Althusser has it, the empiricists insist that knowledge lurks within an object—any object—of our world as an “*invisible* kernel”¹³³ or essence masked by that object’s phenomenal facade; once the veil of appearance is thrown off, the truth that had been lying in wait is laid bare. Knowledge is of the same order of existence as that which it is knowledge *of*, it must simply be separated from the veneer that conceals it, like “gold [...] from the dross of earth and sand in which it is held and contained”; empiricism is a theory of knowledge grounded in “the difference between the inessential and the essence, between surface and depth, between outside and inside!”¹³⁴ This epistemology of extraction is the foundation of Hegelian-cum-Leibnizian expressive totality (one of only two available methods for thinking systemic causality, or “the effectivity of a whole on its elements,” until Marx came along, the other being Cartesian mechanism, that foremost functionalist foe), in which the whole has a simple, even spiritual essence contained in and expressed by each of its parts, which are but the appearances or “phenomenal forms” of this essence, such that the essence of the whole can be gleaned, equally, from any of those parts, parts that are, for that reason, functionally equivalent.¹³⁵

¹³² Louis Althusser, “On the Materialist Dialectic: On the Unevenness of Origins,” in *For Marx*, 202–203. Emphasis in original. Some years later Althusser will suggest that “we can leave to Hegel the category of *totality*, and claim for Marx the category of the *whole*,” insofar as the concept of totality comes with the twin temptations (which turn out to really be one) of expressivity and sphericity; my preference would be that we leave the category of the whole behind as well, and indeed I have always found Althusser’s insistence on maintaining it, even in the form of a complex whole structured in dominance, idiomatically unfortunate. “Is it Simple to be a Marxist in Philosophy?,” in *Essays in Self-Criticism*, trans. Grahame Lock (London: Verso, 1976), 181. Emphases in original.

¹³³ Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 2009), 39. Emphasis in original.

¹³⁴ Althusser, *Reading Capital*, 38, 40.

¹³⁵ Althusser, *Reading Capital*, 206. Were Marx correct in claiming to have turned the Hegelian dialectic rightside up, vulgar Marxism is precisely what we would get: “the political and the ideological will therefore be merely pure phenomena of the economic which will be their ‘truth.’” “Contradiction and Overdetermination,” 108. Fortunately Marx’s in(ter)vention is hardly a simple inversion.

If the Hegelian dialectic presupposes a “simple original unity, splitting into two opposites,” a contradiction that, doubly negated, reassembles into a new but equally simple unity, a totality comprised of the successive sublations of these opposites, or the autopoiesis of their original unity (recall Aristophanes’ severed spheres), Marxism “rejects [...] the presupposition of an original simple unity. What Marxism refuses is the (ideological) philosophical pretension to coincide exhaustively with a ‘root origin’, whatever its form (the *tabula rasa*; the zero point in a process; the state of nature...).”¹³⁶ The properly Marxist theory of social totality can abide no such simple original unity, because something that belies this unity is always already at work (or ever-pre-given, as it is rendered in this essay), something that is nothing other than the lack of an origin itself, such that the zero point from which the whole develops would have to be, rather, a point of *one less*.¹³⁷ Althusser is absolutely clear that his rejection of “the simple unity of a totality”¹³⁸ in no way amounts to an approbation of pluralism: there are not only multiple discrete essences, or too many origins, but too few; the difference between a simple unity and a structured unity is a difference of one (cause, instance) missing, or else, is that between essence hidden and an essence subtracted—a difference that cannot be overstated. As Althusser puts it later, in his sketch of a heretofore neglected (if not outrightly repressed) strain of materialism—one freed from the pincers of metaphysics, and thus from the postulates of necessity and teleology—there is no world but that born out of a “void,” and “no Cause that precedes its effects is to be found in it”; the world itself is simply the fortuitous way that this void differs from itself, its minimal difference, perhaps: “the infinitesimal, aleatory variation of nothing constituted by the swerve of the fall.”¹³⁹ Althusser

¹³⁶ Althusser, “On the Materialist Dialectic,” 197–198.

¹³⁷ “There is no longer any original essence, only an ever-pre-givenness, however far knowledge delves into its past. There is no longer any simple unity, only a structured, complex unity.” Althusser, “On the Materialist Dialectic,” 198–199.

¹³⁸ Althusser, “On the Materialist Dialectic,” 197.

¹³⁹ Louis Althusser, “The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter,” in *Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings, 1978–87*, trans. G.M. Goshgarian (London: Verso, 2006), 173, 175. “Nothing(ness) as

means the fall of atoms (and the clinamen or swerve that introduces difference into this falling) in Epicurean philosophy, but we may also think of the “necessary fall of this first signifier,”¹⁴⁰ the primal repression responsible for symbolic and subjective non-closure, which similarly signals the gap in the place where cause would—but does not—appear. Again, there is only something because there is something missing: no simple origin, no cause, no end, only ever-pre-giveness, a train (or a chain) “that has been running for all eternity.”¹⁴¹

This is how we can understand Althusser’s twinned pronouncements that the economy is determinate in the last instance, and that “the economic dialectic is never active in the pure state; in History, these instances, the superstructures, etc.—are never seen to step respectfully aside when their work is done or, when the Time comes, as his pure phenomena, to scatter before His Majesty the Economy as he strides along the royal road of the Dialectic. From the first moment to the last, the lonely hour of the ‘last instance’ never comes.”¹⁴² There is no contradiction here (or rather, there is an absolutely unassailable contradiction in the world itself): the economy really would be determinant in the last instance, were that last instance ever to arrive. But the last instance, like the

interval or minimal difference of the same” is a concept that Zupančič identifies with Nietzsche. *The Shortest Shadow: Nietzsche’s Philosophy of the Two* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 136. Emphases in original. Nietzsche is a central interlocutor for Althusser in this collection of later essays, though he is cited somewhat less in the one I am referencing.

¹⁴⁰ Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 251. Highlighting its aleatory nature, Bruce Fink describes primal repression as “the roll of the dice at the beginning of one’s universe that creates a split and sets the structure in motion.” *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1995), 68. Althusser’s description of this swerve as “*that which nothing in the world can designate*, although it is the origin of every world” nicely captures the affinity of these concepts. “The Underground Current,” 191. Emphasis in original.

¹⁴¹ Althusser, “The Underground Current” 189. Notably Althusser rejects the incursions of “chance” (209) and “contingency” (215) into his philosophy in “On the Materialist Dialectic,” a defensiveness that perhaps betrays the transformation of his thought he sensed the horizon.

¹⁴² Althusser, “Contradiction and Overdetermination,” 113. It is worth clarifying that Althusser maintains that the economy functions as the dominant contradiction in a complexly structured whole, the only kind of whole in which it is possible for one contradiction to dominate the others, insofar as the Hegelian totality presupposes the functional identity of all of its phenomena as variations on a singular, essential theme; it is the pre-giveness, the unevenness, and the overdetermination (about which we will say more shortly) of the social whole as Marxism conceives it that allows the economy to emerge as the dominant contradiction, which does not mean that it is determinate in the last instance in the vulgar Marxist sense, since it is precisely the existence of first and last instances (and thus the closure of the social totality) that is being contested here.

first, is missing from the get go (a necessary misnomer), in the same way as Lacan's first signifier: it is because the social whole is structurally incomplete, bounded only by an endogenous emptiness—"the *inner darkness of exclusion*"¹⁴³—that there can never be a last instance. As Althusser puts it in a formulation that highlights the holism of expressive totality, "The last instance operates here in such a way that it explodes the peaceful fiction of the circle or the sphere. It is not an accident that Marx abandons the metaphor of the circle for that of the edifice. A circle is *closed*, and the corresponding notion of totality presupposes that one can grasp all the phenomena, *exhaustively*, and then reassemble them within the simple unity of its center."¹⁴⁴ In an edifice, by contrast, the different levels of social existence are really distinguished, that is, not basically analogous because only externally distinct expressions of the essence of the totality, whether we call that essence the economy or something else; in an edifice determination in the last instance manifests as *overdetermination*—a concept that Althusser borrows from Freud, and one that he insists is "sufficiently related formally to the content it designates here for the loan not to have been an arbitrary one,"¹⁴⁵ this content being the immanence of the complex, contingent, and open whole—a whole from which the last instance has been rigorously subtracted—to the contradictions that comprise it; or else, the reproduction in every superstructural symptom of the inexistence of an original essence, a root cause. Where the vulgar Marxist totality has an essential unity, the Althusserian whole has a hole: the center where an origin would appear, would be determinate, but since it is missing...

We can now see that expressive totality and holistic symptomatology share a concept of systemic causality: a closed or complete sphere (we will have more to say about the holistic

¹⁴³ Althusser, *Reading Capital*, 28. Emphasis in original. Althusser is describing the theoretical (rather than the social) field here, but I don't imagine he would object to my transposition.

¹⁴⁴ Althusser, "Is It Simple to be a Marxist in Philosophy," 182. Emphasis mine.

¹⁴⁵ Althusser, "On the Materialist Dialectic," 206n46.

preoccupation with spheres in the next chapter) with an empirically given cause, a positive point of origin, an essence that engenders a whole host of secondary phenomena that “never exist for themselves,”¹⁴⁶ but only to express the essence from whence they emanate. For the vulgar Freudians, it is always the patient as a whole who suffers; the root cause of her suffering is the essential imbalance expressed in every symptom, symptoms that are interchangeable insofar as they will not themselves be treated, but instead treated as clues, as so many manifestations of the symptomatic subject’s perverse, pathological essence—an essence that, once uncovered, extracted from the symptoms that contain and conceal it, can be corrected.

We can also glimpse here a significant epistemological inconsistency in the discourse of root cause analysis itself: if systems biology is oriented towards organisms as complex systems,¹⁴⁷ and complex systems are characterized by emergence and nonlinearity—that is, by precisely the impossibility of determining direct or linear causality, not because we lack the necessary techniques, but simply because there is no such causality to be had here—then the idea of alighting on the right one betrays the very systems theoretical bent of functional medicine.¹⁴⁸ Put otherwise, functional medicine is ultimately and unwittingly reductionist (if more in the expressive than the mechanical sense), seeking to explain all manner of malaise with reference to one essential origin (“the right cause,” “the root cause,” etc). Despite holism’s nominal affinity with structural

¹⁴⁶ Althusser, “On the Materialist Dialectic,” 204.

¹⁴⁷ Here’s how the Institute for Systems Biology describes its object: “It is a holistic approach to deciphering the complexity of biological systems that starts from the understanding that the networks that form the whole of living organisms are more than the sum of their parts.” See <https://isbscience.org/about/what-is-systems-biology/>. Accessed November 15, 2024.

¹⁴⁸ Althusser makes a remarkably similar point in his own discussion of complexity, which is in some ways similar (in “The Underground Current,” he repeatedly gestures toward entropy, chaos, and information theory) and in other ways quite dissimilar (insofar as overdetermination signals not only a surplus of causes, but as a corollary of this surplus, the lack of a first cause) to the concept of complexity as it is wielded in systems biology and systems theory more generally: “Marx does not only show that it is impossible to delve down to the birth or origin of the simple universal, ‘production,’ [...] Marx does not only deny us the ability to delve down beneath the complex whole (and this denial is a denial on principle: it is not ignorance which prevents us, but the very essence of production itself, its concept)...” “On the Materialist Dialectic,” 195–196.

causality—as Maria Turchetto notes, what Althusser found first in structural causality and later in aleatory materialism was a way of “saying that the whole was superior to”—but also, we should add, inferior to, less than—“the sum of its parts, or for referring to the ‘qualitative leap’; that is, for alluding to *non-reductive* and *non-mechanistic* conceptions”—it betrays its commitments to contingency and to the leap or jump of emergence, ending up on the side of expressive causality instead.¹⁴⁹ In a further twist, when root cause is universalized as imbalance—and particularly as microbial dysbiosis—then the suboptimal state of one complex system (the gut microbiome) becomes the singular causal explanation for the malaise of the larger complex system in which it is embedded. A stupefying situation, no doubt, if one that corresponds quite closely to the model of systemic causality rejected by Althusser: every symptom is but an expression of inner disharmony, or else, the disharmony of the inner (eco)system is expressed in and through the pathology of the whole. Overdetermination, the lack of a singular root cause (which has, as its corollary, a surplus of possible causes, none of which will be exhaustive), would be absolutely intolerable to the vulgar Freudians—though it is, as we will see, the crux of interpretation for psychoanalysis.

It is, to be sure, a common misunderstanding to think that the analyst will tell the analysand what cause underlies her dreams or symptoms, that symptomatic reading will not invent but rather expose a buried meaning with some positive (not to say useful) content. Setting functional medicine aside for a moment, we can say that this is exactly how interpretation works in *The Sopranos*, which is probably the vulgar Freudian text par excellence, aided in no small part by the American Psychoanalytic Association’s decision to give Lorraine Bracco an award for her portrayal

¹⁴⁹ Maria Turchetto, “Althusser and Monod: A ‘New Alliance’?,” *Historical Materialism* 17 (2009): 65. Mladen Dolar relates this leap to Lacan: “I think we should hold to the idea of sudden emergence and abrupt passage as a deeply materialist notion and even — why not? — hold to the idea of *creatio ex nihilo*.” “Beyond Interpellation,” *Qui Parle* 6, no. 2 (1993): 77.

of Tony Soprano's analytically-inclined psychiatrist.¹⁵⁰ In any given episode, Tony will have a dream or a panic attack, and Dr. Melfi will unravel the chain of associations to reveal its meaning or cause; this happens so frequently that in one instance, Tony impatiently demands an interpretation of his most recent dream: "Can't you just tell me what the fuckin' thing means? I mean, you obviously know. Why do we have to go through this exercise every time?" When Melfi responds that "the meaning is elicited through verbalization," Tony mockingly retorts "And the gehoxagogun is framed up by the ramistan"—with nonsense signifiers that say more about the 'goal' of analysis than this exchange might otherwise (we will come back to this).¹⁵¹

Of course, the question the analysand must ask is not 'what is the unconscious desire expressed in my dream/symptom/slip of the tongue?'—a desire that, being unconscious, will hardly be amenable to linguistic revelation, since it is not of the same order as that in which we speak—but 'why is my unconscious desire being expressed *this way*?' To reduce interpretation to the unveiling of a hidden essence or a concealed cause—to, as we saw with Groddeck, a kind of consciousness raising—is to ignore how the unconscious actually manifests in the symptom: as *withdrawn*. As Lacan makes clear,

Although Freud there [in *The Interpretation of Dreams*] goes over the thousand empirical forms which this desire can take, there isn't a single analysis which ends up with the formulation of a desire. Desire is, in the end, never unveiled there. [...] It is the stages of the dream-work which are interesting, for that is where we find revealed what we are looking for in the interpretation of the dream, this x,

¹⁵⁰ See Sarah Boxer, "Therapists Go Crazy for One in 'Sopranos,'" *The New York Times*, December 29, 2001. <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/12/29/arts/therapists-go-crazy-for-one-in-sopranos.html>. In a 2006 interview, Bracco claims to have portrayed a Jungian analyst on the show; when asked "What's wrong with Freud?" by the interviewer, she responds, wisely, "You know, I don't really know enough about it." See Deborah Solomon, "Questions for Lorraine Bracco: The Doctor Is In" *The New York Times*, June 4, 2006. <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/04/magazine/the-doctor-is-in.html>.

¹⁵¹ "Calling All Cars," S4E11, aired 24 November 2002. In what follows, Melfi tells Tony that "Freud says dreams are wishes," to which Tony responds, "Dreams are wishes? I thought you said that dreams represent repressed urges"; irritated with the apparent imprecision of analysis ("Maybe it's this, maybe it's that. Maybe it's *vaffanculo*") and indeed the almost parodic nature of its revelations ("My mother would come when she looked at a pot roast"), Tony quits therapy at the end of the episode.

which in the end is desire for nothing. I defy you to bring me a single passage from the *Traumdeutung* which concludes—this is what the subject desires.¹⁵²

The symptom or dream does not harbor, by concealing behind an incidental disguise, an “invisible kernel” of meaning; it is not a frivolous wrapper for a root cause, for what would finally decode or make sense of the subject’s suffering in the missing-puzzle-piece theory of interpretation. Instead, the puzzle comes with one piece missing, and the symptom is a formally specific way of registering this “nothing”: the fallen signifier (“a kernel, a *kern*, to use Freud’s own term, of *non-sense*”); the navel of the dream (its “ultimately unknown center”); the lack of sexual relation; in short, the absolute absence of a root cause, the hole where root cause would be, and *from whence emerges the subject*.¹⁵³ Indeed, there is only a subject where there is something missing, something subtracted, from the causal (qua signifying) chain; the subject comes to be precisely in the place where the first cause—“the cause that causes this cause,”¹⁵⁴ the “*Cause of the cause*”—is missing.¹⁵⁵ As Zupančič puts it, “The subject is the effect of the fact that there is a cause which will never be discovered in the Other; she is the effect of the absence of this cause.”¹⁵⁶ The subject’s symptoms cannot *have* a root cause because they exist in order to index the *lack* of one. And this lack of root cause can on no account be assimilated or re-incorporated into the concept of root cause itself, à la ‘the root cause of the subject’s suffering is simply the lack of a root cause for her suffering,’ such that lack is made to fill the very hole that it creates; the missing cause (as the

¹⁵² Lacan, *The Ego in Freud’s Theory*, 211.

¹⁵³ Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 250, 23.

¹⁵⁴ Jacques-Alain Miller, “To Interpret the Cause: From Freud to Lacan,” *Newsletter of the Freudian Field* 3, no. 1–2 (1989): 32. In seminar eleven Lacan distinguishes two modes or levels of causality: that of the “automaton,” which covers the automatism of the chain of signifiers, the pleasure principle, and the return of the repressed (the less interesting form of repetition); and that of the “tuché,” which designates the failure or impasse of this automatism in the form of the subject’s (missed) encounter with the real, and which is identified with chance, accident, and indeed, the “*clinamen*”; the tuché qua missed encounter is the level of the cause (of the cause) missing. *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 53–64.

¹⁵⁵ Alenka Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real: Kant and Lacan* (London: Verso, 2011), 29. Emphasis in original.

¹⁵⁶ Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real*, 41.

“missing link”¹⁵⁷ of the causal chain, which guarantees that “between cause and that which it affects, there is always something wrong”¹⁵⁸) produces, in the wake of its withdrawal, a surplus of partial, non-exhaustive causes that can never be strung together so as to explain, fully and finally, the subject’s symptoms; it is the gap that guarantees the discontinuity, unpredictability, and contingency of cause itself (as opposed to the continuity, necessity, and determinism of law, which is what the holists have in mind when they speak of the symptom’s root cause). As Joan Copjec writes,

What ought to have been clear from Freud’s exposition is that *over-determination* cannot be adequately approached except as acknowledgement of the subject’s *under-determination*. As subjects we cannot trace backward from condition to condition until we arrive at some ‘lonely hour of the last instance’ (as Althusser would later put it) where a cause operated alone to determine our actions. No external or internal necessity guides subjects, who are thus susceptible to endless enticements, various stimuli, none of which is sufficient by itself to motivate us.¹⁵⁹

What separates Lacan from Althusser on the matter of the missing “root origin” (the missingness of which precludes any understanding of the subject or the social world as whole) is the former’s insistence that this lack is sexual: sex names the inexistence of a first cause, of a moment that could be picked out so as to say, *this is where it all went wrong*, because being sexed—that is, having to deal with being one-less in one of two possible ways—means that it has always already gone wrong.

The holists err in assuming that every symptom indexes a really existing and absolutely remediable root cause, and that this cause can be sought out, excavated from the patient’s

¹⁵⁷ Miller, “To Interpret the Cause,” 33.

¹⁵⁸ Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 22. Lacan’s full sentence reads: “It is at this point that I am trying to make you see by approximation that the Freudian unconscious is situated at that point, where, between cause and that which it affects, there is always something wrong.”

¹⁵⁹ Copjec, “The Sexual Compact,” 32. Emphases in original.

discourse, whereas symptomatic reading for Althusser involves not detection but invention: it is the way that knowledge is made out of what is missing. This is a crucial aspect of “Marx’s Immense Theoretical Revolution”: knowledge cannot be found hiding, but must be constructed; it is not an essence waiting to be unearthed, but something generated in a realm quite apart from that of “real historical genesis.”¹⁶⁰ We cannot read symptomatically unless we “conceive knowledge as *production*.”¹⁶¹ What does symptomatic reading in the properly psychoanalytic sense do? It gives the missing cause a name, a name not discovered, but contrived; it produces for this cause some positive content or consistency, and in so doing allows the subject to live with it. Here’s how Lacan puts it in his second seminar: “That the subject should come to recognize and to name his desire, that is the efficacious action of analysis. But it isn’t a question of recognizing something which would be entirely given, ready to be coopted. In naming it, the subject creates, brings forth, a new presence in the world. He introduces presence as such and by the same token, hollows out absence as such. It is only at this level that one can conceive of the action of interpretation.”¹⁶² As we will see, this early articulation not very far from how Lacan will describe the end of analysis in his later seminars, as as creative knowing-what-to-do with the symptom, a symptom that, far from subsisting only to express something else, is granted an existence—we might even say a dignity—in its own right.

Psychoanalysis assumes a social etiology for symptomatocity: it is our location in the (incomplete) universe of signifiers that severs us from ourselves, that forecloses the possibility of our being whole, and that produces for us (or enjoins us to produce) any number of psychic and somatic

¹⁶⁰ Althusser, *Reading Capital*, 50.

¹⁶¹ Althusser, *Reading Capital*, 36.

¹⁶² Lacan, *The Ego in Freud’s Theory*, 228–229.

symptoms as supplements; it is the very condition of our intersubjectivity that guarantees a minimal degree of suffering.¹⁶³ As Patricia Gherovici puts it, glossing her earlier work on the uniquely Latina affliction *ataque de nervios*, “The Puerto Rican syndrome makes of each individual case of ataque an allegory of a collective situation. This openness to the social field is not specific to this syndrome but a general feature of hysteria.”¹⁶⁴ Hysteria registers the way that a collective (or indeed universal) condition—the lack of sexual relation, as the flip side of the signifier—comes to be inscribed in one’s particular cocktail of complaint, in ways that are unavoidably inflected by social-symbolic (which is to say *material*) positioning—race, class, nation, gender, etc. This is how we should understand the hysterical flourishing of white women beset by imbalances: as a culturally specific manifestation of the intractable fact of disharmony, unique in that it orients itself toward recovering precisely what psychoanalysis finds foreclosed—the possibility of wholeness. All of the privilege in the world cannot buy subjective unity (though it can purchase snake oil promising it); not even the most efficacious of functionalists can free us, forever, from feeling bad. Bland’s “not wholly sick but not wholly well” is, in fact, an apt description of the subject, who is not wholly anything; who is, simply, not whole.

What psychoanalysis offers the afflicted is this: not symptomlessness, but a certain reorganization of the subject’s simultaneous suffering from and enjoyment of her symptoms (for while we no doubt resent our symptoms, we may also relish them¹⁶⁵), a novel way of living with them—a kind of palliative care. Indeed, as Freud writes earlier in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, “Life, as we find it, is too hard for us; it brings us too many pains, disappointments, and impossible

¹⁶³ Foreclosure is not just a correlate of psychosis, but is tied, in Lacan’s later work, to the “constitutive hole” of subjectivity, Roberto Harari, *How James Joyce Made His Name: A Reading of the Final Lacan*, trans. Luke Thurston (New York: Other Press, 2002), 144.

¹⁶⁴ Gherovici, *Please Select Your Gender*, 42.

¹⁶⁵ “As a last technique of living, which will at least bring him substitutive satisfactions, he is offered that of a flight into neurotic illness.” Freud, *Civilization*, 84.

tasks. In order to bear it we cannot dispense with palliative measures.”¹⁶⁶ As Michelle Rada puts it, “In lieu of total cure, Freud proposes unending but ordinary unhappiness”; analysis might deliver the subject from acute psychic anguish and “make her life somewhat more bearable,” but it will never resolve the condition responsible for her anguish in the first place.¹⁶⁷ Psychoanalysis privileges symptom management over cure simply because the latter is impossible: as Freud said to his hysterics, “No doubt fate would find it easier than I do to relieve you of your illness.”¹⁶⁸

In fact, the relief that psychoanalysis provides involves just this fate: it requires a paradoxical taking of responsibility for the lack in the other that brought the subject into being. This is how Bruce Fink characterizes the end of analysis: the analysand must “subjectify the cause of his or her existence—the Other’s desire that brought him or her into the world—and [...] become the subject of his or her own fate.”¹⁶⁹ If what causes the subject is a hole, the efficacy of analysis lies not in filling it (again: impossible) but in bringing the subject to affirm her position in it, and to claim it as her own; if not quite *amor fati*, then a kind of identification with fate, with the stalling of the causal chain that is her point of entry to the world. In subjectifying the cause, the subject comes to appreciate that no necessity ushered her into being, that no other is off enjoying the lost object of her desire, that no transcendental principle governs her her conduct or her symptom: she must assume her rightful place in the hole and become, herself, the cause of the cause. This is the meaning of Lacan’s retranslation of Freud’s “*Wo Es war, soll Ich werden*”—not “where the id was, there the ego shall be,” a confused formulation (*pace* Strachey), but “where (it) was itself [...] it is my duty that I come into being,”¹⁷⁰ or “where it was, there I must come to be as a subject.”¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁶ Freud, *Civilization*, 75.

¹⁶⁷ Michelle Rada, “Overdetermined: Psychoanalysis and Solidarity,” *differences* 33, no. 2–3 (2022): 2.

¹⁶⁸ Sigmund Freud, “The Psychotherapy of Hysteria,” in *Studies on Hysteria*, SE vol. II, trans. and ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1955), 305.

¹⁶⁹ Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, xiii.

¹⁷⁰ Lacan, “The Freudian Thing, or the Meaning of the Return to Freud in Psychoanalysis,” in *Écrits*, 347–348.

¹⁷¹ Lacan, “Science and Truth,” in *Écrits*, 734.

It is the subject's duty to become her own cause, to "assume responsibility for that which interrupts," to become the steward of her lack.¹⁷² As Roberto Harari puts it, "knowing oneself to be responsible entails occupying a position diametrically opposed to that of 'blaming' the unconscious and thus distancing oneself from any participation in the origin at stake."¹⁷³ To be sure, Lacan and his commentators are not advocating any kind of pulling oneself up by one's bootstraps (the "take responsibility for yourself"¹⁷⁴ of neoliberal governance by television, or the holistic model of *mea culpa*), but there is an irreducible ethical dimension here, one that we can approach by way of the *sinthome*.¹⁷⁵

When Lacan begins to speak about the *sinthome*—"an old way of spelling what was subsequently spelt *symptôme*"¹⁷⁶—in 1975, it is not in order to supplant the symptom; the *sinthome*

¹⁷² Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, 47.

¹⁷³ Harari, *How James Joyce Made His Name*, 83.

¹⁷⁴ See Laurie Ouellette, "'Take Responsibility for Yourself': Judge Judy and the Neoliberal Citizen," in *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*. ed. Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 223–242.

¹⁷⁵ There is significant debate over how exactly to characterize the end of analysis. In the first place, I would like to emphasize that nowhere does Lacan speak of identification with the *sinthome*, despite this being a very popular formulation of the aim of analysis. In seminar twenty-four, Lacan discusses "identification with the symptom" (not *sinthome*), which he seems to liken to the third mode of identification described in Freud's *Group Psychology*—an identification not with any positive quality, as in the first two modes, but with "possibility" or "openness" as such. See *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, SE vol. XVIII, trans. and ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1955), 105–107. In seminar twenty-four Lacan also describes this as an identification with the unary trait, but then a not insignificant point of confusion emerges, since in seminar nineteen Lacan says that the unary trait is what Freud finds in the *second* (hysterical), *not third*, mode of identification. Lacan also never says that this identification with the symptom is what should happen at the end of analysis, but poses it as a question—one that he neither answers nor returns to. In seminar eleven, Lacan briefly describes traversing the fundamental fantasy as the "beyond of analysis," and says, in seminar two, that healing is "the realization of the subject through a speech which comes from elsewhere, traversing it." *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 273; *The Ego in Freud's Theory*, 233. Harari is adamant that identification with the *sinthome* is a step beyond traversing the fantasy, while Župančič groups together "traversing the fantasy – identifying with the symptom" and contrasts both to the process by which "the subject ultimately assumes his guilt and 'internalizes' his contingent destiny." *Ethics of the Real*, 179. This is what Fink calls subjectifying the cause, and which is, for him, analogous to traversing the fantasy. See *The Lacanian Subject*, 62. This is also how Žižek characterizes traversing the fantasy in *The Sublime Object*—"at a certain point—precisely the point at which the intention pierces the signifier's chain, traverses it—some signifier fixes retroactively the meaning of the chain, sews the meaning to the signifier"—which he claims is "strictly correlative to identification with a *sinthome*." *The Sublime Object*, 113, 139. In *Please Select Your Gender*, Gherovici eschews any reference to traversing the fantasy and positions identification with the *sinthome*, a "creation, an invention" that allows one to "reknit the main determinants of one's psychic life" as the end of analysis; she also links it, in passing, to "*savoir faire*, know-how," "being-able-to-do-with." *Please Select Your Gender*, 216–217, 243. There is also, of course, *the pass*, in which an analysand who has reached the end recounts his analysis to other analysands, but that is a matter for another day.

¹⁷⁶ Lacan, *The Sinthome*, 3.

is not a ‘mature’ concept of the symptom, but a name for how the subject bears it. We might say that Lacan’s identification of the sinthome with woman is especially apt insofar as it epitomizes the ontological (not commonsensical qua sexist) paradox contained in the maxim *can’t live with em, can’t live without em*.

In his twenty-third seminar, Lacan describes the sinthome as the fourth term in the Borromean knot of the real, the symbolic, and the imaginary (to which the preceding year’s seminar, *RSI*, had been devoted), a knot that is not (yet) a knot but a link or chain (as Lacan describes it in *Encore*), since the three rings comprising it are really distinct; a chain in which the breaking of any one ring necessarily severs the other two from each other as well. Without wading too far into Lacan’s topological intervention here, we can say that what prevents this from happening (or more accurately, what makes up for this having already happened, “what enables the Borromean link to be mended”¹⁷⁷), what prevents the subject from falling into psychosis, is the sinthome. The sinthome is the cord that binds the rings, what holds the them together, however tentatively; it is the condition of their “consistence” insofar as it is produced “at the site where the knot fails, where there is a kind of slip of the knot itself.”¹⁷⁸ As Gherovici puts it, in a formulation that emphasizes the concept’s incompatibility with cure, “The sinthome is a fourth ring that knots tripartite registers not arranged harmoniously, thus providing a palliative solution.”¹⁷⁹ Indeed at one point during the Sinthome seminar, an audience member remarks that “from this perspective, the hope for any cure in analysis seems to pose a problem,” to which Lacan responds: “There can be no radical reduction of the fourth term, not even in analysis, because Freud stated [...] that there is an *Urverdrängung*, a repression that can never be undone. It is in the very nature of the symbolic

¹⁷⁷ Lacan, *The Sinthome*, 76.

¹⁷⁸ Lacan, *The Sinthome*, 51, 80. To be sure, Lacan says that you can put the sinthome somewhere else, but...

¹⁷⁹ Gherovici, *Please Select Your Gender*, 152. Gherovici suggests here that the concept of the sinthome originates, if not yet in name, in the nineteenth seminar, in an implicit reference to Althusser and to symptomatic reading.

to include this hole.”¹⁸⁰ No cure, no repair, no undoing, only the performance of “suture” and “splice”—this, he says, is the work of analysis.¹⁸¹ Analysis is what enables the subject to bind the rings, to tie the knot, to “joi[n] it together fast by means of an artifice.”¹⁸²

The sinthome is a product of *savoir-faire*, a practice of artistry and artifice (Harari calls it “the capacity to bring off certain tricks”¹⁸³), something (or some one) contrived in order to deal with irreparable lack; it jury-rigs, we might say, some form of relation out of the strict “no equivalence”¹⁸⁴ between the sexes, inventing for this non-relation a signifier. Confronting and assuming the place “where the knot fails,” the subject creates a sinthome and gives it a name.

Funnily enough, naming is anathema to the functionalists, who chide biomedicine as a “name the disease, prescribe the cure”¹⁸⁵ model of care, who see the artifice of a name as an affront to the reality of the root cause. In Hyman’s words, “Knowing the name of a disease tells us nothing about its true cause; nor does it lead to the right treatment. This is the disease delusion.”¹⁸⁶ For Lacan, by contrast, naming is neither delusion nor deflection from a deeper truth, but an act of freedom in which the subject takes on the role of “Father of the Name” where the (foreclosed) “Name-of-the-Father” had been.¹⁸⁷ The missing cause does not have a signifier (being coextensive with the one that falls out), but the subject can create one for it, can and indeed *must* create one—it is for this that she is responsible.

At this point, we can look closely at a passage from seminar twenty-three, containing as it does a reference to Lacan’s seventh seminar on ethics (which seminar twenty, part two of Lacan’s

¹⁸⁰ Lacan, *The Sinthome*, 30.

¹⁸¹ Lacan, *The Sinthome*, 58.

¹⁸² Lacan, *The Sinthome*, 58.

¹⁸³ Harari, *How James Joyce Made His Name*, 116.

¹⁸⁴ Lacan, *The Sinthome*, 84.

¹⁸⁵ Bland, *The Disease Delusion*, 78.

¹⁸⁶ Hyman, “Foreword,” xi.

¹⁸⁷ Lacan, *The Sinthome*, 13.

exegesis of *Yad'lun*, offered an *Encore* of). At first, Lacan tell us that “the only responsibility that exists is sexual responsibility,” which seems to echo his oft-cited claim, in seminar seven, that “from an analytical point of view, the only thing of which one can be guilty is of having given ground relative to one’s desire”—sexual responsibility does not signal anything like a demand for safety or consent in sexual relations, but rather a requirement that the subject maintain or reproduce the lack of sexual relation, the hole constitutive of subjectivity and, as we said, of intersubjectivity (divested, of course, of any pretense of symmetry and reciprocity; an intersubjectivity that would not be that of the couple, as Lacan insists in seminar eight).¹⁸⁸ He continues: “What I have called *savoir-faire* goes much further, and to this is added the artifice we impute to God.”¹⁸⁹ Lacan has already established that God is another name for the other of the other, for the woman, for what cannot be said (to exist); this position is vacant, is that of the “empty bag,” and it turns out that we “impute to God what is the artist’s business, the first model of which is the potter, as everybody knows. It is said that he moulded—but with what, though?—this thing that is called, not by chance, the universe. *Universe* means one thing, that there is Oneness, *Yad'lun*.”¹⁹⁰ *Savoir-faire* goes beyond sexual responsibility qua the maintenance of lack, adding artifice—the subject fashions a new signifier, a One all alone, a singular sinthome particular to her; this signifier is “not enchained in a network”¹⁹¹ or circumscribed by any discourse, and so it is one that the subject can toy and tinker with, that she can use to “tie or untie something, to retie things otherwise.”¹⁹² We might say that Tony Soprano’s nonsense rejoinders—“gehoxagogun” and “ramistan”—to his psychiatrist’s insistence that he speak in order to unveil a meaning function as such sinthomes. In fashioning

¹⁸⁸ Lacan, *The Sinthome*, 50; *Ethics*, 319. Copjec translates this pronouncement of the ethics of psychoanalysis as “do not surrender your internal conflict, your division.” Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists* (London: Verso, 2015), 92.

¹⁸⁹ Lacan, *The Sinthome*, 50.

¹⁹⁰ Lacan, *The Sinthome*, 10, 50.

¹⁹¹ Žižek, *The Sublime Object*, 82.

¹⁹² Harari, *How James Joyce Made His Name*, 107.

them, Tony enables what seems like an interminable analysis—one that has not allowed him to move beyond, despite having dutifully uncovered, his mother’s withholding of love—to conclude.

The new signifier, the newly nominated sinthome, cannot be substituted for or referred to anything else; its production entails a kind of unbinding from the other that we now know is not, let’s say, all (that). The subject takes the place of the other that she assumed to be her cause (and the cause of her symptoms), but that turned out to be nothing but *nothing*, and in this she confronts a freedom and a responsibility. In becoming her own cause, she creates, through art or artifice, something out of that nothing—*ex nihilo*—and this is her ethical act. As Lacan puts it in seminar seven, “That is why the potter, *just like you to whom I am speaking*, creates the vase with his hands around this emptiness, creates it, just like the mythical creator, *ex nihilo*, starting with a hole. Everyone makes jokes about macaroni, because it is a hole with something around it, or about canons. The fact that we laugh doesn’t change the situation, however: the fashioning of the signifier and the introduction of a gap or a hole in the real is identical.”¹⁹³ The creation of a new signifier rebores the hole it comes out of (as Lacan says in describing the aim of analysis in seminar two), but the point is now not to invent something *only* to rebores this hole: it is to wield one’s sinthome, to wear it as a badge of honor, to dignify it, to embrace and experience it as an inalienable part of oneself (rather than as something woefully imposed from without)—as one’s responsibility. In Aaron Schuster’s formulation, this is the freedom of living with and as the sinthome “as a kind of fatal destiny: not to be unworthy of the symptom that afflicts one could well serve as a formula for a psychoanalytic ethics.”¹⁹⁴

We are a long way from the symptom as that which simultaneously masks and reveals the essential kernel of the subject’s sickness. Perhaps surprisingly, we find something of a model of

¹⁹³ Lacan, *Ethics*, 121. Emphasis mine.

¹⁹⁴ Aaron Schuster, *The Trouble with Pleasure: Deleuze and Psychoanalysis* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016), 88.

this sinthomatic ethics in the body of work comprising what we can call (though some would surely prefer that we didn't) the negative turn in trans studies. Or else, psychoanalysis and trans studies might be brought together to wrest health from the hands of the holists; to theorize wellbeing for a subject unlikely to ever experience symptomlessness (though you never know—as Jacques-Alain Miller says, the hallmark of effective analysis is surprise), a subject that is not whole, because something—we can call it *jouissance*, or dysphoria—prevents her from fully coinciding with herself. My gamble, in other words, is that these needlessly hostile discourses, attentive as they both are to bad feelings, sticky symptoms, and impossible relations, are uniquely suited to contest the ethical enjoinder to self-optimize currently being embraced by bedfellows equally strange. Against the condemnation of symptomatic or “sick care”¹⁹⁵ by a certain cohort of holistic practitioners, I argue for a renewed notion of symptom management as a potentially (if not detrimentally) pessimistic way through life's ontological wrongs.

... to trans studies' *jouissance*, against the optimism of optimization

For all of their argued-over disagreements (none of which we are going to rehash here), psychoanalysis and trans studies concur on one crucial point: being sexed sucks, and changing the way one is sexed doesn't make it suck any less, it just makes it suck differently. Who knows that sex is a source of suffering better than trans people? While Lacan's insistence on sexual difference (as a different internal to the subject, though this caveat often goes ignored) is routinely dismissed as retrograde, biologically essentialist, or simply offensive, we would be hard pressed to find a trans person who would not affirm sex's stubbornness, its irritating and implacable bearing on

¹⁹⁵ For “sick care,” see (among others) Will Bulsiewicz, *Fiber Fueled: The Plant-Based Gut Health Program for Losing Weight, Restoring Health, and Optimizing your Microbiome* (New York: Avery, 2020).

one's life.¹⁹⁶ Many if not most trans people do not imagine transition “as a way out of the deadlock of sexual division,” as something that “can grant a fantasized position beyond lack and desire,”¹⁹⁷ despite the saccharine optimism of the transition-as-cure narrative—what Hil Malatino calls “Trans Happiness™,”¹⁹⁸—proffered by not a few trans celebrities, most of them white. Indeed, there is a certain cozying up of contemporary trans discourse, in the form of the gender identity model and its memoir-ization, to a holistic (health) model of subjectivity: a conceit that cure (qua freedom from bad feeling) will follow from uncovering a hidden kernel of truth (qua inner psychic gender) and making the lifestyle modifications it demands (qua social, legal, and medical transition).¹⁹⁹ At the same time, there is a surging fourth of work in trans studies interested in negative affect, in madness and maladjustment, and in the various ways that transition fails to make one feel better. Like psychoanalysis, this trans-theoretical negativity offers an understanding of sex as a rupture that can never be repaired, only patched or creatively quilted; both of these discourses are interested in what subjects do with the displeasures of sex, what they make out of their incompletion and discontent. If the liaison between psychoanalysis and queer theory gave us the antisocial thesis, with its desperately needed critiques of liberal sociality, positive identity, relentless utopianism, and the clamor for sexual redemption, then perhaps one between psychoanalysis and trans studies can offer an anti-holist thesis: a critique of harmony, wholeness, and cure.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁶ Retrograde and anatomically grounded is exactly how Lacan's concept of sexual difference was characterized by Ann Pellegrini at a talk for their recent book *Gender Without Identity*, coauthored with analyst Avgi Saketopoulou.

¹⁹⁷ Gherovici, *Please Select Your Gender*, 11.

¹⁹⁸ Hil Malatino, *Side Affects: On Being Trans and Feeling Bad* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2022), 2.

¹⁹⁹ This position might be characterized as “transmedicalist” (a recently coined pejorative for the presently unfashionable belief that being trans requires some experience of dysphoria—unfashionable even among a number of the scholars cited here), but it seems to me that that is the least of its issues.

²⁰⁰ It should be said that of the authors surveyed here, Andrea Long Chu is the only one openly thinking with psychoanalysis, though both Cameron Awkward-Rich's *The Terrible We* and Malatino's *Side Affects* both contain quick references to and dismissals of Freud.

Let us be abundantly clear: we are not purporting to offer a psychoanalytic theory of trans/gender, or to spell out what we think Lacanian psychoanalysis really has to say about transness. Our point is not that the concept of sexual difference tells us something about transness that trans studies does not; it is rather that recent work in trans studies has alighted on something very similar, or else, that psychoanalysis and trans studies proceed in two directions to the same unmissable destination: everyone is beset by sexuation. Different ways of dealing with this being-beset are divided, fruitfully or not, along the lines of cis and trans, but no one does not deal with it. (Or: no one is not submitted to sexuation's misfortunes, but neither is any one wholly submitted and thereby forced to bear their submission in the same fashion as everyone else. It is because we are incompletely or *not-all* subjected to sexuation that there are manifold methods for coping with it.) To pretend otherwise, or to pretend that this misery is surmountable, is as insidious as it is erroneous.

We can begin our foray into the unfortunate discursive affinity between transition and self-optimization with none other than Amanda Chantal Bacon, who describes the start of her wellness journey in the same way that one might a transition narrative:

I realized that if I was going to take back my power, if I was ever going to feel like I was in the right body, if I was going to do any of the things I knew I had the capacity to do, and if I was going to find the joy I knew my heart was born to live, I had to fundamentally change the way I took care of myself. The first step in this transformation was acknowledging that feeling sick and tired was not my truth.²⁰¹

For Bacon, being sick (or not sufficiently well) is an experience of incongruity between identity and embodiment. Bacon does not identify with feeling sick and tired; her truth, the core of her being, is neither fatigue nor malaise but “vitality”; avowing this latent or as yet unrealized truth

²⁰¹ Amanda Chantal Bacon, *The Moon Juice Manual: Adaptogenic Recipes for Natural Stress Relief* (New York: Avery, 2021), 12–14.

triggers a transformation (successful, thank Goddess) that allows her to feel, finally, like she is in “the right body,” a body that no longer feels anxiety, stress, or fatigue.²⁰² This is, of course, the processual premise of the gender identity model, in which the discovery of the subject’s true gender as a “deeply felt internal sense”²⁰³ or an “internal, deeply-held sense”²⁰⁴ precipitates (should that gendered essence turn out to be different from the gender she has been given) a transition that will in turn generate, forces of social repression notwithstanding, bodily bliss, a feeling of having come home.²⁰⁵ As Malatino puts it, this is an affective teleology “that frames the time spent ostensibly ‘pre’ transition as bleak, characterized by depression and despondency, while the ‘post’ of transition is understood to be affirmative, happy, safe, secure.”²⁰⁶ Here the only obstacles to feeling better come from without, in the form of interpersonal and institutional transphobia; barring these, transition never fails to assuage dysphoria, indeed to cure the subject of it entirely. As in the holistic pursuit of health, this freedom from bad feeling requires a practice of depth reading: as Kadji Amin details in his exacting genealogy of the concept of gender identity, the subject must turn inwards and plumb her “deep psyche” to discern the “truth” of her gender, to arrive at a point of self-identification; here one’s gendered essence can be gleaned in its pure state, separated from the dross of one’s social and material conditions of existence—in short, from the way that gender is lived, indeed from the only meaningful way that gender is experienced.²⁰⁷ With the ascendancy of

²⁰² Bacon, *The Moon Juice Manual*, 12.

²⁰³ See the May 2016 U.S. Department of Education’s “Examples of Policies and Emerging Practices for Supporting Transgender Students,” <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oese/oshs/emergingpractices.pdf>. We were saddened but not surprised to discover that this webpage has been taken down as part of the Trump administration’s war on “gender ideology extremism.” It is an odd experience to miss a mode of state discourse that was once a favorite object of critique.

²⁰⁴ see and the 2015 New York City Commission on Human Rights’ “Gender ID Card”: https://www.nyc.gov/assets/cchr/downloads/pdf/publications/GenderID_Card2015.pdf.

²⁰⁵ Cael Keegan has taken cinematic representations of the journey home narrative of transition to task in “Moving Bodies: Sympathetic Migrations in Transgender Narrativity,” *Genders* 55 (2013).

²⁰⁶ Malatino, *Side Affects*, 14.

²⁰⁷ Talk on “Trans Materialism,” Brown University, 19 September 2023. As Cassius Adair, Kadji Amin, and Andrea Long Chu all argue, self-identification (qua the discernment of one’s true gender identity) only goes so far; if this actually constituted a satisfactory experience of gender, no one would bother to transition. As Adair puts it (though

this model, we witness “the burial of gender deeper and deeper within the private recesses of the self,”²⁰⁸ the excavation of which is the first step towards cure. In the beginning is dysphoria, then introspection and knowledge extraction, followed by transition, and finally euphoria.

This is exactly the narrative arc of Elliot Page’s 2023 memoir *Pageboy*, one I would not hesitate to call holistic in its fidelity to root cause as an interpretive program and curative paradigm. Gender identity figures here as a kind of mystical kernel of selfhood, something that Page was aware of from an early age—“not in a conscious sense but in a pure sense, uncontaminated”²⁰⁹—but could not pronounce, indeed would not pronounce until much later. Page’s childhood days are filled with classically tomboyish fun, but from puberty onwards, his life is nothing but misery, in the forms of debilitating discomfort, depression, anxiety, assault, anorexia, and self-harm, all of which stem from Page’s untreated transness; the memoir is so suffuse with suffering that at one point Page recalls wondering, “How was I in so much pain?”²¹⁰ For reasons of mainstream cultural conservatism and the exigencies of the film industry, but chiefly a result of repression: Page strenuously disavowed the possibility of his being trans for the first three decades of his life, even though “inherently something in me knew that I was transgender. Something I had always known but didn’t have the words for, wouldn’t permit myself to embrace.”²¹¹ This something unnamed and unembraced, Page’s suffering compounds: “‘Why do I feel this way?’ I’d plead. ‘What is this

to distance himself from the specter of transmedicalism, he says this is only true for some people), “self-identification is insufficient precisely because it does not remedy the distress of dysphoria; in other words, it is not sufficient for symptom management.” “Is Transsexualism Chronic?,” *Feminist Studies* 48, no. 2 (2022), 490. Or, in Amin’s words, “What is socially relevant is *transition* – a shift in social gender categories, whatever they may be – not *identification* – a personal, felt, and therefore highly phantasmatic and labile relation to these categories. *Identification is the psychic process that makes the interval between the individual and the social apparent; it is not the site of their suture*” (an irreparable interval, I would add, the suturing of which is never complete). “We Are All Nonbinary: A Brief History of Accidents,” *Representations* 158 (2022): 115. Emphases in original. Psychoanalysis would concur with these assessments: sex is not a component of self-identity, but the point of its failure, a failure that is experienced only in relation to the social-symbolic world.

²⁰⁸ Amin, “We Are All Nonbinary,” 116.

²⁰⁹ Elliot Page, *Pageboy* (New York: Flatiron, 2023), 14.

²¹⁰ Page, *Pageboy*, 195.

²¹¹ Page, *Pageboy*, 193.

feeling that never goes away? How can I be desperately uncomfortable all the time? How can I have this life and be in such pain?”²¹² On his thirtieth birthday, Page tries to entertain the notion—“I couldn’t quite touch the truth, but I could talk about my gender without bawling. That was a step,” if unfortunately a step too far: “As I crept closer to my truth, unconscious shame reared its head, bullying me to shut it down.”²¹³ Thence more repression (described as a “U-Turn”), more “sobbing,” indeed “an endless surge of sobs,” nothing but inarticulable pain.²¹⁴ Then some therapy, “slowly developing the skill to speak the words I needed to,” then a top surgery consultation scheduled and canceled, and finally a crossroads (or, just the same road): “Was I going to U-turn again? Or perhaps another would bring me home, return me to when I almost reached it, a last-minute stumble, a jump for the train.”²¹⁵ At this point memories come flooding back, as Page recalls the “friends I had asked, friends I had told. And again and again, I pushed it down, down, and down.”²¹⁶ But he will bury no more: the depth of his psyche will be surface! He will “find the words” to speak his truth, to announce his transness (on Instagram), to swiftly write a memoir through its lens. Before transitioning, “all I knew was permanent emptiness, a mystery I would never solve. Incessant, without language, a depth of despair.”²¹⁷ After, “Nothing but smiles. I felt listened to, I felt safe. My whole body took a deep breath.”²¹⁸ When Page does eventually get top surgery, photographic evidence attests to “the smile on my face, in my eyes, the degree of contentment glowing off me, phew.”²¹⁹ He has been on testosterone for over a year, and “every

²¹² Page, *Pageboy*, 196. Interestingly the only happy period of Page’s pre-transition adult life is when he takes a “Permaculture Design Certificate Course” at an intentional community in Oregon; one that (he cites from their website) “take[s] a holistic approach to sustainability education, engaging students in ecological, social, and personal growth.” *Pageboy*, 111.

²¹³ Page, *Pageboy*, 195, 239.

²¹⁴ Page, *Pageboy*, 239, 238.

²¹⁵ Page, *Pageboy*, 238, 250.

²¹⁶ Page, *Pageboy*, 251.

²¹⁷ Page, *Pageboy*, 256.

²¹⁸ Page, *Pageboy*, 255.

²¹⁹ Page, *Pageboy*, 257.

Friday I wake up excited yet content, a new sense of calm in my life.”²²⁰ As the penultimate chapter concludes: “Let me just exist with you, happier than ever.”²²¹ So we have, here, inner psychic gender as a “pure,” “uncontaminated” “truth,” the singular (and in this case repressed) source of the subject’s suffering, the myriad forms of which are all but expressions of this essence; suffering that is entirely assuaged as soon as its root cause is identified, avowed, and acted upon. Transition cures Page as the gender identity model slides imperceptibly into a functional medical model.

The problems with this model as holism incognito are manifold.²²² For one, Amin shows that the very idea of inner psychic gender was contrived by physicians in the mid-twentieth century in a deliberate attempt to withhold transition-related care from sex workers and others who might stand to profit, materially or otherwise, from hormones and surgery; to conceptually and somatically segregate respectable bourgeois transsexuals from their more enterprising siblings, which amounted to a split along racial lines. The whiteness of the “thesis that gender is psychic rather than social”²²³ is not at all surprising, and it goes some way toward explaining the gender identity model’s tethering of transition to cure, since whiteness, especially when accompanied by wealth, generally entails better care and more favorable medical outcomes. Another problem (less damning than the first, but significant nonetheless, and the one we will pursue here) is that this model is not particularly persuasive, its affective promise—that one can move from dysphoria to depth reading to transition and finally to contentment—routinely belied by the number of trans people who continue to feel like shit even after transitioning. The apparent root cause of their

²²⁰ Page, *Pageboy*, 261.

²²¹ Page, *Pageboy*, 262.

²²² Gherovici explicitly identifies this mid-century notion of gender identity with holism: “Until the invention of the notion of ‘gender identity’ in the second half of the 20th century, an identity that was experienced as an immutable psychic ‘sex’ felt internally, the loaded term bisexuality had defined the foundations of sex. [...] With the emergence of the notion of ‘gender’ seen as gender identity, sexual identity became a holistic notion for the psyche – one would feel either entirely male or entirely female at a psychic level, independently from what one could exhibit as organs present or not in one’s body.” *Please Select Your Gender*, 88.

²²³ Amin, “We Are All Nonbinary,” 117.

suffering—the mismatch between gender identity and gender positionality—has been ameliorated, but the symptom—dysphoria—persists. And this neither only because of countless inconveniences, across a spectrum of maliciousness, that render trans life anything from intermittently tricky to absolutely impossible, nor because one is never really done transitioning, because there is always another medical, legal, or interpersonal hoop to jump through (in more or less the same way that optimal health requires constant maintenance, and can never be achieved once and for all),²²⁴ but because, in addition to both of these things, *one is never done, full stop*: the asymptotic nature of subjectivity is structural.

Cameron Awkward-Rich's *The Terrible We: Thinking With Trans Maladjustment* is exemplary in showing that not-all-ness is not inimical to life, and that suffering is not the subject's ruination: they are that out of which a life is forged.²²⁵ For Awkward-Rich, trans maladjustment describes the “durable association between trans identity and particular bad feelings and mad habits of thought,” including “depression, social withdrawal, unruly post-traumatic identity/affect, suicidality, dysphoria, feeling haunted, and so on”; despite the constant and deprecating appeal to pathology in transphobic discourse, sickness and maladjustment cannot—indeed should not—be wished away, as if they could be nothing but detrimental to trans people and to trans politics, which would be infinitely better off without them.²²⁶ One of Awkward-Rich's decisive interventions is to refuse to understand trans negativity as reducible to transphobia (the standard rebuttal to trans-antagonistic insistences on trans pathology), to take trans negativity seriously only insofar as it

²²⁴ In a talk at New York University on October 7, 2016, Susan Stryker jokingly asked if, having completed every conceivable ‘stage’ of transition, she now qualified as cis.

²²⁵ This is born out particularly in Awkward-Rich's reading of honorary transmasculine Carson McCullers's *The Member of the Wedding*: “McCullers knew as well as anyone that pain, both physical and psychic, cannot be thought of as *only* hostile to life because it is often the medium in which life unfolds,”; her work requires us to “recognize – without romanticizing – various kinds of injury and impairment as productive of their own worlds and rhythms.” *The Terrible We: Thinking with Trans Maladjustment* (Durham: Duke UP, 2022), 21–22. Emphasis in original.

²²⁶ Awkward-Rich, *The Terrible We*, 6.

indexes this transphobia: “while the predominant version of contemporary trans-affirmative thought encourages us to read these forms of trans maladjustment only as outcomes of oppression, ‘symptomatic of the destructive forces in which these infelicitous subjects are caught,’ I read them as (also) integral to trans epistemology and cultural production: they point toward ways of knowing (and not-knowing), of living (and not-living) that arise from within being so caught.”²²⁷ By holding open the possibility that the unpleasantness of trans life is not entirely commensurate with the conditions of its social existence—that trans negativity is overdetermined, the last instance in which cissexism would be determinate never to come—Awkward-Rich contests the prevailing consensus that “in order to do work that affirms trans people as living viable lives, forms of maladjustment must always and only be seen as coming from the outside,”²²⁸ and sets out to theorize the particular ways in which trans life is experienced as incomplete, unpleasurable, maladjusted; the bad affects that appear again and again in accounts of trans life, not only before transition, but during it and after it as well. Indeed Awkward-Rich describes the intractability of bad feeling in a way that those sympathetic to psychoanalysis can no doubt appreciate: “Of course, bad feelings are produced and exacerbated by social structures, and one must be able to attend to this. But also, one must expect that there will always be a residue of bad feeling, an unavoidable fact of being embodied, of being a self in a world inevitably split by difference.”²²⁹ In some of the works that Awkward-Rich reads, negative affect (both repressive and residual) is harnessed to creative or liberatory ends, becoming a source of movement, relation, and perverse pleasure; in others, it just blows. We can make use of bad feeling or try to ignore it, we can enjoy it or just bear it—the choice is ours alone to make. The only thing we can’t do with bad feeling is eliminate it.

²²⁷ Awkward-Rich, *The Terrible We*, 6.

²²⁸ Awkward-Rich, *The Terrible We*, 13.

²²⁹ Awkward-Rich, *The Terrible We*, 74.

It is in this sense that Cassius Adair wonders, as the title of his article asks, “Is Transsexualism Chronic?” Though Adair’s primary interest is in articulating multiple possible chronologies of transness—“both chronic and acute forms,” neither of which would cast doubt on the other—and thus in contesting endurance as the exclusive marker of trans legitimacy, he makes the quite compelling point that according to the gender identity model, transness constitutes a kind of “temporal paradox: a chronic condition that is simultaneously understood as itself a type of cure.”²³⁰ If “medical intervention is supposed to cure you of being trans,” then those who remain trans, those whose dysphoria persists (whether because structural barriers prevent them from accessing the transition protocols they desire, or because those protocols simply fail to subdue it)—the chronic transsexuals—are those for whom cure is, in all likelihood, foreclosed: “Perhaps ‘trans’ can mean not only a type of person but a temporal state of not-yet-feeling-better.”²³¹ This chronic not-yet-feeling-better belies gender identity’s guarantee of post-transition gaiety and consigns the subject to a life of affective “management”²³² in lieu of cure.

Both Adair and Awkward-Rich cite Eli Clare’s *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure*, an elegant and thoroughgoing condemnation of the ideology of cure and the cruel logics that lurk behind its facade of optimistic futurity, in which the allocation of resources to research organizations and nonprofits that aim, at some unspecified date, to rid the world of *x*, *y*, or *z* disability through cure takes precedent over the provision of financial, infrastructural, and other accommodations for disabled people in the present; in which the merit of this curing is unquestioned, and the possibility of changing the world instead unthought. The ideology of cure privileges symptomlessness over symptom lessening, even at the price of ultimately providing

²³⁰ Adair, “Is Transsexualism Chronic?,” 499.

²³¹ Adair, “Is Transsexualism Chronic?,” 487, 490.

²³² Adair, “Is Transsexualism Chronic?,” 493.

neither: “cure promises resolution to body-mind loss,” not a way of mitigating, managing, or making a good-enough life out of that loss; “cure promises wholeness” but constantly comes up empty.²³³ As Awkward-Rich writes, Clare’s work “offers a way of knowing that is inextricably tethered to unbearable social and historical conditions and so is a particular way of bearing them.”²³⁴

Malatino chronicles five affective forms of such bearing in *Side Affects: On Being Trans and Feeling Bad*; these are fatigue, numbness, envy, rage, and burnout. Motivated by “the durability of negativity, the bad feelings that persist before, during, and after such moments of euphoria, the bad feelings that aren’t ameliorated by such euphoria, the bad feelings that transition doesn’t, can’t possibly eliminate,” Malatino unravels a “a trans specificity to certain ways of feeling bad,” a suite of ordinary sensations that delimit trans life largely to the side of the two emotional poles—dysphoria and delight—around which the gender identity model is organized.²³⁵ But most intriguing is Malatino’s final chapter on “whiteness and healing”: the assortment of alternative and indeed holistic (“integrative medicine” is cited) solutions to enduring affective negativity that may extend healing to some, but that also “appropriate, exclude, and entrench

²³³ Eli Claire, *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure* (Durham: Duke UP, 2017), xvi, 159.

²³⁴ Awkward-Rich, *The Terrible We*, 99.

²³⁵ Malatino, *Side Affects*, 2–3. It should be said that Malatino is explicitly uninterested in dysphoria because, on the one hand, he sees it as too bound up with transmedicalization, such that “discomfort and distress” become the arbiters of trans authenticity, and thereby install a “constitutive criteria that unifies transness,” when we all know that identity categories should have no such minimal conditions; and on the other, because he sees dysphoria as an insufficiently capacious affect, one incapable of encompassing ambivalence, pleasure, or other feelings, as the exclusive phenomenon of transphobia (“dysphoria is a conceptually tidy name for the felt impacts of inhabiting transphobic social worlds; we might even all it an epiphenomenal byproduct of such inhabitations” – though this is an odd bone to pick, given that Malatino repeatedly skirts the possibility that the five bad feelings he is interested in exceed transantagonism, or else, only he ever theorizes them as its consequences, without at any point saying that they are only its consequences), and as insufficiently relational (“dysphoria is individuating – about how we feel, on our own, in our bodies and about our being in the world”). *Side Affects*, 102–103. I disagree with the first point because I am crotchety and old-fashioned; with the second because it seems to me that dysphoria, when understood as something akin to *jouissance*, is emphatically *not* exclusive of enjoyment or other seemingly contradictory affects, *not* reducible to repressive social conditions, and *not* isolating, but precisely something that opens us up to the world.

individualized neoliberal models of self-transformation and self-care.”²³⁶ Malatino “turns a critical lens on trans discourses of spirituality, healing, wholeness, and becoming,” on “trans New Age discourse”²³⁷ insofar as it is bound up with the simultaneous exoticization and expropriation of subjugated medical modalities—think Amanda Chantal Bacon’s citation of “Ayurveda”²³⁸—that does nothing to redress the differential distribution of vulnerability to bad feeling that disadvantages the non-white and non-wealthy. In other words, when white trans people play shaman to pursue “feelings of wholeness, unity, and oneness,”²³⁹ they reproduce an understanding of bad feeling as a personal, spiritual plight, not a structural or collective situation, and shore up coloniality to boot. The interesting thing about dysphoria, of course, is that it is at once singular and common, the always particular manifestation of a universal foreclosure (the possibility of being cured of one’s transness); a force of incompleteness or non-closure that will be colored and compounded by exploitation, but that will not be resolved by its retreat. It is both a spiritual plight (in the *sinthome* seminar, Lacan refers off-handedly to a “slender jouissance” that “we call *esprit*”²⁴⁰) and a structural problem, one that can be alleviated but never eliminated in both of these forms.

We arrive, at last, at the essay that arguably initiated the negative turn: Andrea Long Chu’s 2018 “My New Vagina Won’t Make Me Happy.” Here is how Chu describes dysphoria for the uninitiated: “Dysphoria feels like being unable to get warm, no matter how many layers you put on. It feels like hunger without appetite. It feels like getting on an airplane to fly home, only to realize mid-flight that this is it: You’re going to spend the rest of your life on an airplane.”²⁴¹ More

²³⁶ Malatino, *Side Affects*, 171, 17.

²³⁷ Malatino, *Side Affects*, 171, 194.

²³⁸ Bacon, *The Moon Juice Cookbook*, 10.

²³⁹ Malatino, *Side Affects*, 196.

²⁴⁰ Lacan, *The Sinthome*, 50.

²⁴¹ Andrea Long Chu, “My New Vagina Won’t Make Me Happy,” *The New York Times*, November 24, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/24/opinion/sunday/vaginoplasty-transgender-medicine.html>.

often than not (but congratulations are due to anyone who constitutes an exception), transition does not cure dysphoria, but that does not mean transition is not worth pursuing, and it certainly does not mean that practitioners should withhold its medical mechanisms because of a patient's profession of pessimism—something that happens not infrequently: to get hormones and surgery, one must “pretend that these treatments will make the pain go away.”²⁴² In Chu's view, access to transition should be granted not (only) to those who insist it will end their suffering, but to anyone who says they want it. As she writes, smuggling a Lacanian axiom into a Sunday Opinion piece, “Transition doesn't have to make me happy for me to want it. Left to their own devices, people will rarely pursue what makes them feel good in the long term. Desire and happiness are independent agents.”²⁴³ For Chu, transition looks less like cure and more like palliative care. This is wellbeing for the not-whole: a way of making things suck marginally less, because there's simply no way out of the morass of malaise. Sometimes symptom management is all that's possible.

To summarize: *feeling like shit* is an inalienable part of (trans) life; this thesis provides a timely corrective to the identification of optimism with optimization (the belief, we might say, that one's new vagina will make them unconditionally happy) but—and what amounts to the same thing—to the model of the subject touted by functional medicine: one who, with some sustained self-enterprising effort, can successfully ameliorate their bad feelings. The holists doubly miss the mark, maligning symptom management—something crucially necessary, for as we have seen, there is not always a root cause to correct—and at the same time ignoring an entire contingent of potential causes: the structures in which the subject is ensnared. Jasbir Puar's work on debility—

²⁴² Chu, “My New Vagina.”

²⁴³ Chu, “My New Vagina.”

the forms of injury and illness “endemic”²⁴⁴ (rather than epidemic or exceptional) to Black and brown populations routinely exposed to environmental toxicity, food apartheid, medical malpractice, hyper-incarceration, and income insecurity, among other modalities of bodily harm—lends itself to a critique of holistic health as a deeply short-sighted, if not entirely misguided, response to the failings of biomedicine, as an ideology that obscures many of the major causes of chronic illness by locating the system to be altered or transformed *inside* the individual subject—something we will consider in the next chapter. Of course, psychoanalysis would caution us against locating the seat of sickness in structures of inequity *exclusively*; that is, against simply taking holism’s strong determinism in the other direction, insisting that sickness is the sole province of domination, without which we would all be well.

We might conclude with a recent spate of TikToks in which users diagnose themselves with hysteria and prescribe themselves the sea cure. A generation at considerable temporal and cultural remove from the Golden Age of Hysteria appears to have found in it something of value: a vision of health quite different from that of holism’s punitive insistence on symptomless unity. In these short videos, women in white dresses lounge in the sand, eat fruit, read books, play cards, and dip their toes in the ocean. This is the Janus face of Amanda Chantal Bacon’s New Age Nancy Meyers aesthetic: rather than securing optimal health on the condition of permanent behavioral modulation, we might just go to the beach, and hope that it makes us feel, if only briefly, a little bit better.

²⁴⁴ Puar, *The Right to Maim*, xiv.

2. holobiont: of microbes and monists

Recognition of the motley crew of microbes sustaining the so-called subject renders the notion of the individual old hat—or so we hear from the more-than-humanists. In “A Symbiotic View of Life: We Have Never Been Individuals,” Scott Gilbert, Jann Sapp, and Alfred Tauber write that next-generation sequencing has uncovered “a world of complex and intermingled *relationships*—not only among microbes, but between microscopic and macroscopic life,” pushing us in “directions that transcend the self/nonself, subject/object dichotomies that have characterized Western thought” and “transforming the classical conception of an insular individuality into one in which interactive relationships among species blurs [sic] the boundaries of the organism.”¹ Gilbert et al. conclude with the pithy claim that “we are all lichens,”² symbionts of fungus and algae, and Donna Haraway borrows this phrase (which cannot but recall Rimbaud’s more obviously dubious “I is another”³) as an epigraph for the second chapter of *Staying with the Trouble*, asking just after: “What happens when human exceptionalism and bounded individualism, those old saws of Western philosophy and political economics, become unthinkable in the best sciences?”⁴ Our task for these Chthulucenic times, as Haraway sees it, is to “think well about sympoiesis, symbiosis, symbiogenesis, development, webbed ecologies, and microbes.”⁵ As Jamie Lorimer puts it in *The Probiotic Planet*, by “focus[ing] on questions of symbiosis and

¹ Scott Gilbert, Jan Sapp, and Alfred Tauber, “A Symbiotic View of Life: We Have Never Been Individuals,” *The Quarterly Review of Biology* 87, no. 4 (2012): 326. Emphasis in original.

² Gilbert et al., “A Symbiotic View of Life,” 336.

³ See Kara Keeling, “I = Another: Digital Identity Politics,” in *Strange Affinities: The Gender and Sexual Politics of Comparative Racialization*, ed. Grace Kyungwon Hong and Roderick A. Ferguson (Durham: Duke UP, 2011), 53–75, on the promises and perils of this formula picked up by Deleuze in *Cinema 2*. Keeling argues that though the risks of appropriation and essentialism are significant and always threaten to stymie its potential, the equation nonetheless expresses “a radical promise, a present and future responsibility to *the other within us*, to the ‘us’ that is the now each of ‘you,’ and to the ‘we’ referenced by each ‘I.’” “I = Another,” 74. Emphasis added.

⁴ Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke UP, 2016), 30.

⁵ Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 49.

symbiogenesis—the reciprocal, coevolutionary relationships and dependencies between life-forms,” the Gaian science sowed by Haraway, Lynn Margulis, and Isabelle Stengers “stretches and subverts the neo-Darwinian figure of the bounded human individual, emphasizing both its microbial composition and its planetary entanglements.”⁶

From a different disciplinary location, the anthropologist Eduardo Kohn argues in his recent article “Forest Forms and Ethical Life” that *forest* properly names the emergent wholes, including “our gut microbiome,”⁷ from which a new ethics must proceed. By appreciating the “circular wholeness” of all life forms (and indeed of life forms as an All), or by recognizing “the forest whole of which we are but a part,” we can at last “abandon the exceptional and bounded human self we thought we were” and “begin to envision a form of planetary repair.”⁸ Judith Butler concurs in their penultimate book *What World Is This?*, proposing that viral and climatic catastrophe “upend our usual sense of the bounded self, casting us as relational, interactive, and refuting the ego-logical and self-interested bases of ethics itself,” putting the possibility of a truly common world within our reach; individualism nevertheless persists as a “fantasy” in which “‘individuals’ imagine themselves separate from toxic air and soil, from microbes and bacteria.”⁹ By the same token, Ed Cohen maintains in *A Body Worth Defending* that despite the late-nineteenth-century transformation of immunity as a politico-juridical concept into a biomedical one—and concomitantly, “bacteriology’s equation of microbes with invaders”—“the body is not

⁶ Jamie Lorimer, *The Probiotic Planet: Using Life to Manage Life* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2020), 6.

⁷ Eduardo Kohn, “Forest Forms and Ethical Life,” *Environmental Humanities* 14, no. 2 (2022): 402. Kohn’s neat and tidy identification of Sápara cosmology with cybernetics leaves a bad taste in my mouth, especially insofar as their congruity is presupposed and never explicitly addressed.

⁸ Kohn, “Forest Forms,” 411, 403, 417.

⁹ Judith Butler, *What World is This? A Pandemic Phenomenology* (New York: Columbia UP, 2022), 12, 66, 108.

a defensible boundary” and “our indivisible individuality...lives in our imaginations, not our cells.”¹⁰

Also decrying the immunological model “in which the body is positioned as a discrete milieu that must be defended against external pathogens,” Kyla Schuller contends in “The Microbial Self” that “medical research is slowly inching toward a perspective increasingly insisted on by environmental humanities scholars...that we live our lives fully imbricated with our environments, including microbial life-forms, which not only are interdependent with us but, more fundamentally, do not preexist as separate entities”—a perspective with “the potential to challenge the narrative of the self-possessed individual on which the political tradition of liberalism relies.”¹¹ To this point, Jane Bennett suggests in *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* that “the locus of political responsibility is a human-nonhuman assemblage,” such that “on close-enough inspection, the productive power that has engendered an effect will turn out to be a confederacy, and the human actants within it will themselves turn out to be confederations of tools, microbes, minerals, sounds, and other ‘foreign’ materialities.”¹² And in her more recent *influx and efflux: writing up with Walt Whitman*—a treatise that takes up some of the same themes as Smuts’s own monograph on the poet, but eschews capitalization to indicate its formal innovativeness and philosophical daring—Bennett reiterates that, hardly the “indivisible, bounded units” of political theory’s yesteryear, “a swarm of nonhumans are at work *inside* and *as* us; we are powered by a host of inner aliens, including ingested plants, animals, pharmaceuticals, and the microbiomes

¹⁰ Cohen, *A Body Worth Defending*, 30, 70, 73. Elided from this last sentence is a reference to Dorion Sagan, whose name is misspelled but who is generously described as an evolutionary biologist; Cohen’s neat and tidy identification of Okanagan metaphysics with Sagan’s pop microbiology also leaves a bad taste in my mouth. The point is not, of course, that no affinities between indigenous philosophy and systems science can or should exist, but that they cannot be taken for granted!

¹¹ Kyla Schuller, “The Microbial Self: Sensation and Sympoiesis,” *Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities* 5, no. 3 (2016): 52, 53, 54.

¹² Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 36.

upon which thinking itself relies.”¹³ Ed Yong sums it up in his eminently popular pop science book titled—what else?—*I Contain Multitudes*: “Microbes subvert our notions of individuality,” and “I *am* multitudes” ultimately supplants Whitman’s weaker claim to simply contain them.¹⁴

In the ten texts glossed ungenerously and all too briefly here, microbes give the lie to the conceit of the bounded individual, which is revealed to be both empirically fallacious and politically retrograde; the human subject is recast as a *holobiont*, a “superorganism,”¹⁵ a “symbiotic assemblage,”¹⁶ or an “integrated community of species”¹⁷; and this microbial corrective’s undermining of Western thought is said to be a boon for biopolitics and for the biosphere, an ethics of interdependency and care following from the realization of our irreducible relatedness to others at every scale of existence.¹⁸ At the risk of sounding absolutely insufferable, we might still want to ask: which Western thought is this? Or more precisely, in what sense can microbiology be meaningfully excluded from it? We ask this not to exonerate the West of epistemic wrongdoing; incredibly, this is almost what the heralds of the holobiont do in claiming that it was ignorance and not indifference—a failure to appreciate that we are but “critters becoming-with each other”¹⁹ rather than a fuck you to our crittery confederates—responsible for the human’s mistaken self-image and attendant planetary plunder (e.g. Bennett: “We are, rather, an *array of bodies*, many

¹³ Bennett, *influx and efflux: writing up with Walt Whitman* (Durham: Duke UP, 2020), xii, xi. Emphasis in original.

¹⁴ Ed Yong, *I Contain Multitudes: The Microbes Within Us and a Grander View of Life* (New York: Ecco, 2016), 24. Emphasis in original.

¹⁵ Lorimer, *The Probiotic Planet*, 38.

¹⁶ Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 60.

¹⁷ Gilbert et al., “A Symbiotic View of Life,” 334.

¹⁸ Butler writes, for example, that though viral pandemics may seem to underscore the dangers of interdependency or organismic imbrication, “*interdependency is also the way out*. It implies a vision of global health, equal accessibility, free vaccines, and the end to profit-mongering by pharmaceuticals. Interdependency is also the possibility we may have for sensual ecstasy, for the support we need to live, and for radical equality and alliances committed to building and sustaining a livable world in common.” *What World Is This?*, 64. Emphasis added. To Butler’s credit, they eventually acknowledge that “the task is less a simple affirmation of interdependency than a collective effort to find or forge the best form of interdependency”; this finding and forging is, I will argue, precisely what Georges Canguilhem has in mind when insists that the norm or ideal of sociality does not emerge spontaneously from the fact of sociality, but must be invented. *What World Is This?*, 83.

¹⁹ Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 60.

different kinds of them in a nested set of microbiomes. If more people marked this fact more of the time, if we were more attentive to the indispensable foreignness that we are, would we continue to produce and consume in the same violently reckless ways?²⁰ Or Kohn: “A modernized ethics is one that stems from a modern distinction between nature and culture....An ecologized ethics, by contrast, grows from a recognition that we are part of a larger living whole that exceeds us.”²¹ Attention to nested systems + recognition of wholeness = renewed ethico-ecological orientation to the world. Is this not “the politics of holistic consciousness circa 1968”?²² We ask it instead to flag a curious tendency, one we might call *the microbial trump card*, that has become de rigueur in the inhumanities: Western thought is identified as the ideological backbone of everything from colonialism to climate catastrophe—we have no bone, as it were, to pick with this—but then no less Western thought (and biology to boot!) is credited with delivering us from this conceptual quagmire: Lynn Margulis defeats John Locke, bacterial symbiogenesis bests Descartes, the mere mention of microbes put us on the path toward better politics. As Schuller has it, self-possession is the hinge of “the humanist worldview that has brought us to the edge of planetary chaos,” but sympoiesis “marks both [sic] a descriptor of the entanglements that underpin life—and not necessarily to the advantage of human survival—and offers a model for new forms of multispecies kinship that will be necessary amid an increasingly precarious existence.”²³ The “[both marks] a descriptor...and offers a model” here is telling, suggesting as it does that the basic fact of our being entangled implies the desirable form of that entangling, or supplies for it some prefabricated ethical content. The self-possessed individual that the microbial trump card is imagined to displace must

²⁰ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 112–113. Emphasis in original.

²¹ Kohn, “Forest Forms,” 403.

²² Fred Turner, “The Politics of the Whole Circa 1968—And Now,” in *The Whole Earth: California and the Disappearance of the Outside* (Berlin: Haus der Kulturen der Welt and Sternberg Press, 2013), 43.

²³ Schuller, “The Microbial Self,” 57.

be bounded, because he is filled with straw. The point is not to let him off the hook, but to prepare for the possibility that an epistemic shift away from the individual and toward the relation, the (eco)system, the holobiont, or the whole will not provide the salvation we are seeking.

We are not, needless to say, the first to levy this kind of criticism, least not against the more sanguine of microbial missionaries. Lorimer, sympathetic to sympoiesis though he is, notes that “while the identification of the human as a symbiotic holobiont has been taken by some social theorists to undermine models of the competitive, individual human subject...this is not how the microbiome is commonly conceived by immunologists” and advises us against “making naive epistemic alliances with the biological sciences, now that they offer more palatable ontostories to ground liberal, antiracist, and more-than-humanist projects.”²⁴ Heather Paxson and Stefan Helmreich have also flagged the temptation to fold political desires into systemic properties in the new materialist brio for all things microbial, writing that “microbes—especially when thriving as microbial communities—are being upheld as *model ecosystems* in a prescriptive sense, as tokens of how organisms and human ecological relations with them *could, should, or might* be.”²⁵ And Helmreich has cautioned elsewhere that “a clear politics of the ‘human’ do not necessarily follow from redescriptions of the biological” and that “the biology, as astonishing as it is, does not tell us what it will mean...‘biology’ does not speak for itself.”²⁶

²⁴ Lorimer, *The Probiotic Planet*, 73–74, 226. Lorimer is critical of probiotic forms of subject formation that hail the holobiont only to reproduce extant patterns of oppression, but he leaves the logic of scale that underwrites these practices and the probiotic turn in general—“a common scientific ontostory of a world made up of connected spheres, linked across scales,” “from the micro scale to the planetary scale”—largely uninterrogated. *The Probiotic Planet*, 214, 50–51. Or else, Lorimer identifies and then tacitly accepts the “Gaian ontostory of nested systems,” picking his fight with practices of probiotic governance (like the helminth therapy predicated on biotic resource extraction from the Global South) rather than—and as I think is crucially necessary—with the very conceit of this nestedness. *The Probiotic Planet*, 7.

²⁵ Heather Paxson and Stefan Helmreich, “The Perils and Promises of Microbial Abundance: Novel Natures and Model Ecosystems, from Artisanal Cheese to Alien Seas,” *Social Studies of Science* 44, no. 2 (2014): 165. Emphasis in original.

²⁶ Stefan Helmreich, “Homo microbis: The Human Microbiome, Figural, Literal, Political,” *Thresholds* 42 (2014): 56, 59.

Scholars working in Black and Caribbean studies have also taken to task celebratory rhetorics of relationality more generally. In her wonderfully scathing “Blackness and the Pitfalls of Anthropocene Ethics,” Axelle Karera argues that ecocriticism’s shirking of racial antagonism “in the name of a shortsighted conception of ‘becoming’ and an aggrandized notion of ontological relationality” has rendered it completely incapable of developing a properly political concept of climate change.²⁷ “Insofar as the constant recognition of our existential interdependency cannot substantially challenge the many forms of segregation on the steady rise in our current times,” she writes, “it seems to me that assuming the inevitability of our ontological entanglement may need some re-thinking.”²⁸ And in her short monograph *This Will Not Be Generative*, Dixa Ramírez-D’Oleo argues that ecological thought relies on a kind of “forced or coerced relationality,” “obscur[ing] that what looks like relation from one perspective is parasitism from another,” and demonstrates that this work’s all-too-eager apocalyptic projections presume the endurance of “white survival and control—even in rhetorical symbiosis with local ecologies and as abetted by fantasies of communion with (non-African) Indigenous groups.”²⁹

Ramírez-D’Oleo also homes in on the environmental humanities’ anti-critical recourse to a suspect concept of “community,” to a “we” that conveniently elides ongoing histories of violent exclusion to postulate a “flat horizontal plane” of relationality.³⁰ Here we want to dwell on the concept of microbial community in particular, on the claim that the human *qua* holobiont is “an integrated community of species,” a “symbiotic multispecies community,”³¹ or a “cooperative

²⁷ Axelle Karera, “Blackness and the Pitfalls of Anthropocene Ethics,” *Critical Philosophy of Race* 7, no. 1 (2019): 44.

²⁸ Karera, “Blackness and the Pitfalls of Anthropocene Ethics,” 48.

²⁹ Dixa Ramírez-D’Oleo, *This Will Not Be Generative* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2023), 8, 14, 7.

³⁰ Ramírez-D’Oleo, *This Will Not Be Generative*, 5.

³¹ David Griffiths, “Queer Theory for Lichens,” *UnderCurrents: Journal of Critical Environmental Studies* 19 (2015): 41. “This rethinking of the human individual as a lichen-like multispecies community...”

community,”³² and on its corollary—the specter of the community as an organism. Indeed, when the human is redescribed, by virtue of its microbial make-up, as a “committee,”³³ a “confederacy,” or a community, and this committee/confederacy/community as an epistemo-political salve for late liberalism, the human is being romantically identified with an idealized social arrangement (*you can love me too—I am so like the ecosystem*³⁴) of which it also forms part. In this mutation of the age-old social organism metaphor, just modes of relation (no one ever mentions the tendency of microbes to colonize³⁵) are said to be immanent to the very existence of relation: with-ness is granted a priori ethical value, or else, being-with becomes an end in itself. The human organism is at once an expression and an element of a multispecies social formation that is emergent, self-organizing,³⁶ and inescapable; that admits of no exceptions: “everything is connected to something.”³⁷ This chapter argues that something is, in fact, connected to nothing, or else, that the connections into which human organisms enter are predicated on the existence of something connected to nothing, on there being something missing from the social field.

For both Georges Canguilhem and Jean-Luc Nancy, this something subtracted from the social world is absolutely crucial, and it thwarts the analogic apparition incessantly conjured in

³² Penelope Ironstone, “Me, My Self, and the Multitude: Microbiopolitics of the Human Microbiome,” *European Journal of Social Theory* 22, no. 3 (2019): 332. “The biological individual is better understood to be the expression of the activities of several ecosystems working in tandem, a cooperative community.”

³³ Dorion Sagan and Lynn Margulis quoted in Schuller, 51.

³⁴ Notably, Freud’s discussion of the ego’s incorporation of a renounced sexual object in *The Ego and the Id* (from whence comes the famous “you can love me too—I am so like the object”) includes a reference to the totem meal in which an animal whose ingestion is prohibited is consumed by the members of that totem’s clan. *The Ego and the Id*, 29n2. In *Totem and Taboo* Freud identifies the origin of this ritual with the killing and eating of the father of the primal horde—the basis of his more sustained theorization of archaic heritage, or the collective dimension of the unconscious, in *Moses and Monotheism*. Social organization (indeed “community”) is born out of the simultaneous expulsion-incorporation of the primal father, and transmits the failure of this action to secure the “democratic equality” that it was carried out to engender. See *Group Psychology*, 122; *Totem and Taboo*, SE vol. XIII, trans. and ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1955), 151. This will be one focus of the following chapter.

³⁵ Of course we only describe this process as colonization because colonization is something *we* do, but that is a somewhat different can of hookworms...

³⁶ Both Kohn and Bennett emphasize the emergent and self-organizing capacities of living or lively systems, but Haraway, it should be said, cannot abide the insistence on symposiosis and self-organization at once.

³⁷ Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 31.

our conceptual—and, as we will see, commercial—microbiome mania: the organism as a (microbial) community and the (microbial) community as an organism. “What is a community? It is not a macroorganism,”³⁸ writes Nancy in *Being Singular Plural*, extending his earlier claim, in *The Inoperative Community*, that “community is not an organic whole.”³⁹ Though the organismic analogy is a more minor focus of Nancy’s than it is of Canguilhem’s, Nancy sees reflected in it the decidedly dangerous idea of a community’s completion, its formation of a fusional totality (putting to work the death of its members in order to reify a group identity) and its disavowal of the singular being’s displacement from herself. The subject (though this is not the word Nancy uses) can relate to others only because, being outside herself, she must relate to the other that *is* herself; without the “excess” or “transcendence” of finite being no relation—no community—would be possible.⁴⁰ For Nancy community is nothing but the experience of non-identity (“the outside-of-self”) and of “resistance to fusion,” which is to say, the loss of immanence: “such a ‘loss’ is constitutive of community itself.”⁴¹ Whereas the concept of the organism (though, Nancy takes care to say, nothing prevents us from thinking the organism otherwise) presupposes the labor of its parts in the service of totality, or assumes “the whole as form and final reason,”⁴² community opposes itself to work, to ends, and to anything “greater than ‘myself’”⁴³: with community there can be no question of synthesis or sublation, of a totality superior to the relations that comprise it.

³⁸ Jean-Luc Nancy, “Eulogy for the Mêlée,” in *Being Singular Plural*, trans. Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O’Byrne (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2000), 154.

³⁹ Jean-Luc Nancy, “‘Literary Communism,’” in *The Inoperative Community*, trans. Peter Connor, Lisa Garbus, Michael Holland, and Simona Sawhney (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1991), 76.

⁴⁰ Nancy, “The Inoperative Community,” in *The Inoperative Community*, 18.

⁴¹ Jean-Luc Nancy, “The Inoperative Community,” 19, 20, 12. Nancy’s scare quotes here indicate his wariness of lack in general, and he repeatedly attempts (not altogether convincingly) to temper the claims he makes for its existence, going so far as to identify community with Freud’s collective unconscious (qua archaic heritage), and then to immediately disavow this identification on the basis that this consciousness cannot be *un*. See “The Inoperative Community,” 19.

⁴² Nancy, “Literary Communism,” 76.

⁴³ Nancy, “The Inoperative Community,” 19.

Community is characterized not by the production of a determinate form or by its parts “forming into the substance or the higher power of a Whole,”⁴⁴ but by an “incessant *incompletion*,”⁴⁵ a *failure* to congeal or cohere into some larger entity. There is community or being-in-common only if there is an abdication of totality, of the concept of the community as a container.⁴⁶

Canguilhem, for his part, spent several decades inveighing against the organism-society analogy; to describe the social world as an organism, he argues, is to assume that the former has, in the first place, a pre-given ideal or norm, and in the second a self-regulatory tendency, an impulse that would incline it toward that norm’s preservation. But the social world has no such thing; whereas for the organism, Canguilhem writes in 1955, “the norm or rule of its existence is given in its existence itself” and is maintained through “a sort of command of the whole over the parts” (insofar as this norm appears “in the form of its totality”), “the life of a society does not inhere in society itself”: the shape of the social world is indeterminate, not provided or prescribed in advance.⁴⁷ The norm of human sociality must be invented *ex nihilo*; for this reason Canguilhem claims that society resembles not an organism but a tool, albeit “a tool that is always out of order, because it is deprived of its specific apparatus of self-regulation”⁴⁸ (it should be said that Lacan will go a step further than Canguilhem and insist that the human organism is not self-regulating either). The social world constitutively lacks this capacity for self-regulation, which is to say, for “spontaneous social justice”: the regulation of human relations is “something added on and always precarious...justice has to come from elsewhere.”⁴⁹ To claim otherwise (as in, for example, that

⁴⁴ Nancy, “Literary Communism,” 76.

⁴⁵ Nancy, “The Inoperative Community,” 38. Emphasis in original.

⁴⁶ “Community does not lie beyond the lovers, it does not form a larger circle in which they are contained” Nancy, “The Inoperative Community,” 40.

⁴⁷ Georges Canguilhem, “The Problem of Regulation in the Organism and in Society” in *Writings on Medicine*, 70, 74, 76, 71.

⁴⁸ Canguilhem, “The Problem of Regulation,” 77.

⁴⁹ Canguilhem, “The Problem of Regulation,” 78, 77. Emphasis added.

adage about the arc of the universe) is to mistake the social world for a whole: as Canguilhem puts it in 1973, “L’idéologie de l’autorégulation...est la représentation de l’ordre social sans lacunes et sans résidu.”⁵⁰ Because there are lacunas and residues, there is no self-regulation, no rule or principle that would bind us together in any predetermined form. It is our duty to “become just”⁵¹ precisely because justice is not guaranteed.

The wager of this chapter is that Lacan means much the same thing when he says that “there’s no such thing as a sexual relationship”: there is no natural or necessary way of relating to others (including ourselves); the existence of a relation predicates absolutely nothing about it.⁵² Or else: the fact that the human organism can be understood as an unbounded assemblage of uncountable relations does not automatically portend any ethical consequences. And so, at this point on the microbe-to-“radical multispecies relationality”⁵³ pipeline, we might return to a question posed by Joan Copjec: “Is it automatically the case that many are superior to two?”⁵⁴ Or else, how certain can we be that heeding the human as an ecosystem unto herself will help right any of our ongoing wrongs? It seems to us that in order to avoid the pitfalls of this all-too-tidy reversal of terms, we should take the subject as neither a naively insulated individual nor a happy-go-lucky holobiont (the precarity of whose continued existence is always proclaimed with a tinge of masochistic delight), but as a different kind of (dis)organization altogether. Declining possessive individualism on the one hand and both the multiplicity of Lilliputian intermingling and the monism of “the emergent harmonious and unfragmented self”⁵⁵ that Kohn calls “one-

⁵⁰ Georges Canguilhem, “La régulation comme réalité et comme fiction,” *Fin des normes ou crise des régulations?*, 3 conférences de Canguilhem à Louvain, 20–22 mars 1973, GC.25.17, Archives de Georges Canguilhem, Centre d’Archives en Philosophie, Histoire et Édition des Sciences, École Normale Supérieure, Paris, France.

⁵¹ Canguilhem, “The Problem of Regulation,” 78.

⁵² Lacan, *Encore*, 12.

⁵³ Ironstone, “Me, My Self, and the Multitude,” 333.

⁵⁴ Copjec, “The Sexual Compact,” 32. “Many are *more numerous*, certainly...”

⁵⁵ Kohn, “Forest Forms,” 414.

ment”⁵⁶ on the other (as those superficially familiar with Freud’s description of an “oceanic feeling”—the sensation of “being one with the external world as a whole”⁵⁷—might mistakenly assume it advocates), psychoanalysis insists on a two (an unusual two, to be sure: the two you never get from one and nought) that too many of us are wont to swiftly surpass. As Lacan puts it in his second seminar, in words that have not waned in relevance, Freud “wanted to save some kind of dualism at all costs, just when this dualism was crumbling in his hands, and when the ego, the libido, etc., all of that was tending to produce a kind of vast whole,” as colleagues succumbed to the siren song of Gestalt psychology and “reverted to a confused, unitary, naturalistic conception of man.”⁵⁸ Of course (and as the previous chapter belabored) this is a far cry from the dualism of complementarity; it is a dualism askew but well-suited to Freud’s discovery that “man isn’t entirely in man,”⁵⁹ that the subject is not immanent to herself. Indeed psychoanalysis has never ceased to maintain—as do the players of the microbial trump card—that the individual is not self-identical; the virtue of the former approach is to insist that she is not only more than but also less than herself.

For Lacan the subject is not self-possessed but *other*-possessed: she possesses (but not exclusively) an “intimate exteriority or ‘extimacy’”⁶⁰ that, far from prescribing the proper form of our being-with others, human or otherwise, in fact precludes the possibility of an uncomplicated relationship with either milieu or fellow man. We are not, Copjec argues, contained by a larger world of others (Kohn’s “larger living whole”); rather this larger world lurks within and as a (missing) part of us—a part that is, paradoxically, “greater than the individual who ‘contains’ it.”⁶¹

⁵⁶ Kohn, “Forest Forms,” 414. “One-ment” is Peirce’s term, coined at the end of an 1893 article on synechism, or “the tendency to regard everything as continuous,” C. S. Pierce, *The Essential Pierce: Selected Philosophical Writings*, Volume 2 (1893–1913), ed. The Pierce Edition Project (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1998), 1.

⁵⁷ Freud, *Civilization*, 65.

⁵⁸ Lacan, *The Ego in Freud’s Theory*, 37.

⁵⁹ Lacan, *The Ego in Freud’s Theory*, 72.

⁶⁰ Lacan, *Ethics*, 139.

⁶¹ Copjec, “The Sexual Compact,” 34.

Or, as Copjec puts it elsewhere, “There is something of the group in every individual, but that something cannot be consciously known by the individual. This something in the individual more than itself is ‘the group’ or ‘some One,’ something to which one belongs but in which one is not engulfed. For, though the group or the One is bigger than the individual, it figures as a *part of* the individual.”⁶² The stakes of this overturning of the holistic dictum—here the whole is not greater than the sum of its parts, but rather the part is greater than (because it is an opening in) that of which it is part, which can on no account be considered a whole—cannot be overstated. The subject contains, as a negative instance, the social world (we will consider Freud’s conception of archaic heritage and the unconscious as “a collective, universal property of mankind”⁶³ in the next chapter), which is to say, she contains the capacity to make this world something, or to make something of this world. Because we lack a pre-given mode of being-in-common (what would make the social world a self-regulating totality, were it not missing), we are capable—endowed with the technical capacity—to invent the conditions of our common being. Or else, we are responsible for the world precisely because it is *not* given: it is not the righteous multiplicity of relations, including those still awaiting their day under the microscope, but the radical lack of a *principle* of relation that allows us—and requires us—to give those relations form, to flesh out their possibilities, to (re)invent their qualities. Heeding the mere fact of world-sharing will not automatically make that world more livable for organisms misunderstood as communities or communities misunderstood as organisms—we must attend to the something connected to nothing, for it is this something on which the world rests. The first section of this chapter will trace the ambulations of the organism-society analogy through two health movements grounded in the

⁶² Copjec, “The Inheritance of Potentiality. An Interview with Joan Copjec,” *e-Rea* 12, no. 1 (2014). <https://journals.openedition.org/erea/4102>. Emphasis in original.

⁶³ Freud, *Moses and Monotheism: Three Essays*, SE vol. XXIII, trans. and ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1964), 132.

conceit of their commensurability; the second will turn to Canguilhem's and Lacan's remarks on regulation to argue that *there is no such thing as an ecological relationship*.

from probiotics to microbiome management: two lessons in sphere and scale

Not just the watchword of the more-than-humanists, the holobiont is also the subject hailed by Seed, a probiotic supplement company whose social media is instructive for its commercial appropriation of the microbial trump card's conceptual apparatus. Made popular by partnerships with high profile, Los Angeles-based wellness influencers like Jeannette Aranda (@shutthekaleup), Nicole Bruno (@nobread), and Carissa Stanton (@broccyourbody), and with the (also LA-based) health food emporium Erewhon, the first brick-and-mortar store to stock Seed, this capsulated bacteria behemoth is in many ways exemplary of the haphazard embrace of holistic, ecological, and systems biological concepts by consumer brands. Purchasable on their website only as an automatically renewing subscription service, and costing a little over a dollar fifty a probiotic pop, Seed nevertheless positions itself against the market mainstream, manufacturing, in addition to probiotics, viral merchandise (mostly sweatshirts, which they call "wearables" to emphasize the kinship of their capsules with presumably health-promoting self-tracking technologies like smartwatches) that cannot be purchased at all, but only "unlocked" by engaging with Seed on Instagram, typically by answering a series of questions in a given post's comments section, but sometimes more outlandishly, such as by uploading a photograph of one's shit.⁶⁴ This hyper-limited and putatively non-transactional "drop" model, where "you'll have to learn it to earn it,"⁶⁵ or "curiosity is your currency"⁶⁶ (copies of Yong's *I Contain Multitudes* and Lynn Margulis

⁶⁴ @seed, October 30, 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B4P9AvgB1mL/>.

⁶⁵ @seed, September 7, 2023, https://www.instagram.com/p/Cw5kNl2M4Y-/?img_index=1.

⁶⁶ @seed, November 23, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CH8MH-xp3Ev/>.

and Dorion Sagan’s *What is Life*—canonical texts for armchair microbiologists—have also been given away⁶⁷), functions at once as free advertising, insofar as high engagement guarantees an algorithmic privileging of Seed’s posts.

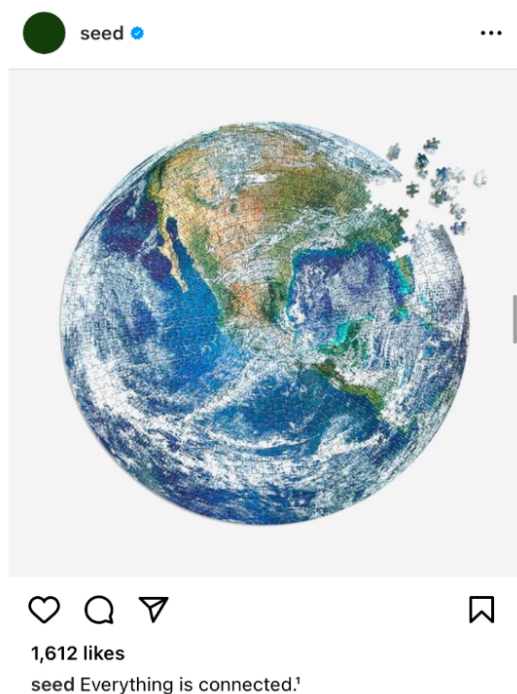


Figure 2.1: Screenshot of Seed Instagram post (April 15, 2021) of a puzzle of the Earth, with a caption that reads “Everything is connected.”

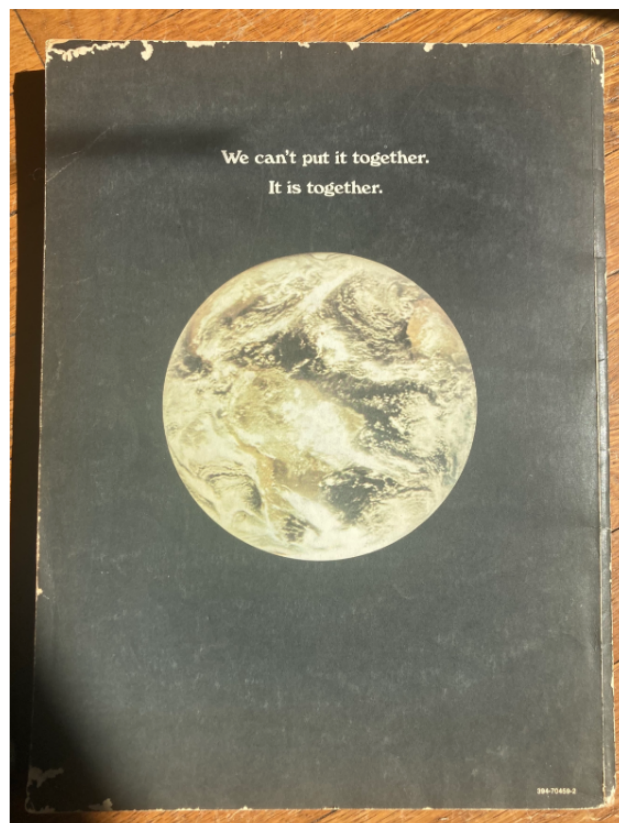


Figure 2.2: Back cover of *The Last Whole Earth Catalog* (1971), which reads “We can’t put it together. It is together.”

Seed’s dime-store anti-consumerism is telling, and it allows us to situate the supplement seller as part of what we might call the *Southern Californian Ideology*: a woo-woo worldview in which countercultural aesthetics and neoliberal logics converge around an outsized concern for bodily wellbeing. An extension of what Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron dubbed “The Californian Ideology” in their seminal 1995 essay of that name, the Southern Californian Ideology emphasizes the continuities between the mid-century counterculture (and particularly the

⁶⁷ @seed, April 24, 2020, https://www.instagram.com/p/B_X_8YRnVLN/. I am grateful that Helmreich has queried the cult of Dorion Sagan, nepo baby *par excellence*: “Why do accounts like those of Dorion Sagan have the purchase they do on contemporary readerships in popular science and critical theory alike?” “Homo microbis,” 59.

macrobiotic movement, which rubbed elbows with Stewart Brand—progenitor of the “politics of consciousness”⁶⁸ from whence sprang this west coast creed—on more than one occasion) and contemporary pop ecology, both conceptual and commercial—continuities which lay bare the risks of overinvesting in holobiont holism and the contiguity of personal and planetary health.

Seed’s central conceit is that “we are a microcosm of the Earth’s ecology,”⁶⁹ one of a set of Gaian Matryoshka dolls, and they generate veritable mountains of media content to belabor this point, boasting over twelve hundred grid posts and two multi-chapter story highlights, “The Story of You” and “(HOME)ROOM.” Their captions hearteningly describe the human organism as a “holobiont,”⁷⁰ “a vast, interconnected world,”⁷¹ “a planet,”⁷² “an organic whole,”⁷³ “a thriving community of trillions of microbes,”⁷⁴ and a “walking, talking ecosystem,”⁷⁵ indeed “an ecosystem within a larger ecosystem”⁷⁶; the essential equivalence of the organism, the ecosystem, and the community is also squarely established (with circles) in several posts attempting to visually convey their nested nature.⁷⁷

⁶⁸ Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*, 209.

⁶⁹ See <https://seed.com/seedlabs>. Accessed November 18, 2024.

⁷⁰ @seed, June 6, 2023, https://www.instagram.com/p/CtKQkjZsT2a/?img_index=1.

⁷¹ @seed, June 6, 2023, https://www.instagram.com/p/CtKQkjZsT2a/?img_index=1.

⁷² @seed, March 21, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/p/C4ymzSct8mE/?igsh=ZGp0NDdrZHhkcmZ3>.

⁷³ @seed, April 26, 2023, https://www.instagram.com/p/Crgld-qpZyK/?img_index=1.

⁷⁴ @seed, May 18, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/p/C7HgXijsmB2/?igsh=MXQ1ZmtibXhqeWFieg%3D%3D>.

⁷⁵ @seed, December 21, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CmcVEVMpCRX/>.

⁷⁶ @seed, December 19, 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B6Q-gG4pc-7/>.

⁷⁷ It is interesting to note that the word ecosystem was coined in explicit repudiation of the conceptual collapse of organisms and communities. In a 1935 article charmingly titled “The Use and Abuse of Vegetational Concepts and Terms,” Arthur Tansley cautioned against a growing tendency among ecologists to describe plant groupings as both “complex organisms” and “biotic communities.” “The Use and Abuse of Vegetational Concepts and Terms,” *Ecology* 16, no. 3 (1935): 286. As the historian of ecology Donald Worster puts it, “Some, he feared, might conclude from such language that human associations and those in nature were parallel. Plants and animals in a locale cannot constitute a genuine community, he argued, for no psychic bond can exist between them, and thus they can have no true social order”—this reference to psychic bonds betraying Tansley’s theoretical and therapeutic involvement with Freud himself. *Nature’s Economy: The Roots of Ecology* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1977), 301. Wary as well of the influence of Jan Smuts’s work among his South African colleagues, John Phillips notable among them, Tansley wrote that “it is difficult to resist the impression that Professor Philips’ enthusiastic advocacy of holism is not wholly derived from an objective contemplation of the facts of nature, but is at least partly motivated by an imagined future ‘whole’ to be realised in an ideal human society whose reflected glamour falls on less exalted wholes, illuminating with a false light the image of the ‘complex organism.’” “The Use and Abuse,” 299. Tansley

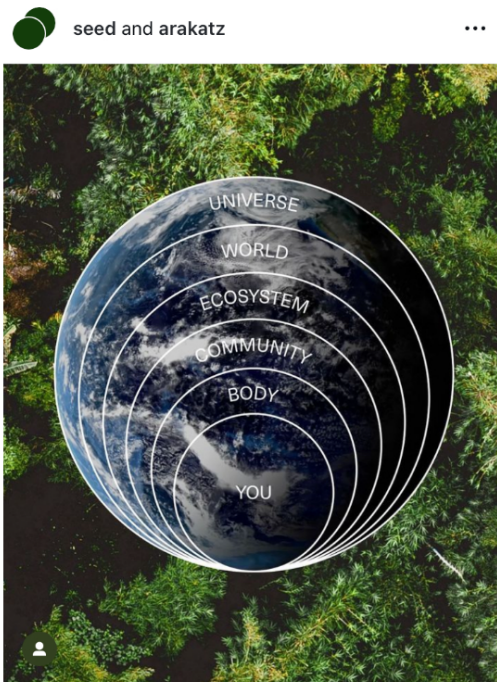


Figure 2.3: Screenshot of Seed Instagram post (January 1, 2023) of the Earth as series of nested systems.



Figure 2.4: Screenshot of Seed Instagram post (December 21, 2022) of Superorganism sweatshirt.

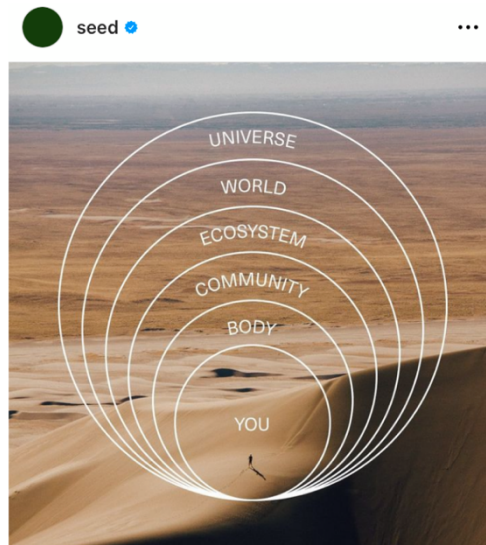


Figure 2.5: Screenshot of Seed Instagram post (December 22, 2021) of the desert as a series of nested systems.

could sense the profoundly promissory undercurrent of claims about holistic organization; the abandon with which social ideals (and in this case, ideals of racial hierarchy and subordination, as Peder Anker argues) were being smuggled into ostensibly “objective” descriptions of nonhuman organismic interaction. See Anker, *Imperial Ecology*, 153. And Tansley proposed, as a corrective to the ultimately all too human “biotic community” concept, that of the “ecosystem,” which would encompass “the whole system (in the sense in physics), including not only the organism-complex, but also the whole complex of physical factors forming what we call the environment.” “The Use and Abuse,” 299. That the ecosystem was imagined as a sober alternative to the terminological anthropomorphisms of the day is striking, given their absolute identification in contemporary pop ecology.

This scalar logic undergirds Seed’s entire epistemo-visual strategy: circles inside of circles represent continuity at scale, a quantitative rather than qualitative difference between the self and the world. This is the crux of Seed’s “interactive learning experience”⁷⁸ “(HOME)ROOM,” each story highlight highlighting a different order of vision—from 10^7 meters, ostensibly the distance at which the earth becomes visible (this series contains the 1968 “Earthrise” photograph that would appear on the cover of the fourth issue of the *Whole Earth Catalog*) to 10^{-6} meters, at which microbes come into view—to insist that not only is everything connected, but “you = everything.”⁷⁹ And because you = everything, managing your health is equivalent to managing that of the planet (indeed what Seed offers is “bacteria to improve human and planetary health”⁸⁰); on this basis Seed frequently promotes the World Health Organization’s One Health project, “an



Figure 2.6: Screenshot of Seed Instagram bio (taken February 15, 2023), which reads “bacteria to improve human and planetary health.”

integrated, unifying approach that aims to sustainably balance and optimize the health of people, animals and ecosystems,”⁸¹ and to “address root causes and create long-term, sustainable solutions.”⁸²

Balance, optimize, root causes: we might have known that functional medicine would be lurking just around the corner. Perhaps unsurprisingly Amanda Chantal Bacon claims more than once in *The Moon Juice Cookbook* that in acceding to her nutritional dictates, “you will begin to experience pretty radical life shifts and contribute to the health of our earth”⁸³; in a similar vein the now besmirched food subscription service Daily Harvest, once promoted by many of the same

⁷⁸ @seed, November 24, 2020, https://www.instagram.com/p/CH_WLgOJ8Qo/.

⁷⁹ 5th story of @seed’s 10^∞ highlight, sixth installment of “(HOME)ROOM.”

⁸⁰ This screenshot is from February 15, 2023; Seed’s bio has since been updated to read “Microbiome science for human and planetary health.”

⁸¹ See https://www.who.int/health-topics/one-health#tab=tab_1. Accessed November 18, 2024.

⁸² See <https://www.who.int/news-room/questions-and-answers/item/one-health>. Accessed November 18, 2024.

⁸³ Bacon, *The Moon Juice Cookbook*, 11.

influencers as Seed, also touts its products' simultaneous contribution to "human and planetary health."⁸⁴ That there is a relation of complementarity between personal and planetary health—in Seed's more heavy-handed formulation, that "there is only One Health"⁸⁵—is an article of faith for holistic health hawkers and players of the microbial trump card alike; Schuller, for example, notes with gusto that "fermenters, fecal transplanters, gardeners, composters, and probiotic swallowers embrace their interdependence with bacterial, fungal, and viral life-forms as important elements of individual and ecological wellbeing."⁸⁶ And for both, the fact of interdependence (a favorite buzzword of Seed's⁸⁷) is significant in and of itself; wellbeing will follow from recognizing, affirming, or embracing this interdependence in general.

This line of thought—that individual and ecosystemic health are bound in some obvious and intractable way; that there is, basically, one health on two (or more) scales, which hinges largely on our ability to perceive not any particular relations between them, but simply the reality of their relatedness—may not be empirically fallacious (the first part, in any case), but it seems to us a terribly risky way to conceptualize our planetary future (in the hands of some more ignoble commentators, staving off the slow death of populations and of ecosystems becomes the purview of individuals *qua* micro-biospheres), as well as (and relatedly) a shoddy way to think about the subject. We will return to this latter problem in due course (briefly, psychoanalysis teaches us that we have fundamentally disturbed relationship to our well-being, that "life doesn't want to be

⁸⁴ See <https://daily-harvest.com/pages/supply-chain-transparency>. Accessed November 18, 2024. This phrase was also commonly included in the captions of their sponsored Instagram posts. Daily Harvest is in the process of settling a class action lawsuit over toxic "French lentil and leek crumbles" for \$23 million.

⁸⁵ @seed, April 5, 2023, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CqqpChnpJzp/>.

⁸⁶ Schuller, "The Microbial Self," 62.

⁸⁷ "The health of each of these homes [body, community, ecosystem, etc.] is interconnected, interwoven, and interdependent." @seed, December 5, 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B5tkbZ-JRET/>. "@who's One Health framework...recognizes that Earth and all its inhabitants are closely linked and interdependent." @seed, January 1, 2023, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cm5C3tevlqD/>. "In this collective home, our health, the health of our planet, and the health of multitudinous species, are intricately intertwined and interdependent." @seed, April 5, 2023, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CqqpChnpJzp/>.



Figure 2.7: Screenshot of a Tweet from @BigDavidMcIver (February 23, 2023) that reads "Aww my microbiome fancies some high quality fermented foods does it? A little kombucha perhaps? I don't give a shit, I'm the megabiome, I do what I want. I'm having a fanta lemon. I'll swallow coins."

healed,"⁸⁸ so perhaps the health of others should not be tethered to our own), for now let us dwell briefly on the former.

If, as Seed insists, "I Am a Coral Reef"⁸⁹ (and Haraway, despite her usual mistrust of monism, concurs: "we are all lichens, all coral," "we are all corals now"⁹⁰), then (eco)systemic transformation is possible with the simple taking of a probiotic pill. Or a tab of acid: the visual

and lexical affinities between the mid-century counterculture and our microbiome mania are manifold, and bespeak the impotence of holobiont holism (the conceit that the human body, the biosphere, and the social world are isomorphic systems with causal connections so obvious they call for no explication) as an

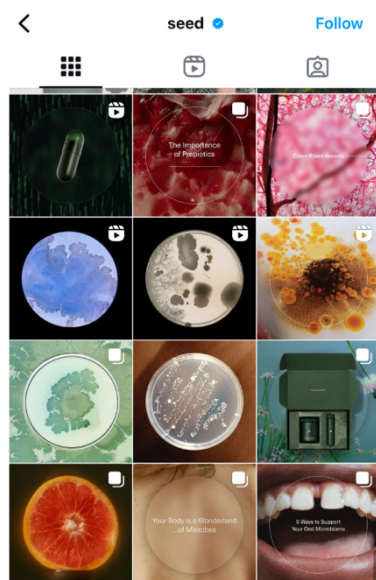


Figure 2.9: Screenshot of Seed's Instagram grid (taken in April 2024).

ecological and political paradigm. Seed deliberately stokes this iconographic connection; until May of this year, all of their grid posts included at least one circle inside of the classic Instagram square.

A longstanding trope of wholeness and unity, the circle-in-a-square features not only in the metaphysical psychology of Carl Jung (whose prudish conception of "this 'great whole' called

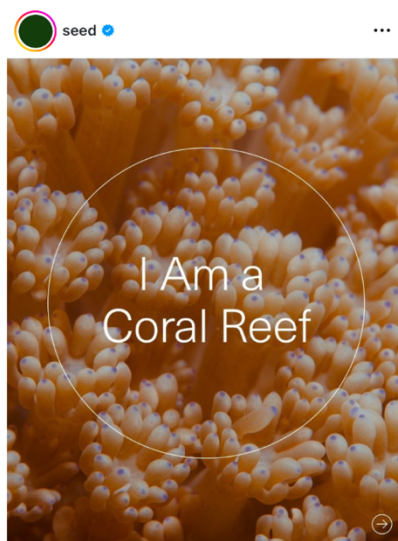


Figure 2.8: Screenshot of Seed Instagram post (June 6, 2023) of a coral with "I Am a Coral Reef" superimposed.

⁸⁸ Lacan, *The Ego in Freud's Theory*, 233.

⁸⁹ @seed, June 6, 2023, https://www.instagram.com/p/CtKQkjZsT2a/?img_index=4.

⁹⁰ Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 72, 80.

the libido”⁹¹ Freud rejects in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*), but also on various covers of *The Order of the Universe*, a macrobiotic magazine that Michio and Aveline Kushi began publishing in 1966. For both the macros and the micros, this circular embeddedness is the representational counterpart of the nested-systems ontology that structures both of their approaches to personal and—and *as*—planetary wellbeing.

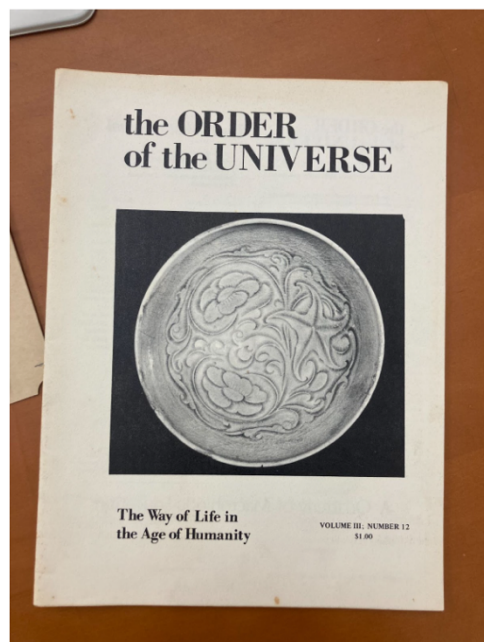


Figure 2.10: Cover of *The Order of the Universe* vol. 3 no. 12 (October 1971). NMAC.AC.0619 box 2, folder 1.



Figure 2.11: Screenshot of Seed Instagram post (November 26, 2020) that reads “DROP PROTOCOL.”

As Fred Turner argues, beset by everything from atomic bombs to *The Population Bomb* and suffused with a fresh sense of political disenchantment and planetary imperilment, a certain subset of the mid-century counterculture proffered a theory of progress rooted in the revelation of systemic imbrication through small-scale technologies like gardening tools and LSD; a “glimpse of the whole systems of which they were a part”⁹² was imagined to automatically engender, or at

⁹¹ Zupančič, *What is Sex?*, 100. As Jung writes of individuation in “On the Psychology of the Unconscious,” “The meaning and purpose of the process is the realization, in all its aspects, of the personality originally hidden away in the embryonic germ-plasm; the production and unfolding of the original, potential wholeness. The symbols used by the unconscious to this end are the same as those which mankind has always used to express wholeness, completeness, and perfection: symbols, as a rule, of the quaternity and the circle.” C.G. Jung, *Two Essays in Analytical Philosophy*, trans. Gerhard Adler and R. F. C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1966), 158.

⁹² Turner, “The Politics of the Whole,” 43.

the very least precipitate, novel forms of world-sharing for the crowd that Turner dubs the New Communalists. In Turner’s analysis, “For the New Communalists, social change began not with a discussion of land rights or the mechanics of government, but with the collective tuning of citizens’ senses toward the cybernetic understanding that the whole, individual person, the whole of human society, and the whole of nature nested inside one another like Russian dolls” (recall that Seed locates the community inside of the ecosystem and the world); foregoing an explanation of the mechanisms of action that might (or might not) join these systems and swearing allegiance to the “ideology of holism” instead, “it was all too easy to believe that making small changes to one’s belief system, or dress, or patterns of consumption changed the planet as a whole. It was, in short, all too easy to believe that one’s intimate personal surroundings were in fact the whole Earth.”⁹³

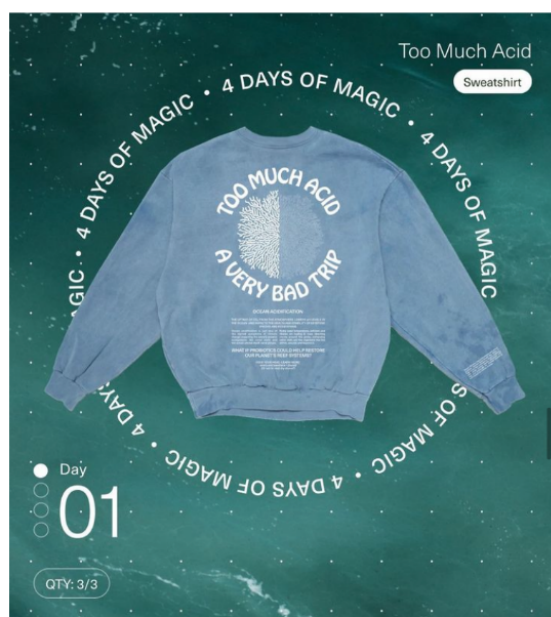


Figure 2.12: Screenshot of Seed Instagram post (December 19, 2022) of Too Much Acid sweatshirt.

A different segment of the counterculture—the self-styled macros—would strictly prohibit the taking of acid (macrobiotics was, in fact, a popular acid-graduate program; even Bob Weir had a “macrobiotic advisor”⁹⁴), but they practiced similar forms of communal living (in “study houses” started by the Kushis in 1969) and somatic experimentation in the service of planetary betterment. The macros understand individual disease (whether acute illness or a more fundamental state of imbalance) to be the source of all social and ecosystemic sickness, symptoms of which included crime, war, pollution,

⁹³ Turner, “The Politics of the Whole,” 45, 46, 47.

⁹⁴ *History of Erewhon*, 274.

deforestation, and waning biodiversity (planetary health encompasses, for them, both political and environmental equilibrium); the individual was therefore the primary axis of intervention for pursuing what Michio Kushi calls “one world community,” a state of multisystemic harmony and accord with “the order of the whole universe.”⁹⁵ The introduction to Kushi’s 1995 book *AIDS and Beyond: Dietary and Lifestyle Guidelines for New Viral and Bacterial Diseases* (Kushi rejected his teacher George Ohsawa’s belief that “macrobiotic philosophy is not in harmony with homosexual lifestyle”⁹⁶ and spent a good portion of the 1980s writing and lecturing about AIDS, which he believed was caused by an improper diet and manageable with a macrobiotic one) aptly summarizes this position:

Just as the Soviet Union—mighty and seemingly indestructible just a few years ago—collapsed, humanity as a whole may collapse as personal, social, and planetary health systems are stretched beyond their limits. In fact, the magnitude of the crisis has led some people to conclude that the earth itself is terminally ill. [...] Clearly, humanity and the planet as a whole are in urgent need of healing. For many years, the macrobiotic community has been saying that the outer environment reflects the inner environment and that the key to our dilemma is a return to a more natural way of life, including a more natural way of eating. Personal health cannot be separated from planetary health, and wholesome natural foods are the bridge between the two.⁹⁷

Kushi’s point here is not that, say, excessive meat consumption has adverse consequences for personal and planetary health (this is more or less the tack that Frances Moore Lappé takes in her 1971 tome *Diet for a Small Planet*: industrial livestock production begets water contamination, soil depletion, harm to animals who ingest DDT, an unequal distribution of agricultural resources,

⁹⁵ Michio Kushi, “Proposal for the Support and Consideration of the Ford Foundation,” August 1973, NMAH.AC.0619, box 13, folder 21, page 3, Michio and Aveline Kushi Macrobiotics Collection, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Washington, D.C.

⁹⁶ “Message from Michio Kushi for ‘Wipe out AIDS’ Friends,” n.d., NMAH.AC.0619, box 21, folder 20.

⁹⁷ Michio Kushi and Alex Jack, *AIDS and Beyond: Dietary and Lifestyle Guidelines for New Viral and Bacterial Diseases* (Becket, MA: One Peaceful World Press, 1995), 7–8.

and not very much protein, at the end of the day⁹⁸), but rather that planetary health reflects personal health by virtue of their harmony or oneness, and thus that dietary modification alone is capable of staving off environmental degradation. In other words, macrobiotics maintains that meat-eating is deleterious in the extreme, not because it happens to both waste the earth's resources and increase our risk of cardiovascular disease, but rather "because Man belongs to the Yang animal kingdom, [so] he should depend primarily upon the Yin vegetable kingdom to maintain biological harmony," and because only biological harmony can precipitate environmental and interpersonal equilibrium: "Through the harmony achieved in our daily food, we are able to attain physical and mental harmony in our natural and social environments."⁹⁹

Edward Esko (who wrote the forward to *AIDS and Beyond*) makes this even clearer in *Healing Planet Earth: Macrobiotics and The New Ecology*, another Kushi-foundation publication that is crucial for its exegesis of the holistic identity of personal and planetary health. Esko proclaims not only that "personal and planetary health are one,"¹⁰⁰ but that environmental ruination is nothing but the metaphysical symptom of bodily imbalance. His remarks are worth quoting at length:

The spleen, pancreas, and stomach are all related to the earth. Their condition influences our relationship with the soil, including our agricultural and farming practices. When these organs are sound and healthy, we prefer more natural methods of farming that maintain healthy, organic soil. When these organs become unbalanced, we lose confidence in natural farming and turn to pesticides and other chemicals that deplete the soil. In a similar way, the kidneys and

⁹⁸ To be sure, though the blurb on the back of the 1973 edition of the book describes it as "a plan for eating less meat (or none!) and actually *improving* your over-all nutrition" (original emphasis), and though Lappé suggests that plant proteins offer more vitamins and minerals than their animal counterparts, she takes care not to claim that meat is inimical to human health, and indeed devotes considerable space to demonstrating that a plant-based diet is, if nothing else, not *worse for you* than an animal-based one; the impetus of her influential intervention is the wastefulness of factory farming and its repercussions for global food systems, rather than for human health. See Frances Moore Lappé, *Diet for a Small Planet* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1973).

⁹⁹ Michio Kushi, "Food for Spiritual Development," 1968, NMAH.AC.0619, box 13, folder 5, page 10, 11.

¹⁰⁰ Edward Esko, *Healing Planet Earth: Macrobiotics and the New Ecology* (Becket, MA: One Peaceful World Press, 1996), 63.

bladder influence our relationship with water. Water pollution and the inefficient use of water resources are signs of widespread imbalance in the kidneys and bladder. This relationship works both ways: foods grown in chemically-depleted soil weaken the spleen, pancreas, and stomach, and chemically-treated or polluted water has a harmful effect on the kidneys and bladder. Deforestation, including destruction of tropical rain forests, is a sign of widespread disorder in the liver and gallbladder; while the use of non-renewable, highly polluting energy sources, such as fossil fuels and nuclear power, is evidence that many people are suffering from imbalance in the heart and small intestine [...]. Depletion of the earth's mineral resources is an indication that many people are experiencing chronic imbalance in the lungs and large intestine [...]. The solution to the environmental crisis lies in restoring each of the organs, and the body as a whole, to a balanced healthy condition. The grains, vegetables, and other foods that heal the organs also heal the mind and emotions, as well as our relationship with our planetary environment. A naturally balanced, macrobiotic way of eating incorporates the understanding of food energetically and offers a practical way for everyone to restore harmony between their internal and external ecology. The macrobiotic way of life is thus the foundation of a new planetary medicine that can help us heal ourselves and the earth."¹⁰¹

Here we can see Seed's logic pushed to its limit: the relation of ill-defined interdependence between the health of the self and that the world becomes one of absolute identity, such that individual well-being (*qua* balance or homeostasis, about which we will have more to say momentarily) automatically inclines us toward organic farming, water conservation, and the pursuit of renewable energy sources; because "the condition of the environment is a reflection of our personal health,"¹⁰² we need only focus on improving the latter and can rest assured that the former will follow suit. This is, it seems to us, the most perilous upshot of the logic of scale that takes the personal and the planetary as nested systems, the world as a scaled-up organism and the organism as a microcosmic world—a logic that only becomes more tempting as microbiome mania waxes.

¹⁰¹ Esko, *Healing Planet Earth*, 85.

¹⁰² Esko, *Healing Planet Earth*, 84.

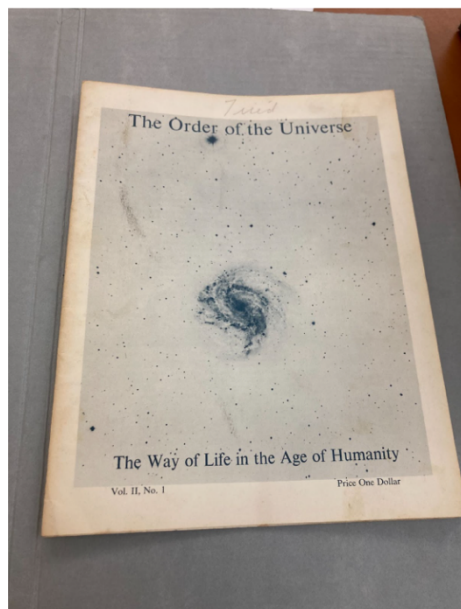


Figure 2.13: Cover of *The Order of the Universe* vol. 2 no. 1. NMAC.AC.0619 box 1, folder 4.

Central to these claims for personal and planetary contiguity is the concept of regulation: healing the individual (and by extension the whole earth) rests on a theory and a practice of systemic harmony, balance, equilibrium, or homeostasis. As Kushi's and Esko's invocations of inner environments and internal ecologies¹⁰³ indicate, Claude Bernard is an important reference here; as Kushi writes in *Holistic Health through Macrobiotics: A Complete Guide to Mind/Body Healing*, "During the latter part of the nineteenth century, the French physiologist Claude Bernard laid the foundation for the modern understanding of homeostasis when he demonstrated that the internal environment of living things needs to remain constant in spite of changes in the external environment."¹⁰⁴ Homeostasis is, of course, Walter Cannon's coinage; taking his cue from Bernard, who saw "with clear vision [...] that the preservation of constancy is the condition for free and independent life," he proposed homeostasis as a more precise term than equilibrium (too closely associated with closed physical and chemical



Figure 2.14: Screenshot of Seed Instagram post (July 1, 2024) of a spiral in the ocean.

¹⁰³ It is worth noting that the first text to describe the gut microbiome in explicitly ecosystemic terms also uses the language of *inner ecology*: "Just as we may think of ourselves as living within ecosystems, we must think, for the sake of our own health, of ecosystems living within us. There are, for example, tiny life forms that live within our intestines that are necessary to our health and well-being.... We have, in other words, an 'inner' ecology as well as an 'outer' one." Gene Marine and Judith Van Allen, *Food Pollution: The Violation of our Inner Ecology* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1972), 3–4.

¹⁰⁴ Michio Kushi, *Holistic Health through Macrobiotics: A Complete Guide to Mind/Body Healing* (New York: Japan Publications, Inc., 1993), 54–55.

systems) for describing “the self-regulation of physiological processes.”¹⁰⁵ Homeostasis presupposes “the total organization of the body,” or the concept of the body as a whole system to which its component parts are subordinate; in Cannon’s words, “The integrity of the organism as a whole rests on the integrity of its individual elements, and the elements, in turn, are impotent and useless save as parts of the organized whole.”¹⁰⁶ Or, as Canguilhem puts it, “What is proper to an organism is to live as a whole and not to be able to live except as a whole. This is made possible by the existence in the organism of a set of apparatuses or mechanisms of regulation whose effect consists precisely in the maintenance of this integrity, in the persistence of the organism as a whole.”¹⁰⁷ It should come as no surprise, then, that homeostasis is axiomatic for the macros and the micros; as Cannon notes (and Canguilhem reiterates), homeostasis is “a modern interpretation of the natural *vis medicatrix*,”¹⁰⁸ the “Hippocratic idea of the healing power of nature”¹⁰⁹—hence Kushi’s claim that “this innate human capacity is a reflection of the order of the universe, most notably, the tendency that all things have to seek harmony or balance.”¹¹⁰ But the macros and the micros part ways with Cannon by positioning homeostasis less as an organismic property than as something the individual must actively cultivate,¹¹¹ and by running amok with his (for Canguilhem already quite dubious) concept of social homeostasis, maintaining not just the analogy but indeed the equivalence between “the body physiologic and the body politic.”¹¹² Without claiming that

¹⁰⁵ Cannon, *The Wisdom of the Body*, 263, xiii.

¹⁰⁶ Cannon, *The Wisdom of the Body*, 309.

¹⁰⁷ Canguilhem, “The Problem of Regulation,” 72.

¹⁰⁸ Cannon, *The Wisdom of the Body*, 240.

¹⁰⁹ Canguilhem, “The Problem of Regulation,” 72.

¹¹⁰ Kushi, *Holistic Healing through Macrobiotics*, 54.

¹¹¹ As Cannon writes in the eighth chapter of *The Wisdom of the Body*, “Thus far we have considered the organism as if it were always ready to meet emergencies and as if the mechanisms for homeostasis were invariably efficient”; though this chapter argues that the organism’s capacity for self-regulation diminishes with age, and another notes in passing that “the physician...plays his part in making effective the self-regulating adjustments of the body that have been disordered or that are in need of reinforcement,” through, for example, giving insulin to someone with diabetes, Cannon does not consider homeostasis something that the organism must (pro)actively hone. *The Wisdom of the Body*, 202, 242.

¹¹² Cannon, *The Wisdom of the Body*, 305.

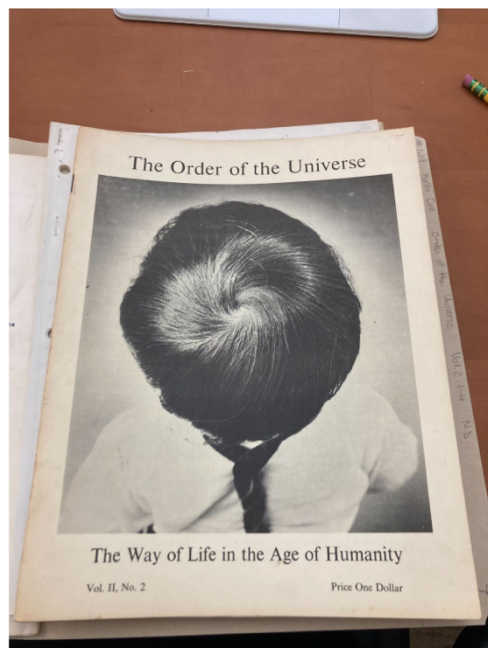


Figure 2.15: Cover of *The Order of the Universe* vol. 2 no. 2. NMAC.AC.0619 box 1, folder 4.

organismic equilibrium immediately reflects sociopolitical stability (though he does affirm, in an argument for state welfare, that “the homeostasis of the individual human being is largely dependent on social homeostasis”¹¹³), Cannon clears the ground for an isomorphism of somatic and social systems on the basis of their shared self-regulatory capacities—a structural identity between the organism and the community that we must rigorously refuse.

For Kushi, the human tendency toward homeostasis may be innate, but its accomplishment is hardly guaranteed, and in most cases it is abdicated through the consumption of “inharmonious food.”¹¹⁴ In order to avoid such a fate one must eat whole foods, not because this is the maximally sustainable or nutritious thing to do, but because whole foods are a microcosm of the greater (indeed the greatest) whole, the harmony of which will engender our own: “Each plant and animal contains the wholeness of nature. We can keep this balance by eating every part of our vegetables, choosing unrefined grains, and enjoying fish from head to tail. When we eat partial foods, our body must make adjustments to compensate and unnatural activities result.”¹¹⁵ Kushi’s

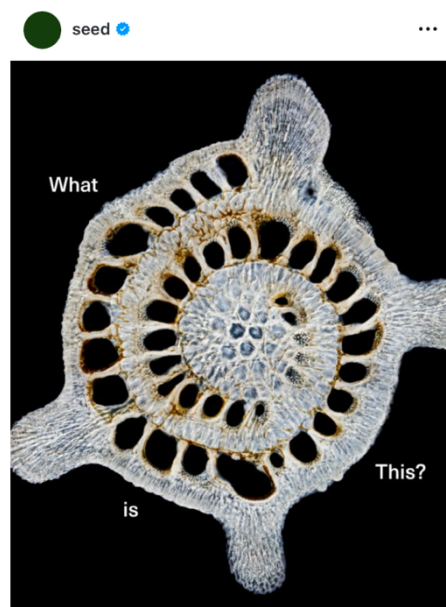


Figure 2.16: Screenshot of Seed Instagram post (July 18, 2024) of a spiraling shell.

¹¹³ Cannon, *The Wisdom of the Body*, 313.

¹¹⁴ Kushi, “Food for Spiritual Development,” 11.

¹¹⁵ Michio Kushi, “Cooking Good Food” in *The Order of the Universe*, n.d., NMAH.AC.0619, box 1, folder 1, page 3.

reference to compensatory adjustments here almost seems to imply that the regulatory mechanisms that Cannon calls homeostatic are, in fact, incapable of securing homeostasis *qua* “the condition of harmony in the human body”¹¹⁶: balance derives from the wholeness that we consume and into which we are subsumed (perhaps to emphasize the dynamic, recursive quality of this multisystemic equilibrium, the macros chose not the nested circle but the spiral as their most enduring visual trope), and if adjustments need to be made to restore it, something has already gone wrong... For Kushi homeostasis signals not the body’s autonomic action to correct an imbalance, but the state of having avoided imbalance in advance.

Seed also traffics in a somewhat curious discourse of homeostasis: in a post dedicated to the term, playing on its inclusion of the word *home* and the fact that “nearly 100 trillion microbes call you home,”¹¹⁷ homeostasis is described as “the ability of an organism or environment to maintain a state of internal balance and wellbeing in spite of external changes”; then, noting that the holidays are fast approaching, Seed asks: “At a time when disruption is almost guaranteed, how can we consider and care for this home, and guide it to homeostasis?”¹¹⁸ The answer is, obviously, by buying their probiotics;¹¹⁹ a supplement subscription enables us to “care for and consider” the body, community, ecosystem, world, and universe, and thereby “return them all to

¹¹⁶ Kushi, *Holistic Health through Macrobiotics*, 54.

¹¹⁷ @seed, December 21, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CmcVEVMpCRX/>.

¹¹⁸ @seed, December 4, 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B5qekIrJLcR/>.

¹¹⁹ It is interesting to note that, in an effort to bolster their subscription model, Seed frequently advises against the increasingly fashionable practice of fecal microbiota transfer (FMT), which aims to entirely repopulate one’s microbiome and encourage its colonization by particular and preferential bacteria, thereby rendering probiotic supplements unnecessary (Seed nevertheless endorses the Old Friends Hypothesis, the conceit that the microbes and helminths with which humans evolved were made scarce by Big Hygiene, which underlies arguments in favor of FMT and helminth therapy; see @seed, September 29, 2022, https://www.instagram.com/p/CjGfu_LJ7d7/). One post decrying “alternative, unregulated, and potentially unsafe treatments...such as at-home fecal transplants” puts *imbalance* in square quotes, as if the favorability of such a state were suddenly in question—and far be it from Seed to disparage the alternative medicines on which its brand identity firmly relies! @seed, December 12, 2019, https://www.instagram.com/p/B5_KTTKpF9U/. Another simply states that “probiotics don’t have to colonize your gut to work,” promising that daily probiotic consumption is just as beneficial as microbial population recomposition. @seed, October 5, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CUqJHRgPnoB/>.

homeostasis.”¹²⁰ Seed interpellates a subject who is both an unsovereign (and apparently self-regulating¹²¹) ecosystem unto herself and the manager of her microbiome, the person responsible for administering the diminutive community that is inside her and *is her*, guiding or returning it to balance and well-being. Homeostasis does not happen spontaneously; it must be pursued with a daily probiotic.



Figure 2.17: Screenshot of Seed Instagram post (December 5, 2019) of nested systems.

And yet despite, or perhaps precisely because of, these claims that organismic homeostasis should be either obviated by eating harmony itself or shored up with continuous supplement consumption—that bodily balance is not guaranteed; that self-regulation requires regulation—the social whole (*qua* the larger form of the organism) is never the locus of intervention. Or else:

¹²⁰ @seed, December 5, 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B5tkbZ-JRET/>.

¹²¹ @seed, December 19, 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B6Q-gG4pc-7/>. “The choices you make extend beyond your body, to your Earth. And like your body, the planet is self-regulating and resilient, but can only sustain so much. You are the nurture to your nature, and also to ours.”

macrobiotics and microbiome management become politics by proxy. While Cannon is concerned with how social homeostasis might be engineered to promote biological homeostasis, citing communism, socialism, trade unionism, unemployment insurance, and higher wages as so many proposals for staving off social imbalance—“lessen[ing] the hardships which result from technological advances, unlimited competition and the relatively free play of selfish interests”—and thus buttressing bodily wellbeing (which would in turn “release the highest activities of the nervous system for adventure and achievement”), the macros and the micros are interested in just the reverse: the bolstering of individual homeostasis in order to elicit—by virtue of their oneness—social and planetary health.¹²² In other words, if for Cannon, society’s “crude automatic stabilizing processes” require refinement in order to secure bodily homeostasis for all (through dependable access to food, shelter, etc.) and free individuals “to work and play, untrammelled by anxieties concerning our bodily affairs,” for the macros and the micros it is the homeostasis of the body that must be fine-tuned, with brown rice or probiotics, so that the harmony of the biosphere and the social whole can take hold.¹²³ For the micros and the macros (and as Simon Sadler notes in his comparative study of hippie holism and Panther totality, representatives of latter started free food and healthcare programs while those of former enjoined readers of the *Catalog*’s final issue to “stay hungry”¹²⁴), bodily homeostasis is contingent less on access to sufficient calories or clean water, but on the optimization of a body that is never imagined to not already have those needs met; in this holistic ideology of personal responsibility, the perfection of one’s health becomes coextensive with care for the planet and for the social world. As we have seen, Kushi understands somatic and social harmony to be not only mirrored but causally connected; a macrobiotic diet

¹²² Cannon, *The Wisdom of the Body*, 321, 323.

¹²³ Cannon, *The Wisdom of the Body*, 311, 323.

¹²⁴ Simon Sadler, “Mandalas or Raised Fists? Hippie Holism, Panther Totality, and Another Modernism,” in *Hippie Modernism: The Struggle for Utopia* (Minneapolis: Walker Arts Center, 2015), 114–125.

“secures a harmonious, peaceful state for the human body and mentality, resulting in individual happiness and world peace.”¹²⁵ World peace is of a piece with the balance of the body and the biosphere; macrobiotics prioritizes “the nourishment of every human being toward higher physical, mental, and spiritual levels in order that a peaceful, one world society may be naturally accomplished.”¹²⁶ *Naturally accomplished*: for the macros community is not the product (as we will propose) of invention and technique, but the inevitable organic outcome of optimal individual health; generating the harmony of the latter (which is not given) guarantees that of the former (which will automatically follow).

Seed similarly transforms what we will maintain is the difference in kind between the organism, the community, and the ecosystem into a difference of size; without claiming explicitly that politics are a function of probiotics, Seed subtly figures the social world as a super-organismic totality (and the microbiome as a social world: “microbes have a decentralized ‘political system’” but they act “as one”¹²⁷) whose well-being is secured through the self-care of the smaller organisms it subsumes. In Seed’s holistic imaginary, political work is commitment to a totality or greater whole; because the actions of the individual radiate outward to the larger systems that contain it—when you “make better choices for yourself you have started a ripple effect that impacts the world around you”¹²⁸—regulating individual self-regulation kindles something akin to community homeostasis. Consider, for example, a post commemorating Martin Luther King Jr. Day in 2020. The unattributed quote that captions his photograph (overlayed, of course, with a circle)—“an individual has not started living until he can rise above the narrow confines of his individualistic

¹²⁵ Kushi, “Food for Spiritual Development,” 10.

¹²⁶ Michio Kushi, “World Health, World Peace: Report of the Second North American Congress of Macrobiotics,” August 25–27, 1980, NMAH.AC.0619, box 13, folder 6, page i.

¹²⁷ @seed, November 8, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CHVxKEGpwyE/>.

¹²⁸ @seed, December 22, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CXyjah0rNnM/>.

concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity”—is summarized thusly: “Lessons from both Martin Luther King Jr., and bacteria: the collective strength of our ecosystem is dependent on our individual commitment to the greater whole.”¹²⁹ Reducing this remark (which, lacking any context, it is admittedly difficult to appreciate) to an approbation of utilitarianism, Seed recasts the impetus of the civil rights movement as the privileging of the “greater whole”; like a “community of bacteria” that “will resolve its microscopic social conflicts for the survival of the whole,” we must put aside our trivial differences, our individual idiosyncrasies, and submit ourselves to the maintenance of a shape or form that is, in the final analysis, thoroughly phantasmatic.

Here’s the rub: there is no greater whole (nor is there a smaller whole, but we will get to this); the postulate of a greatest happiness was, as we know, one of utilitarianism’s principal blunders. No harmonious aggregate can be assembled out of individual commitments, consumption practices, or proclivities; there can be no greatest happiness because it is impossible to make any number of smaller happinesses add up to a whole (and this in part because happiness is not self-identical, because with happiness there is always “a little margin”: as Lacan writes, in a lesson to which we will shortly return, “I am rarely altogether happy... That’s where I am different from a planet”).¹³⁰ As Freud puts it in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, “It almost seems as if the creation of a great human community would be most successful if no attention had to be paid to the happiness of the individual.”¹³¹ Perhaps Cannon’s most damning error in theorizing social homeostasis comes when he writes that “the social organism, like the bodily organism, cannot be vigorous and efficient unless its elements are assured the essential minimal conditions for healthful life and activity. And the possession of a mind by the human elements would require that these

¹²⁹ @seed, January 20, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B7jbgsXpQTK/>.

¹³⁰ Lacan, *The Ego in Freud’s Theory*, 236, 235.

¹³¹ Freud, *Civilization*, 140.

conditions include not only provision for the elementary needs which we have been considering, but also reasonable satisfaction of desires.”¹³² Psychoanalysis makes plain that a society cannot provision the reasonable satisfaction of desires because desires are, as a matter of course, not reasonable, nor are they wont to cohere, to strengthen the topology of the “large community”¹³³; as Freud writes in *Totem and Taboo*, apropos of the murderous event that at once inaugurates and condemns social organization (to be considered in chapter three), “Sexual desires do not unite men but divide them.”¹³⁴ In Copjec’s account,

Out of a number of unique desires it is impossible to construct any big tent, any subsuming whole, that would not quash the differences themselves or increase hostility toward them. This is the poisonous pellet in Freud’s theory of group formation to which Lacan drew our attention in various ways, but never so vividly as in his characterization of the utilitarian project as the misguided attempt to cut enough holes in a piece of cloth for a number (the greatest number!) of people to stick their arms and heads through it.¹³⁵

This conceit of a big tent that would encompass every desiring individual (all those “in possession of a mind”)—of a social whole that would subsume us and define us as its parts, parts on whose “integrity” that of the whole would rest—is precisely what Nancy enjoins us to reject; for him community requires that “there is no communion of singularities in a totality superior to them and immanent to their common being.”¹³⁶ Or else: that there is no whole greater than the individual and containing it as a circle within a circle, making an all of the individuals who are but expressions of that greater whole. We are not all lichens, all corals, because we are not *all*, because there can be no all of speaking beings.

¹³² Cannon, *The Wisdom of the Body*, 322.

¹³³ Cannon, *The Wisdom of the Body*, 310.

¹³⁴ Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 144.

¹³⁵ Joan Copjec, *Imagine There’s No Woman: Ethics and Sublimation* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), 167–168.

¹³⁶ Nancy, “The Inoperative Community,” 28.

“We aren’t at all like planets,” Lacan insists in his second seminar, which, as we will see, mounts a trenchant critique of holism and of homeostasis that prefigures the “not whole” so central to seminar twenty.¹³⁷ The difference between subjects and planets is one of speech, which foils the integrity and self-identity of the former; as far as planets go, “there is absolutely nothing about them pertaining to an alterity with respect to themselves, they are purely and simply what they are”; “If this planet doesn’t speak, it is...because it doesn’t have the time, in the literal sense—it doesn’t have this dimension. Why? Because it is round. That’s what integration is—whatever a circular form does, it is always equal to itself.”¹³⁸ Inscribed in time (like Nancy’s “finite being,” whose finitude requires her “irredeemable excess,”¹³⁹ her non-immanence to herself), the speaking subject is unequal to—split from—herself; this non-coincidence spoils any hope of coherence. This was a hard pill for certain factions of psychoanalysis, those enamored of the ego and obsessed with its so-called integration,¹⁴⁰ to swallow: like macrobiotics, which strives for “the biological, social, and spiritual integration of man,”¹⁴¹ “what is advanced”—mistakenly—“as being the aim of analysis is to make it well-rounded, this ego, to give it a spherical shape in which it will have definitively integrated all its disjointed fragmentary states, its scattered limbs, its pregenital phases, its partial drives, the pandemonium of its *egos*, countless and broken up as they are.”¹⁴² Proponents of “the total personality, and other nonsenses” want to make people like planets, to repair their unfortunate and inessential fragmentation; Lacan of course has no patience for such reproofs of partiality: “People spend their time plaguing us about taking [the subject] in its totality. Why

¹³⁷ Lacan, *The Ego in Freud’s Theory*, 235; *Encore*, 7.

¹³⁸ Lacan, *The Ego in Freud’s Theory*, 238, 241.

¹³⁹ Nancy, “The Inoperative Community,” 15.

¹⁴⁰ The American Psychological Association defines “ego integration” thusly: “In psychoanalytic theory, the process of organizing the various aspects of the personality, such as drives, attitudes, and aims, into a balanced whole. It is considered a strong indicator of psychological health and resiliency.” See <https://dictionary.apa.org/ego-integration>. Accessed November 18, 2024.

¹⁴¹ Michio Kushi, “Proposal for the Support and Consideration of the Ford Foundation,” page 3.

¹⁴² Lacan, *The Ego in Freud’s Theory*, 241.

should it be a whole? We haven't the faintest idea. Have you ever encountered whole beings? Perhaps it's an ideal. I've never seen any. I'm not whole. Neither are you."¹⁴³ The subject is not the whole earth because she is not whole; the person and the planet (whether we take this to mean the biosphere or the community, the former subsuming the latter for the micros and the two immediately reflecting one another for the macros) are not nested systems but radically incommensurate structures.

And so, any claim for the contiguity of personal and planetary health will have to be based on something other than the presumption of their identity across scale, the premise that “the human body is a walking, talking, breathing planet”¹⁴⁴ and “the planet itself is one living organism.”¹⁴⁵

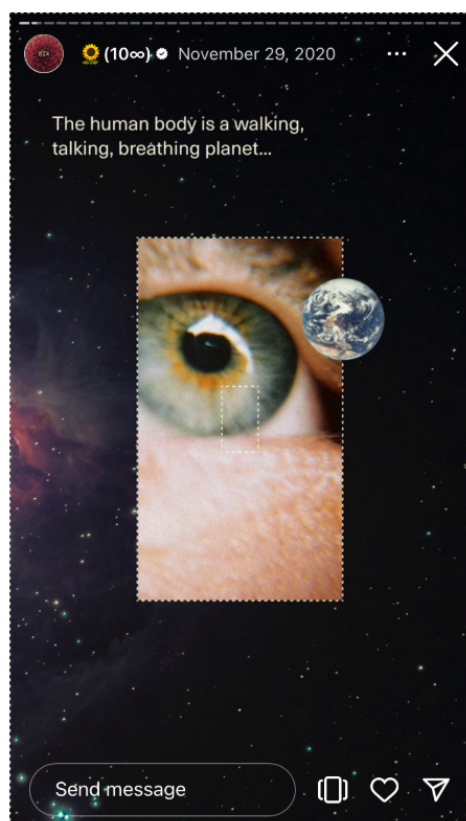


Figure 2.18: Screenshot of Seed Instagram story (November 29, 2020) that reads “The human body is a walking, talking, breathing planet...”

The larger social and ecosystemic wholes that the macros and the micros hail do not exist except as a utilitarian flights of fancy or hippie heuristics; that the latter spawned neither harmonious sociality nor environmental stewardship but retrenched Romantic individualism gives us little reason to be excited about its resurgence. There is no more a social whole *qua* “infinite superhumanity”¹⁴⁶ than there is a subject in its totality, and indeed the speaking being’s ontological shortcomings are responsible for the hole in the world, its failure to cohere or contain—which is not, as the holists would have you believe, such a bad thing after all.

¹⁴³ Lacan, *The Ego in Freud’s Theory*, 63, 243.

¹⁴⁴ 2nd story of @seed’s 10th highlight, the sixth installment of *(HOME)ROOM*.

¹⁴⁵ Bill Tara, lecture on “Human Ecology,” July 19, 1984, NMAH.AC.0619, box 41, number 10.

¹⁴⁶ Nancy, “The Inoperative Community,” 13.

There is no such thing as an ecological relationship

Concomitant with the rebranding of the human as a microbial community is a mushrooming of well-intentioned invocations of a sick world.¹⁴⁷ “It is no measure of health to be well adjusted to a profoundly sick society,”¹⁴⁸ comments Sinead O’Connor on her own 2021 *New York Times* profile; “Our bodies, societies, and planet are inflamed,”¹⁴⁹ write Rupa Marya and Raj Patel in their book *Inflamed: Deep Medicine and the Anatomy of Injustice*, also from 2021; “America Is a Sick Society—Literally”¹⁵⁰ and “Science Alone Can’t Heal a Sick Society”¹⁵¹ read opinion headlines in the *Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*. It is easy to appreciate the impulse here: a neoliberal world order enjoins us to seek individual solutions to structural problems, such that diagnosing the problematic structure itself appears as an attractive clapback; claims for the pathology of the larger entity also mesh nicely with enduring conceptions of the organism, the community, and the biosphere as nested systems whose harmony or balance is bound. As Marya and Patel put it,

¹⁴⁷ It should be said that even Freud was not immune to the allure of this analogy, writing, in *Civilization and its Discontents*, that “at this point we cannot fail to be struck by the similarity between the process of civilization and the libidinal development of the individual,” and later, that “if the development of civilization has such a far-reaching similarity to the development of the individual and if it employs the same methods, may we not be justified in reaching the diagnosis that, under the influence of cultural urges, some civilizations, some epochs of civilization—possibly the whole of mankind—have become ‘neurotic’?” But he quickly warns that “we should have to be very cautious and not forget that, after all, we are dealing only with analogies and that it is dangerous, not only with men but also with concepts, to tear them from the sphere in which they have originated and been evolved.” See Freud, *Civilization*, 97, 114.

¹⁴⁸ See <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/18/arts/music/sinead-oconnor-rememberings.html#commentsContainer>. Accessed November 18, 2024. This quote is typically attributed to the philosopher Jiddu Krishnamurti, but its actual source is enigmatic.

¹⁴⁹ Rupa Marya and Raj Patel, *Inflamed: Deep Medicine and the Anatomy of Injustice* (New York: Picador, 2021). Though I will chide this book for its predictably uncritical “holistic vision,” it is worth saying that *Inflamed* is significantly better than most of the similar texts cited in this chapter, by and large drawing out the specific links between colonialism, climate catastrophe, and chronic disease (as opposed to simply stating that they are linked). *Inflamed*, 26.

¹⁵⁰ William A. Galston, “America Is a Sick Society—Literally,” *The Wall Street Journal*, January 3, 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/america-is-a-sick-society-literally-oecd-life-expectancy-infant-mortality-obesity-guns-healthcare-11672762512>.

¹⁵¹ Jay S. Kaufman, “Science Alone Can’t Heal a Sick Society,” *The New York Times*, September 10, 2021; <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/10/opinion/covid-science-trust-us.html>.

“Health is not the static condition of an independent organism but a state of dynamic interaction of systems within systems,” so “the good news is that ecologically guided reparation starting at one point of the web of life can bring vitality back to the whole.”¹⁵² To be clear, we are not disputing that uneven practices of political, economic, and planetary domination are critically tethered to bodily well-being (or its absence), and we share the impulse of the “sick society” proclaimers to situate the space of transformation somewhere other than (or other to) the individual organism. Our issue with *Inflamed*’s formulation in particular is, on the one hand, its apparent need to negate the interval between the body and the world, such that their ‘health’ is immediately and unproblematically coextensive, and, on the other hand, its goal of “making the body whole”¹⁵³—which makes sense only insofar as the body is understood as both a microcosm and an element of the greater totality whose coherence is threatened by its—and our—sickness.

Let us recall that for Cannon, homeostasis is predicated on “the total organization of the body”: the body self-regulates in order to maintain its topological cohesion. It seems to us that the conceit of a sick society is the flip side of Cannon’s claim that “the body politic itself exhibits some indications of crude automatic stabilizing processes”—it is an argument for the failure of society to heal itself, for the breakdown of its self-regulatory capacities (and thus the breaking down, the fragmentation, of its total form), and an urging for us to intercede and repair what is unable to repair itself.¹⁵⁴ As Canguilhem notes, “what dominates the comparison of the organism to a society is the idea of social medication, the idea of social therapeutics, the idea of remedies for social ills”—and yet “the relation between the illness and the remedy are radically different

¹⁵² Marya and Patel, *Inflamed*, 328, 104. The last quote continues: “synchronized and harmonized in ways that support the thriving of the entire whole.”

¹⁵³ Marya and Patel, *Inflamed*, 327.

¹⁵⁴ Cannon, *The Wisdom of the Body*, 311.

when an organism is concerned and when a society is concerned.”¹⁵⁵ As we have said, for Canguilhem, a society, unlike an organism, has no normative or ideal state from which illness would constitute a deviation and to which it would hope, by healing, to return: “The norm of human sociability is not determined....Hence the multiplicity of possible solutions calculated or dreamt by men to put an end to injustices.”¹⁵⁶ The indeterminacy of what is, for the organism, “inborn” requires us to calculate, dream, and indeed “invent” the conditions of our sociability; an abdication of this signal responsibility is what the organism-society analogy risks.¹⁵⁷

Our sense is that we should abandon the “sick society” rallying cry not because it does not, at least partially, alight on the right problem, but because it leaves unexamined a “fundamentally worrisome”¹⁵⁸ temptation to naturalize what is, we will argue, decisively technological; because it can lead just as easily to strategies for planetary repair as it can to pernicious plans for bolstering the ‘health’ of the economy or the nation (as holistic biologist and new materialist darling Jakob von Uexküll wrote in a 1934 letter signed “Heil Hitler”: “Since I am convinced that the state is a living entity, I would particularly welcome the establishment of an academy dedicated to the care of its health”¹⁵⁹); and because it assumes (whether it intends to or not, though it seems to us that very often it does) that there exists a normative condition of social and environmental relation, a

¹⁵⁵ Canguilhem, “The problem of Regulation,” 69–70.

¹⁵⁶ Canguilhem, “The Problem of Regulation,” 71.

¹⁵⁷ Canguilhem, “The Problem of Regulation,” 72, 78.

¹⁵⁸ Canguilhem, “The Problem of Regulation,” 67.

¹⁵⁹ Jakob von Uexküll quoted in Gottfried Schnödl and Florian Sprenger, *Uexküll’s Surroundings: Umwelt Theory and Right-Wing Thought*, trans. Michael Thomas Taylor and Wayne Yung (Lüneburg: meson press, 2021), 74. Schnödl and Sprenger’s book is a scathing exegesis of the claim that “Uexküll’s Umwelt theory is antidemocratic, totalitarian, and holistic in the worst sense,” and they argue very convincingly that “the proximity of holism, ecology, and fascism reflects not only how they have been received but an intellectual kinship that any critical history of knowledge and of science must address.” *Uexküll’s Surroundings*, 12, 106. For more on Uexküll’s racist and anti-Semitic holism, see Anne Harrington, *Reenchanted Science: Holism in German Culture from Wilhelm II to Hitler* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996), 34–71.

pre-given, organic state of harmony with our human and nonhuman others that it is our task not to create but to restore.¹⁶⁰

In his second seminar, Lacan is absolutely clear that the non-unity of the subject forecloses any possibility of a natural or harmonious relationship with her milieu, giving the lie to Ed Cohen's claim that, with the late-nineteenth-century ascent of immunity as a preeminent biomedical concept, "the human organism loses its natural harmony with the environment," as well as its belief that "health emerges from restoring inner and outer harmony"—a conviction to which the sick society sect would have us return.¹⁶¹ Lacan's less rosy contention is that speaking beings never had any such "natural harmony" to lose: "The notion of reflected relations of the being with its environment, the hypothesis of a pre-established harmony, even if we give it the broadest sense, is a premise whose validity nothing goes to demonstrate."¹⁶² Indeed, "the subject doesn't rediscover the preformed tracks of his natural relation to the external world," because "he lacks what I call the preformed paths. Man starts with nothing at all."¹⁶³ There is no sense pining, then, for the rekindling of our prior unity with (or as Cohen has it, indistinction from) the environment; this fantasy of paradise lost serves primarily to disclaim the more troubling truth that human beings

¹⁶⁰ Canguilhem, "The Problem of Regulation," 67.

¹⁶¹ Cohen, *A Body Worth Defending*, 30, 4.

¹⁶² Lacan, *The Ego in Freud's Theory*, 98. Lacan makes this argument in explicit repudiation of German holistic biology; though he names Karl von Frisch as author of the theory of "reciprocal holism, taking an *Umwelt* to correspond to an *Innenwelt*," it seems likely that he intended to cite Uexküll instead. *The Ego in Freud's Theory*, 97. As far as I can tell von Frisch never used the term *Umwelt*, popularized, of course, by Uexküll; "reciprocal holism," or *holisme réciproque*, appears to be Lacan's own coinage, though it aligns closely with Uexküll's postulate of a harmonious coupling (indeed harmonious in the musical sense) between an organism's inner and outer worlds, which are unique to it but which coalesce with all of the other *Umwelten-Innenwelt* duets into what Schnödl and Sprenger call a "superordinate harmony." *Uexküll's Surroundings*, 178. Lacan's reference to the closure of the *Umwelt*—"The human world isn't at all structurable as an *Umwelt*...it isn't enclosed, but rather open to a crowd of extraordinarily varied neutral objects"—further suggests that it is Uexküll (who is emphatic that every *Umwelt* forms a self-enclosed sphere) to whom Lacan refers. *The Ego in Freud's Theory*, 100. Elsewhere in this seminar Lacan credits a "Karlus Mayer" with the development of the concept of entropy, but there appears to have existed no one by that name who matches Lacan's description, so it seems likely that he simply got some names mixed up this year. Lacan also briefly refers to Uexküll as someone who reconstructs the "the soul, which is the imagining of imbeciles," at the end of seminar nineteen. or *Worse*, 218.

¹⁶³ Lacan, *The Ego in Freud's Theory*, 136, 112.

do not (and never will) dovetail with the world, that we are fundamentally maladapted to the milieu on which we nevertheless depend. Make no mistake: to insist that we are ontologically at odds with the world is not to claim that we are independent of it, that we could do without our earthly locale (whether Cohen fails to see the difference between these things, or whether his point is that immunological discourse fails to, it remains unclear); as Cassandra Guan puts it, “Need is a painful reminder of the constitutive rupture between organism and environment.”¹⁶⁴ We emphasize the discontinuity of the subject and the world not out of hubris or a desire for transcendence in the debased sense (though it is no coincidence that many mid-century holists were interested in space colonization, as is Seed¹⁶⁵), but because insisting on their identity across scale gets us exactly nowhere, or back to something like a politics of homeostasis, to the pursuit of a prior harmony from which we have strayed, to the reestablishment of relations of equity and equilibrium—which are always implicitly collapsed—between the biosphere and the social sphere.

But the social world is precisely not a sphere; before we draw out the implications of this claim, we should note that for Lacan, the subject not only lacks “natural harmony” with her environment, but also with herself: “In man, there’s already a crack, a profound perturbation of the regulation of life. That’s the importance of the notion introduced by Freud of the death instinct.”¹⁶⁶ As Lacan details, despite Freud’s attempts to theorize the dynamics of the ego and the unconscious alike according to a “law of regulation,”¹⁶⁷ to cycles of energetic accumulation and discharge that would allow the organism to oscillate around an average level of excitation, he

¹⁶⁴ Cassandra Xin Guan, “Critique of Flowers: The Exigency of Life in the Era of its Technical Reproducibility,” *October* 175 (2021): 50.

¹⁶⁵ Specifically, Seed is interested in whether microbes can capture and remove carbon from “enclosed biosphere or life support systems in space” to tackle the “major societal challenge” that is “interplanetary survival.” See <https://seed.com/seedlabs?srsId=AfmBOoq-sHLbr7x3hCauaaltL5iYik02VV24nVjvFe0zQF3MFXIXmlC>. Accessed November 18, 2024.

¹⁶⁶ Lacan, *The Ego in Freud’s Theory*, 37.

¹⁶⁷ Lacan, *The Ego in Freud’s Theory*, 60.

sensed the absolute inadequacy of the energetic model supplied to him by Fechner, if not exactly how to overcome it, hence the famously confused nature of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*: first, the compulsion to repeat or “return to the inanimate”—what is said to “override” the pleasure principle *qua* “principle of constancy”—is elevated to the status of “universal attribute,” such that all instincts become death instincts, even those that appear to be aimed at the organism’s self-preservation; then intercede the sexual instincts, both “conservative in the same sense as the other instincts” but at the same time “the true life instincts,” and therefore “operat[ing] against” the death instincts.¹⁶⁸ Then, in the last instance, the death instincts are identified with the very pleasure principle they were supposed to point *beyond*, such that the dualism Freud pits against Jung’s libidinal monism becomes one between Eros and Thanatos, not between “homeostasis and insistence.”¹⁶⁹

Lacan describes this final move as an “opportunity for yet one more misunderstanding,” embraced by commentators who would mistake not only the pleasure principle (homeostasis) for the compulsion to repeat (insistence), but the *death* of the death instinct for “the concrete dissolution of the corpse.”¹⁷⁰ None of these confusions will escape Lacan’s scrutiny. In the first place the death instinct (drive) is firmly distinguished from the pleasure principle, not as its opposite, but as its fortuitous offshoot: “After the restitutive tendency has manifested itself, something is left over which...appears to be gratuitous, paradoxical, enigmatic and is genuinely

¹⁶⁸ Freud, *Beyond*, 38, 22, 9, 36, 40.

¹⁶⁹ Lacan, *The Ego in Freud’s Theory*, 53. Lacan uses the term *homéostase* in this seminar, but the more contemporary French language version is *homéostasie*. According to Jacques Alain Miller, “*Homéostasie*, c’est le mot qu’il est allé chercher, c’est le biologiste Cannon qui l’a inventé en 1920, pour savamment qualifier l’équilibre, l’harmonie - l’équilibre c’est-à-dire une figure de l’harmonie - du milieu interne de l’organisme.” The ambiguity of this sentence precludes us from saying with certainty that Lacan found the term in Cannon’s work, but given what I am establishing as his and Canguilhem’s accord on the matter of the inexistence of fundamental social principles or laws (especially as described by Cannon), it seems not unlikely. *La Vie de Lacan*, Cours no.2, L’Orientation lacanienne III, no. 12 (2009–2010), 7.

¹⁷⁰ Lacan, *The Ego in Freud’s Theory*, 80.

repetitive.”¹⁷¹ Unfaithful to its forebearer, the drive flies in the face of self-regulation, “vascillat[ing] beyond all the biological mechanisms of equilibration, of harmonisation and of agreement”¹⁷² and bungling the organism’s hoped-for homeostasis. Indeed it is because we repeat that we do not adapt, or else, become integrated into our milieu (the way the animal “fits into its environment”); the drive precludes our equilibrium and our accord with the world—and certainly troubles any delusions about personal regulation engendering planetary homeostasis. In the second place death is said to take place not on the other side of but rather firmly within life (and recall from the previous chapter that sexual reproduction is what forces this proximity): “Life is only caught up in the symbolic piece-meal, decomposed. The human being himself is in part outside life, he partakes of the death instinct. Only from there can he engage in the register of life.”¹⁷³ It is not the case that life and death are opposed in the form of two conflicting but complementary instincts, because if there is already something of death in life, then it does not form an independent impulse, but an intractable force in but not of life (as Zupančič puts it, “its inherent negativity and internal preposition,”¹⁷⁴ a negativity that the drive aims at repeating and not resolving); we can therefore understand the dualism of the drives that Freud demands in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* not (and as we said earlier) as a matter of two that merge into one (the “stupefying couple”¹⁷⁵ of Eros and Thanatos), but of two that you don’t get from one and something else (the compulsion to repeat that comes out of the pleasure principle, from the very conservative instincts that “tend towards the restoration of an earlier state of things”¹⁷⁶). Human life is not self-regulating

¹⁷¹ Lacan, *The Ego in Freud’s Theory*, 66.

¹⁷² Lacan, *The Ego in Freud’s Theory*, 90.

¹⁷³ Lacan, *The Ego in Freud’s Theory*, 86, 80. Enterprising ethologists may want to disagree with Lacan’s argument for the animal’s accord with its environment and its (sexual) others.

¹⁷⁴ Zupančič, *What is Sex?*, 30.

¹⁷⁵ Lacan, *Or Worse*, 108.

¹⁷⁶ Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 38.

because self-regulation is not self-identical: something inherent but heterogenous to this movement prevents the subject from achieving equilibrium with herself or her environment.

When Canguilhem argues correctly, then, that society is characterized by “the absence of social wisdom, the absence of social homeostasis, the absence of those regulations that make an organism be an organism,”¹⁷⁷ he misses the fact that it is the human organism’s own lack of a principle of re(gu)lation, her failure to be a fully living organism, that bores the hole in the social world. In other words, the absence that Canguilhem imputes to something like intersubjectivity—on their own, he seems to imply, organisms self-regulate, it is when you put them together that the trouble begins—Lacan and Nancy locate on the level of the subject (who is never, strictly speaking, alone, but also never unproblematically together)—hence Lacan’s insistence on the “one by one,” which is “entirely different from the One of universal fusion,”¹⁷⁸ and Nancy’s on the “one by one” opposed to “common being.”¹⁷⁹ Because speaking subjects are not whole (and insist, unwittingly, on repeating their not-whole-ness), you cannot put them together to make a totality (or worse, something ‘greater’ than this, whatever that can be said to mean); there is no social whole, but only the unfinished, non-totalizable set of relations between parts that are themselves partial. And so it is not quite right to say that the organism-society analogy falters because the latter, unlike the former, fails to self-regulate; nevertheless we do not want to claim that the organism and the social world share a pathological ontology, that their identity can be established on the basis of their mutual incompleteness. As Copjec reminds us about *sex* (which is, as the last chapter belabored, the locus of the subject’s disharmony), not-whole-ness cannot be something that unites, only something that divides; if incompleteness were made the common quality of the organism and the

¹⁷⁷ Canguilhem, “The Problem of Regulation,” 78.

¹⁷⁸ Lacan, *Encore*, 10.

¹⁷⁹ Nancy, “Literary Communism,” 77.

community, then it would become a container for them both, reinstalling just what it was marshaled to invalidate—the possibility of subsuming the organism and the world under a greater unity. But incompleteness is not a quality of the human organism, it is what deprives it of qualities, and what therefore ushers in the demand for community.

What Zupančič calls the (sexual) “non-relation”¹⁸⁰ at the center of the subject (or the sexual non-relation that decenters or dislocates the subject, that causes her non-coincidence with herself) does not consign her to a monadic solipsism; it is because the sexed *qua* speaking subject (but again, neither of these things *absolutely*: the symbolic is not “a totality which would make the whole of humanity a kind of large animal,”¹⁸¹ not something that aggregates the subjects who cannot but be caught up in it “piece-meal, decomposed”) is *not* bounded (but forced open), *not* indivisible (but inexactly divided), that she must forge relations with others, including herself. As Lacan puts it in seminar nineteen, “The absence of sexual relation clearly doesn’t prevent liaisons, far from it, but rather provides them with their conditions.”¹⁸² But here we want to be careful not to claim that non-relation is immediately coextensive with surplus relation, which would get us no farther than more-than-humanist microbiology. Indeed this is where the theory of the subject parts ways with that of the holobiont; the negativity that provides the conditions of our manifold relations—that precludes those relations from having a proper form or formula—cannot be brushed aside, so that the subject would just be the holobiont in a different hat. Whether the champions of the human as a “multispecies chimera”¹⁸³ claim crudely that “everything is connected,”¹⁸⁴ or more carefully that “everything is connected to something,”¹⁸⁵ they elide the

¹⁸⁰ Zupančič, *What is Sex?*, 18.

¹⁸¹ Lacan, *The Ego in Freud’s Theory*, 31.

¹⁸² Lacan, *or Worse*, 11.

¹⁸³ Lorimer, *The Probiotic Planet*, 83.

¹⁸⁴ @seed, December 5, 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B5tkbZ-JRET/>.

¹⁸⁵ Haraway positions this formulation against what Thom van Dooren describes as “the brand of holist ecological philosophy that emphasizes that ‘everything is connected to everything’ [...]. While we may all *ultimately* be

lapse or break in the relational chain that psychoanalysis insists on emphatically, and insists on because without this break there would be no need to make anything in its place: all of our relations would simply be given, already there, requiring recognition but not creation; there would be *something* rather than “*nothing* which entails the world unity of human beings,”¹⁸⁶ and holism would be a practicable political program. Or else, the social world would be natural and not technological.

Recall that for Canguilhem, “A society is more on the order of a machine or of a tool than on the order of an organism,” and this because it lacks “a purpose and a totality,” a formal coherence that self-regulatory mechanisms would serve to shore up.¹⁸⁷ There is more to be said about technology here than we will be able to (viz. Lacan’s claim, in seminar two, that “there is a mutation taking place in the function of the machine, which is leaving all those who are still bent on criticizing the old mechanism miles behind,”¹⁸⁸ and his interest in this seminar—and almost exclusively in this seminar—in cybernetics, which, like psychoanalysis, is concerned with automatism of the signifying chain; Canguilhem’s engagement with Leroi-Gourhan in his essay “Machine and Organism,”¹⁸⁹ etc.); for now a few remarks on inoperativity will have to suffice.

In the first place, it should be said that the human’s technical capacity to invent what isn’t given is an effect of its ontological deficiency, the not-whole-ness of its being (we can think back here to the *savoir-faire* with the sinthome that that Lacan calls “art, artifice,”¹⁹⁰ and that Roberto

connected to one another, the specificity and proximity of connections matters—who we are bound up with and in what ways.” Van Dooren quoted in *Staying with the Trouble*, 173n2. Emphases in original. I agree that this specificity is woefully overlooked in most holistic human and planetary health discourse; nonetheless I cannot countenance the claim for ultimately complete connection.

¹⁸⁶ Lacan, *The Ego in Freud’s Theory*, 33. Emphasis added.

¹⁸⁷ Canguilhem, “The Problem of Regulation,” 76, 77.

¹⁸⁸ Lacan, *The Ego in Freud’s Theory*, 32.

¹⁸⁹ Georges Canguilhem, “Machine and Organism,” in *Knowledge of Life*, 94–95.

¹⁹⁰ Lacan, *The Sinthome*, 47.

Harari describes as “the capacity to bring off certain tricks”¹⁹¹). As Bernard Stiegler has it, “Religion, speech, politics, invention—each is but an effect of the de-fault of origin. The essential is the accident, the absence of quality. The political question, the question of community, only makes sense if one starts from the community of a de-fault or of the imminent de-fault of community....The *logos*, *qua* religion, *qua* politics, is (on the basis of the fault) wholly technical, fruit of an originary incompleteness of technical being.”¹⁹² It is the lack of a principle of relation—indeed of any positive attribute or quality—that requires “the art of the political,” the technical invention of community: if humans were not deficient from the get-go, we would have no need to invent “the community of those who have no community.”¹⁹³

But the de-fault or “flaw in being”¹⁹⁴ for which technicity compensates is never completely redressed by this supplement: something added on does not negate something left out, the invention of community never makes good its un-pre-givenness, and for this reason society is not just a tool but “a tool that is always out of order.”¹⁹⁵ As Lacan puts it, “What constitutes the basis of life, in effect, is that for everything having to do with the relations between men and women, what is called collectivity, it’s not working out”¹⁹⁶; in not working out, in always being out of order, relation can (indeed must) be made to work differently. The ongoing incompleteness of community is a “workless and inoperative activity”¹⁹⁷: freed from the constraints of adapting to its milieu, of acquiring good forms, of achieving harmonious balance with itself and its others, the

¹⁹¹ Harari, *How James Joyce Made His Name*, 116.

¹⁹² Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus*, trans. Richard Beardsworth and George Collins (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998), 193–194.

¹⁹³ Stiegler, *Technics and Time*, 192, 201. The latter is a quote from Bataille (one of Nancy’s chief interlocutors in “The Inoperative Community”) that Stiegler takes from Blanchot’s *The Unavowable Community*, published a year after Nancy’s book.

¹⁹⁴ Stiegler, *Technics and Time*, 193.

¹⁹⁵ Canguilhem, “The Problem of Regulation,” 77.

¹⁹⁶ Lacan, *Encore*, 32.

¹⁹⁷ Nancy, “The Inoperative Community,” 35.

subject is allowed—an enjoined—to be outside herself otherwise. We have a responsibility to create something (some way of sharing the world) out of nothing (the lack of any pre-given or supra-ordained form of this sharing).¹⁹⁸

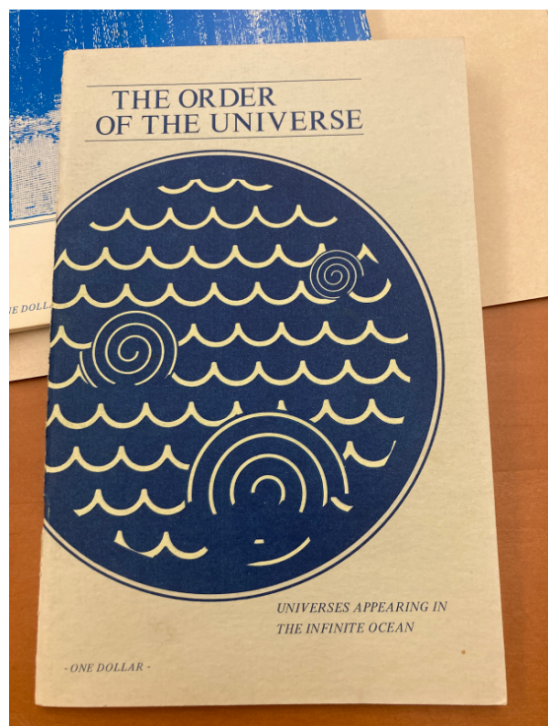


Figure 2.19: Cover of *The Order of the Universe* (nd) that reads “Universes appearing in the infinite ocean.”

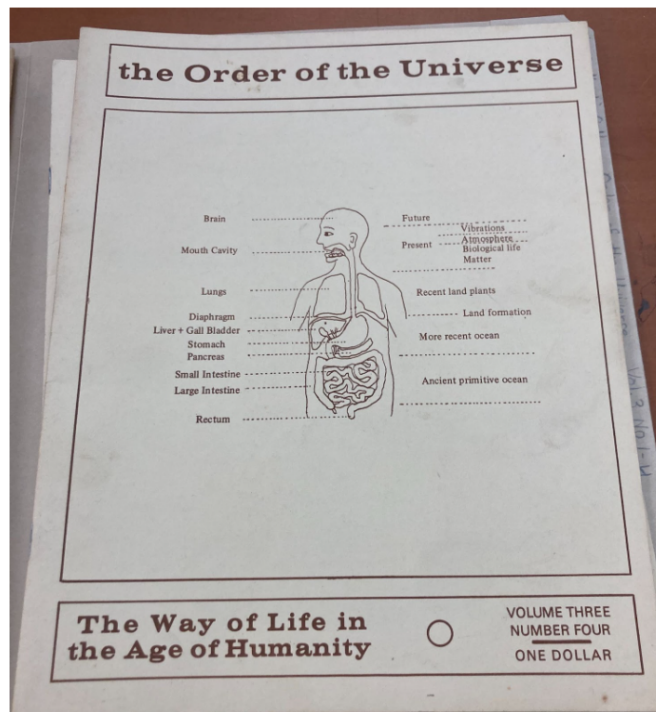


Figure 2.20: Cover of *The Order of the Universe* vol. 3 no. 4, with a map of the body that identifies the “large intestine” as an “ancient primitive ocean.” NMAC.AC.0619 box 1, folder 6.

This duty—to rigorously and ceaselessly invent our relations—is what is passed over in Seed’s claim that “I Am an Ocean,”¹⁹⁹ or in Kushi’s that man is but one manifestation of the “Infinite Ocean” that is our “Larger Self”²⁰⁰; that we are, as Freud describes the “oceanic feeling” proposed to him by his friend Romain Rolland, “one with the external world as a whole.” As Sadler

¹⁹⁸ It is possible that this is what Lacan is getting at when he says, in seminar twenty-three, that “one is only responsible within the limits of one’s *savoir-faire*,” which is “art, artifice, that which endues a remarkable quality to the art of which one is capable, because there is no Other of the Other to perform the Last Judgment,” and a few pages later, that “no relation of any sort ever comes to be founded on the basis of the sexual. This implies, as pondering dictates, that, in the sense that responsibility means non-response, or a response that falls widely of the mark, the only responsibility that exists is sexual responsibility” *The Sinthome*, 47, 50. Is it because there is no Other of the Other, no metalanguage, no sexual relation, nothing to verify the ethicality of our actions from without, that we are responsible?

¹⁹⁹ @seed, June 6, 2023, https://www.instagram.com/p/CtKQkjZsT2a/?img_index=1.

²⁰⁰ Michio Kushi, “Why Did We Become Man?,” *The Order of the Universe* 2, no. 1, n.d., NMAH.AC.0619, box 1, folder 2, page 11.

writes, “Had he lived long enough, Sigmund Freud would doubtless have despaired at the hippies’ Jungian, ‘oceanic’ sentiments”²⁰¹; indeed to Freud “the idea of men’s receiving an intimation of their connection with the world around them through an immediate feeling which is from the outset directed to that purpose sounds so strange and fits in so badly with the fabric of our psychology”²⁰² that he feels obliged, in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, to assess it, halfheartedly proposing that perhaps this feeling is the relic of an infantile state in which the ego

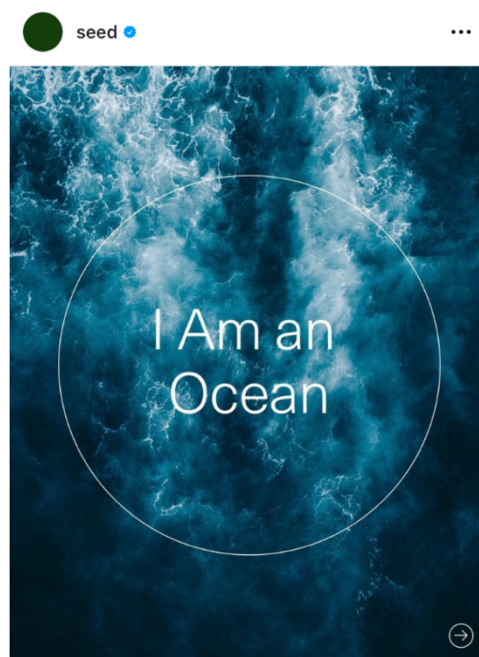


Figure 2.21: Screenshot of Seed Instagram post (June 6, 2023) of an ocean with “I Am an Ocean” superimposed.

has not yet distinguished itself from the external world, broaching but not belaboring the issue of another differentiation—that between the ego and the id. As Copjec argues, it not the continuity but the impassable rift between them—the subject’s failure to fully coincide with herself—that leads to Freud’s tacit rejection of his friend’s proposal: “The ‘inner sense’ I have of myself as other than myself...precisely *prevents* the oceanic feeling, the feeling of being *immersed* in the One, from overtaking us.”²⁰³ If Freud tactfully concludes that he has “no right to deny that [this feeling] does in fact occur in other people,” he refuses outright Rolland’s claim that this feeling is the “true source of religious sentiments” (though he “can imagine that the oceanic feeling became connected with religion later on,” citing another friend’s “unusual experiments” with Yoga); what we want to insist is that this suspect oneness cannot—and should not—ground political or ethical sentiments either.²⁰⁴

²⁰¹ Sadler, “Mandalas or Raised Fists?,” 119.

²⁰² Freud, *Civilization*, 65.

²⁰³ Copjec, “The Sexual Compact,” 44. Emphasis in original.

²⁰⁴ Freud, *Civilization*, 65, 72.

By way of conclusion, let us say that the subject is not embedded in a larger, shared milieu, not contained within it as a system within a system (where, again, the difference would be one of scale), but in fact the *subject is what contains this milieu*—not a reflection or a microcosm of the whole (on the model of the microbiome), but the negativity that joins us precisely by not prescribing in advance the form of this joining, which is to say, the exigency of relation’s invention. This is, it seems to me, what is expressed in both Lacan’s “there’s no such thing as a sexual relationship” and Canguilhem’s “there is no spontaneous social justice, that is to say, no social self-regulation”²⁰⁵: no principle (and certainly no biological principle) dictates the mode of our relation to others. There is no harmony of being or being-with to rediscover, because there *is* something connected to nothing: a gaping hole where the guarantee of relation would be. And so we will propose, adapting Lacan’s formulation to the intellectual climate in which we find ourselves, that *there is no such thing as an ecological relationship*: interdependency and entanglement have no properties that can be prescribed in advance; the shape or form of any-relation-whatever will have to be invented. The fruit of this invention can be just or unjust, can make the world a more livable place for all or only a more pleasant place for some—the crucial point is that there is no way of knowing, in advance, which. In other words, ecology is not an ethics: the fact of being bound up with others in no way guarantees that those bindings will be auspicious for anyone; the fact of being bound up with the Other requires us to invent them anyway, that is, precisely *without* guarantee.

²⁰⁵ Canguilhem, “The Problem of Regulation,” 78.



Figure 2.22: Photograph of the author as a baby, with their dad pretending to feed them some of his macrobiotic meal (which he is having with an extremely yin Diet Coke) (1997).

3. human: of plasticity and prehistory

A specter is haunting the United States—the specter of estrogen dominance. We encountered this apparition in chapter one, in functional physician Mark Hyman’s claim that “we live in an estrogen dominant universe.”¹ According to this hypothesis, the spoils of modernity—nutritional negligence, aerobic indolence, and particularly for our purposes here, the proliferation of plastics—beget sexual disharmony and population degeneration.

The condition was coined by John Lee and Virginia Hopkins in their 1996 book *What Your Doctor May Not Tell You About™ Menopause: The Breakthrough Book on Natural Progesterone*. Putting the problem in terms by now familiar to us, Lee and Hopkins write that “harmony and balance, the hallmark of a healthy body, are lost when biologically active synthetic compounds are thrown into the dance of steroids,”² when the normal functioning of our sex steroid hormones is disturbed by all manner of menacing acronyms (PCBs, PFAs, DDE, BPA), resulting in infertility, cancer, and the accrual of cross-sex characteristics, among other afflictions. Crucially, estrogen dominance is depicted as both the byproduct of behavioral impropriety and the unavoidable upshot of life on a ruined planet, the combined outcome of personal failing and postwar chemical manufacturing. ED (as if there were not enough medical maladies with these initials) is “brought on by a sedentary lifestyle, a poor diet, birth control pills, HRT, and exposure to environmental estrogens”; like the fish that we consume at our reproductive peril, we are swimming in a “sea of estrogens,” from pesticides to PCBs to “nearly all plastics.”³

¹ Hyman, “A Functional Medicine Approach To The Root Causes Of Endometriosis.”

² John R. Lee and Virginia Hopkins, *What Your Doctor May Not Tell You About Menopause: The Breakthrough Book on Natural Hormone Balance* (New York: Warner Books, 2004), 15. The titular “Progesterone” was changed to “Hormone Balance” in the “revised and updated” edition of the book.

³ Lee and Hopkins, *What Your Doctor May Not Tell You About Menopause*, 25, 56, 58.

Of course, xenoestrogens bungle the endocrine choreographies of all creatures, including those whose doctors probably aren't telling them anything about menopause. Ample evidence suggests that the planetary diffusion of endocrine disruptors is doing queer things to animal sex across species; for who knows what reason, alligators and their shrinking signifiers have pride of place in this zoological literature.⁴ Media fanfare has fueled moral panics around discoveries of animal intersexuality; as an *LA Times* article titled "Sexual Confusion in the Wild" begins, "In the gender-bending waters of Lake Apopka, alligators aren't quite male. They aren't quite female either. They may be both. Or neither."⁵ We are loath to admit that Secretary of Health and Human Services Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s claims about "forcibly feminize[d]"⁶ frogs are not, in fact, all that wide of the mark—though given his concern that the same chemicals transforming frogs could be stoking "sexual confusion" in human children, his familiarity with the phrase *forced feminization* is certainly remarkable.⁷

Queer and trans theorists have outed these inflammatory discourses for attempting to naturalize an ideology of sexual normativity under cover of conservation (as the *LA Times* has it, "If males aren't male and females aren't female, they cannot reproduce, and some outwardly healthy populations could be a generation away from extinction"⁸). At the same time, these

⁴ See, for example, Louis J. Guillette Jr. et al.'s influential article "Plasma Steroid Concentrations and Male Phallus Size in Juvenile Alligators from Seven Florida Lakes," *General and Comparative Endocrinology* 116, no. 3 (1999): 356–372.

⁵ Marla Cone, "Sexual Confusion in the Wild: From gators to gulls, scientists say, pollution may be playing havoc with animals' hormones. Some males try to lay eggs; some females nest together. Certain species may risk extinction," *Los Angeles Times*, October 2, 1994, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1994-10-02-mn-45665-story.html#:~:text=This%20is%20probably%20a%20legacy,blocking%20hormones%2C%20which%20control%20sexuality>.

⁶ Robert F. Kennedy Jr. quoted in Abby Turner and Andrew Kaczynski, "Robert F. Kennedy Jr. Repeatedly Suggested that Chemicals in Water are Impacting Sexuality of Children," *CNN*, July 13, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/07/13/politics/robert-kennedy-jr-chemicals-water-children-frogs/index.html>. See Hannah Boast, "Theorizing the Gay Frog," *Environmental Humanities* 14, no. 3 (2022): 661–679, for a critical survey of the figure of the gay frog in right-wing political discourse.

⁷ On forced fem, see Chu, *Females*, 75–79.

⁸ Cone, "Sexual Confusion in the Wild."

theorists suggest, such consternation serves to disclaim the most obvious implication of this research: that sex is, quite literally, culturally contrived, the morphological ramifications of consumer manufacturing's refuse giving fresh purchase to the phrase *social construct*. As a result of industrial production, "everybody on the planet is now encompassed within the category of transgender,"⁹ ineluctably exposed, even at extraordinary degrees of remove, to the "gender-bending" potentials of plastics, textiles, shampoos, furniture foams, and dry-cleaning chemicals—to mention only some conveyors of xenoestrogens that we don't directly consume. RFK Jr. certainly has his work cut out for him.

Unsurprisingly, the book that sounded the first widely heard alarm about the endocrine consequences of persistent organic pollutants was centrally concerned with the fate of the sexual relation. In their onerously titled 1996 tome *Our Stolen Future: Are We Threatening Our Fertility, Intelligence, and Survival? A Scientific Detective Story*, hailed by then-vice president Al Gore as something of a "sequel"¹⁰ to Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, Theo Colborn and colleagues propose to look "beyond cancer"¹¹ to chemically wrought perils "equally important not only to the health of individuals but also to the well-being of society," including infertility, social dysfunction, and the dissolution of the nuclear family.

⁹ Bailey Kier, "Interdependent ecological transsex: Notes on re/production, 'transgender' fish, and the management of populations, species, and resources," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 20, no. 3 (2010): 299. See also Malin Ah-King and Eva Hayward, "Toxic Sexes: Perverting Pollution and Queering Hormone Disruption," *O-Zone: A Journal of Object Oriented Studies* 1 (2013): 1–12; and Giovanna Di Chiro, "Polluted Politics? Confronting Toxic Discourse, Sex Panic, and Eco-Normativity," in *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*, eds. Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2010), 199–230.

¹⁰ Al Gore, "Foreword" to Theo Colborn, Dianne Dumanoski, and John Peterson Myers, *Our Stolen Future: Are We Threatening Our Fertility, Intelligence, and Survival? A Scientific Detective Story* (New York: Plume, 1997), vii.

¹¹ Colborn et al., *Our Stolen Future*, 198.

A sort of liberal-humanist counterpart to the right-wing ‘soy boy’ polemic (in which tofu consumption begets estrogen dominance, effeminacy, and leftism¹²), Colborn et al. submit that xenoestrogens are at least partially to blame for mood disorders, learning disabilities, aggressivity and otherwise aberrant behavior, and “the disintegration of the family and the neglect and abuse of children”; these unruly chemical compounds “undermine the ways in which humans interact with one another and thereby threaten the social order of modern civilization.”¹³ Such compounds ultimately imperil humanness itself, they contend, both qualitatively and quantitatively (though this is a more remote prospect, and Colborn et al. are more concerned with infertility’s interpersonal fallout than its mushrooming into species endangerment):

What we fear most immediately is not extinction, but the insidious erosion of the human species. We worry about an invisible loss of human potential. We worry about the power of hormone-disrupting chemicals to undermine and alter the characteristics that make us uniquely human—our behavior, intelligence, and capacity for social organization.¹⁴

While Colborn and company’s concerns about endocrine disrupting chemicals are not unmerited, their style of species essentialism certainly is. As we suggested in the previous chapter, “humanity is without qualities,”¹⁵ bereft of anything that would “make us uniquely human.” And yet human is not simply of a piece with other living things either, so our interest is not in affirming a condition of “interdependent ecological transsex,”¹⁶ a species-agnostic endocrine entanglement. Instead, we propose to parse the articulation of plasticity to prehistory in two very different venues, the paleo movement and Freud’s phylogenetic fancies, and to argue that a kind of feminine plasticity—the

¹² Readers may be relieved to know that though tofu contains high levels of plant estrogens similar to those endogenous to the human organism, it is not considered an endocrine disruptor or a contributing factor to estrogen-related illnesses.

¹³ Colborn et al., *Our Stolen Future*, 232, 207.

¹⁴ Colborn et al., *Our Stolen Future*, 234.

¹⁵ Stiegler, *Technics and Time*, 193.

¹⁶ Kier, “Interdependent ecological transsex.”

formal limitlessness of our unconscious inheritance—is the very condition of the speaking being’s negotiation with its world and its Other milieu.

From Primal Kitchen...

An investment in the human as the bearer of a (decidedly *not* historically materialist) species-being orients one conspicuous response to our endocrine catastrophe. As industrial chemicals appear to pose a tremendous threat to human thriving, a phenomenon that can only be called a *primal fantasy* has emerged to make right this estrogenic excess. Premised on what proponents call the



Figure 3.1: Screenshot of a Hu Kitchen Instagram ad (taken September 15, 2020) that reads “Eat More ‘No’ Feel More Human”

... “evolutionary discordance hypothesis”¹⁷—the conceit that the human species has not evolved in any significant way in at least the last ten-thousand years, and is therefore physiologically incongruous with its late-modern milieu—the paleo or caveman movement promises a curative return to a pre-plastic past. As the slogan of Hu Kitchen—a paleo chocolate brand that, along with Mark Sisson’s Primal Kitchen condiment company, popularized the diet among mainstream consumers—has it, the goal is to “get back to human.”

Advocating considerable animal protein consumption and the avoidance of dairy, grains, and all things processed, the paleo diet “mimics the types of foods our ancestors ate prior to the

¹⁷ This phrase does not actually appear in S. Boyd Eaton and Melvin Konner’s inaugural “Paleolithic Nutrition: A Consideration of Its Nature and Current Implications,” though in their 2010 follow-up article they describe the former as “the first publication of the evolutionary discordance hypothesis.” “Paleolithic Nutrition Twenty-Five Years Later,” *Nutrition in Clinical Practice* 25, no. 6 (2010): 594.

agricultural revolution.”¹⁸ If, for the mid-century macros, “brown rice [was] the icon of antimodernity,”¹⁹ the edible symbol of today’s neo-primitivist nutritional crusade is much closer to the “square steak” mocked in Tom Wolfe’s *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*.²⁰

In his account of the sixties and seventies “countercuisine,” Warren Belasco argues that “the rural-oriented ecoculture at the end of the [sixties] thought in terms of preindustrial subsistence,”²¹ aping North American indigeneity (“Stewart Brand is an Indian freak,”²² writes Wolfe) and encouraging adherence to a simple dictum: “don’t eat plastic food.”²³ In this context *plastic* came to describe, disparagingly, both processed fare and ‘straight’ society; the transformation of organic materials into simulacral foodstuffs and the complacency of a mainstream populace “defined as ‘impressionable, easily influenced, and malleable,’”²⁴ perfectly willing to eat food thickened with the same gelling agents used to make napalm. As Belasco describes the logic of the countercuisine, using the organism-society analogy advanced by the macros, “it simply made sense that a sick society would produce carcinogenic food. And since modernity itself seemed the cause of cancer, the prevention seemed equally clear: Think primitive.”²⁵

For proponents of the paleo diet, the brief is the same, if their meaty methods oppose the alfalfa sprout-enthusiasm of their mid-century counterparts. Jamie Lorimer’s distinction between “postpaleo” and “postpastoral” biome-restoration projects is instructive here.²⁶ The latter,

¹⁸ See <https://thepaleodiet.com/debunking-the-biggest-myths-about-the-paleo-diet/>.

¹⁹ Warren Belasco, *Appetite for Change: How the Counterculture Took on the Food Industry* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1993), 27.

²⁰ Tom Wolfe, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (New York: Picador, 1968), 88.

²¹ Belasco, *Appetite for Change*, 26.

²² Wolfe, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, 11.

²³ Belasco, *Appetite for Change*, 39.

²⁴ Belasco, *Appetite for Change*, 37.

²⁵ Belasco, *Appetite for Change*, 37.

²⁶ Lorimer, *The Probiotic Planet*, 172.

exemplified by the homesteading social-media sensation Ballerina Farm,²⁷ harks back to “a more recent and premodern rural pastoral [...] characterized by close encounters with agricultural animals, soil, raw and fermented foods, extended family, and the reinvention of traditional birthing and child-rearing practices,”²⁸ heir to the New Communalism that Turner and Belasco describe. A paleo lifestyle, on the other hand, cannot perforce involve going ‘back to the land,’ since agrarianism is precisely where our troubles are said to have begun.²⁹

Though paleo practitioners do not, as a rule, promote cave dwelling or the formation of nomadic hordes, the primal-ketchup-and-mustard-peddling Sisson does construct an elaborate mythos centered on a character named Grok in his self-help manifesto *The Primal Blueprint*.³⁰ In a chapter titled “From Indigenous to Digital: One Giant Step (Backward) for Mankind,” we are introduced to “Grok as the patriarch of a primal family.”³¹ A “prototypical preagricultural human being,” Grok and “his small band of 20 relatives” hunt and gather in “what is now known as the Central Valley of California.”³² Grok “ruled the planet with little more than a spear”; he represents,

²⁷ See Julia Moskin, “Tycoon or Tradwife? The Woman Behind Ballerina Farm Makes Her Own Path,” *The New York Times*, December 3, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/03/dining/ballerina-farm-hannah-neeleman.html>, on the homesteading lightning rod.

²⁸ Lorimer, *The Probiotic Planet*, 172.

²⁹ Rachel Kushner’s recent novel *Creation Lake*, which chronicles the infiltration of a commune accused of eco-terrorism for sabotaging the French state’s plan to siphon and store groundwater in “huge plastic-lined ‘megabasins,’ where it would absorb leached toxins and be evaporated by the sun,” and for which the cave-dwelling, Neanderthal-obsessed “anti-civver” Bruno Lacombe serves as an ideological figurehead, offers an interesting pastiche of agriculturally-oriented and paleo movements. See Rachel Kushner, *Creation Lake* (New York: Scribner, 2024), 7.

³⁰ Mark Sisson, *The Primal Blueprint* (Malibu: Primal Nutrition, Inc., 2012), 18. Grok gets his name from Robert Heinlein’s *Stranger in a Strange Land*, and Sisson has affirmed his affinity for the flagbearer of libertarian counterculture in a 2022 Tweet reading “There is no biological free lunch.” See @Mark_Sisson, April 3, 2022, https://x.com/Mark_Sisson/status/1510687234453815304?s=20&t=NhDams6llsO1HS2qgsarkg. Though Heinlein was undoubtedly important to Stewart Brand and the computationally oriented mid-century counterculture more generally, various sources seem to suggest erroneously that “there’s no such thing as a free lunch” was one of three “rules” printed in *The Whole Earth Catalog*. See, for example, Belasco, *Appetite for Change*, 26. As likely as this sounds, we can find no trace of the axiom in issues of the catalog.

³¹ Sisson, *The Primal Blueprint*, 36n4.

³² Sisson, *The Primal Blueprint*, 18, 40.

for the orthogenetically inclined Sisson, “the Ultimate Human,” the evolutionary pinnacle from which we have, since the advent of agriculture, steadily plummeted.³³

It is no coincidence, of course, that the paleo movement positions itself against phenomena like Ballerina Farm, or the “Low T”³⁴ soy boy (legumes are verboten for Grok-olytes). “Violent paleo masculinities”³⁵ are par for the course; a fantasy of raw, unrefined masculinity, personified by the patriarch of a primal horde, conjured to vanquish the threat of feminized plasticity—both the estrogenic effects of plastics and plasticity’s affinity with femininity more generally, the latter’s longstanding association with artifice and cosmetic intervention. (Ironically, the consumption of animal protein is a significant source of xenoestrogen exposure.³⁶) And though the meaty masculine paleo movement and the sissy soy countercuisine may share a professed antipathy to plastic and a nostalgia for better days, their aims differ sharply. While macros, as the previous chapter belabored, hoped to heal an ailing ecosystem and fractured social milieu with whole foods, the caveman caravan does not pitch their diet “as a way to transform consciousness, to reintegrate mind and body, to overcome personal alienation, and to take social responsibility.”³⁷ The paleo movement promises not a magic bullet for the woes of the world, but “a model of defense against certain ‘diseases of civilization.’”³⁸

³³ Sisson, *The Primal Blueprint*, 18.

³⁴ Jules Joanne Gleeson, “An Anatomy of the Soy Boy,” *New Socialist*, February 3, 2018, <https://newsocialist.org.uk/an-anatomy-of-the-soy-boy/>.

³⁵ Lorimer, *The Probiotic Planet*, 222.

³⁶ See P.D. Darbre, “Estrogen-Disrupting Compounds in Food,” in *Encyclopedia of Food Safety*, Volume 1, ed. Gerald G. Moy and Peter Varelis (Cambridge: Academic Press, 2024), 690–700.

³⁷ Belasco, *Appetite for Change*, 59.

³⁸ S. Boyd Eaton and Melvin Konner, “Paleolithic Nutrition: A Consideration of Its Nature and Current Implications,” *New England Journal of Medicine* 312, no. 5 (1985): 288. Here I disagree with Adrian Rose Bitar’s claim that “Paleolithic diets argue this better body makes the better world, as the improving self creates an improved society, with personal and social transformations that go hand-in-hand,” which I find frankly unconvincing (and poorly phrased). While this is certainly true of other dietetic movements (though Bitar strangely claims just the opposite, suggesting that the paleo movement is unique in its emphasis on social-because-somatic transformation), claims about the diet’s potential to spur social change seem to me striking absent from much if not most of the scholarly and self-help literature. See *Diet and the Disease of Civilization* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2018), 37–38.

The paleo party's patina of apoliticism is attributable, at least in part, to their prehistorical reference point: the solution to the "diseases of civilization"³⁹ (which include all of the familiar suspects: diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, cancer, etc.) cannot be sought in the organization of the social sphere—in, say, the redress of food insecurity or medical racism—but must seek a pre-civilizational panacea. If, as Loren Cordain (who trademarked The Paleo Diet™) and colleagues write, "the ultimate factor underlying diseases of civilization is the collision of our ancient genome with the new conditions of life in affluent nations,"⁴⁰ then the locus of intervention must be that temporal collision itself—the clash not of civilizations, but of civilization and the human's chromosomal substratum.

Let us consider the paleo diet's evolutionary premise more closely. In their seminal 1985 *New England Journal of Medicine* article "Paleolithic Nutrition: A Consideration of Its Nature and Current Implications," S. Boyd Eaton and Melvin Konner claim that "the range of diets available to preagricultural human beings determines the range that still exists for men and women living in the 20th century—the nutrition for which human beings are in essence genetically programmed."⁴¹ As Eaton, Cordain, and other drinkers of the caveman kool-aid elaborate elsewhere,

Similar to all species, contemporary humans are genetically adapted to the environment of their ancestors—that is, to the environment that their ancestors survived in and that consequently conditioned their genetic makeup. There is growing awareness that the profound environmental changes (eg, in diet and other lifestyle conditions) that began with the introduction of agriculture and animal husbandry ≈10,000 y ago occurred too recently on an evolutionary time scale for the human genome to adapt. In conjunction with this discordance between our ancient, genetically determined biology and the nutritional, cultural, and activity patterns in contemporary Western

³⁹ This phrase also appears in Loren Cordain et al., "Origins and Evolution of the Western Diet: Health Implications for the 21st Century," *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* 81, vol. 2 (2005): 341; and Konner and Eaton, "Paleolithic Nutrition Twenty-Five Years Later," 594.

⁴⁰ Cordain et al., "Origins and Evolution of the Western Diet," 350.

⁴¹ Eaton and Konner, "Paleolithic Nutrition: A Consideration of Its Nature and Current Implications."

populations, many of the so-called diseases of civilization have emerged.⁴²

It is perhaps telling that the alligator—an animal of markedly prehistoric appearance, whose lack of major evolutionary change in the last eight million or so years is oft noted⁴³—figures so prominently in the scholarly and popular literature on sex-scrambling species decline: endocrine disrupting chemicals are running afoul of established evolutionary forms, whose primeval purity is either the object of repair (in the case of the alligator) or its means (in the case of the human).

We could counter Eaton et al.’s claims on the grounds of evolutionary biology itself and say that the concept of genetic determination they marshal is desperately outdated, as indeed it already was when the article was published in 2005. It is well known that adaptation involves much more than the apparently snail-paced selection of random genetic variations; that ontogenetic or developmental adaptations can be drivers of evolution (as Eva Jablonka and Marion Lamb describe what is sometimes called the “plasticity-first hypothesis,”⁴⁴ “phenotypic adjustment comes first, and genetic change follows”⁴⁵); and of course that genetic adaptations with alimentary significance, like lactose tolerance, have plainly arisen in the last ten-thousand years.

This is Marlene Zuk’s approach in *Paleofantasy: What Evolution Really Tells Us About Sex, Diet, and How We Live*, a book-length rejoinder to the primal proselytizers. Not only, Zuk

⁴² Cordain et al., “Origins and Evolution of the Western Diet,” 341.

⁴³ See, in addition to the illuminating Reddit thread on the subject, Stephenie Livingston, “A reptilian anachronism: American alligator older than we thought” *University of Florida News*, September 16, 2016, <https://archive.news.ufl.edu/articles/2016/09/a-reptilian-anachronism-american-alligator-older-than-we-thought-1.html>.

⁴⁴ This hypothesis is often attributed to Mary Jane West-Eberhard’s seminal book *Developmental Plasticity and Evolution*, which argues that “environmental induction is a major initiator of adaptive evolutionary change” and that “genes are followers, not leaders, in evolution.” *Developmental Plasticity and Evolution* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003), 20. See also Nicholas A. Levis and David W. Pfennig, “Evaluating ‘Plasticity-First’ Evolution in Nature: Key Criteria and Empirical Approaches,” *Trends in Ecology & Evolution* 31, no. 7 (2016): 563–574, for a survey of varying responses to the question of “whether environmentally initiated phenotypic change—in other words phenotypic plasticity—precedes and facilitates adaptation.”

⁴⁵ Eva Jablonka and Marion J. Lamb, *Evolution in Four Dimensions: Genetic, Epigenetic, Behavioral, and Symbolic Variation in the History of Life* (Cambridge: MIT, 2014), 408.

argues, have humans experienced “evolution [on] ecological timescales,” acquiring the capacity to drink milk as adults or survive at high altitudes recently and rapidly, but at no point have we been “perfectly adapted to our environments”: the paleo romance of “our well-muscled and harmoniously adapted ancestors” has no evolutionary biologist worth their salt under its sway.⁴⁶

Though Zuk is interested exclusively in garden-variety genetic variation, we could also counter these claims for evolutionary lag on the grounds of microbiology, an area of particular interest to paleo proponents, many of whom adhere to the ‘old friends hypothesis’—the conceit that the microbes with which humans co-evolved were made scarce by Big Hygiene, and that our antibiotic age is to blame for the rise of allergic, autoimmune, and inflammatory diseases.⁴⁷ The hologenome theory of evolution—in which “the holobiont, with its integrated community of species, becomes a unit of natural selection”⁴⁸—maintains that microbes indeed play an essential role in human evolution, but holds that “rapid changes in the symbiotic microbiota could allow the holobiont to adapt and survive under changing environmental conditions, thus providing the time necessary for the host genome to evolve if required.”⁴⁹ Variation in the genome of an aggregate of microorganisms arises more quickly (bacteria’s generation time is somewhere in the vicinity of half an hour, as compared to the human’s twenty-five years) and by more mechanisms (such as the amplification of existing strains or the acquisition of entirely novel ones) than it does in that of its plant or animal host.⁵⁰ Thanks to microbial confidants old and new, then, humans can both

⁴⁶ Marlene Zuk, *Paleofantasy: What Evolution Really Tells Us About Sex, Diet, and How We Live* (New York: Norton, 2013), 12, 7.

⁴⁷ See Lorimer, *The Probiotic Planet*, 68–69, on the role of the old friends hypothesis in paleoecology and the paleo movement.

⁴⁸ Gilbert et al., “A Symbiotic View of Life,” 334.

⁴⁹ Ilana Zilber-Rosenberg and Eugene Rosenberg, “Role of microorganisms in the evolution of animals and plants: the hologenome theory of evolution,” *FEMS Microbiology Reviews* 32, no. 5 (2008): 730.

⁵⁰ Unsurprisingly, Haraway rejects the hierarchy implicit in the host–symbiont formulation of the hologenome theory, writing that “my use of *holobiont* does not designate host + symbionts because all of the players are symbionts to each other, in diverse kinds of relationalities and with varying degrees of openness to attachments and assemblages with other holobionts.” *Staying with the Trouble*, 60.

adapt rapidly and pass those adaptations on to subsequent generations, insofar as large swathes of the microbiome are transmitted transgenerationally through birth and breastfeeding, among other mechanisms. This is a clear example of the inheritance of acquired adaptive characters,⁵¹ and many micro- and evolutionary biologists have remarked that the hologenome theory requires us to reappraise the prevailing lay perception of Lamarck's outlandishness.⁵² The proper object of evolutionary theory is not only the population-level selection of random variations, but also 'individual' (or holobiont-level) adaptations and the epigenetic inheritance of "environmentally induced acquired characteristics."⁵³

Tempting as these two tacks may be, we would prefer to counter the evolutionary discordance hypothesis on philosophical grounds, extending Zuk's avowal of our "our maladapted ancestors"⁵⁴ to claim, as we did in the last chapter, that maladaptation is not a contingent condition, our hapless lot in modern life, but a structural fact of subjectivity. As Lacan says in his second seminar: "the subject as such, functioning as subject, is something other than an organism which adapts itself."⁵⁵ A view that he shares, we will see, with the paleontologist André Leroi-Gourhan. The speaking subject is constitutively ill at ease in what we will propose are her two external environments: her milieu and her unconscious. Or else: the subject is the upshot of the intractable tension between these two milieus.

⁵¹ Scott Gilbert argues that such inheritance is epigenetic, while Jablonka and Lamb insist that it is both genetic and epigenetic. See "Symbionts as an Epigenetic Source of Heritable Variation," in *Transformations of Lamarckism: From Subtle Fluids to Molecular Biology*, eds. Snait B. Gissis and Eva Jablonka (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011), 283–293; and Jablonka and Lamb, *Evolution in Four Dimensions*, 389. As is well known, Lamarck never used the phrase with which his name has become practically synonymous.

⁵² See Eugene Rosenberg, Gil Sharon, and Ilana Zilber-Rosenberg, "The hologenome theory of evolution contains Lamarckian aspects within a Darwinian framework," *Environmental Microbiology* 11, no. 12 (2009): 2959–2962; and Jablonka and Lamb, *Evolution in Four Dimensions*, 388–390.

⁵³ Eva Jablonka and Marion J. Lamb, *Epigenetic Inheritance and Evolution: The Lamarckian Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995), 8.

⁵⁴ Zuk, *Paleofantasy*, 7.

⁵⁵ Lacan, *The Ego in Freud's Theory*, 9.

It is worth bringing psychoanalysis to bear here for reasons of genealogy as well: the evolutionary discordance hypothesis (and its postulation of an “environment of evolutionary adaptedness, or EEA”⁵⁶) in fact derives from the deeply dubious field of evolutionary psychology. The concept was coined by John Bowlby, a twentieth-century psychiatrist who trained as an analyst with Joan Riviere and Melanie Klein but maintained a somewhat icy relationship with the British psychoanalytic community throughout his career (not to speak of the ire with which the French would have regarded his work).⁵⁷ The “environment of evolutionary adaptedness”⁵⁸ is proposed in Bowlby’s 1969 book *Attachment*, the first of his three-part treatise *Attachment and Loss*; we will not venture a guess as to how the preachers of the paleo gospel came upon this particular text. In it Bowlby sets out to give Freud’s theory of instinct surer footing, convinced that the concepts of *feedback* and *homeostasis* differed meaningfully from Freud’s *inertia* (despite James Strachey’s suggestion to him that perhaps they really did not).⁵⁹ Combining anthropology, cybernetics, and behaviorism, those bastions of mid-century systems thinking, Bowlby produces a nominally psychoanalytic notion of instinct as “adaptive, goal-directed behavior,” making explicit that his “ideas are the antithesis [...] of those to be found in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920a) and later works,” and that “Freud’s concept of *Trieb*, so unfortunately mistranslated as ‘instinct,’ is therefore dispensed with.”⁶⁰ In his version of the too-slow story of evolution, Bowlby writes that

The speed at which man’s environment has been diversified, especially the speed in recent centuries of man-made change, has far outstripped the pace at which natural selection is able to work. We can therefore be fairly sure that none of the environments in which

⁵⁶ Konnor and Eaton, “Paleolithic Nutrition Twenty-Five Years Later,” 594.

⁵⁷ See Inge Bretherton, “The Origins of Attachment Theory: John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth,” *Developmental Psychology* 28, no. 5 (1992): 760, on Bowlby’s antipathy to the work of Klein—his erstwhile supervisor—in particular.

⁵⁸ John Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss Volume 1: Attachment* (New York: Basic Books, 1969), 58.

⁵⁹ See Bowlby, *Attachment*, 18n1.

⁶⁰ Bowlby, *Attachment*, 37, 172–173.

civilized, or even half-civilized, man lives today conforms to the environment in which man's environmentally stable behavioral systems were evolved and to which they are intrinsically adapted.⁶¹

If we want to understand instinctual behavior, beholden as it is to the painfully protracted processes of mutation and selection, we must consider “the degree to which and the way in which it might contribute to population survival in man's primeval environment.”⁶² It is obvious that Lacan—who, as we have seen, vehemently rejects “the hypothesis of a pre-established harmony”⁶³ between the subject and her environment—would balk at Bowlby's pretension to plow the same theoretical field that “Freud had started tilling sixty years earlier.”⁶⁴ But can the same be said of Freud himself?

...to the primal father

Much to Lacan's chagrin, Freud had an abiding interest in phylogeny, and he proposed his own sort of evolutionary psychoanalysis, a framework with the concept of archaic heritage—the unconscious transmission of age-old psychic acquisitions, including neurotic dispositions and memory-traces—at its center. “Acquisitions”⁶⁵ is Freud's word, but it is also Lamarck's, whose notion of ‘the inheritance of acquired characteristics’ (a phrase that, as is well known, he never used) he summarizes thusly:

All the acquisitions of losses wrought by nature on individuals, through the influence of the environment in which their race has long been placed, and hence through the influence of the predominant use of permanent disuse of any organ; all these are preserved by reproduction to the new individuals which arise,

⁶¹ Bowlby, *Attachment*, 59.

⁶² Bowlby, *Attachment*, 59.

⁶³ Lacan, *The Ego in Freud's Theory*, 98.

⁶⁴ Bowlby, *Attachment*, xi.

⁶⁵ “Acquisitions” appears at least in Sigmund Freud, *A Phylogenetic Fantasy: Overview of the Transference Neuroses*, trans. Alex Hoffer and Peter T. Hoffer (Cambridge: Belknap, 1987); *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*; *The Ego and the Id*; and *Moses and Monotheism*.

provided that the acquired modifications are common to both sexes, or at least to the individuals which produce the young.⁶⁶

Freud took up Lamarck's claim for the animal's ability to acquire modifications through repeated actions occasioned by environmental alterations—and to transmit those modifications to subsequent generations—to theorize something like “cultural inheritance,” or the capacity of the individual to “acquire the whole essential history of being human within the first few short years of its life,” as Juliet Mitchell puts it.⁶⁷ Despite “the present attitude of biological science,” Freud wrote in 1939, “which refuses to hear of the inheritance of acquired characters by succeeding generations [...] I cannot do without this factor in biological evolution.”⁶⁸ Freud was emphatic that such psychic acquisitions were not transmitted by education or communication (that is, by way of the ego) but through the medium of the unconscious. Lamarck's concept demanded such mediation; as Canguilhem has it, “Lamarck writes that if by action of circumstances or milieus one takes him to mean direct action by the exterior milieu on the living, one is putting words into his mouth. It is via the intermediary of need, a subjective notion implying reference to a positive pole of vital values, that the milieu dominates and compels the evolution of living beings.”⁶⁹ Environmental upheavals engender new needs, new needs occasion “new activities” and “new habits,” and new habits compel the individual to develop previously unused organs or parts, or else “to make use of entirely new parts, to which the needs have imperceptibly given birth by efforts of its inner feeling,” an affective force (we might say, the body's representation of need to itself) that propels action and organ-ic innovation.⁷⁰ As we will see in the following section, the

⁶⁶ J. B. Lamarck, *Zoological Philosophy: An Exposition With Regard to the Natural History of Animals*, trans. Hugh Elliot (London: Macmillan, 1914), 113.

⁶⁷ Juliet Mitchell, “Introduction” to *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the école freudienne*, trans. Jacqueline Rose (New York: Norton, 1982), 14.

⁶⁸ Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, 100.

⁶⁹ Canguilhem, “The Living and Its Milieu,” in *Knowledge of Life*, 104.

⁷⁰ Lamarck, *Zoological Philosophy*, 112.

unconscious is both such a force, an intermediary between the organism and its environmentally responsive actions, and a milieu unto itself.

The concept of archaic heritage appears first in *Totem and Taboo*, peppers the metapsychological papers and Introductory Lectures, and then receives relatively substantial treatment in many of Freud's later works, including *Group Psychology*, *The Ego and the Id*, and *Moses and Monotheism*. But it is in one of the twelve planned metapsychological papers that Freud never published (indeed, that he destroyed the fair copy of) that he makes his most thoroughgoing case for understanding the neuroses as untimely remainders of environmentally induced modifications to psychic life, as "residues of the acquisitions of our ancestors."⁷¹ As Axel and Peter Hoffer write in their Foreword, here Freud boldly submits that the transference neuroses (anxiety, conversion hysteria, obsessional neurosis) and narcissistic neuroses (dementia praecox, paranoia, and melancholia-mania) might form "a set of formerly adaptive responses that have become maladaptive as the climatic and sociological threats to the survival of mankind have changed."⁷²

This paper, written in 1915 and published in 1987 as *A Phylogenetic Fantasy*, is worth describing in some detail. Freud takes his cue from Sándor Ferenczi's 1913 article "Stages in the Development of the Sense of Reality," a sort of springboard for the latter's 1924 *Thalassa: A Theory of Genitality*. In this article Ferenczi proposes that hysterical and obsessional neuroses—characterized, respectively, by regression to infantile experiences of pre-genital sexuality and magical thinking (the "omnipotence of thought")—may have been determined in character by

⁷¹ Freud, *A Phylogenetic Fantasy*, 10.

⁷² Axel Hoffer and Peter T. Hoffer, "Foreword" to Sigmund Freud, *A Phylogenetic Fantasy*, xii. This has not gone unnoticed by evolutionary psychologists: in the field-defining anthology *The Adapted Mind: Evolutionary Psychology and the Generation of Culture*, Randolph M. Nesse and Alan T. Lloyd suggest that "the enduring vitality of Freud's work may result from his attempts to explain the adaptive significance of mental phenomena." "The Evolution of Psychodynamic Mechanisms," in *The Adapted Mind: Evolutionary Psychology and the Generation of Culture*, ed. Jerome H. Barkow, Leda Cosmides, and John Tooby (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992), 602.

“geological changes in the surface of the earth, with their catastrophic consequences for primitive man,” such that in neurosis we “faithfully recapitulate” the repressions occasioned by “the misery of the glacial period.”⁷³ Ferenczi maintains that, if not in 1913, “we shall some day succeed in bringing the individual stages in the development of the ego, and the neurotic regression-types of these, into a parallel with the stages in the racial history of mankind.”⁷⁴

In *A Phylogenetic Fantasy* Freud attempts just that; acknowledging, as does Ferenczi, the somewhat screwball quality of his suppositions, Freud proposes a (pre)historic catalyst for each of the neuroses listed above—a phylogenetic fixation point to which neurotic regression would return us—and by extension a chronology of those neuroses’ emergence. The question of history here is a fraught one—but we will get to this in due course.

Freud concurs with Ferenczi that “the exigencies [*die Not*⁷⁵] of the Ice Age” spurred the transference neuroses, beginning with that behemoth *anxiety*, as the formerly “friendly outside world [...] transformed itself into a mass of threatening perils,” withholding the satisfactions it had heretofore offered.⁷⁶ “As the hard times progressed,” the importance of limiting procreation (of greater concern, Freud adds, to women, who were disinclined to kill their children) “prompted a certain regression” to the polymorphous perversity of our ontogenetic yore, a “situation [that] obviously corresponds to the conditions of conversion hysteria.”⁷⁷ Next, man (or men, whom this phase “primarily affected”⁷⁸) honed his fledgling intellectual and technical skills, acquiring the first inklings of mastery over this harsh milieu. Immensely proud of his accomplishments—“language was magic to him, his thoughts seemed omnipotent to him”—he granted himself

⁷³ Sándor Ferenczi, “Stages in the Development of the Sense of Reality,” in *First Contributions to Psychoanalysis*, trans. Ernest Jones (The International Psychoanalytic Library 45, 1952), 235–237.

⁷⁴ Ferenczi, “Stages in the Development of the Sense of Reality,” 236.

⁷⁵ See page 11 line 28 of the facsimile (page 44 of *A Phylogenetic Fantasy*).

⁷⁶ Freud, *A Phylogenetic Fantasy*, 13, 14.

⁷⁷ Freud, *A Phylogenetic Fantasy*, 14, 15.

⁷⁸ Freud, *A Phylogenetic Fantasy*, 15.

“unrestrained dominance” as a reward.⁷⁹ Freud had already identified the animism and magical thinking of so-called primitive peoples with obsessional neurosis in *Totem and Taboo*, and here he notes that “obsessional neurosis recapitulates the characteristics of this phase of mankind.”⁸⁰

Before proceeding to the narcissistic neuroses, where our difficulties will only deepen (we are headed, of course, for Freud’s dreaded hobby horse, the father of the primal horde), we should stop to consider the somewhat surprising suggestion of the text so far: that *phylogeny* (the evolutionary history of the species, here as it experiences climatic upheaval) in fact recapitulates *ontogeny* (in regressions first to infantile anxiety, then to pre-genital sexuality, and finally to “childhood megalomania of their own omnipotence”⁸¹), reversing the well-known Haeckelian dictum that Freud affirms elsewhere.⁸² The phases of individual psychogenesis may be “at bottom heritages, abbreviated recapitulations of the development which all mankind has passed through from its primeval days over long periods of time,”⁸³ but that “development which all mankind has passed through” appears itself to be a sort of scaled-up ontogenesis—the species-level recapitulation of the individual’s development. Freud’s phylogenetic fantasy involves a sort of “vertigo of origins,”⁸⁴ the neurotic recapitulation of a phylogenetic acquisition that is itself the recapitulation of individual development—phylogeny and ontogeny preceding one another ad nauseam.

Freud’s account of the advent of the narcissistic neuroses further compounds this origin-al fugitivity. The swelling despotism of the primal father—the one whose “thoughts seemed

⁷⁹ Freud, *A Phylogenetic Fantasy*, 15.

⁸⁰ Freud, *A Phylogenetic Fantasy*, 16.

⁸¹ Ferenczi, “Stages in the Development of the Sense of Reality,” 219.

⁸² See Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, 131; *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 37.

⁸³ Sigmund Freud, “Some Thoughts on Development and Regression—Aetiology,” lecture XXII in *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis (Part III)*, 354.

⁸⁴ Joan Copjec describes the “vertigo of origins” as “the ‘externalization’ of what is ‘internal’ only after the externalization takes place.” Personal communication, January 27, 2020.

omnipotent to him”—led him to castrate his sons, and this severing of their capacity for object-cathexis “seems to be recapitulated by dementia-praecox.”⁸⁵ Some of the sons fled their father’s knife, forming a community bound by the sublimation of homosexual desire (“the basis for every later society,” Freud writes, presciently acknowledging that queers invented culture), but residual gay panic begat “paranoia.”⁸⁶ Then, at last, the band of brothers rose up and offed their tyrannical father, the neurotic upshot of which, Freud suggests, was melancholia-mania. Once the excitement of having executed the lethal act abated, the remorseful brothers, recalcitrantly “rever[ing] him as a model,”⁸⁷ identified with the slain patriarch (thus, Freud suggests in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, establishing the agency of the super-ego) and incorporated a part of him into themselves in what would later become the totem meal, “a repetition and a commemoration of this memorable and criminal deed.”⁸⁸

Freud was very fond of recounting “this great event of human history.”⁸⁹ And yet, as Catherine Malabou notes, what he so often called the “historical beginning”⁹⁰ of civilization cannot properly be described either as an event or as historical. The problem is not the deed’s preposterousness (though this is probably part of the reason Lacan wants no truck with it), but its categorical necessity. As Malabou writes, “A historical event, whatever its importance, even if fundamental, foundational, is by definition always contingent. [...] The father’s murder, with its religious implications, is on the contrary absolutely not contingent. It had to take place.”⁹¹ This is more or less Lacan’s point when he claims that “it is not a matter of genesis, nor of history, nor of

⁸⁵ Freud, *A Phylogenetic Fantasy*, 17.

⁸⁶ Freud, *A Phylogenetic Fantasy*, 18.

⁸⁷ Freud, *A Phylogenetic Fantasy*, 18.

⁸⁸ Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 142.

⁸⁹ Freud, *A Phylogenetic Fantasy*, 18.

⁹⁰ Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, 137.

⁹¹ Catherine Malabou, “Is Psychic Phylogenesis Only a Phantasy? New Biological Developments in Trauma Inheritance,” in *Freud and Monotheism: Moses and the Violent Origins of Religion*, eds. Gilad Sharvit and Karen S. Feldman (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2018), 185–186.

anything whatsoever that might resemble an event, even though this is what Freud seems to have called it at some moments. [...] It's a matter of structure."⁹² It is also more or less Copjec's when she offers the primal father as an example of "society's generative principle," the missing cause that cannot be of the same order as that which it causes, such that "what Freud accounts for in *Totem and Taboo* is the structure, the real structure, of a society."⁹³ And so the killing becomes another name for the nothing that is responsible for something, for the "moment of creation *ex nihilo* [...]" which gives birth to the historical dimension of the drive."⁹⁴ The murder is transcendental and the rest, as they say, is history.

Unerring as these readings are, and nicely as they accord with our suggestion, in the previous chapter, that something must be subtracted from the social sphere, lest we should lapse into the politically and epistemically suspect realm of immanence, and with our claim for the missing cause of the cause in the chapter before that, we nevertheless cannot escape the impression that Freud does not seem to posit the primal father's killing only or primarily as a structural heuristic. As he declares in *Moses and Monotheism*, "I have no hesitation in declaring that men have always known (in this special way) that they once possessed a primal father and killed him."⁹⁵ (Lacan, again, tries desperately to avert this obvious disaster: in insisting "that it actually happened, that it is the real,"⁹⁶ Freud gives us a name for the impossible qua real.) But even if we suspend our disbelief in the "cock-and-bull story of *Totem and Total Bull*,"⁹⁷ how are we to square Freud's insistence on this act as "the beginning of so many things"⁹⁸ and the dizzying recursivity of ontogeny and phylogeny in *A Phylogenetic Fantasy* (the prehistorical acquisition of the narcissistic

⁹² Lacan, *or Worse*, 179.

⁹³ Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 9, 12.

⁹⁴ Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 213.

⁹⁵ Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, 101.

⁹⁶ Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, 123.

⁹⁷ Lacan, *or Worse*, 184.

⁹⁸ Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 142.

neuroses obviously recapitulated in the child's traversal of the Oedipus complex, whence the same chicken-or-the-egg conundrum), the impossibility of establishing either as the ground of the other? For Malabou, the father's traumatic murder is "*from the outset* transcribed and expressed each time in a different way," such that there is "no origin proper": the origin is "already a variation," is itself "plasticize[d]." ⁹⁹ Is the killing simply a repetition for which there is no original? (Have we in fact been reading "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" this whole time?)

Let us linger on Freud's claim that we have always known about the primal father's murder "in this special way"—through what Lacan mocks as "mnestic transmission through chromosomes."¹⁰⁰ What the individual inherits are psychic schemata, neurotic dispositions, and even memories; as we suggested above, these "acquired characters"¹⁰¹ can only be transmitted through the unconscious, which, unlike the ego, is "capable of being inherited."¹⁰² Freud's discovery that it was possible to remember an event one did not in fact experience was revolutionary, casting new light on the staggering number of stories he heard of children seduced by adults, exposed to scenes of parental sex, and threatened with castration. Freud's abandonment of the seduction theory of neurosis is often narrated as his coming to realize that his patients were suffering from reminiscences not of events that took place early in their lives, but of forgotten infantile fantasies—a formulation that overlooks the phylogenetic component of those fantasies.

As Freud puts it in his 1917 lecture "The Paths to the Formation of Symptoms," insights from which he would add, in brackets, to the Wolf Man case history (written the same year as *A Phylogenetic Fantasy*, but not published until 1918),

I believe these *primal phantasies*, as I should like to call them, and no doubt a few others as well, are a phylogenetic endowment. In

⁹⁹ Malabou, "Is Psychic Phylogenesis Only A Phantasy?," 186, 195. Emphasis in original.

¹⁰⁰ Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, 115.

¹⁰¹ Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, 100.

¹⁰² Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, 38.

them the individual reaches beyond his own experience into primaeval experience at points where his own experience has been too rudimentary. It seems to me quite possible that all the things that are told to us to-day in analysis as phantasy—the seduction of children, the inflaming of sexual excitement by observing parental intercourse, the threat of castration (or rather castration itself)—were once real occurrences in the primaeval times of the human family, and that children in their phantasies are simply filling in the gaps in individual truth with prehistoric truth. I have repeatedly been led to suspect that the psychology of the neuroses has stored up in it more of the antiquities of human development than any other source.¹⁰³

Freud's claims here and elsewhere would famously land him in hot water with commentators who saw (and still see) in them a repugnant pretext for what is much more easily explained as a pervasive culture of sexual abuse.¹⁰⁴ Freud did not, of course, dismiss this possibility, noting in *From the History of an Infantile Neurosis* that these primal scenes “are unquestionably an inherited endowment, a phylogenetic heritage, but may just as easily be acquired by personal experience”¹⁰⁵—as was the case with the Wolf Man's seduction by his older sister—and that a patient's life history should always take explanatory precedence over phylogenesis. But Freud is ultimately uninterested in the etiology of the memory—whether it the product of the individual's experience or that of earlier generations, or indeed some combination of the two, “is not in fact a matter of very great importance”¹⁰⁶ to the analyst. The point is not that Freud doesn't care whether or not his analysands have been assaulted, but that inherited memory-traces are no less psychically determinant than are lived experiences.

¹⁰³ Freud, “Paths to the Formation of Symptoms,” 371.

¹⁰⁴ See, for example, Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson, *The Assault on Truth: Freud's Suppression of the Seduction Theory* (New York: Ballantine, 2003).

¹⁰⁵ Sigmund Freud, *From the History of an Infantile Neurosis*, SE vol. XVII, trans. and ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1955), 97.

¹⁰⁶ Freud, *History of an Infantile Neurosis*, 97.

What psychoanalysis seeks to understand is an inherited memory's expression: the circumstances under which it is "awakened"¹⁰⁷ and the form that it takes, the manner in which it is made to "fill in the gaps" (a formulation Freud uses in the lecture and the case history) in an individual's conscious life. This is one of the two questions that Freud poses in *Moses and Monotheism*, immediately after his assertion of man's "special way" of knowing about their prehistoric patricide: "First, under what conditions does a memory of this kind enter the archaic heritage? And, secondly, in what circumstances can it become active—that is, can it advance to consciousness from its unconscious state in the id, even though in an altered and distorted shape?"¹⁰⁸ What interests Freud, then, is the plasticity of our unconscious inheritance: its capacity to take new shape, to squeeze itself into the cracks of consciousness, to disguise itself as one's developmental history.

The neuroses are overdetermined (which is to say, of course, not wholly determined) by phylogenesis: between the archaic memory-trace and its coming to consciousness is a degree of indeterminacy, and it is at this gap that analysis aims. As Freud writes in *A Phylogenetic Fantasy*, the neuroses and the primeval events that occasioned them "naturally cannot coincide completely, because neurosis contains more than what regression brings with it," exceeds its phylogenetic cause.¹⁰⁹ "Primitive man survives potentially in every individual,"¹¹⁰ but the activation of an individual's share of group memory is subject to "a whole number of influences [...] not all of which are known."¹¹¹ This is where the ultimately quite sharp distinction between Freud's evolutionary psychoanalysis and Bowlby's concept of the same comes into view—for Bowlby has

¹⁰⁷ Freud, "Paths to the Formation of Symptoms," 361.

¹⁰⁸ Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, 101.

¹⁰⁹ Freud, *A Phylogenetic Fantasy*, 13.

¹¹⁰ Freud, *Group Psychology*, 123.

¹¹¹ Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, 101.

no notion of the unconscious, and the “amazing variety and plasticity”¹¹² he accords to inherited instinctual behavior is predicated entirely on learning and symbolic communication, not on the plasticity of what is inherited as such. Our archaic heritage is, as Joan Copjec claims, essentially plastic, not just capable of being given form but requiring it: “what we inherit through the id, or as *jouissance*, is not something we have conscious access to and it does not mold us; we have to mold or express it.”¹¹³

We have not yet mentioned *jouissance*, but it is central to Lacan’s reading, in his seventeenth and nineteenth seminars, of *Totem and Taboo*, where Freud claims that the murder of the primal father necessitated the barring of unbridled enjoyment, since each of the brothers would have liked to usurp his position, “to have all the women to himself”¹¹⁴ (and we should suspect that one of Lacan’s gripes will be with just this “all the women”). As we saw in the last chapter, “sexual desires do not unite men but divide them,”¹¹⁵ and so in the interest of social cohesion, of making communal life possible, the brothers “renounced the women whom they desired and who had been their chief motive for despatching their father.”¹¹⁶ Thus, Lacan writes, “the dead father is what guards *jouissance*, is where the prohibition of *jouissance* started.”¹¹⁷

Readers will have noticed that Freud’s yarn is the basis for the male side of Lacan’s formulas of sexuation: the *all* of men is established by the (murderous) exemption of the *one* who is not castrated, the one who every man imagines might have been him, collective renunciation of unfettered *jouissance*—the exception that makes men *all* and not (that) *one*—notwithstanding. Men as a group must settle for a shred of “surplus *jouissance*,”¹¹⁸ a substitutive satisfaction that

¹¹² Bowlby, *Attachment*, 173.

¹¹³ Copjec, “The Inheritance of Potentiality.”

¹¹⁴ Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 144.

¹¹⁵ Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 144.

¹¹⁶ Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 144.

¹¹⁷ Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, 123.

¹¹⁸ Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, 74.

necessarily fails to make good the want wrought by submission to the phallic function. “As the myth demonstrates,” Lacan says, “sexual jouissance will be possible but it will be limited,”¹¹⁹ essentially masturbatory and not “related to the Other as such,”¹²⁰ to the “all the women” whom men have renounced—hence the inexistence of the sexual relation. But the myth also implies (fallaciously, Lacan thinks) the ontological parity of those women—the existence of an “all” of women (let’s say, their renunciation at the level of experience but not of being) and therefore of two sexes, the One and the Other, and the possibility of a relation between them. As we saw in chapter one, the formulas posit that there can be no *one* (no exception) and therefore no *all* (no totality) of women, and “if woman is *not all*, it is because of the duality of her jouissance.”¹²¹ Because she is not wholly submitted to the phallic function—or better, because she brings “something more”¹²² than the phallic function bargained for—she is not consigned to the paltry “jouissance of the idiot.”¹²³ As Lacan puts it in seminar twenty, “being not-whole, she has a supplementary jouissance compared to what the phallic function designates by way of jouissance. You will notice that I said ‘supplementary.’ If I had said ‘complementary’ what a mess we’d be in! We would fall back into the whole.”¹²⁴ This supplementary jouissance is neither surplus (phallic) jouissance, nor some kind of womanly equivalent that would balance the two sides of the formulas—it is something else entirely, a “jouissance that is beyond,” unlimited, “promoted only on the basis of infinity.”¹²⁵

¹¹⁹ Lacan, *or Worse*, 34

¹²⁰ Lacan, *Encore*, 9.

¹²¹ Lacan, *or Worse*, 88.

¹²² Lacan, *Encore*, 74.

¹²³ Lacan, *Encore*, 81.

¹²⁴ Lacan, *Encore*, 73.

¹²⁵ Lacan, *Encore*, 76, 7.

Importantly, *jouissance* means not only (sexual) enjoyment, but “can also be a legal term referring to the right to enjoy the use of a thing (usufruct).”¹²⁶ Usufruct does not involve ownership of a transfer of title, but the “enjoyment,” barring destruction or waste, “of the advantages of property belonging to another”¹²⁷—or an Other. As Lacan has it, “when you have the usufruct of an inheritance, you can enjoy the inheritance (*en jouir*) as long as you don’t use up too much of it.”¹²⁸ Though Lacan stops short of describing this usufruct or *jouissance*, this right to enjoy the use of something that is not one’s own, *as* an inheritance, we cannot help but hear here echoes of Freud’s claim, in *Moses and Monotheism*, that the unconscious is “a collective, universal property of mankind,” such that “we must finally make up our minds to adopt the hypothesis that the psychical precipitates of the primeval period became inherited property which, in each fresh generation, called not for acquisition but only for awakening.”¹²⁹ *Jouissance*—but particularly the “*jouissance* of the Other,”¹³⁰ the unlimited *jouissance* of the feminine that cannot, as a matter of course, be used up—is, we want to suggest, the common property passed down through the unconscious, the plastic inheritance that it is our right (but not, Lacan insists, our duty) to enjoy, to express, to awaken. Which is to say: it is only by accounting for not-whole-ness (which Freud fails to do in his postulation of an “all of women”) that the concept of archaic heritage becomes intelligible—if not, as we will see in the final section, knowable. If there is “no origin proper” to Freud’s phylogenetic fantasy, if the murder of the primal father cannot be historical and neither ontogeny nor phylogeny chronologically prior, this is precisely because of the “undecidab[ility]”¹³¹ of feminine existence and the unlimitedness of feminine *jouissance*, the

¹²⁶ Judith Feher-Gurewich, “Lacan in America,” *European Journal of Psychoanalysis* 12–13 (2001).

<https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/articles/lacan-in-america/#block-1>.

¹²⁷ *Oxford English Dictionary*, “usufruct (*n.*), sense 1.a,” June 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/7429194073>.

¹²⁸ Lacan, *Encore*, 3.

¹²⁹ Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, 132.

¹³⁰ Lacan, *Encore*, 7.

¹³¹ Lacan, *or Worse*, 183–186.

negations that rescind something from (pre)history. And so the paleo preachers' promise to quash the perils of forced feminization by plastic is thwarted by the fact that feminine plasticity is there not just from, but *as* the impossible beginning.

From plastic eaters...

Let us turn, now, to David Cronenberg's Freudo-Lamarckian pastiche *Crimes of the Future* (2022), which provides a remarkably pertinent commentary on the conceptual morass we have been wading through thus far. Set in a concrete-clad, ambiguously European city at an unspecified point in the future, the film revolves around the performance artists Saul Tenser and Caprice. Their first scene together shows Caprice waking Saul from a turbulent sleep in his monstrous machine-bed. This writhing, sinewy apparatus is suspended from the ceiling of Saul's brutalist silo of a bedroom that, with its expensively shuttered windows and expansive view of the desert (the only plant life we will see in the film), looks more like a luxury resort in Utah than an artist's loft—as if the mise-en-scène of Cronenberg's earlier *Exitenz* has won the lottery.

Caprice eagerly informs Saul of some test results: "There is a new hormone in your bloodstream," she relays, as if delivering news of a welcome pregnancy. We eventually discover that Saul suffers from "accelerated evolution syndrome," a condition that causes him to grow never-before-seen organs. Caprice, an erstwhile trauma surgeon, laparoscopically tattoos and then robotically removes these "neo-organs" for enraptured audiences at a kind of dystopian Venice Biennale. "The surgery is sex," no one is surprised to learn, and the aptly named "New Vice Unit" has taken an interest in these and other performances that smack of phylogenetic subversion.

The "National Organ Registry," a covert branch of New Vice, is responsible for cataloging novel organs in the interest of state security. As Whippet, an employee of the registry, tells Saul

and Caprice, “Human evolution is the concern. That it’s going wrong. That it’s uncontrolled, it’s insurrectional. [...] Our fear is that some of these neo-organs might establish themselves genetically, and then be passed down from parents to children, who would then no longer be, strictly speaking, human.” He offers as evidence of evolution’s dubious direction the recent advent of insensitivity to pain, which is now experienced by only a handful of people in their dreams (as a kind of unconscious inheritance, no doubt); the waning of this somatic warning system and the vanishing of infection—which together enabled the emergence of invasive performance surgery—are of grave concern to the government, which has established itself as the arbiter of human identity and the preventer of “evolutionary derangement.”

A New Vice cop, Detective Cope—and it is no coincidence that he shares this name with perhaps the most prominent American Neo-Lamarckian, Edward Drinker Cope—has recruited Saul as an undercover agent. Beneath his all-too-hip, Berlin-adjacent performance persona Saul harbors a crotchety conservatism about the human’s organic composition, and cannot abide the physiological flippancy of his adoring fans, who gush over the growths they hail as “inner beauties.” Caprice, too, finds Saul’s situation disconcerting: “It’s pathological. It’s not healthy. It’s a breakdown of the system. An organism needs organization.” Indeed, Saul is sickly; he is sensitive to light, only venturing outside when shrouded in what looks like an Ann Demeulemeester cloak; he struggles to walk and stand; he hacks and wheezes; and most significantly, he fails to eat without biomechanical assistance. Pain may be an archaic property, but discomfort is epidemic. Saul’s body “wants to kill him”; removing his neo-organs when they appear is the couple’s way of “making art out of anarchy, [...] creating meaning out of emptiness.”

Cope directs Saul toward a radical movement that has devised a surgical procedure for making industrial waste digestible. “Our bodies were telling us it was time to change [...], time for

human evolution to sync up with human technology,” Lang Dotrice, our representative of this decentralized organization, tells Saul and Caprice. Like Saul, Dotrice has an “eating problem,” and is unable to ingest what we would call food without tremendous difficulty. To those who can afford it, “LifeFormWear” (purveyors of the bizarre bed intended to quell Saul’s vestigial dream pain) offers the “BreakFaster,” a skeletal chair encased in grey flesh that forces food into the mouth of its grudging, gagging occupant. The first time we see Saul use his BreakFaster, Caprice has just enjoyed eggs and bacon straight out of the frying pan. Eating with a wooden spoon in front of a shelf of homey antique cookware, desert light streaming in from the floor-to-ceiling window, there is a sense of convenience and even quaintness that sharply contrasts the scene of Saul’s breakfast to follow. In a dark, windowless room paneled with rusting metal, the supremely creepy chair grumbles and growls, jerking Saul’s body as he labors to accommodate a sporkful of some supremely unappetizing, neon-green-and-orange substance. Even the tines of his strange utensil are twisted, though they cannot be adding much to Saul’s already considerable distress. Saul’s next attempt to stomach one of these uncanny Lean Cuisines is even less successful. He slams his utensil (this time just a spoon) down, unable to get it past his lips, though he reports a strange sensation—“a compelling fullness, not a completely bad feeling, at least not uninteresting”—to Caprice, whose position in the doorway allows some natural light to permeate, for the first time, the BreakFaster’s dank chamber.

Humans, we are led to understand, are gradually becoming intolerant to organic foodstuffs and capable of consuming only synthetics and plastics. Dotrice and his fellow communards plan to surgically accelerate this process, bypassing the interim period of being force-fed brightly colored purees by a chair—much to the state’s (and LifeFormWear’s) displeasure. For sustenance, the network manufactures and consumes “synth bars,” chewy purple rectangles packaged in shiny

silver wrappers. “We eat modern food. We eat plastic. And that’s what we like to call it,” Dotrice affirms, rescuing plastic from its pejorative fate.

Dotrice’s son Brecken was the “first-born,” able to digest plastic without surgical intervention. He could “eat it and enjoy it,” his mother tells Saul; in the film’s opening scene she smothers Brecken after catching him snacking on a wastebasket. Saul is initially reluctant to accept Dotrice’s claim for Brecken’s inheritance of this plastic-digesting characteristic: “You’re saying your surgery, the surgery that made you plastic eaters, was somehow replicated genetically in your son? That surgically acquired characteristics became inheritable?,” he asks incredulously.

Dotrice convinces Saul and Caprice to perform a public autopsy on Brecken, hoping to reveal to the audience and the world “the future of humanity.” Unbeknownst to any of them, one of the Registry employees has replaced Brecken’s honestly begotten gastrointestinal tract, and when Caprice cuts him open a tangle of tattooed and surgically altered organs—including one with a Sailor Jerry-style banner bearing the word “Other”—spews forth. Convinced that Dotrice and his “plastic eating comrades” are “evolving away from the human path,” New Vice, in cahoots with two LifeFormWear technicians, plotted to conceal the fact that Brecken was “born that way” and thereby suppress the revelation of this insurgent form of inheritance.

Brecken may have been the first to inherit a penchant for plastic, but others are developing the digestive idiosyncrasy independently. Saul acquires the organ-system after the “endocrine gland” whose appearance and performance-removal open the film; electing not to excise this set of growths, the film concludes with Saul’s ecstatic consumption of a synth bar. Saul is in his BreakFaster, exactly as he was the first time, battling the mush on his spork. Caprice retrieves the bar and Saul, barely able to speak, accedes. One bite is all it takes for the chair’s erratic movements and exasperated rumblings to cease, and a powering-down noise gives way to a soft purring. Saul’s

own agonized groans quiet as he sighs in relief, and the film becomes black and white as a tear rolls down his tightly framed, faintly smiling face—an unequivocal citation of Dreyer’s *The Passion of Joan of Arc*—before cutting to black.

There is a neatness to this ending that belies the film’s otherwise staunch commitment to disjuncture. Indeed the film is full of formal and narrative misalignments: when Saul’s neo-endocrine gland is discovered, for example, Saul asks Caprice to give it a tattoo “that really looks like a tattoo [...], a heart, an anchor, ‘Mother,’” to which Caprice responds “that would be playful, but the Registry insists on ‘uniquely self-referential.’” But it turns out that at this point Saul and Caprice have never been to the Registry or registered one of Saul’s growths—curious not only because of Caprice’s insistence on adhering to the Registry’s policy, but because we learn later that the policy itself was based on and instituted after Saul and Caprice’s own tattooing practice. This carefully cultivated chronological confusion (or, indeed, vertigo of origins) does not serve to disorient the viewer but rather to introduce a real inconsistency into the diegesis, to create a world out of sync with itself.

And yet in this all-too-tidy final scene, everything falls into place, and a stale equilibrium—a “harmony with the techno world,” in Dotrice’s words—is established. Saul’s adaptation to a milieu richer in industrial detritus than in vegetation succeeds, and his struggle is concluded. Before submitting to plastic’s siren song, Saul is, Dotrice tells him, “a man who is fighting what he really is. Don’t you see? You should let your body lead you where it wants to go instead of hacking it to pieces and displaying it in some hidden museum like the bones of an extinct animal.” Saul’s body has a plan: an end toward which it is oriented (“where it wants to go”), a course of action it is clearly communicating (“our bodies were telling us it was time to change”). Through no effort on his part—indeed all of his efforts have been against this transformation, aimed at the

preservation of existing forms—the necrotic world in which Saul lives has spawned felicitous adaptations that he has foolishly mistaken for dead ends. But no longer, as the sublime surrender of the last close up makes clear.

If the film breaks faith with Lamarck by representing adaptation to a ruined planet as telic, immediate (that is, unmediated by “inner feeling,” the force that prompts a somatic response to need), and “harmonious [and] providential”¹³² rather than precarious and actively sought, it reaffirms its allegiance to his thought in another way. Perhaps Saul is mistaken when he claims that growing new organs “doesn’t seem to be [his] decision”; perhaps these growths do represent what Canguilhem describes as an “effort by life to continue to ‘stick’ to an indifferent milieu.”¹³³ As Whippet tells Cope, “We believe that on a certain level, perhaps a subconscious one, Saul Tenser wills these new organs to grow.” If we can forgive the film’s use of *subconscious* where *unconscious* would surely be more appropriate, we can glean a remarkable affinity between the film’s concept of acquired characters and Freud’s own, somewhat unorthodox understanding. As Freud wrote to Karl Abraham of his and Ferenczi’s eventually abandoned plan to coauthor something on the French naturalist,¹³⁴ “the idea is to put Lamarck entirely on our ground and show that his ‘need,’ which creates and transforms organs, is nothing but the power of *Ucs.* ideas over one’s own body, of which we see remnants in hysteria, in short the ‘omnipotence of thoughts.’”¹³⁵

¹³² Canguilhem, “The Living and Its Milieu,” 104.

¹³³ Canguilhem, “The Living and Its Milieu,” 104.

¹³⁴ In addition to the war, the coauthoring itself was an issue; as Freud wrote to Ferenczi at the end of 1917, “I cannot make up my mind about getting back to Lamarck. Perhaps our problem with him is like that of the two noble Poles and their bill: ‘And because neither one could bear having the other one pay for him, neither one paid.’” Sigmund Freud, December 27, 1917 letter to Sándor Ferenczi, in *The Correspondence of Sigmund Freud and Sándor Ferenczi*, Volume 2, 1914–1919, trans. Peter T. Hoffer (Cambridge: Belknap, 1996), 256.

¹³⁵ Sigmund Freud, November 11, 1917 letter to Karl Abraham, in *The Complete Correspondence of Sigmund Freud and Karl Abraham, 1907–1925*, trans. Caroline Schwarzacher (London: Karnac, 2002), 361. For other readings of this conceptually jam-packed sentence, see Ilse Grubrich-Simits’s “Metapsychology and Metabiology: On Sigmund Freud’s Draft Overview of the Transference Neuroses” in Freud, *A Phylogenetic Fantasy*, 75–107; and Daniel Wilson, “Freud’s Lamarckian Clinic,” in *Inheritance in Psychoanalysis*, eds. Joel Goldbach & James A. Godley (Albany: SUNY Press, 2008), 255–273.

Here Freud identifies, explicitly, Lamarck's need with the unconscious, and the former's ability transform the body (through something like inner feeling, the affective intensity that drives the strengthening of existing organs or the fashioning of new ones) with neurotic symptoms. And so it is not quite that a plastic-laden environment engenders Saul's plastic-consuming capacities without the mediation of effort, a need for new sources of nutrition and an attempt in this direction (which, again, Saul appears to actively resist for most of the film), because the force that intervenes between him and his increasingly inorganic milieu, and that quite literally "creates and transforms organs," does so by intervening between Saul and himself.

And perhaps this is what, in the final analysis, the closing close up—as a reference to *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, what Gilles Deleuze calls "the affective film *par excellence*"¹³⁶—captures. Deleuze locates in the close up qua affection image a power "to tear the image away from spatio-temporal coordinates," to express "the event which does not allow itself to be actualized in a determinate milieu."¹³⁷ In Mary Ann Doane's reading of Deleuze's Balázs-ian theory of the close up or the face (which are, for him, one and the same), the close up gives the lie to the very conceit of a self-contained, internally consistent diegetic world: "the close-up is not a detail because there is no whole from which it is extracted. The space of the narrative [...] exists nowhere; there is no totality of which the close-up could be a part."¹³⁸ Unmoored from the milieu that seemed directly to motivate Saul's morphological transformations, the final close up shows us that "the event itself [...] goes beyond its own causes,"¹³⁹ that something in Saul's adaptation exceeds, is incommensurate with, its environmental determination.¹⁴⁰ This is not an image of "harmony with

¹³⁶ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997), 106.

¹³⁷ Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 96, 107.

¹³⁸ Mary Ann Doane, "The Close-Up: Scale and Detail in the Cinema," *differences* 14, no. 3 (2003): 107.

¹³⁹ Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 106.

¹⁴⁰ As Canguilhem writes, "What is essential in Lamarck's ideas, as we have seen, is that the organism's adaptation to its milieu is attributed to the initiative of the organism's needs, efforts, and continual reactions. The milieu

the techno world,” of an organism that now fits into an environment encumbered with commercial waste, because there is no determinate world or environment to be found here—only a face, which expresses not any particular adaptation but the affective capacity for adaptation as such. The film’s diegetic out-of-jointness culminates in a close up that reveals it has been rent by another milieu impelling somatic modification—the unconscious.

As a way into this matter of the two milieus, we will mention something odd about Freud’s (hysterically?) pregnant sentence, his claim, which bears repeating, that Lamarck’s “‘need,’ which creates and transforms organs, is nothing but the power of *Ucs.* ideas over one’s own body, of which we see remnants in hysteria, in short the ‘omnipotence of thoughts.’” In Freud’s writing the “omnipotence of thoughts” is always associated with obsessional neurosis rather than conversion hysteria; with superstitions rather than somatic symptoms; with the misguided conviction that one can transform one’s “outer world” through conscious thought rather than the occurrence of self-transformation through the condensation and displacement of unconscious desire.¹⁴¹ The phrase was suggested to Freud by the obsessional neurotic nicknamed the Rat Man, and appeared for the first time in that 1909 case history; that children, obsessional neurotics, and “primitive men” alike “believe they can alter the external world by mere thinking”—that the omnipotence of thoughts is a “survival” of a primeval situation, an erstwhile adaptation transmitted as part of our archaic heritage—is the very impetus of Freud and Ferenczi’s phylogenetic inquiries into psychic life.¹⁴² Why, then, in his letter to Abraham does Freud so uncharacteristically figure the omnipotence of

provokes the organism to orient its becoming by itself. *Biological response by far exceeds physical stimulation.*” “The Living and its Milieu,” 115. Emphasis added.

¹⁴¹ Sigmund Freud, “One of the Difficulties of Psycho-Analysis,” *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 1 (1920): 19.

¹⁴² Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 84, 86, 87.

thoughts as “the power of *Ucs.* ideas over one’s own body,” as “the transformation, in conversion hysteria, of ‘psychical excitation into chronic somatic symptoms’”?¹⁴³

Notably, Freud had signaled the centrality of the omnipotence of thoughts to his and Ferenczi’s project in the letter that immediately preceded the one from which we have been quoting, writing to Abraham that “I do not know whether I have yet mentioned the Lamarckian work, the point of which is to be that even the ‘omnipotence of thoughts’ was a reality once.”¹⁴⁴ Here Freud seems to allude to his hypothesis, in *A Phylogenetic Fantasy*, that toward the end of the last Ice Age, man (and not just any man, as we know) “learned [...] how to understanding the hostile world somewhat, and how by means of inventions to secure his own mastery of it,” such that “language was magic to him, his thoughts seemed omnipotent”—the ancestral acquisition that he suggests obsessional neurosis recapitulates.¹⁴⁵ Freud also hinted at the historical reality of the omnipotence of thoughts in a December 1921 letter to Groddeck, wishing him “all the best and most beautiful things for the coming year 1922, and for myself, at the same time, the restoration of the omnipotence of thought so that my wish will bear fruit.”¹⁴⁶

(As an amusing aside, we will note that Freud was especially fond of using the phrase when wishing friends and colleagues a happy birthday. “Had I retained a remnant of belief in the ‘omnipotence of thoughts,’ I would not hesitate today to send you the warmest and heartiest good wishes for the years that await you,”¹⁴⁷ he writes to the Austrian physician and playwright Arthur Schnitzler. “I am one of your ‘oldest’ readers and admirers and I might wish you a very long and happy life as is the custom on such occasions. But I shall not do so. Wishing is cheap and strikes

¹⁴³ Wilson, “Freud’s Lamarckian Clinic,” 255.

¹⁴⁴ Freud, October 5, 1917 letter to Karl Abraham, in *The Complete Correspondence of Sigmund Freud and Karl Abraham*, 358.

¹⁴⁵ Freud, *A Phylogenetic Fantasy*, 15.

¹⁴⁶ Freud, December 29, 1921 letter to Groddeck, in Groddeck, *The Meaning of Illness*, 67.

¹⁴⁷ Sigmund Freud, May 14, 1922 letter to Arthur Schnitzler, in *Letters of Sigmund Freud*, trans. Tania Stern and James Stern (New York: Dover, 1992), 339.

me as a relapse into the days when people believed in the magical omnipotence of thoughts,”¹⁴⁸ he tells Thomas Mann. And in a tribute to his lifelong confidant and biographer in the *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, Freud, referring to himself in the third person, writes “let it be permitted him to conclude, not with a wish, for we do not believe in the omnipotence of our thoughts, but with the avowal that he cannot imagine Ernest Jones after his fiftieth birthday any other than he was before—zealous, combative, energetic and devoted to the cause.”¹⁴⁹ Freud also employed the phrase when bidding friends safe travels and speedy convalescences.)

Let us restate our question about Freud’s enigmatic remark to Abraham. Why is the omnipotence of thoughts identified with the capacity to transform the body, rather than, as we would expect, the (imagined) capacity to transform the world? We will have to consider the rest of the letter in order to hazard an answer. Freud goes on to suggest that tethering Lamarck’s need to the unconscious would provide a psychoanalytic explanation of evolutionary “expediency,”¹⁵⁰ and “two big principles of change (of progress) would emerge; the change through adaptation of one’s own body and the subsequent change through transformation of the external world (autoplastic and heteroplastic).”¹⁵¹ Here Freud refers to what Ferenczi would call “autoplastic” and “alloplastic” adaptations in *Thalassa*; “in the former,” Ferenczi writes, “the physical organization itself becomes adapted to the altered conditions; in the latter, the organism strives to alter the environment in such a way that accommodation on the part of the body becomes superfluous.”¹⁵² Autoplastic adaptation, he adds, can be “regressive” or “progressive”: it can manifest as neurosis

¹⁴⁸ Sigmund Freud, June 1935 letter to Thomas Mann, in *Letters of Sigmund Freud*, 426.

¹⁴⁹ Sigmund Freud, “To Ernest Jones—On the Occasion of his Fiftieth Birthday,” *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 10 (1929): 124.

¹⁵⁰ “Expediency” is Schwarzacher’s translation of *Zweckmässigkeit*. Ernest Jones had earlier translated this as “fitness”; Cassandra Guan proposes “biological adaptation” as an alternative. See Ernest Jones, *Sigmund Freud Life and Work, Volume Three: The Last Phase 1919–1939* (New York: Basic Books, 1957), 312; and Guan, “Critique of Flowers,” 61.

¹⁵¹ Freud, November 11, 1917 letter to Abraham, 361–362.

¹⁵² Sándor Ferenczi, *Thalassa: A Theory of Genitality*, trans. Henry Alden Bunker (New York: Norton, 1968), 92n1.

(in “regression to more primitive stages of development,” as both Freud and Ferenczi have belabored elsewhere) or as “the development of new organs.”¹⁵³

At this point Freud’s identification of Lamarck’s need and the organ-ic innovations it induces with the power of the unconscious to transform the body in hysteria would appear to be a matter of autoplasmic adaptation alone—were it not, that is, for the curious intrusion of the omnipotence of thoughts in both letters to Abraham. What do the omnipotence of thoughts (a belief in one’s capacity to change the outer world at will) and heteroplasticity (adaptation through the changing of that world) have to do with Lamarck’s need, or the affective impetus for morphological modification?

As we have seen, hysteria precedes obsessional neurosis in the (admittedly suspect) chronology of *A Phylogenetic Fantasy*, and we might be tempted to conclude that here Freud is predicating the latter on the former, such that heteroplastic adaptation is only ever “subsequent” to its autoplasmic counterpart, or transforming the world—through thought or otherwise—contingent on having already transformed oneself. In fact Ferenczi had suggested something like this to Freud a month before Freud would propose it to Abraham:

Man has almost completely renounced autoplasmicity and is adapting heteroplastically. But he is enabled to do this only with the aid of a remnant of the old plasticity which has been preserved. I am thinking of the plasticity of *striated musculature*, which, under the influence of the will, immediately assumes precisely the form and consistency required. It is this *alteration of self* which ultimately makes possible the *alteration of the outside world*.¹⁵⁴

For Ferenczi, as for Freud, hetero- or alloplastic adaptation depends on and follows from somatic re-forming; physiological plasticity makes possible the modification of one’s milieu. But it seems

¹⁵³ Ferenczi, *Thalassa*, 92–93n1.

¹⁵⁴ Ferenczi, October 14, 1917 letter to Freud, in *The Correspondence of Sigmund Freud and Sándor Ferenczi*, Volume 2, 244. Emphasis in original.

to us that the unexpected reference to the omnipotence of thoughts as a matter of “the power of *Ucs.* ideas over one’s own body” belies Freud’s own chronological claims, suggesting that the acquisition of adaptive neuroses and novel organs is always and at once an expression of heteroplasticity—or, as we will argue, technicity. Or else: autoplaticity *is* a modification of one’s (Other) milieu.

Ferenczi’s reference to “the influence of the will” points us in this direction. We should recall Freud’s cheeky birthday greetings, which are not as tangential as they might have seemed, for they remind us that the omnipotence of thoughts is “an immense belief in the power of [...] wishes.”¹⁵⁵ When accompanied by “a motor impulse, the will,”¹⁵⁶ Freud writes in *Totem and Taboo*, the coming to pass of these wishes is called magic—what he would characterize, in 1933, as “the earliest fore-runner of the technology of to-day.”¹⁵⁷ This schema of wish and will corresponds closely to the Lamarckian dictates of need and effort, but here it is the outer world that is transformed: a wish suggested to the organism by its environment motivates a “motor impulse” or “striving”¹⁵⁸ that is “destined to alter the whole face of the earth.”¹⁵⁹ Magic emerges, Freud claims, as a tool or weapon to be wielded against a hostile world: “in [prehistoric peoples’] struggle against the powers of the world around them their first weapon was *magic*”;¹⁶⁰ magic is “a technique for dealing with the external world.”¹⁶¹ And “the magic of words, too, has its place here,” this was the moment—if it can be considered one—at which “ideas, memories, and inferences became decisive.”¹⁶² It seems to us that when Freud suggests that the omnipotence of

¹⁵⁵ Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 83.

¹⁵⁶ Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 84.

¹⁵⁷ Sigmund Freud, “The Question of a Weltanschauung,” in *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, SE vol. 22, trans. and ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1964), 165.

¹⁵⁸ Ferenczi, *Thalassa*, 54.

¹⁵⁹ Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 84.

¹⁶⁰ Freud, “The Question of a Weltanschauung,” 165. Emphasis in original.

¹⁶¹ Sigmund Freud, “On Narcissism: An Introduction,” SE vol. XIV, 75.

¹⁶² Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, 113.

thoughts (as the “principal governing magic”¹⁶³) is a historical phenomenon preserved in our archaic heritage and recapitulated in obsessional neurosis, he alights on the fact that we inherit through and as the unconscious the very capacity for heteroplastic or technical evolution, and moreover, that technical evolution encompasses transformations not only to the external world that we call the environment or milieu, but to our “second external world”¹⁶⁴—to the unconscious itself.

This “second external world” is an indeterminately interior milieu—neither Claude Bernard’s “*milieu interne*,” what Cannon calls the “internal environment” or “fluid matrix”¹⁶⁵ responsible for maintaining homeostasis (and with which Lamarck’s “inner feeling,” working by way of agitating or disturbing “nervous fluid,”¹⁶⁶ has heretofore been associated), nor, certainly, the microbiome as an “inner ecology,” for these are formulations that facilitate an erroneous equivalence between the organism and society and make a whole of both. The unconscious—as both a “collective property of mankind,” what attaches or glues the subject to the history of the group, and something at once internal and external, intimate and foreign to her, an inner world that is inevitably withdrawn—is both the medium and prime mover of the subject’s adaptive efforts; the intermediary through which the subject tries to reconcile herself to a hostile environment (autoplastic adaptation) and, at once, its own less-than-congenial milieu that she endeavors to transform through technique (heteroplastic adaptation). Autoplasticity and heteroplasticity are perhaps, then, not “two [...] principles of change (of progress),” but one way in which the human tries, and necessarily fails,¹⁶⁷ to adapt to two indifferent milieux.

¹⁶³ Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 85.

¹⁶⁴ Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, 55.

¹⁶⁵ See Cannon, *The Wisdom of the Body*, 37–38 and 269–270, on Bernard’s *milieu interne*.

¹⁶⁶ See Lamarck, *Zoological Philosophy*, 314–320.

¹⁶⁷ As Cassandra Guan brilliantly observes, “If evolution depends on the adaptive struggles of living beings, then every exertion aimed at adaptation must necessarily miss its mark, for life would have no reason to go on if all sources of tension with the environment were once and for all terminated in a truly successful act of adaptation”; “the possibility that life might ‘fail’ at yet persist through its failures, which implies that evolutionism can be

...to heteroplastic inheritance

As Cassandra Guan notes, Freud's reference to heteroplastic adaptation in his later letter to Abraham "anticipates [...] Bernard Stiegler's theory of 'epiphylogenesis,' that is, the heteroplastic evolution of humankind in the field of technics"¹⁶⁸—which Stiegler develops via Leroi-Gourhan. An absolutely singular figure, Leroi-Gourhan premises his paleontological intervention on a rejection of the brain-first theory of evolution (notably expounded by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a frequent target of Lacan's scorn¹⁶⁹), which holds that the expansion of the skull and development of the brain engendered the human's manual and technical capacities—a view that he claims "puts the cart before the horse."¹⁷⁰ For Leroi-Gourhan it is the shortening of the face and the liberation of the hand during locomotion that characterizes and makes possible the human's remarkable, more-than-zoological evolution, such that the brain is "an element incidental to evolution in general."¹⁷¹

Leroi-Gourhan does at first blush seem to make a chronological claim quite similar to Freud and Ferenczi's: that technical or heteroplastic evolution—what Stiegler describes as "the pursuit of life by means other than life"¹⁷²—progressively takes over from, or supplants, morphological adaptation. After the appearance of bipedalism (and the book goes back even further; like Ferenczi in *Thalassa*, Leroi-Gourhan is initially concerned with the very remote

thought without finalism or teleology, is a Lamarckian intuition that the Darwinian logic of natural selection cannot admit." Guan, "Critique of Flowers," 64, 51.

¹⁶⁸ Guan, "Critique of Flowers," 62.

¹⁶⁹ Lacan refers to Teilhard de Chardin on several occasions, from seminar one to twenty-fourth and in a number of his *écrits*. These references revolve around one of two themes—the existence of angels or garbage as the hallmark of hominization. Notably Teilhard's holistic theory of planetary hominization and evolution's telic trend toward a spherical synthesis of thought (which he called the noosphere) is favorably compared to George Ohsawa's macrobiotic philosophy by early Erewhon employee Bill Tara in a 1984 lecture on "Human Ecology."

¹⁷⁰ André Leroi-Gourhan, *Gesture and Speech*, trans. Anna Bostok Berger (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), 72.

¹⁷¹ Leroi-Gourhan, *Gesture and Speech*, 47.

¹⁷² Stiegler, *Technics and Time*, 17.

transition of organisms from an aquatic to a land- and air-based existence), tools arise as “a ‘secretion’ of the anthropoid’s body and brain”¹⁷³—a formulation of which Cronenberg would doubtless approve. The “chopper and biface,” for example, “seem to form part of the skeleton, to be literally ‘incorporated’ in the living organism,”¹⁷⁴ giving credence to Freud’s claim, in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, that “with every tool man is perfecting his own organs.”¹⁷⁵ These first tools mark the beginning, Leroi-Gourhan writes, of “a long transitional period during which sociology slowly took over from zoology,” during which the shackles of anatomical evolution were slowly thrown off, culminating in the arrival of *Homo sapiens*, for whom “technicity is no longer geared toward cell development” but takes on a life of its own, the human’s technical evolution becoming fully emancipated from its erstwhile biological support.¹⁷⁶ Before this—this, the decisive moment, being the disappearance of a cranial “bar” or “ridge” that made possible the enlargement of the prefrontal cortex (the brain apparently no longer incidental but indeed quite pivotal to evolution)—“tools appear simply as an anatomical consequence,” “technical activity was a faithful reflection of biological status.”¹⁷⁷ At this stage technics merely compensates for our morphological shortcomings, “follow[ing] the very slow development of what humans still lacked”; it is not until this lack is made good by the completion of our “cerebral evolution”¹⁷⁸ that technics is freed to propel, rather than just follow, phylogenesis. It is the long-drawn-out disarticulation of the tool from the hand—and therefore of technicity and sociology from biology and zoology—that marks, for Leroi-Gourhan, the advent of humanness as such.

¹⁷³ Leroi-Gourhan, *Gesture and Speech*, 91.

¹⁷⁴ Leroi-Gourhan, *Gesture and Speech*, 106.

¹⁷⁵ Freud, *Civilization*, 90.

¹⁷⁶ Leroi-Gourhan, *Gesture and Speech*, 90, 139.

¹⁷⁷ Leroi-Gourhan, *Gesture and Speech*, 90, 137.

¹⁷⁸ Leroi-Gourhan, *Gesture and Speech*, 229.

Leroi-Gourhan appears more than a little unconvinced of his own historical sketch. So, too, were his contemporaries, and by the end of the twentieth century his chronology was described as “somewhat outdated, even obsolete.”¹⁷⁹ It seems to us that the issue is not, however, Leroi-Gourhan’s periodization (to which this criticism is directed), not something that could be corrected with new or more precise paleoarchaeological data, but rather his very positing of a historical continuum on which technics and language are said to unfold. Indeed, one of Leroi-Gourhan’s central claims is that “as soon as there are prehistoric tools, there is a possibility of prehistoric language,” that “tools for the hand, language for the face, are twin poles of the same apparatus,”¹⁸⁰ which makes his postulation of the slow, progressive evolution of technics—from a primitive, prosthetic extension of the body to fully exteriorized phylum unto itself—eminently problematic. (We should not fail to notice that Leroi-Gourhan’s identification of the emergence of language with technics in human prehistory mirrors Freud’s claim for the proto-primal father’s omnipotence of thoughts, the language that “was magic to him,”¹⁸¹ his “first weapon” against a harsh milieu and “the precursor of our technology.”¹⁸²) At various points Leroi-Gourhan seems to identify “the creation of the first artificial tool” as a break, a rupture altogether “outside the scope of zoological realities and outside the multimillennial course of evolution”¹⁸³—a claim that he rolls back in positing instead the gradual, piecemeal becoming-exteriorized of technics that a shift in skull shape brings to its triumphant conclusion.

It is of course the former conception of technics as a historical fissure—not a breaking point in history but the breaking open of history, the eruption into historical time of something that

¹⁷⁹ Randall White, “Introduction” to *Gesture and Speech*, xxi.

¹⁸⁰ Leroi-Gourhan, *Gesture and Speech*, 114, 20.

¹⁸¹ Freud, *A Phylogenetic Fantasy*, 15.

¹⁸² Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, 113.

¹⁸³ Leroi-Gourhan, *Gesture and Speech*, 229.

could not have occurred within it—that we find more compelling, and that we would hazard Leroi-Gourhan—who laments, at the end of his introduction, that “a place should perhaps have been set aside for psychoanalysis”¹⁸⁴—does too. As Lorenzo Chiesa has it, there is “only one viable hypothesis on the origins of language and the concomitant transformation of animal instinct into human desire: they must be thought in terms of a jump.”¹⁸⁵ Language is not the upshot of the gradual complexification of grunts and gestures, of the steady progression of symbolization, but of a jump that cannot be accounted for historically or located at a particular point in our paleolithic past, because like the ascendancy and murderous deposition of the primal father, it is something absolutely necessary, not subject to the vicissitudes of contingency. Chiesa cites as evidence Lacan’s remark, in his second seminar, that “the dimension discovered by analysis is the opposite of anything which progresses through adaptation, through approximation, through being perfected. It is something which proceeds by leaps, in jumps.”¹⁸⁶ An idiosyncratic creationist, Lacan’s claim that the speaking subject is “something other than an organism which adapts itself” insists on the irreparable rift between the human and her milieu at the same time as it dispels the myth of her measured development—both onto- and phylogenetic.

For Leroi-Gourhan, too, the human evolves precisely by not adapting: “our significant genetic trait is precisely physical (and mental) *nonadaptation*”; “the whole of our evolution has been oriented toward placing outside ourselves what in the rest of the animal world is achieved *inside* by species adaptation.”¹⁸⁷ It is the human’s radical non-specialization, its ill-fitted-ness to every situation but ability to eke out an existence in almost any of them—what Canguilhem might

¹⁸⁴ Leroi-Gourhan, *Gesture and Speech*, 21.

¹⁸⁵ Lorenzo Chiesa, “The World of Desire: Lacan Between Evolutionary Biology and Psychoanalytic Theory,” *The Yearbook of Comparative Literature* 55 (2009): 215.

¹⁸⁶ Lacan, *The Ego in Freud’s Theory*, 86.

¹⁸⁷ Leroi-Gourhan, *Gesture and Speech*, 246, 235. Emphases in original.

call its capacity for normativity—that sets the species apart. This exteriorization or “placing outside ourselves” what supplements the human’s non-adaptation is Leroi-Gourhan’s (let us say, latent) attempt to account for the leap or jump of technics.

For Leroi-Gourhan, the hallmark of human evolution is the transmission of species memory not through a “biological instinctual apparatus” but through language qua technics (and that Leroi-Gourhan “oppose[s] instinct to language” gives us another indication of his psychoanalytic inclinations—as Bowlby and Lacan both insist, albeit to entirely different ends, Freud’s *Trieb* should on no account be translated as *instinct*).¹⁸⁸ The memory of non-human animals, he argues, “involves a maximum of genetic predetermination”¹⁸⁹ and is stored in the species itself, in the genetic material that every individual of the species inherits. This memory stores the species’ specialized repertoire of actions for establishing and maintaining “balance between the organism and its environment”; is transmitted in its totality—“each individual must possess the entire capital of collective knowledge”—and can only be added to “at the rate of paleontological drift.”¹⁹⁰ Human memory, by contrast, is exteriorized, transferred to what Leroi-Gourhan rather unfortunately calls the “social” or “collective organism” (and sometimes “superorganism” or “macroorganism”), which comprises the human’s tools as well as its structures, its social and symbolic formations.¹⁹¹

If we can overlook this regrettable recourse to the organism-society analogy, or to a substantialized concept of social memory, we can see that Leroi-Gourhan is proposing something not dissimilar to Freud’s archaic heritage: something “outside ourselves” that is transmitted transgenerationally, “a potential memory whose entire contents belong to society.”¹⁹² As Freud

¹⁸⁸ Leroi-Gourhan, *Gesture and Speech*, 20, 221.

¹⁸⁹ Leroi-Gourhan, *Gesture and Speech*, 222.

¹⁹⁰ Leroi-Gourhan, *Gesture and Speech*, 228, 222.

¹⁹¹ Leroi-Gourhan, *Gesture and Speech*, 229.

¹⁹² Leroi-Gourhan, *Gesture and Speech*, 228. It should be said that Leroi-Gourhan predicates the transmission of social memory on education, whereas Freud sees the archaic heritage as something operating entirely to the side of it. It should also be mentioned that whereas Freud sees the archaic heritage as something akin to instinct for animals

puts it (again), against Jung's ultimately redundant concept of the collective unconscious, "the content of the unconscious, indeed, is in any case a collective, universal property of mankind."¹⁹³ The unconscious properly names the heritable, non-totalizable potential—not "a potential for anything specific,"¹⁹⁴ but a potential in the sense of Lamarck's inner feeling, a "fountain"¹⁹⁵ of affective and adaptive force—shared among speaking beings. Like the archaic heritage that fills in where ontogenetic "experience fails,"¹⁹⁶ language and social memory are, Leroi-Gourhan argues, "the instrument[s] of liberation from lived experience"¹⁹⁷—what establishes our non-self-identity, the negative insistence of the group or social world in every individual. Social memory (or archaic heritage, or simply unconscious) is not a positive entity independent of and "parallel"¹⁹⁸ to the biological body, but something at once internal and external to it, something "strange to me, although it is at the heart of me"—what Lacan describes several times in the *Ethics* seminar as "the prehistoric Other that it is impossible to forget."¹⁹⁹ The unconscious is the subject's Other milieu, one of two external worlds at whose transformation technics (and, we will suggest in the final section, magic) aim.

Where the human is concerned, then, we can say that autoplasmic adaptation is heteroplasmic adaptation, or else, that there is no radical difference between transformations in morphology and transformations in the milieu, because human evolution proceeds by way of exteriorization—through invention, technics, and art (we can think here of Saul's "inner beauties," the film's

(in "The Unconscious" and *Moses and Monotheism*), Leroi-Gourhan's point is that social memory is precisely what frees the human from the instinctive behavior to which other animals are beholden. Indeed a different chapter could certainly draw out the various ways in which the conceptual kinship between Freud and Leroi-Gourhan suggested here falls apart.

¹⁹³ Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, 132.

¹⁹⁴ Copjec, "The Inheritance of Potentiality."

¹⁹⁵ Lamarck, *Zoological Philosophy*, 334.

¹⁹⁶ Freud, "From the History of an Infantile Neurosis," 97.

¹⁹⁷ Leroi-Gourhan, *Gesture and Speech*, 227.

¹⁹⁸ Leroi-Gourhan, *Gesture and Speech*, 269.

¹⁹⁹ Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 71.

identification of autoplasic adaptation with the plastic arts; we might also cite Freud's claim that "the field of art" is the only place in "our civilization where the omnipotence of thoughts has been retained"²⁰⁰). Or better, we can say that heteroplastic adaptation is autoplasic adaptation, since the unconscious is our "second external world," both the medium of morphological change and a milieu that compels adaptations of its own. The difference is not, then, one between autoplasic/somatic/hysterical and heteroplastic/environmental/neurotic adaptation, between changing the body with organs and symptoms and changing the world through technique, but is instead a difference within heteroplastic adaptation itself. Heteroplastic adaptation describes the subject's never-ending, always-failing attempts to reconcile itself to two outer worlds that can never be made to mesh harmoniously, and between which she is constitutively caught. And these are not really, of course, two separate milieus, but one milieu split, at the point of whose splitting the subject is situated. This is why, we think, Freud identifies omnipotence of thoughts—and its associations with magic, technology, and the alteration of the outer world—with "the power of *Ucs.* ideas over one's own body" in his letter to Abraham. The unconscious separates the subject from herself (as Leroi-Gourhan notes, language grants human beings the unique capacity to "distanc[e] themselves from their environment, both external and internal"²⁰¹), makes her a stranger in a strange land, and at the same time tethers her to the social world—not through positive connection, but through the common use and enjoyment of the unknowable negativity we share.

Wither magical thought?

For Leroi-Gourhan, the exteriorization of tools and memory has crucial consequences for the rate of evolutionary change. "Rapid and continuous evolution," he writes, "could apparently be

²⁰⁰ Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 90.

²⁰¹ Leroi-Gourhan, *Gesture and Speech*, 235.

achieved only by breaking the link between species and memory, an exclusively human solution.”²⁰² (Ferenczi also flags the relative rapidity of hetero- or alloplastic adaptation, “the specifically ‘human’ type”: “the changing of the environment is a far more rapid process than that of the animal’s own organization.”²⁰³) The speed at which technical innovation proceeds and at which novel experiences are acquired and added to social memory means that human evolution is not wholly beholden to “the geological time scale,” but that “some species change takes place whenever humankind replaces both its tools and its institutions.”²⁰⁴ Though he agrees with the expounders of the “evolutionary discordance hypothesis” that “present-day peoples are a collection of individuals with physical properties hardly different from those possessed thirty thousand years ago,” Leroi-Gourhan insists that evolution now proceeds primarily through rapid mutations of the “exteriorized body”²⁰⁵ qua collective organism (what we have characterized as the Other milieu). And so to say that human evolution has failed to keep pace with environmental change is to overlook the fact that environmental transformation—transformation of the very split between the subject and the world—is the means by which the human changes over time.

And yet Leroi-Gourhan describes paleolithic man with a certain romantic longing, raising some of the same concerns as would the paleo proponents half a century later. Leroi-Gourhan’s warning that “the loss of manual activity and the reduction of the human physical adventure to a passive one will cause more serious problems”²⁰⁶ could easily appear in Sisson’s *Primal Blueprint*, which laments “the youthful sense of adventure that has been stifled by the constraints and predictability of the modern world.”²⁰⁷ Leroi-Gourhan too harbors a fantasy of the human’s pre-

²⁰² Leroi-Gourhan, *Gesture and Speech*, 228.

²⁰³ Ferenczi, *Thalassa*, 92n1.

²⁰⁴ Leroi-Gourhan, *Gesture and Speech*, 247.

²⁰⁵ Leroi-Gorhan, *Gesture and Speech*, 269.

²⁰⁶ Leroi-Gourhan, *Gesture and Speech*, 404.

²⁰⁷ Sisson, *The Primal Blueprint*, 228.

agricultural, pre-graphic harmony with the environment, arguing at several points that “discontinuity begins to appear with agriculture sedentarization and with early writing.”²⁰⁸

At this point, and in order to return to the plastic-redressing primal fantasy with which we began, we might restate a question of Freud’s from *Civilization and Its Discontents*: “How has it happened that so many people have come up take up this strange attitude of hostility to civilization?”²⁰⁹ Sisson begins *The Primal Blueprint* by rehearsing a telic story of human evolution, which, we are told, reached its apex ten-thousand years ago and then “essentially ground to a halt in conjunction with the flourishing of civilization.”²¹⁰ The upshot of what Sisson characterizes as environmental upheaval without evolution (the selection of auspicious variations) is the flourishing of “the fattest, laziest humans in the history of humanity” whom Sisson claims “exist in a state of devolution.”²¹¹ The good news is that because “we are generally identical to our primal ancestors,” returning to peak form is simply a matter modulating one’s surroundings—the milieu in which and the objects with which one lives, the food one eats, the activities one engages in—in order to achieve “optimal gene expression.”²¹² It is, in other words, a matter of epigenetics, which describes, for Sisson, our “power to turn on or turn off certain genes” by changing the “signals they receive from their immediate environment.”²¹³ Genetic responsiveness to environmental inputs puts optimal health within everyone’s reach; if we obey “the laws of living 10,000 years ago” and cease to “program our genes with the wrong diet, wrong lifestyle behaviors—even the wrong thoughts,” we can tap into our primal potential and avoid the health

²⁰⁸ Leroi-Gourhan, *Gesture and Speech*, 211.

²⁰⁹ Freud, *Civilization*, 87.

²¹⁰ Sisson, *The Primal Blueprint*, 16.

²¹¹ Sisson, *The Primal Blueprint*, 18, 19.

²¹² Sisson, *The Primal Blueprint*, 16, 17.

²¹³ Sisson, *The Primal Blueprint*, 20.

hazards that begin when hunting and gathering end.²¹⁴ “Fit Your Genes to Fit into Your Jeans,”²¹⁵ Sisson enjoins: change your environment to change yourself.

Indeed, the paleo movement is premised entirely on phenotypic plasticity, on the capacity of “organisms with the same genotype [to] develop a variety of phenotypes when raised in different conditions”²¹⁶ (*plasticity* refers to the “the property of organisms to produce distinct phenotypes in response to environmental variation,”²¹⁷ and *epigenetics* to the study of the relationship between genotype and phenotype, including but not limited to how environments affect gene expression to produce particular phenotypes, though it is sometimes used to refer specifically to the heritability of environmentally induced phenotypic variations—terminological imprecision abounds here). As Bland puts it in *The Disease Delusion*, which shares the epistemic precepts of the paleo movement, “our genes do not hardwire us for chronic disease but instead offer a menu of what we can be under differing environmental conditions.”²¹⁸ It matters, Bland writes, “whether we heat up dinner in a BPA plastic dish in the microwave or start the meal from scratch by handpicking ingredients at the farmer’s market,” not only because ingesting the xenoestrogen can compound one’s risk of all manner of ailments, but because “exposure to environmental toxins can result in epigenetic changes transmissible to the next generation and can create increased incidence of chronic disease.”²¹⁹ Bland is particularly concerned with how “obesogens like BPA put epigenetic marks in our book of life” that are transmitted transgenerationally; it is only by “modifying, altering, or radically redoing environment, diet, and lifestyle,” Bland argues, that we can wrest back control

²¹⁴ Sisson, *The Primal Blueprint*, 22, 21. Emphasis added.

²¹⁵ Sisson, *The Primal Blueprint*, 19.

²¹⁶ Jablonka and Lamb, *Evolution in Four Dimensions*, 261.

²¹⁷ Ralf J. Sommer, “Phenotypic Plasticity: From Theory and Genetics to Current and Future Challenges,” *Genetics* 215, vol. 1 (2020): 1.

²¹⁸ Bland, *The Disease Delusion*, 66.

²¹⁹ Bland, *The Disease Delusion*, 67, 72.

of our genetic expression and rekindle our “organic reserve, vitality, and longevity.”²²⁰ For the paleo movement epigenetics represents a promise and a curse; the possibility of returning, on a cellular level, to our “environment of evolutionary adaptedness” and the prospect of unwittingly passing down suboptimal phenotypes that abet the increasing incidence of diseases of civilization; *plasticity* appears as both a sign of evolutionary indeterminacy and a harbinger of dysgenicity, of accelerated species decline. (Is this simply the dialectic of construction and destruction that is, for Catherine Malabou, the crux of plasticity?)

We would seem to be a long way from “the inheritance of memory-traces of the experiences of our ancestors,”²²¹ from the “special” knowledge of the murder of the primal father from which Freud’s concept of “the inheritance of acquired characters” proceeds. But perhaps, at the same time, not far enough; Sisson’s insistence, for example, on the phenotypic consequences of thought cannot but conjure Freud’s own claim for “the power of *Ucs.* ideas over one’s own body.” In the first edition of *The Primal Blueprint*, Sisson asks “Is it preposterous to consider a basketball player growing to six feet six inches (even though his two brothers and father did not reach six feet), simply because he spent so much time and energy focused on being a basketball player—and needing to be tall—that he essentially *willed himself to grow*?”²²² According to Bruce Lipton—the developmental biologist and “epigenetics expert”²²³ who authored the widely-maligned *The Biology of Belief: Unleashing the Power of Consciousness, Matter & Miracles*—“it’s not only possible, but [...] comparable things happen, in one form or another, to each of us.”²²⁴ This claim for the efficacy of what is often referred to as *manifesting* (a term popularized by the

²²⁰ Bland, *The Disease Delusion*, 252, 73.

²²¹ Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, 99.

²²² Sisson, *The Primal Blueprint* (Malibu: Primal Nutrition Inc., 2009), 52–53 of .epub edition. Emphasis added.

²²³ This is how he is described in the announcement of a talk at George Washington University. See <https://www.cps.gwu.edu/biology-joy-special-event-bruce-h-lipton-phd#:~:text=Lipton%2C%20a%20stem%20cell%20biologist,life%20by%20reprogramming%20your%20thoughts>.

²²⁴ Sisson, *The Primal Blueprint* (2009), 53 of .epub edition.

book-turned-movie *The Secret*) is toned down in the second edition of Sisson's book, where he submits that professional basketball players have both won the genetic lottery and achieved optimal gene expression through "the foods they've eaten, how they've trained, [and] even how they've thought."²²⁵ The scientifically spurious link between epigenetics and the omnipotence of thoughts is not the exclusive province of "complementary and alternative medicine" practitioners who see in epigenetics proof of "magical thinking,"²²⁶ as oncologist and author of the popular blog "Science-Based Medicine" David Gorski argues—it is also, as we have seen, the basis of Freud's foray into Lamarckism. Sisson, it would seem, wants to resurrect the primal father (remember Grok, patriarch of a primal horde) and the omnipotence of thoughts that Freud claims emerges with his ascendancy.

"The power of *Ucs.* ideas over one's own body," as a force that "creates and transforms organs," certainly sounds more like the New Age line on epigenetics, what the geneticist Adam Rutherford also dismisses as "mystical thinking,"²²⁷ than it does the respectable Lamarckism of contemporary evolutionary thought. Indeed the scientific literature on epigenetics is typically careful to caution that it does not amount to mind control or mastery of fate. But it is clear that the Freudian concept of archaic heritage, of the transmission of psychic acquisitions from prehistory, cannot do without some measure of magical or mystical thinking, since it is precisely the magical thinking of neurotics that suggested to Freud the existence of this kind of inheritance in the first place!

²²⁵ Sisson, *The Primal Blueprint* (2012), 21.

²²⁶ David Gorski, "Epigenetics: It doesn't mean what quacks think it means," *Science-Based Medicine*, February 4, 2013, <https://sciencebasedmedicine.org/epigenetics-it-doesnt-mean-what-quacks-think-it-means/>.

²²⁷ Adam Rutherford, "Beware the Pseudo Gene Genies," *The Guardian*, July 19, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2015/jul/19/epigenetics-dna--darwin-adam-rutherford>.

Freud would also identify the archaic heritage with hypnosis, another dodgy enterprise that he dabbled in at the beginning of his career but had largely abandoned, for ethical and practical reasons, by the turn of the century.²²⁸ Hypnotic suggestion (as opposed to Josef Breuer's "cathartic method"²²⁹ of hypnosis, which would become, of course, the talking cure) bears more than a passing resemblance to manifesting or mind control, boiling down to telling hypnotized patients that their symptoms had abated, sometimes with the addition of somatic pressure. It "consists," Freud writes in 1888, "in giving the patient under *hypnosis* a *suggestion* which contains the removal of the disorder in question. Thus, for instance, we cure a *tussis nervosa hysterica* by pressing on the larynx of the hypnotized patient and assuring him that the stimulus to coughing has been removed."²³⁰ And often such symptoms did vanish (if typically only for a short time, necessitating frequent follow-ups that led either to "a kind of addiction to hypnosis"²³¹ or to the whole thing being abandoned), almost as if by magic. Indeed, as Freud puts it in a remarkable contribution on hypnosis to a "semi-popular"²³² medical anthology published in 1890, "the words spoken by the hypnotist which have the magical results that I have described are known as a 'suggestion.'"²³³ Words, Freud maintains, "are nothing other than watered-down magic," and those who see in his claim for their curative power a defense of magic are "not so very wrong."²³⁴ Once we realize that words are, as he puts it, privileged media for changing minds, "there is no longer anything puzzling in the assertion that the magic of words can remove the symptoms of illness."²³⁵

²²⁸ See Anne Harrington, *The Cure Within: A History of Mind-Body Medicine* (New York: Norton, 2008), 69–72; and James Strachey, "Editor's Introduction to Papers on Hypnotism and Suggestion," in SE. vol. I, trans. and ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1966), 63–69, on Freud's early work with, and writings on, hypnosis.

²²⁹ See Sigmund Freud, "The Psychotherapy of Hysteria," 261–267, on the cathartic method.

²³⁰ Sigmund Freud, "Hysteria," SE vol. I, 56. Emphases in original.

²³¹ Sigmund Freud, "Psychical (Or Mental) Treatment," SE vol. VII, 301.

²³² Strachey, "Editor's Introduction to Papers on Hypnotism and Suggestion," 63.

²³³ Freud, "Psychical (Or Mental) Treatment," 296.

²³⁴ Freud, "Psychical (Or Mental) Treatment," 283.

²³⁵ Freud, "Psychical (Or Mental) Treatment," 292. Notably Freud would go on to argue that something of hypnotic suggestion is manifest in transference; see *Group Psychology* 126n2.

Science seeks to “restor[e] to words a part at least of their former magical power,”²³⁶ the capacity they possessed when “the ‘omnipotence of thoughts’ was a reality”—as Freud describes the “point” of the “Lamarckian work” to Abraham. And so “a belief in the thaumaturgic force of words” is obviously not only a delusion shared by children, neurotics, and “primitive peoples,”²³⁷ because here it is foundational to psychotherapy itself.

In *Group Psychology* Freud returns to hypnotism, a theme of Gustave Le Bon’s “deservedly famous”²³⁸ *Psychologie des foules*. Hypnosis is not an analog for group psychology qua the group’s subjection and compliance, Freud insists, but is strictly speaking identical with it; he writes several times that the hypnotic relation describes a group of two. Le Bon’s discerning claim for the hypnotic state of the individual in a group fails, however, to account for the position of the hypnotist—a factor that Freud draws out in claiming that every group is a vestige of the primal horde. If group psychology “corresponds to a state of regression to a primitive mental activity,” this is because the father of the primal horde “forced” his subjects into “group psychology,” such that the very possibility of hypnosis “is solidly founded upon a predisposition which has survived in the unconscious from the early history of the human family.”²³⁹ Thus “the hypnotist,” Freud writes, “awakens in the subject a portion of his archaic heritage,” a state of fearful submission to the primal father.²⁴⁰ The individual’s very susceptibility to suggestion, to the magic of words—as well as to obsessional neurosis as a belief in the omnipotence of thoughts (and not an entirely misguided one, we would now have to admit)—is a phylogenetic acquisition, a prehistoric disposition preserved through archaic inheritance.

²³⁶ Freud, “Psychical (Or Mental) Treatment,” 283.

²³⁷ Freud, “On Narcissism,” 75.

²³⁸ Freud, *Group Psychology*, 72.

²³⁹ Freud, *Group Psychology*, 122, 124, 128n1.

²⁴⁰ Freud, *Group Psychology*, 127, 128n1.

Given the entanglement of Freud's Lamarckian intuitions with magical thinking on multiple levels, recent attempts to reify their scientific acuity strike us as rather curious. In "Is Psychic Phylogenesis Only a Phantasy? New Biological Developments in Trauma Inheritance," Catherine Malabou (whose work is often, rightly or wrongly, divided into "the plasticity period and the epigenetic period"²⁴¹) argues that epigenetic research "brings significant scientific confirmation of Freud's concept of phylogenesis"—that the 'boys in the basement' (as Copjec charmingly refers to Freud and Ferenczi in their evolutionary exploits) were, "without knowing it, on [their] way to epigenetics."²⁴²

Malabou's title is at least a little misleading, because it presents the fantasy of phylogenesis as purely epistemic. Freud is, to be sure, perturbed by the apparent biological implausibility of his "scientific fantasies."²⁴³ In *A Phylogenetic Fantasy* he acknowledges the difficulty posed by the fact that the narcissistic neuroses "appear to be acquired under conditions that exclude heredity,"²⁴⁴ since the sons that aren't castrated by the primal father are having exclusively gay sex; how women might have acquired the neuroses of these sons seems to present an even greater problem, "but we are spared the grossest difficulty by observing that we should not forget human bisexuality"²⁴⁵—perhaps one of his more compelling uses of this otherwise unfortunate theory.

Freud's staunch insistence on psychic phylogenesis despite these and other obstacles was a little embarrassing, the story goes, but the crackpot concept could not be written off completely, and so "the only solution for psychoanalysts was to consider it a helpful fantasy, something

²⁴¹ Benjamin Dalton, "What Should We Do with Plasticity? An Interview with Catherine Malabou," *Paragraph* 42, no. 2 (2019): 241.

²⁴² Malabou, "Is Psychic Phylogenesis Only a Fantasy?," 178, 184. Malabou is emphatic about this, reiterating on 193–194 that "Current biology—cellular biology and neurobiology, in particular—are able to bring confirmation of some of the major psychoanalytic theses. Epigenetics undoubtedly makes the idea of psychic phylogenesis sustainable."

²⁴³ Freud, *A Phylogenetic Fantasy*, 20.

²⁴⁴ Freud, *A Phylogenetic Fantasy*, 19.

²⁴⁵ Freud, *A Phylogenetic Fantasy*, 20.

impossible to scientifically prove but endowed with a high heuristic and methodological value.”²⁴⁶ Fortunately, as Malabou sees it, with new knowledge of epigenetic inheritance, “we are then moving from fantasy to reality.”²⁴⁷ But what is phantasmatic about phylogenesis is not or not only its scientific basis, but the actual content of the archaic heritage, the “primal phantasies” that “are a phylogenetic endowment,” plastic amalgams of the past experiences of the individual and the species.²⁴⁸ And *this* fantasy, it seems to us, cannot simply be shifted into reality or subjected to contemporary epigenetic exegesis, since anything that works by way of the unconscious is by definition unavailable to empirical verification.

Malabou’s move may have the felicitous effect of rescuing Freud and Ferenczi’s interest in evolutionary history from those that would either disavow it entirely or make it exclusively a matter of structure, but at the risk of reducing the more radical aspects of their madcap concept. Our contention is that the concept of archaic heritage is ultimately unassimilable to the scientific paradigm that Malabou describes, because of Freud’s insistence that this mode of inheritance is unconscious—which cannot, we have to insist, be made equivalent to epigenetic (allowing us to avoid the question with which Malabou ends: “Can psychoanalysis remain what it is when it becomes ‘true’?”²⁴⁹). For Malabou, epigenesis is the “intermediary zone”²⁵⁰ between history and biology (the “link between nature and nurture,”²⁵¹ as a *BBC* article has it), but the unconscious is conspicuously absent from her account of Freud’s account of the archaic heritage. The unconscious is an intermediary between the subject and the social and historical world, we agree, but not in any positive or positivist sense: it is the crack common to both, the negativity that precludes their

²⁴⁶ Malabou, “Is Psychic Phylogenesis Only a Fantasy?,” 179.

²⁴⁷ Malabou, “Is Psychic Phylogenesis Only a Fantasy?,” 193.

²⁴⁸ Freud, “Paths to the Formation of Symptoms,” 371.

²⁴⁹ Malabou, “Is Psychic Phylogenesis Only a Fantasy?,” 196.

²⁵⁰ Malabou, “Is Psychic Phylogenesis Only a Fantasy?,” 179.

²⁵¹ Martha Henriques, “Can the Legacy of Trauma Be Passed Down the Generations?,” *BBC*, March 29, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20190326-what-is-epigenetics>.

closure and their accord. It is something that, as Lacan describes feminine jouissance, “one experiences and yet knows nothing about.”²⁵²

There is an ineradicable quantum of the inexplicable in Freud’s phylogenetic flight of fancy, which may not be only a fantasy, but which cannot avoid being one entirely. Lacan, of course, cannot suffer magic any more than he can Freud’s musings about the primal father, but he does suggest, in seminar twenty, that those who recognize the existence of feminine jouissance are “the ones we call mystics.”²⁵³ We do not know anything about unconscious inheritance, but this locus of knowledge’s failure has an evolutionary efficacy—one we might call the omnipotence of the unthought. However compelling the comparison, then, it seems to us thoroughly fruitless to claim that epigenetics has proven psychoanalysis to be “true.” As we said in the first chapter, truth can only be half told; it is impossible to tell the whole truth, but “it is through this very impossibility that the truth holds onto the real.”²⁵⁴ In phylogenesis psychoanalysis forces us to confront, not just the hard kernel of the real, but perhaps also something like a magic bean.

To Saran wrap things up: those who propose to counter plastic’s planetary diffusion and its attendant program of forced feminization with a return to the milieu with which we harmoniously mesh might do well to remember that the unconscious enables the speaking being to spin off creative ways of coping with her constitutively unaccommodating environment. “There is no need to fear or hope, but only to look for new weapons,”²⁵⁵ like the “new weapon”²⁵⁶ that Freud supposes empowered the band of brothers to kill their father. The social, somatic, and ecological consequences of plastic’s ubiquity are uncertain, and they are bound to prompt, among

²⁵² Lacan, *Encore*, 77.

²⁵³ Lacan, *Encore*, 76.

²⁵⁴ Jacques Lacan, *Television*, trans. Dennis Hollier, Rosalind Krauss, and Annette Michelson (New York: Norton, 1990), 3.

²⁵⁵ Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” *October* 59 (1992): 3.

²⁵⁶ Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 141.

other attempts at adaptation, the invention of new neuroses. Perhaps the paleo-primal fantasy is one of these. There is no point pining for a pre-plastic past, a truer, well-adapted humanness—Sisson’s “Ultimate Human,” or the “uniquely human” qualities that Colborn et al. claim plastic threatens—that we might magically regain (though we would not begrudge them pining anyway if they could do it without proselytizing. Let them eat meat!). What is uniquely human is the individual’s indelible alienation from that Other milieu and her inheritance of the technical capacity to invent new things in and out of it.

coda: goodbye to not-all that

There is, let's face it, no good way to conclude a dissertation that has tried to make a case for eschewing wholeness and completion as theoretical tools and therapeutic goals. (How convenient for us!) We have endeavored to assess competing conceptions of subjects and systems through a critical interrogation of holistic health culture, or else, to take holistic health culture as a kind of petri dish in which simultaneously trendy and enduring ideas about subjectivity and relationality are cultured—ideas that we maintain psychoanalysis is uniquely equipped to repudiate. In the first chapter we argued that the concepts of whole system and root cause undergird the clamor for self-optimization, denying the affective force of sexual difference and unwittingly reducing functional medicine to the very reductionism it purports to rectify. In the second we suggested that celebratory discourses of microbial community mistake the simple fact of relatedness for an ethical mode of relation, dangerously disclaiming the intractable negativity that plagues the social and the somatic—but not in the same way. In the third we located in the paleo panacea to our plasticized, late-modern malaise an erroneous notion of environmental accord that fails to heed the Other milieu through which technical evolution proceeds. We hope we have done those things, and perhaps a few others as well. But there are several things we have not done—ideas we have abandoned, problems we have neglected to pursue, and not only because “saying it all is literally impossible.”¹ We offer an inexhaustive account of them here.

First and foremost, we have not submitted the dissertation's own conceptual commitments to the same scrutiny we have its impressive collection of bad objects. If critique and love are indeed fellow travelers, then we might have given our anti-holistic harangue a taste of its own medicine. We believe in psychoanalysis's theoretical preeminence, but it is not above reproach, and we regret

¹ Lacan, *Television*, 3.

in particular not dealing with the profoundly problematic role that primitivity plays in Freud's work on prehistory and phylogeny. Freud's failure to distinguish between the history of the human species and the sociology or anthropology of racial others—his recapitulationist claim that non-Western, non-modern cultures represent “the infancy of humanity”²—may not have been intended as a charge of “primitive” inferiority, but it traffics in and buttresses the same civilizational discourse used to justify Christian imperialism, the subjugation and genocide of indigenous peoples, and other insidious forms of white saviorism. Realizing that a rigorous engagement with the critical literature on Freud's primitivism and its consequences for his phylogenetic fantasy would take us too far afield (and frankly, too much time), we decided against any engagement at all, and the third chapter is undoubtedly worse for it.

We regret having neglected Blackness and indigeneity more generally—not only the ways in which they are alternately conjured and spirited away by the holisms surveyed here (native people paid lip service but never sought as practitioners; Black folk disavowed as the foil for white wellness culture), but also the contributions of Black and postcolonial thought to the (psychoanalytic) critique of holism. We would have liked in particular to heed the conceptual confrontation between the Black Panthers and the Whole Earth movement, and to consider how the Marxist concept of totality was taken up and retooled by the Black power movement against a non-materialist, happy-go-lucky notion of the whole. (We regret the scant attention paid to totality overall, and are surprised we ended up letting Lukács off the hook.) We also would have liked to consider the systems-theoretical significance of the Combahee River Collective's articulation of racism, hetero/sexism, and class oppression as interlocking systems of oppression, and to ask what alternatives *to* systems thinking Black feminist thinking *about* systems provides.

² Lacan, *The Ego in Freud's Theory*, 297.

To continue cataloguing our regrets chronologically: we wish we had written more about holistic health's affinity with the burgeoning tech culture of the mid- to late-twentieth century. We hinted at the relationship between alternative medicine and the techno-libertarianism of the Californian Ideology, but the emergence of Silicon Valley's super weird wellness stuff seemed too obvious a line of inquiry to pursue. Closer scrutiny of this historical nexus, however, might have helped make sense of the three-way tryst between alternative medicine, the tech industry, and far-right statism currently underway.

We also earnestly regret not examining the micro-biopolitical obsession with autism. Nary a piece of writing we read while researching the second chapter failed to mention autism as a condition (and usually a 'disease') likely caused by, or at the very least closely connected to, microbial malaise. Many also eagerly touted microbiome repopulation via fecal microbiota transplant as a potential 'cure.' We had hoped to situate this enthusiasm in terms of the logic of social homeostasis and scalar causality, where 'impaired' sociality, in the forms of nonverbal communication and self-stimulating behavior, is imagined to be repairable through the restoration of microbial relations. Given the state's sudden interest in eradicating autism, we are especially sorry that this fell by the wayside.

On the (not) whole, we have some misgivings about the dissertation's methodology, its combination of armchair history and protracted theoretical exposition, with crumbs of that theory's history occasionally sprinkled in. We would have liked to think more explicitly about the psychoanalysis's status in the history of alternative medicine, and about the relationship between psychoanalytic theory and practice; at the same time we would have liked to make a more compelling case for our decision to provide a theoretical rejoinder to holism not just as an epistemic contrivance but as a cultural phenomenon.

And then there are the amusing little tidbits we might have liked, with unlimited funding, to pursue at our leisure: the development of the first low-carb diet by an undertaker who attended the lectures of Claude Bernard; Leo Weiner's (Norbert Weiner's father's) attempt to establish a socialist-vegetarian commune in then-British Honduras; and Ronald Reagan's work as a sports announcer for a chiropractic radio station, to name a few. Lastly, we wish we had found out who Bob Weir's macrobiotic advisor was.

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