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The Unworlding and Worlding of Agoraphobia

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The Unworlding and Worlding of Agoraphobia

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Dedicated to Catherine, my eternal sunshine.

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The Unworlding and Worlding of Agoraphobia

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It is not uncommon to hear people speak of their worlds coming undone during traumatic events of existential crisis or catastrophe. Yet, human geographers have largely neglected to attend to the phenomenal nature of this unbounded sense of ‘unworlding’ disintegration, as well as the wild material forces, agencies and passions at loose in the world that carry the unlimited potential to wreck the integrity of our worlds. This dissertation dedicates itself to critically thinking through the human experience of suffering to live through, confront and respond to unworlding disasters of sense that are materially capable of disrupting the functional and relational composition of our worlds.

More concretely, in this dissertation I explore unworlding disasters of sense through the specific experiences of agoraphobic sufferers. While social scientists, including human geographers, have long been interested in what is sociologically, spatially and clinically exceptional about agoraphobia as a static predicament of being spatially bounded due to fear of public space, little to no consideration has been given to how agoraphobia primitively and phenomenally manifests itself as an eventful disordering of sense that unsettles not just one’s situated place in the world, but the entire relational order of the world itself. By critically attending to agoraphobia as an eventful

disordering of sense that improperly deforms the structure of a human world, I seek to develop new ways to account for affective disasters of unworlding that carry the potential to overturn a proper sense of the world. Furthermore, I also speculate on the finite human ability to affirmatively respond to, make sense of, and impose limits on unworlding disasters that exceed one's subjective ability to grasp, yet improperly and materially affect the entire scope of one's lifeworld.

In terms of its greater contribution to the discipline of geography, in this dissertation I strive to develop new understandings about the human condition of being in an eventful, material world that infinitely exceeds our ability to subjectively control or understand. By doing so, this dissertation aims to reaffirm the humanistic perspective as a theoretically valid and ethically critical way of practicing geography after the non-representational turn.

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Chapter One

Introduction

“How do we theorize and represent events and the worlds that they transform (Shaw 2012, p. 613)?

In this dissertation, I speculatively explore both the material and the humanistic qualities of eventful disasters of sense that have the unlimited potential to destroy entire worlds of meaningful connections. It is not uncommon to hear people speak of their worlds shattering or coming unraveled during traumatic events of crisis or catastrophe. And yet, human geographers have largely neglected to attend to the phenomenal nature of this existentially global sense of ‘unworlding’ disintegration, as well as the wild material forces, agencies and passions at loose in the world that carry the unlimited potential to wreck the entire “referential totality” (Heidegger 1985) of a human world.

On an abstract level, this dissertation dedicates itself to critically thinking through the human experience of suffering to live through, confront and respond to unworlding disasters of sense whose violate materiality ruins the functional and relational coherence of the world; its ability to materially-ideally cohere as a symphonic, integral whole. In this work, I think of unworlding disasters as improper events of cosmic proportions that do not just upset the composure of the self, but more extensively the relational integrity of the world itself – the entire order, structure and logic of global sense.

In this way, I conceive of unworlding as a way to describe events of *material disaster* that include what we commonly think of as ‘natural disasters’ such as hurricanes, tsunami and earthquakes, but also more broadly include what might be called ‘affective

disasters' which are less physical and less visibly sensational than the former, but just as materially real and just as potentially destructive to a world. One of the primary aims of this work is to reach out for new and better ways to account for affective disasters of sense that carry the material potential to inundate, disrupt and overturn the relational composure of our sense of the world. These are eventful disruptions of sense that are thoroughly sovereign, improper and material in quality. Sovereign because they autonomously descend upon and disrupt our worlds, reducing us to the role of passive participants as they subject us to the wrath of their unsettling passing/passion. Improper because they exceed our finite ability to grasp, control or understand in a properly possessive (subjective/objective) sense. And material because they are powerful forces that appear out of nowhere to interrupt and violate an ideal and integral sense of properly dwelling in a world that is mostly rational, comprehensible, legible, orderly, meaningful and appropriate.

In this dissertation, however, I consider unworlding to be far more than just a purely material event of disaster that strikes an impersonal world. Unworlding also always happens to *someone* (even if we do not definitively know what this someone formally is). It describes a singularly existential predicament of being caught relationally in-between proper and improper senses of the world; of being drawn out between a proper sense of having a world and being someone, and an improper sense of losing one's ideal possessions and becoming deprived of one's functional identity and relational capacities of worldhood. Unworlding also describes this singular existential predicament

of being exposed to material disasters of sense of catastrophic proportions that have the potential to unravel the entire fabric of one's relational existence all the way to the farthest edges of sense. I want to suggest that this existential predicament offers a materially critical starting place for affirming the presence of the human in non-representational contexts of an eventful, material world improperly beyond our finite abilities to absolutely control, grasp and understand. This is a predicament in which being human is not defined by an individual essence of subjectivity, but rather performed through a singular imperative of *responsibility*; a responsibility to care for, respond to, and make sense of one's singular predicament of being-in-the-world.

In this way, I equally consider unworlding to be an ethical situation of human crisis and human responsibility in which we are called to answer for, respond to and make sense of eventful disasters of sovereign impropriety that strike our worlds and the worlds of others with whom we come into contact. In addition to being a primitive event of the material world, unworlding is also always a narrative account that tells of a finite, human predicament of being immersed in, exposed to, and vulnerable before material forces of impropriety that have the infinite potential to “tear apart the fabric of sense and habit in the world” (Shaw 2012, p. 613). Unworlding, I suggest, is also a narrative account about humanistically being-in-the-world through transitive processes of suffering and responsibility. Beyond being a material situation, unworlding is also always an ethical situation in which the (embattled) sense of being human is undeniably present in the world. As such, in this dissertation I also seek to locate the sense of being human that

is vitally present in unworlding, and that shows itself through its responsibility to endure, overcome, and rebuild worlds following material events of disaster.

On a more concrete level, in this dissertation I explore these material and humanistic qualities of unworlding disasters of sense through the ‘grounded’ experiences of agoraphobic sufferers. While social scientists, including human geographers, have long been interested in what is sociologically, spatially and clinically exceptional about agoraphobia as a relatively static predicament of being fearful of public spaces, little to no consideration has been given to how agoraphobia primitively and eventfully manifests itself in the phenomenal worlds of sufferers as a diffuse but impenetrably material disordering of sense that unsettles not just one’s place in the world, but the entire relational structure, logic and order of the world itself. As a result of this bias in thought, I contend that what has been overlooked in social accounts about disorders of sense such as agoraphobia are the more primitive, eventful and, above all else, suffering experiences of being exposed to and engulfed in their affective and eventful disasters of unworlding impropriety. By attending more critically to the primitive and material nature of agoraphobia as an improper *event of unworlding* – as opposed to a proper socio-clinical condition – I wish reach out for new ways to care about agoraphobia as one among a plurality of ways that human suffering takes place in the world.

As such, my primary interest in agoraphobia is not to *explain* what this disorder properly is in scientific terms (whether social or natural) as an exceptional social condition, but rather to speculatively describe what agoraphobia feels like as an affective

and eventful disordering of the sense of the world. This requires approaching agoraphobia more primitively so as to remain faithful to the irreducible, non-representational and non-relational nature of impropriety that engulfs the lived experience of being-with-agoraphobia. To write about agoraphobia through a more primitive language of suffering is to acknowledge that it is singularly experienced as a material force of impropriety which *subtracts* coherence and meaning from the world, rather than clarifying anything or adding up to some determinate social cause or critique.

However, in addition to speaking to this primitive confrontation with disaster, the language of suffering also allows us to acknowledge something universally human from the particular disorder of being-with-agoraphobia so that it is no longer so exceptionally removed from the conventional realms of ordinary experience. Through narratives of unworlding, in this dissertation I hope to (re)present agoraphobia more humanistically as one way among many that the universal event of suffering takes place in the world. A more primitive language of suffering thus opens pathways for *humanizing* the experience of being-with-agoraphobia, as opposed to pathologizing or objectifying it as something exceptionally other. Ultimately, by searching for more common ways to account for agoraphobia in terms of suffering, unworlding and responsibility, I seek to re-present agoraphobia as a more generalizable and humanistic story about being immersed in a world of improper excess; and about being vulnerable to and responsible for material events of disaster that have the unlimited potential to overturn and unwork our worlds all

the way to the farthest edges of sense. What can agoraphobia teach us about the broader human predicament of being-in-a-world of improper magnitude, agency and excess?

Reflecting these specific concerns onto greater theoretical issues and debates in contemporary geography, this dissertation more broadly aims to revive a humanistic geographical interest in the felt experiences of being-in-the-world, in the ‘non-representational’ context of a world that is thoroughly material, animated, and in excess of our finite human ability to subjectively/objectively grasp. In terms of its intended contribution to the discipline of geography, what I have sought to develop in this work is a way of reaffirming the humanistic perspective as a valid and ethically important way of practicing geography after the ‘non-representational’ and ‘post-humanist’ turns towards more thoroughly materialist, relational, affective, eventful and speculative ways of accounting for the world in thought. What this requires, I argue, is an operation that liberates questions about the concrete senses and felt textures of being human from the ontological trappings of subjectivity. How can we ‘rewild’ the very real senses of being human, having a world, and being existentially situated in a world of incommensurable magnitude? How can we release these vitalities back into the world of material possibility and speculative reality; a non-representational world of excess in which the human rightly and improperly dwells? How can we emancipate a human sensibility from the narrow confines of absolutist, subjective/objective frameworks of binary thought; the ruins of a black-and-white world in which very little is allowed to dwell in the margins of uncertainty and flourish in the aether of possibility?

By re-building human experience from a ‘prehistorical’ origin that precedes the emergence of subjectivity in time and exceeds the limits of subjectivity in space, this dissertation may be read as a critical and sustained effort to liberate a speculative sense of being human from its subjective enclosure in thought; the prison house to which it has become confined in thought. What does the human become once we release it back into the wilds of a speculative, material world that exceeds thought? And where might we look for new signs of its existence in the wilds of this vast, extensive and more-than-human terrain? These are two overarching questions that I have tried to obliquely and indirectly reflect upon throughout this dissertation. While I make no pretense of having developed fully fleshed-out responses to these ambitious questions, I believe that this dissertation at least offers a starting place for further exploring these questions about finding and affirming the place of the human in a non-representational world of improper magnitude.

Overview of work by chapter

In the chapter that immediately follows, I outline the methodologies I have employed for this project. The initial sections of this methodology chapter outline the so-called ‘end stages’ of the research process; the stages when the methodological issues of representation and writing come into play. With the popularization of non-representational theories, questions about *how* we communicate our research to others through our writing have become as critical to issues of methodology as the more traditional ‘front stage’ concerns for how primary data is collected in the field. Heeding

this call to more explicitly and critically reflect upon writing as a methodological praxis in qualitative geographical research, in this chapter I consider how description can performatively function as a way of ‘worlding’ non-representational qualities of being-in-the-world that have traditionally eluded formal accountability. In order to better account for agoraphobia as an eventful disordering of global sense that causes human suffering, in this work I seek to employ a particular method of experimental, descriptive writing that seeks to link up with a more primitive sense of living with and living through agoraphobia as an improper event of suffering. This method of experimental writing intends to reach out to the unspoken and unspeakable facets of agoraphobic suffering that are largely resistant to accountability because they are beyond our ability to relate, to grasp and to comprehend. Because this method of outreach relies on description to try to ‘world’ new materialities of agoraphobic suffering, in terms of accounting for their worldly but elusive presence, I call this a method of descriptive outreach.

In the second part of this chapter, I provide an overview of the more practical details of my methodological framework for gathering testimonial accounts about suffering-with-agoraphobia as an eventful disaster of unworlding sense. In order to incorporate actual expressions of agoraphobic suffering into this work, I interweave into my writing a selection of lived testimonies expressed by agoraphobic sufferers that explicitly describe what agoraphobia feels like as a material disaster of sense that upsets the entire composition, order and logic of one’s world. These testimonies come from a publicly accessible, online support group forum for agoraphobia which provides sufferers

with an interactive commons for sharing and publicizing their experiences of this disorder. By interweaving textual accounts from this public forum that specifically describe what it feels like to have one's world become unraveled and devastated by agoraphobic suffering, in later chapters I aim to construct speculative and phenomenological descriptions about what suffering might feel like as a process of unworlding, as well as about how the human spirit responds to this dissolution of sense with a resolve to restore the functional relations of being-in-the-world that suffering breaks down.

However, prior to tackling the larger issues, I find it necessary to reconstruct more critical understandings of human existence and worldly experience that are entirely free of the ontological trappings of subjectivity. As such, in the pair of chapters that immediately follow a discussion of my methodology, I step back to establish an ontologically critical foundation for thinking the nature of being human in a world that improperly exceeds our subjective abilities to actively grasp, control and represent. In chapter three, I trace a trajectory of metaphysical thought that begins with the failures of subjectivity and advances toward more common ways of thinking existence in terms of its unbounded worldliness. Within the context of present demands to think the taking place of existence in ways that are other- and more-than-subjective, I consider an alternative ontology of radical coexistence whose development in social thought can be traced from Heidegger's phenomenology to more recent, 'post-phenomenological' theories of intermediality which speculate about the radically in-between spaces of

coexistence. Ultimately, by detailing how Heidegger conceived of existence in terms of an extensible world, I wish to demonstrate how an alternative ontology of being-through-extension, rooted in phenomenological thought, can lead to new ways of thinking the ‘place’ of human experience. I contend that this alternative ontology of being-through-extension offers more responsible ways for “worlding” the improper commons and excesses of existence; in-between spaces that get left out of subject – object relations. By tracing this trajectory of thought, I seek to establish for future humanistic studies in geography a more critically material foundation for thinking spatialities of human experience that exceed the conventional limits and boundaries of subjectivity.

Building on this alternative foundation of human experience, in chapter four I argue for the revival of a humanistic ethos in geography following the relational turn toward the ways that life is composed across pluralities of hybrid, distributed and fluid material relations. In the aftermath of the relational turn in geography, I suggest that the humanistic perspective should be about responding to the call of humanity as an ethical event of responsibility. Humanistic geography should engage the sense of humanity in a world of more-than-human entanglements even if it remains uncertain what ‘the human’ substantively *is* as a formal entity. Accordingly, I argue that humanistic geography can and should thrive as a speculative practice and ethical style of inquiry that explores possibilities for and potentials of better kinds of human relations in a world made up of more-than-human entanglements.

I strive to rehabilitate the humanistic perspective in geography in this chapter by attending to both the ontological and ethical components of this longstanding geographical perspective. Regarding the former component, and working off the ideas presented in the preceding chapter, I argue in support of a reconceptualization of humanity that separates complex existential questions about being human from essentialized ontological frameworks that uncritically equate being human with notions of subjectivity and sovereign agency. By dissociating the sense of humanity from formal properties of subjectivity, I endeavor to speculatively redefine the human in terms of a ‘weak’ agency of responsibility. To be human is to be emplaced within eventful, ethical predicaments of encounter and entanglement which demand that we answer for ourselves and respond to the presence of others in the world even though we lack the unlimited authority and resources for properly doing so.

In chapter five, I turn to consider the epistemological and ethical challenges that suffering poses to human abilities to represent and relate. Common to most if not all phenomenal accounts of suffering is a sense of dissolution in which the boundaries and distinctions between self and world come undone. The resolution of one’s proper identity and the singular integrity of the world come unfettered, upset and unwound. In suffering nothing makes sense, yet the senseless sense of suffering keeps coming anyway. Suffering dissolves meaning and enisles the sufferer into isolation. And yet suffering very much exists in the world as a material and public affliction that is exposed on the surfaces

of places, bodies, eyes, words and images; and tangible in atmospheres we encounter and inhabit.

Here I argue that if we want to better understand the primitive materiality and spatiality of pure suffering – its subtractive agency, its dark passion, its negative phenomenality – we need to develop speculative and interrogative styles of analysis that are solely responsible to/for the *sense* of pure suffering. This would be a style of analysis that would hover over the wounds, dwell in the ruins and delve into the cavernous recesses of absence that suffering unearths – or, un/worlds.

In the context of agoraphobia, previous analyses in the social sciences have undoubtedly demonstrated a high degree of sensitivity for the presence of suffering in the agoraphobic condition. This is especially true of geographer Joyce Davidson's (2000, 2001a, 2001b, 2003a, 2003b) groundbreaking work on agoraphobia as spatial disorder that calls into question the subjective ideals of having sovereign boundaries and invulnerable authority over territories of the self. However, for as much as these accounts regard suffering as a significant part of the agoraphobic experience, they do not directly confront the non-relational *adynamia* of suffering-with-agoraphobia. This is to say, these accounts do not fully dwell upon the primitive and unresolved nature of suffering-with-agoraphobia in terms of endlessly not being able to grasp it, understand it and make sense of it; in terms of inappropriately not being able to get the upper hand and subdue its intruding passion.

By emphasizing suffering in experiences of agoraphobia, I argue that agoraphobia exposes a *human* struggle to come to grips with non-relational suffering. In this way, I want to suggest that what is at the heart of agoraphobia isn't an affirmation about anything, but rather a desperate struggle to come to grips with a negative sense that interrupts being-in-the-world, both as an ongoing, formative practice of identity and as a metaphysical model for describing how existence takes place. By approaching agoraphobia along this alternative line of thought, one of my primary aims is to grapple with ways to ethically respond to the negation, uncertainty and traumatic ruin of agoraphobic suffering in ways that do not efface or otherwise explain away their senseless and non-relational qualities. Can we attend to an ethics of human suffering in agoraphobia in ways that affirm this traumatic ruin? Building on material phenomenologies of sense and existence, I turn in this chapter to dwell on this problematic of relating to the non-relational experience of suffering-with-agoraphobia.

In chapter six, I endeavor to piece together testimonial fragments about the dark passions of disintegration, attenuation and breakdown that are phenomenally given with agoraphobia. With these fragments I seek to tell about a common existential process of unworlding which speculatively describes what agoraphobia might feel like as a singular event of the world's suffering dissolution. As an existential event of undergoing a catastrophic breakdown of sense, unworlding describes an attenuation and disintegration of the relational integrity of one's extensive Being. It describes a spacing of loss and unbecoming which has the unlimited potential to unravel the entire fabric of one's

existence all the way to the farthest edges of sense. Ultimately unworlding tells of the *spacing of suffering* as an attenuated event of unbecoming across space and time; a spacing whose lengthening span progressively disorders and decomposes the integral, relational harmony of Being-through-extension. In this way, we might say that unworlding narrates the progression of suffering as its cosmic disaster unfolds across space and time. Unworlding testifies to the experience of living through suffering, an experience which is always singular, transitive and existential but also cosmic, global and atmospheric.

Finally, in chapter seven I broadly consider a profound capacity we share as human beings for repairing the unworlding of suffering, both in our own worlds and in others with which we come into contact. This is the capacity of compassion. Drawing on a number of recent theoretical inquiries into compassion, I argue that compassion is a powerful, intentional capacity that we have recourse to as human beings to interrupt the unworlding breakdown of suffering and repair what has been broken in the process: not just an intensive sense of being ('self'), nor just an extensive sense of being ('world'), but their intermingled, co-instantial, relational whole (being-in-the-world). Compassion describes the greatest capacity and highest calling of humanity, which is its responsibility to suffering in another. Compassion interrupts suffering, opening it up to new possibilities for becoming different and otherwise. But because compassion interrupts suffering, it has to come from somewhere else; a space outside of suffering.

Broadly speaking, this chapter is devoted to speculating about where human compassion comes from and what it has the capacity to achieve in terms of interrupting and repairing suffering. More concretely, I shall explore these grandiose, humanistic questions about the structure, spacing and restorative capacities of compassion through the ‘grounded’ context of a specific virtual, public space in which agoraphobic sufferers gather together online; a space that I refer to as “the Commons.” Interweaving a broad concern for building compassion with this specific virtual context, I develop a theory about the Commons as a meaningful place of gathering for sharing the burdens of agoraphobic suffering with others, as well as for interrupting its unworlding breakdown by worlding new possibilities of hope, progress, repair and compassion.

Chapter Two

Descriptive Outreach: A Methodology

“Once the possibility of signifying truth is a thing of the past, another style is necessary. The end of philosophy is, without a doubt, first of all a question of style in this sense. It is not a matter of stylistic effects or ornaments of discourse, but of what sense does to discourse if sense exceeds significations. It is a matter of the praxis of thought, its writing in the sense of the assumption of a responsibility for and to this excess” (Nancy 1997, p. 19; emphases in original).

Introduction

In this chapter, I want to detail the methodologies I have employed for this project. In the second part of this chapter, I provide an overview of the practical details of my methodological framework, such as where, how, when and with whom my research was conducted. These latter sections are meant to address the more pragmatic issues of research decisions and techniques employed during the ‘field stages’ of the research process. However, in the initial sections of this chapter, I want to start by considering the so-called ‘end stages’ of the research process. These are the stages when issues of representation and writing come into play.

Writing as research method

With the popularization of non-representational theories, issues related to *how* we communicate our research to others through our writing have become critical to methodologies of qualitative research in geography (Adams 2009; DeLyser 2010; Dewsbury 2010a, 2010b; MacKian 2010). This critical interest in writing as a substantial part of the research process – one that is every bit as important as the so-called ‘field stages’ of any research project – can be seen as an extension of previous efforts to raise

awareness about issues of representation, reflexivity and performativity in qualitative geography (Barnes and Duncan 1992; England 1994; Nash 2000). Whereas writing might once have been regarded an afterthought to the ‘active’ research practices of muddy-boots fieldwork, it has since come to be seen as a critical factor in determining how geographical objects, relations and events become *worlded* through performative practices of writing (the ‘-graphy’ in geography). This is reflective of a broader concern in non-representational thought to consider how the material and symbolic registers of worldly experience translate across, feedback into, and co-inform one another. In non-representational thought:

[R]epresentations become understood as presentations: as things and events they enact worlds, rather than being simple go-betweens tasked with re-presenting some pre-existing order or force. In their taking-place they have an expressive power as active interventions in the co-fabrication of worlds (Anderson and Harrison 2010b, p. 14).

For qualitative geography, this critical interest in the power of representation has led to new sensibilities about how writing informs not only which aspects of worldly experience ‘show up’ through our research as empirically significant, but also how these aspects of experience become qualitatively conveyed to our audience through different modes, styles and medias of communication that include, but also exceed, writing (Dewsbury 2010b; Latham 2003). This has led to new appreciations in qualitative geographical research for how “writing informs research just as it is informed by our research,” as DeLyser (2010, p. 344) has recently affirmed.

Heeding this call to more explicitly and critically reflect upon writing as a methodological praxis in qualitative research, I want to begin this methods chapter by

considering how description can performatively function as a way of worlding materialities that have traditionally eluded formal accountability. Wrapped up in this revamped notion of description as performative ‘worlding’ are three distinct non-representational concerns. The first consists of ethical questions of care and compassion, which ask about how we can become better attuned to worldly materialities that take place in the world but are not conventionally afforded a proper place in social accounts of it (Barnett 2010; McEwan and Goodman 2010). As an ethical concern, description is therefore a way of caring for facets of worldly existence that are underrepresented, marginalized or invisible because they resist the capture of representation (Harrison 2007a).

The second is a concern for a politics of publicity, which is about expanding awareness for new matters of concern, new assemblages, or new forms of co-existence (Anderson and McFarlane 2011; Latour 2004, 2005; Thrift 2008, 2011). As a political concern, description is therefore about formalizing and ‘making public’ the underrepresented, the marginal and the invisible so that these things begin to *matter*, or carry weight, in our accounts of the world (Latour 2005; Latour and Sánchez-Criado 2007; Massey 2005).

Finally, on a more pragmatic level, I am interested in description as a methodological approach for applying the lessons of non-representational thinking to our practices of geo-geography, or world writing. As a methodological concern, description is therefore about practical techniques for sensing or ‘intelligencing’ (Thrift 2008) material

aspects of the world that are remain unaccounted for and uncared about. Since this notion of description emphasizes movements of extensive outreach, I like to think of this non-representational methodology of description as a form of ‘remote sensing’ that does with affective and linguistic technologies what optical and mechanical technologies do for the more physical geographical notions of remote sensing.

In this chapter, I wish to develop a ‘theory of description’ (Stewart 2011) that attends simultaneously to these ethical, political and methodological concerns. All three of these descriptive concerns, I would argue, are fundamental to contemporary questions about how we can productively apply the affirmative lessons of non-representational thinking to our practices of human geography. The first half of this chapter is intended to contribute to emerging discussions about how to *practice* non-representational research in geography. I call the applicable theory of practice I will develop here ‘descriptive outreach.’ As a theory of practice, descriptive outreach establishes how I engage with questions about the worlds, worldings and unworldings of agoraphobia in my research.

Responding to the call of non-representational theories

In their introduction to a volume of essays about non-representational geographies, Anderson and Harrison (2010b) argue that this blossoming subfield is more about *styles* of relating to the world and *modes* of responsibility, than it is about any formal object of study. This generic quality is undoubtedly what makes non-representational theories so hard to pin down in terms of a concrete definition or summary explanation. They are not about anything, in particular, so much as they are

guides for new *ways of sensing* – to expand upon Berger’s (1972) ‘way of seeing’ trope – which must be grounded in particular contexts in order to make sense. As such, non-representational thought is not about anything empirical but rather about empiricism itself; about what counts for reality, materiality and experience. Non-representational geographies, claim Anderson and Harrison (2010b), have served to “multipl[y] ‘signs of existence’, helping to introduce all kinds of new actors, forces and entities into geographic accounts and, at the same time, aiding in the intervention of new modes of writing and address and new styles of performing Geographic accounts” (p. 2).

Within this context, non-representational theories are, above all else, a well-disciplined and broadly-informed movement in geography that advocates for the broadening of geographers’ material sensibilities for what matters and what counts for our being and being-with. Echoing this ethos of amplification, Thrift (2008) intends for non-representational work to be focused upon “making more of the world, not allowing it to be reduced, but rather allowing it to be read and writ large” (p. 170). In this way, not unlike actor-network theory, non-representationality is foremost a theory of practice – in other words, a *methodology* – for attending to novel presentations and eventualities of the world’s endless evolutions, rearrangements, deferrals, becomings and unbecomings (Doel 2010; McCormack 2010; Thrift 2008, 2011). Reflecting on the centrality of methodology to the non-representational agenda, Thrift (2011) writes:

[W]e need to think seriously about social science methodology. For, in this kind of restless experimental world, we may not need data as such – that will be there in increasing abundance – so much as new means of probing what is going on and instigating new behaviours/assemblages. We need, in other words, to invent an *art of experiment* which can up the methodological ante (p. 8, my emphasis added).

This art of experiment is about upping the methodological ante so that our understandings and descriptions may become more attuned to the “generative phenomenality” of “a world always almost there, and thus always elastic in the way it leans into the moment, a world of infinite mobilisation” (ibid).

As Thrift acknowledges in the quote above, non-representational theories share a strong affinity with phenomenology. At their core, both are fundamentally research methodologies that emphasize sensation and description as forms of intelligence for worlding new kinds of embodied, perceptual and affective experience into thought. This methodological connection between non-representational theories and phenomenology can be discerned in Lingis’s (1986) description of the latter approach:

From its most rudimentary experience, our sensitivity per-ceives – goes out to, captures – things, and is open to the world. The perceiving subject has to be desubstantialized, and conceived as an intentionality, a self-transcending movement of ex-istence, and no longer as the place of inscription of impressions. The repudiation of all etiological analysis into sensations opens the field for the descriptive inventory of phenomenal structures – for phenomenology (p. 60).

Phenomenology is a highly qualitative approach that emphasizes description over analysis, interpretation over measurement, and speculative theory over positivistic conclusions. “Correctly conceived phenomenology does not adopt a particular position, standpoint, or world-view philosophy,” writes Pickles (1985). “Rather, it is the name for a method which allows *original experiences* to be seen” (p. 2, emphasis in original). As Relph (1981) makes perfectly clear, phenomenology is not a specific method that “can be applied simply to existing geographical topics” (p. 109). Rather it is a far more radical attempt to “restructure subject matter” (ibid) so as to realign it closer to the felt truths we

discover about the world through our non-representational encounters and interactions with it.

As Denscombe (2010) relates, a phenomenological approach “concentrates its efforts on the kind of human experiences that are pure, basic and raw in the sense that they have not (yet) been subjected to processes of analysis” (p. 95). As such, the goal of a phenomenological approach is not to treat human expressions as crude data to be aggregated, explained or reinterpreted into more sophisticated analyses or grand social critiques.¹ Rather, the goal is more basic and simple: to treat each singular expression as an irreducible truth about the human and more-than-human experiences of being-in-the-world (Heidegger 1962; Harrison 2007; Relph 1981).

While phenomenology and non-representational theories share much in common in terms of a methodological approach, what perhaps most distinguishes the latter is that non-representational theories take more seriously the idea that phenomena are never static ‘beings’ but rather always dynamic ‘becomings.’ This distinctively Bergsonian notion that phenomena are always active processes of “on-flow” (Thrift 2008) is encapsulated in non-representational thought by its primary concern for *events*, which are perhaps nothing more than phenomena re-imagined as transitive, lively and formative becomings. Indeed, as I understand it, what fundamentally drives non-representational thought is a search for new ways of conceiving and representing the world as infinitely disclosing, unfolding and coming into being. The question at the core of non-

¹ This emphasis of description over explanation, which is the traditional hallmark of the phenomenological method, is also shared by actor-network theory (*see* Latour 2005). In this way, a markedly phenomenological influence can be discerned in actor-network theory.

representational theories is: how do we compose and perform a representable and (en)durable world out of the unmediated and unregulated arrival of senses, materialities and possibilities still coming into being? Affirming this thought, Anderson and Harrison (2010b) contend that one of the main lessons of non-representational theories is that “what pass for representations are apprehended as performative presentations, not reflections of some a priori order waiting to be unveiled, decoded, or revealed” (p. 19).

Non-representationality is very much a post-relativistic, pragmatic question about how we perform provisional structures of social order, understanding and meaning in the absence of a universal Truth. In other words, the question of non-representationality becomes: how do we signify worldly things, worldly senses, and worldly happenings that have a material basis and a relational context but lack a solid basis of significance and a determinate social context. As evoked in the best exemplars of non-representational work in geography, the point is not to try to transcend or dispense with representation. Rather the goal is to critically think about the interfaces *between* the different representational and non-representational dimensions, or registers, of experience (Dewsbury 2010a; Doel 2010). In this way, non-representational thinking is less about an ‘outside space’ beyond representation than it is about an ‘in-between space’, or middle ground, of interaction and (in)commensurability between presentations of sense and representations of significance.

Pragmatic as they are, non-representational theories are about the politics and ethics of representationality and relationality as practiced and performed. Despite misunderstandings to the contrary, non-representational thinking represents a turning

back from the brink of (an)nihilistic relativism to which the social sciences had arrived as the inevitable outcome of an era of post-structural deconstruction-without-an-end. Non-representational theories take place in this historic aftermath of the fragmentation of meaning – in the aftermath of the ‘end of the world’ (Nancy 1997), as I discuss in another chapter. As such, quite to the contrary of what their (unfortunately problematic) name would suggest, non-representational theories are not about dispensing with structures of representation or denying their power. Rather they are about endeavoring to understand how structures, norms and conventions come to be materially re/de/solved, re/de/composed, or re/de/constructed across the unfurlings of space and time. Non-representational theories have, in essence, given new life to questions about how the world *takes-place* in a formative – as opposed to formal – sense.

Non-representational theories therefore signal a return to questions of world-making (Goodman 1978), except this time with a greater emphasis on the material and relational qualities of world-building as formative, on-going processes of assembly or composition. This stands in contrast to so-called ‘liberal humanist’ understandings of world-making as subjective and perceptual enterprises. World-building, as a ‘spatial imaginary’ (Delaney 2010) of non-representational thinking, becomes this incredibly vibrant practice of interrelating sense (qua material input) with sense (qua social significance and personal meaning) in a singular-plural fashion of weaving or composing (Descola 2010a, 2010b; Ingold 2010; Latour 2010; Tresch 2005). As an affirmative and creative imaginary of non-representational thought, world-building is a performance of

mediating, assimilating and resolving sense with sense. Affirming this importance of world-building, as such, to non-representational thought, Dewsbury (2010b) contends:

How we bring the world into being through our modes of registration and representational communication is the principle research question for non-representational theorists. This may seem esoteric and abstract but non-representational theory deals with the question of world-forming (often meaning world-framing), that is it focuses upon the everyday performative practices across the sciences and the arts, and thus across technology and the meanings we make to inform our actions and values (p. 150).

In this dissertation, I seek to think about world-building in a way that meshes with non-representational thought on the matters of sense and relations. In particular, I am drawn to spaces and times of exceptional crisis when the practices of assimilation, integration and composition that world-building implies are put to the test and pushed to the limits of what is proper, sensible, tolerable and appropriate. My interest is, therefore, in probing the limits of understanding vis-à-vis the (suffering) excesses of sense. The former register of sense I qualify in terms of propriety. With qualities of propriety and the ‘proper’, I intend to evoke a fundamental relationship of compatibility and reversible fitness between material sense and predicative sense. The latter register of sense, which I qualify in terms of impropriety, is meant to convey less fortunate kinds of reversible incompatibility, unfitness and discord between these two registers of sense.

According this framework, I see world-building as a compositional performance that takes place along the singular-plural limits between improper/material and proper/ideal registers of sense about the world. This, I want to suggest, offers a way to think about worlds as relational compositions that form according to how – and how well – material, social, symbolic and existential layers of sense fit, or mesh, together into a

collective whole (Descola 2010b; Ingold 2007; Latour 2010). Applying this to my stated interest in crisis, I am interested in those spaces and times of breakdown, disorder and dissolution when the compositional integrity of the world begins to shift out of alignment, slide out of order, and fall out of place. Within these space-times of disintegration, I want to think about how the practical challenges of representation are linked to the more substantial challenges of relating and responding in an ethical and material sense. In particular I want to think about how – through descriptive research practices of representation that are outreaching, generative and creative – new ethical bonds based on compassion, recognition and understanding might be forged with others in the world who are suffering. In broader terms, I am interested in how geographers can employ innovative styles and creative tactics of representation to better ethically relate to improper senses of being-in-the-world that resist being drawn into relational accountability. This relationship between the practicalities of representation and the ethicalities of relating is what I hope to establish through a methodology of ‘descriptive outreach.’

Worlding descriptive outreach

At issue in the descriptive methodology I want to develop here is providing accommodations for that which is improper – that which does not (yet) have a proper place in our represented accounts of the world. When we are dealing with things that are non-relationally inappropriate or senseless, such as agoraphobia, I believe that an ethos of service should trump any concerns for pre-serving familiar conventions of language and

accountability. With this approach, the priority is to relate outwardly in an extensive movement of ‘descriptive outreach’ rather than to relate circularly back to familiar places of well-worn understanding. This ‘descriptive outreach’ approach seeks to revive the exploratory ethos of geography in a world in which the frontiers of discovery are no longer so much physical and terrestrial, as relational and material² (Anderson and Wylie 2009).

Descriptive outreach is about tracing new linkages and associations, but doing so through compassionate *modes of relating* that are non-representationally ‘in-touch’ in addition to being formally logical, analytical and representational. Descriptive outreach has humility for those things which can be sensed about the world but not formally expressed, or publicly accounted for, through conventional means.

Descriptive outreach intends to be a socially relational practice of making things public. But it is also an auto-relational practice of being in touch with the affective residues of sensory being-in-touch that invariably build up ‘inside oneself,’ so to speak, through the analyst’s material encounters with his/her subjects and objects of analysis (and the world in general). This embodied and residual nature of affective intelligence draws unexpected connections between humanist and non-representational styles of

² As I discuss elsewhere, materiality offers, from an ontological standpoint, a much broader framework than physicality for accounting for existence. Whereas physicality seems to be confined to formal evidence and empirical propriety, with materiality the ontological bar is much less demanding in terms of ‘what counts.’ Materiality offers a kinetic, relational framework for accounting for existence in terms of ‘matterings’ (Thrift 2008). It holds open a place for things like suffering, which do not quite achieve full status as physical objects. In this way, we might say that physicality is about *earthly* things, while materiality is about *worldly* things. This distinction has been fruitfully explored in the discipline of geography in recent years through studies of aerography (*see* Olwig 2011a; Jackson and Fannin 2011; Mitchell 2011).

doing geography. Coming from this common space of interrelatedness, I intend for descriptive outreach to be a methodology that lends a *human(istic) voice* to material accounts of our worldly co-existence. Perhaps, ultimately, descriptive outreach is a relational approach to understanding the world that admits an opening for inappropriate things like the non-relational, the residual and the human.

Descriptive outreach as a methodological approach requires flexibility and tolerance for different ways of thinking, writing and relating. It requires a flexibility of language to adapt to new contexts and relations of a world-in-formation. And it requires tolerance on the part of the analyst (and his/her readers) to admit a greater degree of uncertainty, ambiguity and unconventionality into academic accounts of the world. In this regard, descriptive outreach places, by design, more demands on its reading public to become actively involved in *questions* about interpretation and the resolution of meaning that are at stake in social analysis.

Following the thinking of design theorist Tony Fry (1999), I regard descriptive outreach as, in part, a methodological strategy that intends to activate a sense of complicity and involvement in the reader by drawing him/her into an interactive *work-space* also shared by the research subjects and the researcher. In this shared work-space built around the text, the common goal is to make some sense out of what all is here before us and between us as a public. As Fry suggests, this alternative strategy implies an unorthodox take on academic writing in which its purpose is not to be a bullhorn for broadcasting messages for mass consumption, but to be a hook for drawing in new

participants who will play an active role in responding to the social questions, problems, uncertainties or controversies that are at hand:

In terms of writing and other forms of communication, the common assumption is almost always that efficacy depends on 'reaching' as many people as possible. In contrast to this mass communication/mass entertainment model, this text is based on giving the reader work to do. In this respect, its success will be measured by the extent to which it brings active readers into being who accept responsibility for finding ways, in their own circumstances, of taking appropriate action (Fry 1999, p. 13).

This 'open method' in which meaning and significance remain speculative and partially unresolved *by design* stands in contrast to more conventional methods of information delivery in which the purpose of academic writing is to provide an authoritative account that gives full closure to the questions or problems under consideration. Not only is this authoritarian model of academic writing becoming increasingly untenable in a world in which uncertainties and controversies continue to proliferate (Latour 2005). It is also a remarkably effective way to impede the formation of more inclusive, participatory and interactive communities of knowledge that would be built around 'incipient systems' (Massumi 2002), or open source commons, in which information is transparent and accessible to all parties involved, and its arrangements of meaning are contingent and subject to multiple ways of assembly or interpretation.

Descriptive outreach is, therefore, more geared toward dwelling upon the challenges of responding and relating to unmediated senses of the world, than toward facilitating the efficient delivery of clear information and tidy resolutions about this world. This involves thinking about language as presentational, expository, and *outwardly* oriented toward what is new, different, other, unprecedented and

underrepresented. This particular understanding of language as expositional, expansive, nomadic, rhizomatic and exodic is what the ‘non-representational’ seeks to affirm – that the ‘substance’ of symbolic communication is not represented within language (inferred or inscribed), but presented *through* language (deferred or exscribed).³ In this way, language ceases to be a circular relation that ends in representational closure, and it becomes an opening of relations that inaugurates presentations of difference, otherness and newness.

Descriptive outreach aspires for affirmative practices of deconstruction and reconstruction, and un-determination and re-determination. It is not about playing cute language games, nor is it about arbitrarily attacking structures of order or conventions of meaning just for the sake of being fashionably destructive, skeptical or eliminativistic. Rather, it is about finding new ways to care about the unaccounted for, the inappropriate and the non-relational: to give these improper things a more proper place in our accounts of the world. It is, therefore, an affirmative deconstructive approach that aims to “defamiliarise the familiar” (Fry 1999), but only so that new ways of seeing, thinking and relating may be worlded.

³ This is the great and unfortunate irony of the nomenclature of non-representational theories: the prefix of the name appears to suggest a negative deconstructive attack on language. However in practice non-representational thinking is really about affirming a ‘presentational’ understanding of language that breaks open the closure of language as merely representational. In this way, non-representational theories are really generative and performative theories about language as demonstrative of new possibilities and new ways of being, and evocative of new matters of concern.

Methodology as an ethical practice of relating

Suffering is, by definition, improper – indecent, intolerable, inappropriate – and nothing we can say about it will change this bare fact. In this way, suffering is like an obstinate wild creature that is never going to be broken into proper submission, unless it is resolved, at which point it ceases to be suffering. This material reality of suffering offers three modes of response. The first is ignorance: to ignore that suffering exists as such a pervasive and senseless part of the world. The second is accountability: to compel suffering to make sense as a representational object. The third is responsibility: to engage with suffering where we encounter it along the unresolved limits of language and sense; in a primitive space of first contact, or primal encounter, in which the known and the unknown intermingle in ways that breach, confuse and destabilize the fixed structures of identity and meaning.

The first option, ignorance, is literally irresponsible because it fails to respond to something that exists as a material part of the world and, as such, demands our care and attention. The second option, accountability, is idealistically naïve because it assumes that suffering's impropriety can be willfully made to submit to a superior dominion of sovereign human intelligibility (Butler 2005; Harrison 2007a; Raffoul 2010). The third way, that of responsibility, I want to argue – despite it being the most demanding of the three options – is the only ethically and ontologically sound option for responding to our encounters with suffering in the world. Descriptive outreach intends to be a methodology for practicing a responsibility to suffering in the world. Like the term implies, it suggests

an *extensive* movement to accommodate things that do not currently fit, belong, or have a place in conventionalized accounts of the world. Its loyalty lies with an undetermined future of emergent difference and otherness, rather than with a predetermined history of conventions and certainties.

I want to argue that the profound confusion that agoraphobia exposes in the lives of people who suffer with it fundamentally does not fit with our normal frames of the world, or *frameworlds*. Agoraphobia cannot, nor should not, be held accountable to any predetermined frame for how the world should operate or fit together. The lived spatial disorder of agoraphobia, I want to suggest, represents as much a crisis of ontology for the analyst (and his/her reader) as it does a crisis of existence for the sufferer. In both cases, the struggle is between presentational sense and representational sense; between being faithful to a materiality of given experience and being faithful to an ideal of communicative significance. For the sufferer, the struggle is existential. What is on the line is one's sanity, one's identity and, quite often, one's life as well. For the analyst, the struggle is ethical: an onto-epistemological question of how to respond to suffering in the other and how to world this being-with of the encounter. What is on the line is a balance of fidelity between what sufferers express (their words, but also their inarticulate cries, hesitations, ellipses and spaces of silence) and what makes sense in conventional frameworlds of social analysis. This ontological and ethical challenge fundamentally becomes a descriptive challenge (Harrison 2007a, 2010; Scary 1985). It becomes an issue of employing description to world new kinds of understanding.

Rather than demand that agoraphobia conform to our proper framework of understanding, I believe that we must learn to respond to agoraphobia with ethical consideration and ontological flexibility; bending and contorting our frameworks to try to accommodate its material improprieties, and not the other way around. We cannot understand the primitive materiality of agoraphobia's suffering sense of impropriety so long as its disorder serves to *inform* social thought in terms positively advancing its predetermined discourses, its established political agendas and its grand theories about civilization. To relate to agoraphobia on a more primal level of material suffering requires that we abandon at the outset any pretensions of 'grasping' its disorder and situating it *within* predetermined structures and accounts of meaning. Just as suffering is materially a limiting experience that takes place along the farthest edges of sense – along the intermingled fringes of proper and improper sense, so too should our writing reflect this sense of encountering strange otherness at the borderlines of sense. To write about something improper like the material phenomenality of suffering-with-agoraphobia, we need to think in terms of annexing our frameworks – continually expanding and adding onto them to accommodate aspects of the world that do not presently fit, belong, or have a place.

In order to better account for agoraphobia as a *material* disorder, as opposed to a *social* disorder, I employ a particular method of experimental writing that seeks to link up with a more primitive sense of living with and living through agoraphobia as an improper event of suffering. This method of experimental writing intends to reach out to the

unspoken and unspeakable facets of agoraphobic suffering that are resistant to accountability because they are beyond our ability to relate, to grasp and to comprehend as social analysts. Because this method of outreach relies on description to ‘world’ new materialities of agoraphobic suffering, in terms of accounting for their worldly, material presence, I call this method descriptive outreach.

In the core chapters that follow, I practice this method of descriptive outreach through a style of writing that intentionally mimics the speculative, diffuse and uncertain sense of being engulfed by agoraphobia’s destabilizing and unsettling impropriety. Rather than try to capture some kind of essential meaning about agoraphobia, the aim of this writing is to *relate* to the fragmented and confused sense of Being that agoraphobia phenomenally composes for those who are singularly engulfed in its sphere of impropriety. My aim in these core chapters is not to *appropriate* this sense of suffering in terms of its greater significance but to *approximate* its felt materiality through vignettes of descriptive writing that engage with primitive expressions and testimonies about suffering-with-agoraphobia.

Sourcing Agoraphobic Testimonies

In order to incorporate actual expressions of agoraphobic suffering into this work, I shall interweave a selection of textual accounts that explicitly describe what this sense of ruinous impropriety feels like in specific contexts of agoraphobia. As mentioned previously, my interest in agoraphobia is not to consider its causality, pathology or sociology, but rather to consider the more general, human experiences of suffering that

this condition exposes. To do so, I have identified a publicly accessible, online support group forum for agoraphobia where individuals post testimonial accounts about their experiences with this disorder. By interweaving anonymous textual accounts from this public forum that specifically express what it feels like to have one's world come unraveled by agoraphobia, I aim to construct phenomenological descriptions about what suffering feels like as a process of unworlding, as well as about how the human spirit responds to this dissolution with a will to restore the vitality that suffering unravels and destroys.

All the textual expressions about being-with-agoraphobia that appear in this work come from discussion threads and diary entries that were posted in archival public spaces within this online support group site between 2007, when the site was conceived, and early 2012. During the five years that this online support group site has been functional, roughly 200,000 discussion thread postings and public diary entries about living with agoraphobia have been archived on the site. Out of this cumulative total of lived expressions, I selected roughly a one-percent sample at random to read and consider for my analysis. From this one-percent sample of approximately 2,000 individual expressions, written by several hundred different authors, I screened messages according to their testimonial ability to describe the phenomenal event of living with agoraphobia in terms of what the medical phenomenologist Eugene Minkowski (1970) refers to as lived time and lived space. After filtering out messages that did not directly address the existential and phenomenal qualities of agoraphobia (i.e. messages concerning clinical

treatments and medical definitions of agoraphobia; discussions about drug regimens, drug interactions and drug side effects; and off-topic discussions about news and current events), my research yielded just under one hundred texts that testify to the phenomenal experience of living with agoraphobia. These testimonial texts are the basis for my descriptive outreach toward better understandings of agoraphobic suffering in this work.

Because I am only interested in the generic human expressions that appear on this site, not the particular identities of its users, I enact a variety of disguise measures to protect the identities of both the online forum as a whole, as well as its individual users. These disguise measures, which I shall explain in greater detail below, comply with a set of best practices for ethical internet research which have recently begun to be articulated through the Association of Internet Researchers' (2002) Ethics Working Committee, as well as through scholarly discussions that consider ethical research practices in online environments (Bruckman 2002; Convery and Cox 2012; Eysenbach and Till 2001; Hewson, *et al.* 2003; Holmes 2009; Markham 2012). Paramount among the disguises I employ to ensure that my research causes no harm to this therapeutic, but entirely public⁴, online forum is the adoption of a pseudonym for this forum, which I shall refer to in this work as "the Commons."

The Commons is a public, online therapeutic support group for agoraphobia whose content is entirely user-generated (except for banner ads) and whose interactions

⁴ Upon submitting a full research proposal to the Institutional Review Board at The University of Texas at Austin (IRB # 2012-10-0132), the board exempted this research from its oversight after determining that the scope of the research occurs within the public domain online and its engagement with textual expressions in this domain does not constitute human subject research.

and postings are monitored by senior users who volunteer as “group leaders” within the forum. As of October 2012, the Commons listed more than 1,500 registered members on the forum. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that only roughly ten percent (10%) of registered users are active on the site during any given month. While registration is not required to access or browse the Commons, it is required if one wishes to actively participate on the site by posting content and interacting with other users. The online group is declared to be “an open community of patients who share, in public, their experiences and knowledge.” As such, its space of gathering is explicitly public and all communications that take place on this forum – except for private messages (referred to as PMs) – are publicly accessible to unregistered visitors of the site.

The Commons is intended to be “a meeting place for people [with agoraphobia], a comfort zone to help and get help,” as stated on its ‘About Page’. Reflecting these social and public intentions, the site is primarily oriented around a discussion forum space, within which several dozen conversation threads – subcategorized according to four main themes: personal stories, general support, medicine and treatment, and lounge/off-topic discussions – are active at any given time.

In addition to the central meeting space that the discussion forum enacts, each user on the Commons is afforded a tributary space in the form of a personal page that has much of the same functions and features as personal pages on conventional social networking sites, such as Facebook. On these personal pages, users can add customized wallpaper, post photos and images, stream music, list a limited amount of personal

information (such as age, location, birthday, marital status), and post links to other media on the Internet. The personal pages also display users' communication histories with links to their recent discussion forum posts and public diary entries. While the great majority of users' personal pages remain largely undeveloped, a surprising number of users do post personal photos and other information that discloses aspects of their actual, embodied identities.⁵ Through these personal pages, users can also "friend" one another, send personal message invitations for private chat sessions, and even send one another virtual hugs, prayers and salutes which post to the recipient's personal page.

The impersonal quality of the Commons

Given the highly qualitative nature of this study, and given that the Commons is a digitally-mediated public space whose gathering is predominantly impersonal, this study does not present a highly detailed account of the demographic profile of the individuals who participate on the Commons. There are two reasons for this, one practical and the other theoretical. Practically speaking, representing users in terms of embodied characteristics, such as age, race, ethnicity, and gender, is difficult in online environments in which markers of physical identity are often obscured or absent. In other words, on a practical level, this information simply is not adequately available within the Commons. Nevertheless, some general and anecdotal demographic information can be crudely

⁵ Although the site's administrators explicitly discourage users from disclosing any personal information on the Commons, the design of the personal page platform seems to implicitly facilitate such disclosures by allowing users to post photos and video. Even though there are clearly potential risks in disclosing such information, and despite a culture that is tolerant of anonymity and respectful of users' privacy, a small but significant number of users who are highly active on the site do post personal photos to share with their "Agor family" online.

discerned to provide a rough socio-geographic context for agoraphobic communications within the Commons. For instance, all communications on the Commons take place in English; as such, its users predominantly reside in North America, the United Kingdom and Australia. Anecdotally, and in contrast previous studies which have explored agoraphobia as a gendered issue, it appears as though both genders are roughly equally represented in the Commons, and gender is rarely a topic of discussion in conversations and testimonial accounts. In fact, gender appears to be largely insignificant to the nature and quality of communications in the Commons. Furthermore, anecdotal evidence suggests that while age is not a factor – but is perhaps the most salient feature of one’s embodied identity on the Commons, given that discussions and expressions about the agoraphobic experience frequently deal with life-stage issues – the majority of users on the Commons are distributed across an interval between early adulthood (~ 18 years old) and retirement age (~ 65 years old). Beyond this basic and largely anecdotal information, not much else can be reasonably inferred about the demographics of users in the Commons.

However, more than just being a practical issue, I argue that this absence of personal information about the embodied identities of inter-actants within the Commons is an essential part of the *quality* of this space. In other words, the Commons furnishes a place for public gathering where social interactions and human interminglings are largely *impersonal*. This is not to say that these digitally-mediated interactions are fully disembodied (Adams 2009). Rather, it means that the quality, texture and overall

experience of relations formed in virtual spaces such as the Commons are relatively less determined by the factual and symbolic characteristics of users' "embodied particularities" (Willson 2001; see also Atkinson and Ayers 2010). In order to remain faithful to this impersonal quality that predominates in the Commons, I make an intentional effort to faithfully represent this quality of impersonality in my work. I seek to accentuate this predominant quality of impersonality in my writing by disallowing 'personal' information about interactants' embodied identities to enter into my presentations of human expression and interaction within the Commons. As Dewsbury (2010b) recently noted, "experience doesn't need to be coded to be appreciated and understood, it needs to be presented and treated as being just what it is" (p. 325). Just as they appear in the Commons, in this work readers will encounter human expressions and interactions of an anonymous and impersonal nature. Even in environments of virtual impersonality, it is possible to discover the *voice* of humanity circulating through and transmitting across its space of gathering. In this way, I seek to intentionally dissociate qualities of humanity from those of the personal identity so that I might reimagine humanity as an affective and material sociality that exceeds the confines of subjective individuality.

Interrogating materialities of agoraphobic suffering

In addition to not contextualizing the human expressions presented in this work in terms of socio-embodied categories of personal identity, another distinguishing feature of my presentation is an absence of direct engagement with these testimonial expressions. In

this work, I make no attempt to authoritatively *explain* the significance of expressions made by others about an unsettling sense of being-with-agoraphobia, a condition with which I have no direct experience. Rather than try to smooth over the internal boundaries that distinguish my second-hand knowledge from the direct experiences of agoraphobic others represented in this work, I wish to accentuate these interstitial boundaries of knowledge that compose this work. In the two core chapters that contain agoraphobic testimonies, I have tried to accentuate this non-relational divide between my understanding and another by preserving a space of difference, distance and non-correspondence between my writing and the writing of agoraphobic sufferers. As such, rather than try to assimilate theory and direct testimony into a singular narrative, or monologue, my theoretical writing in these chapters seeks to enter into an asymmetrical dialogue with direct testimonies about being-with-agoraphobia.

This *interrogative mode*⁶ of writing takes seriously the material quality of agoraphobic testimony and agoraphobic suffering as a concrete but impenetrable worldly realities that are objectively real but improperly excessive to subjective appropriation, or ‘proper’ relations of sense. Interrogation is a phenomenological practice that treats its ‘object’ as materially concrete but impenetrable; as a hard, fleshy and vital thing about whose internal ‘essence’ we can only speculate (Anderson and Wylie 2009; Harman 2005; Lingis 1986; Merleau-Ponty 1968). In the interrogative style of writing that I adopt

⁶ This idea comes from Anderson and Wylie’s (2009) discussion of interrogation as a speculatively materialist way of gathering intelligence about the world. Regarding this mode of inquiry, they write: “Subjectivity may no longer be the basis or fount of intelligibility, but an account in which subject and object, self and world, devolve or precipitate from interrogative materialities may still be written” (p. 323).

in later chapters, theory and testimony are meant to question and speak to one another without ever melding into an ideal union of perfect, one-to-one correlation. Rather than melding together into an authoritative story about agoraphobic suffering, theory and testimony are meant to imperfectly grapple with one another across ‘open spaces’ of translation in which meaning dissolves into a plurality of possible interpretations and correspondence becomes broken up, choppy and spaced out over different wavelengths of sense. These open spaces between theory and testimony in the chapters that follow are meant to accentuate the non-relational gaps (Harrison 2007a) in communicating agoraphobic suffering that my writing cannot but fail to grasp, relate to and account for. Rather than being a weakness of my writing to better incorporate agoraphobic testimonies into the theoretical account, this open space of slight incommensurability is meant to convey an ethical gesture of respect for the limits of my ability to understand the suffering of others and their struggles to overcome its ruinous impropriety.

Constructing a heavy disguise

As mentioned earlier, my interest in testimonies of agoraphobic suffering are not about the specific human subjects themselves, but rather about the textual expressions about impersonally being-with-agoraphobia that they convey. This approach draws on an established methodological tradition within the social humanities to engage with public expressions on the Internet as authored, textual representations, as opposed to human subjects (Bassett and O’Riordan 2002; Denzin 1999; White 2002). As such, I am not interested in analyzing or gaining access to the personal lives of agoraphobic sufferers.

To do so would be to situate the eventful origin of agoraphobia within a historicized context in which the material controversies of being-*entangled-with-the* world have already been resolved into representational and relational networks of proper sense. Rather, I am interested in dwelling in the impersonal and pre-subjective experience of agoraphobia as a ‘prehistoric’ (Butler 2005) event of impropriety; a material disaster that overturns the settled, interrelated coherency of our worlds.

Given this interest in the impersonal and pre-subjective expressions of being-with-agoraphobia, not the embodied particularities of their subjectivized authors, I employ a plurality of tactics to protect the relative anonymity of both the Commons as a whole, and the individual authors who post expressions about being-with-agoraphobia on this public, online forum. Although the Institutional Review Board determined that the research presented in this dissertation does not constitute human subject research, qualitative researchers who study human expressions, interactions and behaviors in public spaces online have rightfully argued that researchers should take special precautions to protect the integrity of these gathering spaces, as well as the personal identities of their participants (Association of Internet Researchers 2002; Bruckman 2002; Heilferty 2011; Holmes 2009; Madge 2007; Markham 2012; Whitehead 2007). This ethical ‘best practice’ to protect the anonymity of both research site and research participants in online contexts – to the greatest extent possible, regardless of how technically ‘public’ a site may be – is especially important for internet research that involve either: (a) topics that are conventionally regarded as ‘private’ matters (such as

personal health, sexuality and emotional wellbeing); or (b) segments of the population that are potentially vulnerable to psychological, emotional or physical harm.

Because this research meets the criteria for both of these ethically critical issues of qualitative internet research, and because I am not interested in historicized and socialized accounts of agoraphobia, I employ a “heavy disguise” (Bruckman 2002) in this research to protect individual and group anonymity in the Commons. This approach consists of three safeguards. First, as already introduced, I employ the pseudonym of “the Commons” throughout my work, so as to not identify the real name of this online forum. Furthermore, I have ensured that my description of the online forum is intentionally vague, so as to prevent any reader from being able to infer the identity of the site through contextual clues.

Second, I do not divulge any personal information (such a gender, occupation, age, geographical location, etc.), even if this personal information has been voluntarily disclosed by the author. In the event that a textual expression does disclose any personal information that could be used to identify its author (such as his/her screen name, real name, profession, geographical location, etc.), I have employed substitute pseudonyms, pseudo-professions, pseudo-locations, etc., to ensure that the author remains anonymous and his/her identity cannot be inferred or otherwise identified. I only identify textual expressions by a pseudonymous title cited in the footnotes.

Third, given that the textual expressions I shall incorporate into my research are part of the public domain – and thus capable of being located on the Internet via

sophisticated online search engines – I have deliberately manipulated the syntax and vocabulary of the actual textual expressions so as to ensure that they cannot be located via an Internet search. This effort to intentionally manipulate text so that it cannot be located in the growing archival spaces of public information online is an emerging practice advocated by several scholars of ethical internet research (Bruckman 2002; Markham 2012). For instance, if a textual expression published on the Commons were to say:

I lived like I could never be broken and I found that I can be. I do have limits and they are bearing down on me more and more.

I have intentionally manipulated the syntax and prominent vocabulary of the passage, while still preserving the overall meaning of the expression, as follows:

I lived as if nothing could break me, but I discovered that I can be broken. There are limits to my world, limits that continue to close in on me.

By enacting these “heavy disguise” safeguards, I have sought to establish a methodological framework for “adequately anonymizing information while providing accounts that present rich descriptions and important details” (Markham 2012, p. 336) about being-with-agoraphobia in materially phenomenal sense.

Chapter Three

Re-Placing Existence as Being-*with*-the-world

Introduction

In this chapter, I trace a trajectory of metaphysical thought that begins with the failures of subjectivity and advances toward more *common* ways of thinking existence in terms of its unbounded worldliness. Within the context of present demands to think the taking place of existence in ways that are other- and more-than-subjective, I consider an alternative ontology of radical coexistence whose development in social thought can be traced from Heidegger's (1962) analysis of Being (*Sein*) to more recent, post-phenomenological theories of intermediality which speculate about the radically shared spaces of coexistence (Nancy 1992, 1997, 2007, 2008b; Oosterling and Ziarek 2011; Sloterdijk 2011). Ultimately, by detailing how Heidegger conceived of existence in terms of an extensible world, I wish to demonstrate how an alternative ontology of being-through-extension that is grounded in (post)phenomenological ways of thinking can lead to new ways of thinking the 'place' of human experience. I contend that this alternative ontology of being-through-extension offers more responsible ways for "worlding" the improper commons and excesses of existence; in-between spaces that get left out of subject – object relations. By tracing this trajectory of thought, I seek to establish for future humanistic studies in geography a more critically material foundation for thinking spatialities of human experience that exceed the conventional limits and boundaries of subjectivity.

In what follows below, I begin with a brief primer on Heidegger's analysis of Being, in which he advances a critically important argument about the spatially differential nature of existence. This, I contend, is fundamentally an argument about the inherent co-existentiality, or sociality, of Being. Setting this issue aside temporarily, I next turn to discuss exactly why and how subjectivity, as a metaphysical convention of Western thought, fails to account for improper, worldly dimensions of existence that exceed the idealized boundaries of absolute *auto-nomy* (literally "self-possession") that this proper category establishes in thought. This failure of subjectivity to account for material senses of excess and impropriety, which by now has been thoroughly deconstructed, challenges us to find new ontologies, imaginations and languages for thinking existence in the absence of determinate subject – object relations. Taking up this challenge, I return to Heidegger's analysis in order to carefully establish an understanding of Being-in-the-world and Dasein as radically alternative spaces of singular existence that are excessively more-than- and other-than-subjective. Indeed, according to this understanding, they should be regarded as local events of *co-existential* taking place, in which sense and experience take place not as properly subjective (or objective) but as improperly atmospheric or worldly. These co-existential understandings, I argue, are fundamentally founded upon an alternative ontology of radical being-in-common that is clearly discernible in Heidegger's philosophy. Ultimately, I contend that this ontology produces an understanding of existential "Being there" (*Dasein*) as always co-existentially "Being-with there" (*Mitdasein*). This analytic of *Mitdasein*, I suggest,

offers one possible vehicle for approaching in thought a radical space of the in-common. In the last section, I briefly consider a speculative practice of ‘worlding’ that human geographers might employ to better account for these material spaces of being together that ground our sense of the world, yet exceed proper thought. In conclusion I argue that geographers more actively pursue experiments for worlding these radically in-between spaces of our being-in-common.

The spacing of (co)existence

Despite the failings of Heidegger – whose thought seems to have been derailed by dangerous ideals of (Nazi) communitarianism – it is hard to deny the enduring value of his thought to human geography, among other fields of social thought. I argue that what Heidegger (1962) accomplished in thought was an ontological framework for reimagining not just the nature of existence, but of *co*-existence, without relying on a metaphysics of dialectical (subject – object) relations. In this regard, his thinking speaks more broadly to a spatially extensive condition of *co*-existentiality, than to merely an intensive condition of existentiality. To this spacious, material and primitive condition of (co)existentiality he gave the name Being (*Sein*). Given the spatial nature that Heidegger attributes to Being, we might say that our condition of (co)existentiality is also one of (co)extension: an always original spacing of being and being-together across varying degrees of distance. In this ontology, existence is, before and above all else, a *world*.

Working up to this spatial equation of Being qua world, Heidegger first posits that the “term for the Being of an entity that is in itself, is ‘*substantia*’” (Heidegger 1962, p.

123). Building on this thought, he continues by writing that “substances become accessible in their ‘attributes’, and every substance has some distinctive property from which the essence of the substantiality of that definite substance can be read off” (ibid).

What is the attribute that Heidegger considers to be the essence of Being?

Extension – namely, in length, breadth, and thickness – makes up the real Being of that corporeal substance which we call the ‘world’. ... Extension is a state-of-being constitutive for the entity [*res corporea*] we are talking about; it is that which must already ‘be’ before any other ways in which Being is determined, so that these can ‘be’ what they are. Extension must be ‘assigned’ [*zugewiesen*] primarily to the corporeal Thing (Heidegger 1962, pp. 123-124).

By declaring extension as *the* essential attribute of the substance of Being / the Being of substance, what Heidegger proposes is profoundly revolutionary and unsettling to proper thought (of the world) as conceived in terms of the subject-object dialectic. In other words, what he suggests is that what is most proper to a finite being or thing (its “essence”) is fundamentally derived or deducted from what is most improper to all finite beings or things: the extension, or spacing, of their substantial differences qua ‘world.’

In other words, Heidegger essentially proposes that the foundation for existence is not a privileged space of inalienable property (possession qua “subjectivity”) but rather a public space of untitled commons (sharing qua “world”). That this foundational space of the world is held in common means, paradoxically, that its substantiality is shared by all yet proper to none (Nancy 2007, 2008a, 2008b). What is the substance of that which is held in common? Extension: that empty interval of space between things that realizes their substantial differences-held-in-common; their Being. By deferring the question of substance into one of extension, and vice versa, Heidegger establishes a circular problematic of the world which he conceives in terms of a non-dialectical and

“inauthentic”⁷ relation between existential Being and existent being(s). How is it that what is most common and essential to all of existence – the spacing of Being – is precisely that which is least proper or privileged to any being in space? How do we properly make sense of this shared difference in common that the coextension of Being implies?

The being and unbecoming of subjectivity

In many ways, the ontology of Being that Heidegger first proposed in *Being and Time*, represents a major catalyst for the deconstruction of the ontological regime of Western metaphysics premised on the standard of subjectivity; a dismantling process which still continues today. In the time since the emergence of Heidegger’s thought, the wounds to the corpus of Western metaphysics seem to have ‘taken hold’ like a bad infection that has progressively diminished the substance and health of its host, metastasizing and proliferating over time. What is dying is nothing less than a grand history and style of thought whose passing can no longer be avoided. However, at the same time, what is dying is only a conventionalized way of accounting for existence *in thought*, in the sense that the so-called death of subjectivity only occurs “in theory.” In this way, this demise is not about denying the substantiality of any material thing, or the sense of any vital essence in the world – including the senses of humanity and being

⁷ This is the English translation of *uneigentlich*, a term Heidegger (1962) uses to refer to a non-representational mode of Being that occurs outside of “proper” structures of thought/language. While the terminology of “in/authenticity” is still used by some Heideggerians, across the landscape of continental philosophy it has been largely replaced in translation and thought by a terminology of “im/propriety.”

human. Rather it is about finding *better ways of worlding* the ‘things in themselves’ in thought and through language.

More specifically, what is dying in theory is a metaphysical structure composed of a proper syntax of relations (i.e. “causality”) and endpoints (i.e. “subject” and “object”). As purely ontological artifacts of Western metaphysics, the categories of subject and object were created to authorize a particular positioning and organization of substantial differences in both time and space. In this way, these categories of proper thought are perhaps the Western world’s oldest spatial technologies for creating order out of an undifferentiated extension of Being. Within this metaphysical structure, the ontological category of the “subjectum” marks a privileged substance: that which comes first in the time of substantial difference, as well that which is withheld, or exempt, from the space of substantial difference. Relating this very idea in the greater context of Western metaphysical thought, Romano (2009) writes:

The modern characterization of the ‘subject’ since Descartes is inseparable from the conventional translation of Aristotle’s beingness (*ousia*) as *substantia*: that which *lies at the base* and *continues underneath* the various attributes or accidents, their permanent *substratum* (p. 50; emphases in original).

As such, the “subjectum” became the categorical *standard* for appraising an entire universe of substantial differences known as the world. It became the arch-tool for authenticating everything else; the special tool that built the (Western) world. Every substantial difference properly ‘minted’ through the currency of metaphysical thought (and what is “proper” can only be such relative to a standard of thought (Latour 2005)) carried the mark of this marker; the so-called “mark of the same.” In this way, the

“subjectum” served as *the* archetypal constant for all variables of difference that have been properly established throughout the millennial experiment in thought known as Western metaphysics. It represents the universal standard upon which all substantial differences have been categorically forged, minted and evaluated.

The pitfall with the category of “subjectum,” however, is precisely the emptiness of its own (categorical) ‘being.’ In the end, it is nothing more than a vacant distinction that must be arbitrarily bestowed upon one singular substance/point/place of Being amidst an extension/landscape/atmosphere of Being. The “subjectum” as a category is not just slippery but, ultimately, groundless: without a concrete basis or material origin outside of the artifice of language. It is insubstantial in itself, and unsubstantiated in the impersonal, material world of coexistence. The “subjectum” ultimately shows itself to be nothing more than a formless formality of thought: a fashion, a habit, a culture, a convention.

Over time, however, the category of the “subjectum” has calcified into something ostensibly definite, substantial, and grounded in nature. In a purely ontological sense, the “subjectum” has, over time, become uncritically made into an absolute and inalienable property of Being, generally, and of a particular kind of extant being, in particular; this despite it being fundamentally nothing other than a relative designation assigned within Being. In other words, what was originally nothing more than a relative designation, a contextual place-marker, or an arbitrary starting point for evaluating an undifferentiated ‘world’ of substantial differences has since formalized into an absolute property: a

substantial and inalienable essence of an extant being. Over the course of Western history, the artifice of the “subjectum” has substantiated into an ontic-ontological figure of the “Subject”: the most proper of the proper; the standard-bearer; the ma(r)ker of privilege and difference, sameness and otherness; the absolutely sovereign grounds for appraising existence as it properly exists through representation.

“Subjectivization” is the term I give to this historical process of substantiation in which what originally functioned as a non-substantial formalizer (“subjectum”) has solidified into a substantial form (the “subject”) with material outcomes and consequences. The ontic-ontological substantiation of this arbitrary designation into an absolute figure of ‘God’ or ‘Ego’ or ‘Man’ is perhaps the singular (hi)story that Nietzsche intended to expose and hammer away at in his fragmented body of writings. In this way, Nietzsche perhaps figures into history as the original deconstructionist of the post-structural turn.

This movement of deconstructionism seems to have developed through two distinct but interrelated projects, both of which can be seen as fundamentally responding to subjectivization, as the arch-process underwriting the (Western) world as it properly exists in thought. The first might be described as predominantly an ontological project that intended to expose the insubstantiality of the ideal subject as an absolute and essential basis for categorizing, evaluating, defining and ordering all of existence. The second might be thought of as a more politicized project that sought to unwork all of the material and ideological fortunes won and lost as a result of the ways that the privileged

category of the “subjectum” became arbitrarily grounded in particular forms, figures and attributes of substantial difference (such as the classic standards of race, gender and sexuality implied by the terms whiteness, masculinity and heteronormativity).

In the end, these processes of deconstruction have effectively demonstrated how possession of the standard of subjectivity affords arbitrary advantages of privilege (“power”), as well as how the designation of privilege that subjectivity implies exists only relative to designations of difference or otherness. Due to the factuality of this reversible, consubstantial relation, the presumed ontic priority and autonomy of the “subject” turns out to be not absolutely essential, but rather absolutely arbitrary and contrived. In essence, deconstructionism has effectively invalidated not only the proper standard of subjectivity, but additionally an entire system of categorical thought founded upon the “grounds” of subjectivity. Only by painstakingly tracing how subjectivity has served as the ontological foundation upon which the entire structure of Western thought has been built can we see why the fruits of this metaphysical tradition are now widely regarded as suspect. This being undermined and betrayed by our inherited history and structure of metaphysical thought is our “disaster” of thought (Blanchot 1995).

One of the ultimate lessons of deconstructionism is that thinking in terms of subjectivity – which is to say, *being* in the privileged place of the “subjectum” – is irresponsible to the material intelligences of sense and experience, which demand that the world is really improperly more-than and otherwise-than entirely comprehensible to the

sovereign human subject. Expressing this critique of the modern subject through the language of Continental deconstructive thought, Romano (2009) contends that:

[D]etermining the human being as ‘subject’ precludes from the outset that anything like an event could touch him; this characterization thinks of a human being as the one who always continues underneath what happens (to him) (*sub-jectum*), who exercises so great a mastery and control over events that he relegates them to simple attributes, the one who is identical with himself even in his alterations. This characterization fundamentally excludes that a human being could be touched by something like an event, upended and transformed by it (p. 51).

The crisis of thought brought on by deconstructionism is precisely one that requires new ways of thinking existence without the absolute privileges implied by subjectivity. For so long Western thought has been oriented by this absolute sense of ontic-ontological propriety grounded in the notion of the thinking being as the standard-bearer for all of existence. To be the “subject” meant ontically occupying a centrally privileged place in the world, a private reserve of substantial distinction, from which all forms of substantial difference could be transparently grasped and properly understood.

Importantly, however, the solution for advancing the ends of deconstructionism has nothing to do with obliterating the sense of an absolute standard (common origin, ground, copula, history, destiny, essence) for all of existence. This is the mistake made by the more nihilistic forms of deconstructionism, all of which end up overstating the fragmentedness of existence to the point that the very real and pressing ontological, ethical and political demands of our material *coexistence* – alternatively described in terms of globalization, worldhood, throwntogetherness and cosmopolitics – become irresponsibly overlooked (Heidegger 1962, 1985; Latour 2004; Massey 2005; Morin 2009; Nancy 1997, 2007; Sloterdijk 2011).

Rather, the solution lies in *displacing* the absolute standard for existence – indicated by the empty placeholder of the “subjectum” – outside of any and all properties of categorical thought. In other words, the only practical and affirmative way to advance deconstructive thought beyond itself is to decenter the absolute ‘location’ of the standard from an *inside place* of privilege, possession and property to an *outside, in-between space* of sharing, equality, and non-property. This slight but profound movement of decentering – which displaces the absolute standard, or ‘grounds,’ for existence from immanently and properly within an extant place of existence to improperly and transimmanently held in common between all extant places of existence – is fundamentally a process of *différance*. What becomes endlessly deferred is the unrequited question of the sense of existence, given that it is neither properly absent nor present, but improperly held in-between, in the internal *spacing* of a world-held-in-common.

This question of “the sense of the world” (Nancy 1997) becomes important following the collapse of subjectivity and the end of deconstructionism. What is still very much alive beyond thought is our sharing of an improper commons of the world composed of singular-plural points (places, perspectives, positions, bodies) and relations (spacings, distances, proximities, gatherings, divisions, intervals, sense, communication). The issue comes down to no more and no less than one of rethinking how this dis/unity of co-existence takes place and assembles together into a collectivity. It begs a question about the nature of existence in its most common form (‘Being’). How can we make sense of this Being that we are in the absence of any absolute standard for properly

grasping its inherent spatiality of substantial differences? How can we make sense of this open commons of existence; this expansive topos of communal non-property and improper relations to which we are exposed and through which we are composed (Kate and Nancy 2011)?

Spacing out existence

In contrast to an ontology of existence premised on the proper standard of subjectivity, Heidegger proposes an alternative ontology of existence premised on the improper standard of Being. As discussed earlier, the novelty of Heidegger's innovation is in the way he infinitely defers the question of the substance, or essence, of Being into a question of its extension, or non-essence, relative to the rest of Being. In this way, Heidegger essentially succeeds in formulating an ontological framework of internal co-dependency⁸ in which singular instances of existence (*Dasein*) are derived from a more general, improper and common condition of Being (*Sein*). In other words, the ontological framework that Heidegger proposes essentially operates according to a fashion of thought that runs counter to those based on the standard of subjectivity. What comes first in the syntax of Heidegger's ontology – what fulfills the category of the “subjectum” in thought, if you will – is not a privileged, topic property or a determinate point of view,

⁸ Perhaps a handy visualization for imagining this ontological structure is a suspension bridge or a stone arch in which the ‘being’ of the composition is equally shared out among its singular-plural constituent parts. In these structures of internal co-dependency, the substantial support is shared/shared out among itself, rather than being derived from some other underlying or outside foundation. This ontological structure is characterized by the non-dialectical qualities of sharing (togetherness, mutual support) *and* division (sharing out, distribution) (see Nancy 2000).

but rather a common, atopic extension, or spacing, of undifferentiated Being-a-world which encompasses many *possibilities* for being.

In the context of an historical trajectory of thought, then, what Heidegger's thinking ultimately proposes is an ontological unworking of the subject that results in the de-privileging of its prior anteriority in time and of its sovereign immunity in space. With this erasure, Heidegger's ontology does not so much destroy the underlying essence, or the material basis, for subjective experience so much as it spatially defers the 'grounds' for this experience out into the improper commons, or ecstatic medium, of the world. In other words, this way of thinking does not eliminate possibilities for subjective experience so much as it displaces its essence out into a shared space of common, undetermined Being (*Sein*). This simple but grand deferral of proper essence into an improper medium of (co)existence is arguably the singularly most important contribution made by Heidegger to social thought. This unworking marks the opening of a new and inherently spatial problematic of coexistence which is arguably just now coming into full bloom in social thought some eighty years later. Indeed, Nancy (2008b) has remarked that "from *Being and Time* onward, it becomes noticeable how *co-existence* constitutes an *experimentum crucis* for our thinking" (p. 4, emphases in original).

Being-in-the-world and Dasein

If Being is meant to refer to all of existence, which is to say the existence we all share by way of our internal, co-dependent extension, then this absolute Being is, ultimately, properly impossible in thought. This is because, assuming one *could* properly

grasp the entirety of Being in thought, the (divine) ‘subject’ of this thought-object would, by necessity, have to be independently located outside of Being in order to apprehend it in its entirety. Simply put, a proper thought of the world of Being requires an impossible, heavenly perspective that no one could ever attain on account of our mortal emplacement *within* the world (Nancy 2005b). The absolute of Being (coexistence, the world) becomes absolutely excessive to thought, even though it is *the* concrete foundation for everything that materially exists, including thought itself. In such a way, the foundation for everything that properly exists (as thought) becomes, somewhat paradoxically, the singular thing that is most in-common *and* most inappropriate: the Being of the world. Unlike an ontology of subjectivity, in which properties of the world are founded upon a proper standard of identity, Heidegger’s ontology of Being is essentially premised upon an improper standard, or ‘quasi-standard’ (Latour 2005), of Being-in-common. This Being-in-common might be considered our ‘quasi’ or ‘not quite’ standard for thinking the world precisely because it is a *common sense* in which all of existence improperly shares, by way of its corporeality, yet which none of existence rightly possesses or singularly apprehends. This concrete impossibility of our Being-a-world becomes the unattainable foundation, or a ‘groundless ground,’ for everything that properly exists in Heidegger’s ontology. The most proper always arises from the most improper.

What proceeds in thought from this improper foundation of Being are not categorical certainties about an extant ‘being’ in the ‘world,’ in terms of their proper differentiation. Rather what follows are grounded but indeterminate *possibilities* for

being-in-the-world, in terms of the latter being an eventful “unitary phenomenon” through which existential being-in (*In-sein*) takes place (Heidegger 1962, p. 78). Through this initial move from an atopic extension of Being to a topic (taking) place of being-in, Heidegger essentially begins to formulate an alternative ontology of existence from *without* the construct of subjectivity but *within* the groundless ground of our being-in-common.⁹ Within this formative construction of thought, being-in-the-world is only ever a possibility because its phenomenal unity has not yet been properly differentiated into categories of subject/object, self/other, or interiority/exteriority. In the whole but fleeting event of space-time that being-in-the-world represents, there are always multiple ways for Being to come into being. This contingency is certainly not because the world is in any way arbitrary, deficient, imperfect, broken or lacking definite essence, but rather because our capabilities for *worlding* the world through proper thought possesses all of these qualities (Descola 2010a).

Within this alternative ‘chrono-topology’ of thought that Heidegger formulates, being-in-the-world thus becomes established as a localized and materially grounded “pre-ontological” site, or topos, in which universal Being (the ‘global’) singularly takes place, or comes into being, through ecstatic and reversible processes of proximal “co-determination” (Heidegger 1962, p.153). This singular locality of Being, represented by

⁹ This ‘outside-within’ foundation of thought is often referred to in the Spinozan-Deleuzian tradition as “radical immanence.” Alternatively, this is also what Bataille (1988) seems to refer to as “inner experience,” which he describes as “not the subject isolating itself from the world, but a place of communication, of fusion of the subject and object” (p. 9). The latter definition of this space in terms of it being a place of communication links up to larger discourse about community and public space that can be traced across Continental philosophy (see Esposito 2010; Vandeputte and Devisch 2011).

the taking place of being-in-the-world, is, however, still not yet a defined property of some extant being or entity. Rather this topic locality indicates a still unresolved and undefined areal proximity, local commons, or public space which is not properly “mine” or “another’s” but simply improperly “there” where (co)existence takes place. In this way, being-in-the-world is not so much a determinate position in space as it is an indeterminate *opening of space* – an eventful clearing – through which “the world wells up each time anew” (Vandeputte and Devisch 2011). This absolute location of “being there” is what Heidegger famously names *Dasein*. *Dasein* is in every instance this atmosphere of immanent extensivity; an embodied milieu in which existence *co-*determinately takes place.

However, that *Dasein* is ‘atmospheric’ does not mean that it is in any way detached from the here and now of singularly embodied existence. Rather *Dasein* marks the auto-substantial or “self-forming” place in which existence singularly takes place for and as itself. This is the grounded yet areal *chora* (Entrikin 1991; Olwig 2011b) in which singular existence qua *Dasein* always discovers its ownmost possibilities and, ultimately “chooses” itself. In this way, *Dasein* represents not only a spatial extension of Being, but also a temporal extension of determinate becoming, through arbitrations of ‘sameness’ and ‘otherness,’ which take place within this indeterminate locality of Being. Alluding to *Dasein* in terms of this relation between an original field of possibilities and a subsequent worlding of proper boundaries between things, Heidegger not so subtly hints at the arbitrary, imperfect and shaky ‘ground’ for negotiating these boundaries. Due to the

many possible ways for Dasein to properly become, there is essentially never a sense of certainty in having properly grasped, or “won,” the substantial essence of one’s own existence. Speaking of this “decision” that Dasein has to make about its ownmost essence, Heidegger poetically remarks that “because Dasein is in each case essentially its own possibility, it *can*, in its very Being, ‘choose’ itself and win itself; it can also lose itself and never win itself; or only ‘seem’ to do so” (Heidegger 1962, p. 68). In this passage, Heidegger essentially uncouples the notion of proper self-possession (identity) as an inalienable, stable and certain foundation. By uncoupling the certainty of the foundational ontic-ontological ground of and for identity, Heidegger exposes a truth about the elusiveness of a proper grip on one’s own place of being-in-the-world.

Unlike the perfectly coinciding structure of identity implied by “subjectivity,” with Dasein there is always implied an imperfectly contingent structure of ontic-ontological *différance*, to borrow from Derrida’s vocabulary. The essence of Dasein is always just slightly decentered and deferred in the ecstatic sense that it is always proximally and marginally “mine” without ever being inherently and essentially “me.” Heidegger carefully navigates this slight *différance* as follows:

[I]n each case Dasein is mine to be in one way or another. Dasein has always made some sort of decision as to the way in which it is in each case mine [je meines]. That entity which in its Being has this very Being as an issue, comports itself towards its Being as its ownmost possibility. In each case Dasein *is* its possibility and it ‘has’ this possibility, but not just as a property [eigenschaftlich], as something present-at-hand would (Heidegger 1962, p. 68).

Due to this structure of ecstatic *différance*, Dasein becomes established not as a self-assured property of identity, but as an extensive relation of spacing, or a field of concern,

which is always somehow more-than and otherwise-than what is determined to be properly “me.”

In this way, Dasein is not so much an essence of identity, as it is an essential relation of difference which precedes in time and exceeds in space the formative, ontological decisions I make about who, what, where and how “I am” vis-à-vis the rest of the world. Heidegger arrives at this (co)existential *excess* within Dasein, as both an areal space and a temporal process of self-determination, through reasoning that:

The assertion that it is I who in each case Dasein is, is ontically obvious; but this must not mislead us into supposing that the route for an ontological Interpretation of what is ‘given’ in this way has thus been unmistakably prescribed. Indeed it remains questionable whether even the mere ontical content of the above assertion does proper justice to the stock of phenomena belonging to everyday Dasein. It could be that the ‘who’ of everyday Dasein just is *not* the ‘I myself’ (Heidegger 1962, p. 150).

Here Heidegger explicitly challenges the premise of ontic subjectivity, or proper immanence, in which that which is most intimately and immediately given is uncritically assumed to be one’s own substantial essence. Instead, Heidegger proposes that perhaps what is most intimately and immediately ‘given’ is not identity but rather otherness:

The Others who are thus ‘encountered’ in a ready-to-hand, environmental context of equipment, are not somehow added on in thought to some Thing which is proximally just present-at-hand; such ‘Things’ are encountered from out of the world in which they are ready-to-hand for Others – a world which is always mine too in advance (Heidegger 1962, p. 154).

Reversing the teleological narrative of subjectivity, in which proper differences arise from a known standard of identity, Heidegger posits an ‘Other’ narrative in which *possibilities* (and *only* possibilities) for proper identity/difference arise from an always prior, undifferentiated space of (co)existential Being.

However, what is critically important to note here is that this ‘Otherness’ to which Heidegger refers is not a dialectical category relative to an opposing category of ‘Sameness.’ In the end, this dialectic of categorical difference would do nothing more than reinscribe the entrenched structure and the inherent problems of subjective thought. Rather, what Heidegger intends to signify through this terminology of ‘Otherness’ is a common (or “average”¹⁰) condition of *radical otherness* (decenteredness, *différance*, non-possession) vis-à-vis the shared, ontic foundation of Being-in-common. In this way, Heidegger’s ‘Otherness’ does not refer to that which is categorically most alien, but rather to that which is existentially most common, given and immanent to the shared Being of (co)existence. This ‘Otherness’ is precisely the groundless ground of the world we all share; a Being-in-common which is impossibly anterior, ulterior and excessive to proper thought. We ourselves, as the material singularity of a world-held-together, are this radical otherness which we all share in common, one to another. Affirming the in-common quality of this radical otherness, Heidegger writes:

By ‘Others’ we do not mean everyone else but me – those over against whom the ‘I’ stands out. They are rather those from whom, for the most part, one does *not* distinguish oneself – those among whom one is too. This Being-there-too [*Auch-da-sein*] with them does not have the ontological character of a Being-present-at-hand along-‘with’ them within a world. This ‘with’ is something of the character of Dasein; the ‘too’ means a sameness of Being as circumspectively concerned Being-in-the-world. ‘With’ and ‘too’ are to be understood *existentially*, not categorically (Heidegger 1962, pp. 154-155).

This is essentially an argument in support of the enterprise of non-representational

¹⁰ This is Heidegger’s chosen term [*durchschnittlich*] for denoting the common, ordinary, unprivileged and unexceptional nature of being-in-the-world, which sharply contrasts with the inherent privileges granted to subjectivity. This particular facet of ‘commonality’ connotes a social standing of humble, modest origins, which Heidegger notoriously cultivates into a populist, nationalistic discourse of the Volk. Whereas Heidegger regrettably chose to associate this sense of humble origins with a politics of totalitarianism, it has since been rightfully redirected in political philosophy towards more inclusive and democratic notions of equality, fraternity and liberty (*see*: Nancy 1993, chapters 4 and 7).

geographies, albeit made nearly a century prior. As with non-representational theories, the emphasis here becomes thinking the space in-between proper (“representational”) and improper (“non-representational”) modes of being with the world.

Within the corpus of Heidegger’s thought, the extensivity of Dasein ‘fills’ this interval of space-in-between, touching upon both the proper and improper limits of (co)existence. Dasein is always improperly mine (proximity in distance) but never properly me (distance in proximity). Dasein is, in other words, a *good* spatial-ontological alternative to subjectivity, which has for too long shut out the improper spaces of experience from the purview of social and geographical thought. Dasein is ontically ‘me’ in the sense that it *is* the existential, material basis for all that ‘I am’ properly and ontologically. However this ontic foundation “there” (*da*) to which the ‘I’ refers is never properly ‘me’ alone. This paradox of Dasein’s differential relation to itself creates a non-dialectical foundation for thought in which the ontic informs the ontological, but the ontological cannot properly return, or trace back, to fully comprehend its own ontic, or material, foundation. In essence, then, the so-called ‘identity’ of the ‘I’ of Dasein is founded on the non-identity of its own improper origin of being-held-in-common with others. Heidegger expresses this differential structure of Dasein in terms of an extensive spatiality:

[E]ven when Dasein explicitly addresses itself as ‘I here’, this locative personal designation must be understood in terms of Dasein’s existential spatiality. ... [L]ocative adverbs have a relationship to the ‘I’ *qua* Dasein. The ‘here’ and the ‘there’ and the ‘yonder’ are primarily not mere ways of designating the location of entities present-at-hand within-the-world at positions in space; they are rather characteristics of Dasein’s primordial spatiality (Heidegger 1962, pp.155-156).

Ultimately, this extensive spatiality of Dasein redirects us back to the notion of radical otherness discussed above. In both instances, what is essentially being traced out in Heidegger's thought is an understanding of Dasein as not merely existentially "Being there" but, more radically, as *co-existentially* "Being-*with* there."

Dasein as Mitdasein

Although this improper, co-existential quality of Being-*with* (*Mitsein*) is not something that Heidegger discusses at length in the corpus of his writing, it is nonetheless absolutely essential to Heidegger's analysis of Being, and, perhaps more importantly, absolutely relevant to the challenges we face in *worlding* existence in a post-subjectivist, post-deconstructive and more-than-representational epoch of social thought. Regarding both the puzzling under-development of *co-existential with-ness* in Heidegger's writings, as well as its value to Heidegger's analysis, Nancy (2008b) remarks that:

It is therefore all the more noticeable that Heidegger never attempted a specific examination of that which had at first been undertaken in the terms of *Mitdasein* and *Miteinandersein* ('Being-with-one-another'), since the *with* had been declared essential to the existent's essence (an assertion that nothing in the development of the work can lead us to believe has been forgotten or minimized: Heidegger has never stopped thinking in a collective or common dimension and nothing in his thinking even approaches solipsism) (p. 5).

Regardless of Heidegger's reasons for not better developing this essential dimension of his analysis – reasons for which we will never really know, and which are, in any case, beyond the scope of this short chapter – what is certain is that this co-existential quality of *with-ness* is explicitly affirmed by Heidegger in Section 26 of *Being and Time*.

Continuing his thought about the 'with' quality of Being-there-too (*Auch-da-sein*) in radical otherness, which I discussed above, Heidegger writes:

By reason of this *with-like* [*mithaften*] Being-in-the-world, the world is always the one that I share with Others. The world of Dasein is a *with-world* [*Mitwelt*]. Being-in is *Being-with* Others. Their Being-in-themselves within-the-world is *Dasein-with* [*Mitdasein*] (Heidegger 1962, p. 155).

Here Heidegger directs thought towards an outside commons of coexistence – our sharing and composing a world – that is fundamentally the grounds for “being there” in a properly existential sense. This dovetails perfectly with Heidegger’s strategy for deferring the question of Being’s essence into a question of its extension. According to this radically co-existential ontology, experience does not arise independently from within one’s own substance of being, as the story goes with subjectivity. Rather, it arises co-dependently from within a radically shared extension of substantial outsideness-, spacing-, or difference-in-common.

In a very real way, the bare materiality of our sharing-in-common, captured by Heidegger in the global sense of *Mitsein* (Being-with), and in the local sense of *Mitdasein* (Being-with there), foretells of the telos of the entire arch of deconstructive thought that was to follow. Deconstruction has been a contentious and convoluted journey toward this most basic question/problem of our material being-together as a world of differences. How do we make sense of the unbreakable bond of our being-together, which is at once absolutely concrete *and* impenetrable (Blanchot 1988; Esposito 2010; Nancy 1992, 1997, 2003a)? This bond is our ‘binding contract’ that holds us together; a bond whose essence cannot be denied, even though it can neither be definitively affirmed. In this way, this bond is really a “double bind” in which the *sense* of our being-together is impossible for us to affirm in thought, yet impossible for us to avoid in practice (Nancy 1997).

What this “double bind” of coexistence demands are new sensitivities, languages and ontologies of responsibility in which “subjective” existence comes after and through – but not before – the radical Otherness of our being-in-common (Raffoul 2009). In this ontology of responsibility, “subjective” experience becomes properly thought in the secondary, non-privileged position of the “objectum.” According to this logic of responsibility, the problem with “subjectivity” as a descriptor for proper selfhood is precisely one of syntax and semantics, not substance. Surely we properly exist as auto-relational selves and others properly exist as auto-relational selves in their own rights; however these proper modes of self-reflexive being always arise in response to a prior condition of Being-with. Thinking this absolute condition of Being-in-common, which serves as the premise for an ethos of responsibility, requires an ontology different from subjectivity:

We are challenged to think this pre-ethical condition without deriving it from a subject, whether individual or collective. Advancing beyond any notion of intersubjectivity, we can only derive the subject from the in-common, not the reverse (Kate and Nancy 2010, p. 38).

Similar to this primordial notion of commonality, Sloterdijk (2011) describes an elemental union of substantial difference in terms of a “correlative duality,” or a “dyadic union.” Describing this indivisible pairing of togetherness, he writes: “The primary pair floats in an atmospheric biunity, mutual referentiality and intertwined freedom from which neither of the primal partners can be removed without cancelling the total relationship” (Sloterdijk 2011, pp. 42-43). Appropriately, the challenge here is finding new forms of intelligence for sensing and thinking the very real sense of substantial identity and substantial differences within this “total relationship” without the inalienable

privilege and immunity implied by “subjectivity.” The analytic of *Mitdasein*, as I have outlined it here, offers one appropriate possibility for thinking the space of the in-common.

Conclusion

What the term *Mitdasein* has to offer ‘geographers of the social’ – including those who approach the world’s material complexity with a humanistic ethos of care and compassion for human otherness – is not so much a concept that can be added to existing frameworks for how Being composes itself as a common world. Rather, what it offers is a pathway for accessing an alternative cosmology in which the in-betweenness and (con)fusion of *relations* are the true ‘grounds’ for experience. In this alternative imaginary of the world, subjectivity is not a firm, autonomous and well-defined *place* of experience; if anything it is an intermedial but finite predicament of tenuously being composed through confusion and across extensions of (material) sense that exceed the limits of (ideal) sense. *Mitdasein* offers a way to reinterpret the certainties of subjectivity – as the foundational bedrock for objective constructions of the world – into an uncertain labor and contingent process of responsibility for improperly being comingled and confused with materialities of otherness.

In the way that *Mitdasein* signals a turn toward Eastern philosophies premised upon the ‘starting point’ that experience is collectively negotiated, not individually authorized, perhaps the term serves best as a mantra for meditations about and mediations with the non-representational and atmospheric senses of Being that are within our

capacity to feel but beyond our capacity to fully grasp. These are the diffuse, improper senses of being-in-the-world and relations of being-together that do not quite fit into conventional styles and categories of thought. As such, they require new sensibilities, intelligences and accounts that are more mindful and considerate of different and otherwise possibilities for how both local worlds as well as the globalized world are materially composed.

These common spaces of possibility mark the potential for new kinds of work in human geography that more explicitly engage with the improper, in-between and radically other spaces of coexistence. On a very deep level, this dissertation is about worlding improper commons of sense across which differences are shared and commonalities shared out in ways that exceed not only representation, but ultimately appropriation. What thinking in terms of intermediary spacings of radical otherness suggests is that our lives are extensible worlds beyond measure in which we not only come into contact with existent others, but also space out into (co)existential otherness.

Adequately responding to our material conditions of *Mitdasein* means that human geographers must not only concern themselves with “man’s place in the world” [sic] but more fully with the more basic controversies about how the entire framework of the world itself becomes arranged, composed and related together in thought. In response to this bigger question about the integrity of the world itself, I propose that human geographers more fully embrace questions of *worlding*.¹¹ Drawing from a diverse group

¹¹ I am indebted to Katie Stewart for teaching a thought-provoking graduate seminar entitled “Worlding.” Although we never actually defined what this idea means – and this was likely intentional – this seminar

theorists who have written in this arena of thought (Descola 2010a; Heidegger 1985; Oosterling and Ziarek 2011; Stewart 2011; Tresch 2005; Tsing 2010; Wenthe 2007; Zhan 2012), worlding as I imagine it is a speculative practice of *spatial composition* that would seek to account for how senses and relations are configured, composed, shared and shared out across the internal extensions of our world. Worlding is about composing possibilities for this impenetrably universal question of how we are concretely together as a “collective complexity” (Wenthe 2007). As Kate and Nancy (2011) convey, worlding is about engaging with the intermedialities of sense that compose a world:

Being *inter* one another as a formal designation of the condition of intermediality we nowadays live in, means: making sense. However, this ‘sense’ is not a vector heading toward the epiphany of a meaning but the circulation of proximity in distance and of distance in proximity: the constant ‘rebound’ of ever on-going sense-events by which a world makes a world (p. 41).

Given the universality of this question to which it seeks to respond, worlding is a speculative practice of spatial composition that would apply to all ‘scales’ of life: from the most intimate spaces of one’s own being, to the most global spaces of social, political and economic life. In every instance, though, worlding is an outreach of responsibility that seeks to better account for the internally marginal, improper, and non-representational spaces of our being together.

In this way, worlding implies a thoughtful and practical engagement with the impossible whole or universal of our differences-in-common. Like Latour’s (2010) practice of “compositionism,” worlding “takes up the task of building a common world” with the “certainty that this common world has to be built from utterly heterogeneous

was transformative in the way it elevated descriptive writing to a practice for ‘worlding’ the non-representational and affective dimensions of experience that all-too-often get left out of conventional accounts of the world.

parts that will never make a whole, but at best a fragile, revisable, and diverse composite material” (p. 474). What is absolutely critical to practices of worlding is an ontological commitment to ways of sensing, thinking and relating to the wholes of existence *that we are* in ways that are mindful of its unattainable reality. Because of this, practices of worlding are intended to be risky, bold and provisional experiments in relational *ontogenesis* (Massumi 2002) that will, at some point, fail to live up to the improper reality of existence as radically common and other (Harrison 2007b).

Worlding is about attempts to make new breakthroughs into the “exscribed” (Nancy 1990) spaces of the in-common that are radically outside of proper structures, categories and relations of thought, yet which are materially common and radically immanent to worldly existence. It is about probing the improper, intermediary spaces of existence outside of thought; spaces that one is always improperly *with-* in a non-representational sense of embodied co-presence; yet also always properly without in a formal, appropriative sense. Worlding is a kind of descriptive outreach that creatively speculates about, and strives to ethically and politically account for, material possibilities for our being together as a co-extensive world. It is an imperfect practice of speculative determination that *responds* to Being’s radical otherness in which we participate in the flesh. Worlding is about becoming attuned to this outside space of shared immanence that is radically present with and grounded in our differences:

What is happening is that the immense coexistence of things and people, of beings (in short, the world), has begun to pull away from the representation of a destiny (from an arrangement, an Idea, a kingdom of ends), has started to matter in and of itself, to refer to and network with itself; in short, it has started to comprise a co-existence. The sense of the world no longer lies outside of it; in it, it is its proximity and strangeness, each one infinite (Nancy 2003b, p. 305).

Worlding is attending to this common space of radical otherness that we are to ourselves,
one to another.

Chapter Four

Weak Humanism

“Is there a humanity of human beings that can be distinguished and separated from human beings’ biological humanity” (Agamben 1999, p. 55)?

“Humanity cannot be taken as a given; it is something we have continually to work at” (Ingold 2010, p. 300).

Introduction

In this chapter I argue for the revival of a humanistic ethos in geography following the ‘relational turn’ toward the ways that life is composed across pluralities of hybrid, distributed and fluid socio-material relations. Within geography one of the primary ways that this turn has manifest itself is as a movement away from anthropocentric and subjective accounts of the world and towards new social geographies whose accounts are decidedly decentered, non-idealistic and radically materialist. This relational turn has quite literally revitalized and revolutionized the discipline of geography. It has introduced new vitalities into the purview of geography; and it has been nothing short of revolutionary for inaugurating a radically social mode of geography that transcends the human/physical binary (*e.g.* Whatmore 2002).

Along with non-representational theory and actor-network theory, a posthumanist school of thought has emerged within this relational turn to challenge anthropocentric accounts of the world and to remove “the human and *Homo sapiens* from any particularly privileged position in relation to matters of meaning, information and cognition” (Wolfe 2010, p. xii). Without a doubt, posthumanism has provoked progress in ‘Human Geography’ by critically problematizing reductive notions of human subjectivity, human

agency and human essence; and by advocating for non-subjective, material-based inquiries into the *ecologies* of co-existence and distributed experience. In this regard, the posthumanist school should be credited as one of the main contributors to a ‘post-subjective’ discourse in geography and the social sciences more generally; a discourse to which I sought to contribute in the previous chapter through an in-depth exposition of Heidegger’s analytic of *Mitdasein*.

While posthumanist styles of thought should be embraced for their *ontological* contributions toward more critically non-subjective and thoroughly materialist accounts of the world, I argue that they also threaten to create an ethical deficit in geography’s collective capacity to reach out to human others through sensibilities of care, solidarity and compassion that are distinctly humanistic. Progress in geography *does* consist of abandoning outdated ontological modes of thought as new frameworks come along that allow geographers to better account for the world’s material complexities. To make intellectual progress, I argue that geographers must advance beyond the uncritical ideals of human essence and autonomous subjectivity that are frequently associated with the humanistic perspective in geography.

However, progress *does not* happen if we abandon wholesale the humanistic perspective. This is because, beyond espousing a particular ontological point of view – which is, in any case, arguably more existential and phenomenological than subjective¹² –

¹² While humanistic geography is often dismissed as an uncritically subjectivist perspective – and, admittedly, was often driven in this direction by a faction within humanistic geography – it is also possible to reconstruct a more nuanced existential-cum-phenomenological foundation for the humanistic perspective in geography. Indeed, referring to the works of Tuan, Buttimer and Relph, Entrikin (1976) states that “the

the humanistic perspective espouses a uniquely ethical agenda for striving to better understand the *commonalities of experience* that constitute the human condition of being-in-the-world. We gain nothing by abandoning the ethical project of a humanistic style of geography which tries “to gain an insight into the worlds of other people in other places” (Cloke, *et al.*, 1991, p. 92), and “attempts to unravel the nature of being-in-the-world” (Pocock 1983, p. 357) *despite* the impossibility of ever fully achieving these idealistic goals. If ethics refers to situations in which we must act in the absence of a solid foundation for action, then the humanistic perspective should be rightly regarded (and proudly reclaimed) as an ethical commitment to that diffuse but certain sense of boundedness, and that endless potential for better ways of being-together in community, that we call humanity.

Following the relational turn, the humanistic perspective in geography should be about responding to the *call* – as an ethical *event* of humanity that implies a burden of responsibility – and not the caller. Humanistic geography must learn to listen amidst a world of more-than-human entanglements to and for the *voice of humanity* – a material but intangible reverberation that has the potential to communicate hope, meaning and compassion to another – despite an imperfect knowledge about what ‘the human’ objectively and substantively *is* in an ontic sense. In this sense, I argue that humanistic geography can and should thrive as a speculative and ethical style of inquiry into the

philosophy which underlies their humanistic approach is existential phenomenology” (p. 615). Similarly, Pocock (1983) outrightly defines humanistic geography as “geographical work of a phenomenological or existential nature” (p. 355). See also Relph (1985), Samuels (1978), Seamon and Mugerauer (1985), and Tuan (1979), for similar interpretations of humanistic geography that do not rely on a subjectivist point of view.

possibilities for and potentials of better kinds of human relations in a world composed of more-than-human entanglements.

In this chapter I want to work towards reclaiming the humanistic perspective in geography by attending to both the ontological and ethical components of this geographical perspective. In terms of the former component, and building on the general ideas presented in the previous chapter, I argue for a redefinition of humanity that divorces complex existential questions about being human – or, what the humanistic geographer Marwyn Samuels (1978) so elegantly called our “situational contingency” – from reductive ontological frameworks in which the human condition is automatically conflated with qualities of subjectivity and sovereign agency. By divorcing qualities of humanity from properties of subjectivity, I seek to speculatively redefine the human in terms of a ‘weak’ agency, or limited capacity, of responsibility. This ‘weak’ understanding of human-beingness stands in sharp contrast to the more liberal notions of humanity as being a fountain of ‘strong’ agency, originary intentions and unlimited potential. I shall argue that to be human is to find oneself entangled in worldly relations and material predicaments beyond one’s limited capacity to understand or control. To be human is to find oneself perpetually emplaced within eventful, *ethical* predicaments of encounter and entanglement that demand we act – that we answer for ourselves and that we respond to the presence of others – despite lacking the perfect knowledge and resources for how to properly do so.

In the following section, I turn to more fully consider the theoretical turn in geography, and the social sciences more generally, toward ontologically rigorous paradigms of thought that engage with how singular experiences, organisms and processes are composed across a pluralities of relations that are distributed, heterogeneous, hybrid, material and affective in nature. Playing upon Latour's (2005) label for this relational approach in the broader context of the social sciences (which he calls the "sociology of associations") in this next section I outline and contextualize what I call the new "geographies of association" that have come into formation as a result of the relational turn in social theory. In the subsequent sections, I turn to consider non-relational experiences, such as suffering, which do not readily 'show up' in relational accounts of the world that emphasize flow, associability and agency over impasse, adynamia and breakdown. Drawing heavily on the work of British geographer Paul Harrison, I argue that human geographers should continue to cultivate other ways of thinking beyond the relational paradigm in order to account for the non-relational. After briefly considering the reduced stature of humanism in contemporary geography, I turn toward erecting what I call a 'weak humanistic' perspective. I argue that this postmetaphysical humanistic perspective offers a valid approach for exploring the non-relational dimensions of the human condition of being-in-the-world in ways that diverge from but do not contradict the relational paradigm. Rather than framing humanity in the strong, liberal image of intentionality, original agency and subjective rationality, this weak humanistic perspective structures humanity as a finite and limited responsibility to

the world's improper material excess. In conclusion I argue for a revitalization of a humanistic ethos in geography that aspires to the ideals of liberation, solidarity, and compassion while also being mindful of our limited human, all too human, capacities to relate to the non-relational in others. Weak humanism is a labor to reach out to human and non-human forms of otherness with an ethos of compassion, despite our fundamental inability to fully achieve the ideals to which humanism aspires.

A brief tour through the new geographies of association

Over the past decade geography, in concert with the virtually all of the social sciences, has positively embraced relational ontologies of materiality, complexity, vitalism and hybridity in order to animate new geographies of the social. Indeed, in recent years commentators have variously remarked upon this momentous paradigmatic shift as a 'materialist return' (Anderson and Wylie 2009), a 'relational turn' (Harrison 2007a), and a 'relational-materialist manifesto' (Lorimer 2008) that has unsettled the internal divisions of human and physical geography. If the 1990s were about deconstructing static identities and social categories, this most recent decade has been about doing away with static forms and fixed identities altogether. Following Whatmore's (2002) landmark thesis on 'hybrid geographies,' and following the provocative insights of actor-network theory (Latour 2005), it would seem appropriate speak of a new mandate for decidedly *social* geographies.

Indeed, this mandate for new 'geographies of association', to refashion Latour's relationally-emphatic term, can be seen across multiple strands of thought in geography;

strands that are closely aligned through a shared commitment to new standards of material ecology. These strands of thought include posthumanism, actor-network theory, relational theories of space, theories of affect, and non-representational theories. For instance, regarding the overarching agenda of the latter, a distinctively homegrown product of geography, Anderson and Harrison (2010b) contend that:

If one single thing can be said to characterize non-representational work in Human Geography over the past 15 years it is the attempt to invent new ways of addressing fundamental social scientific issues and, at the same time, displacing many of these issues into new areas and problems. In doing so we believe that it has multiplied 'signs of existence', helping to introduce all kinds of new actors, forces and entities into geographic accounts and, at the same time, aiding in the invention of new modes of writing and address and new styles of performing Geographic accounts (p. 2).

The rise of these new geographies of association is premised upon indeterminate interactions, entanglements, and assemblages rather than on fixed orders; and upon open systems of feedback, contamination, and the messiness of our 'becoming with' (Haraway 2008), and our 'throwntogetherness' (Massey 2005), rather than upon closed systems of binary opposition, neat categorization, and determinate forms and beings. With these new geographies of association the emphasis has shifted away from a formal ontology of being (*What is it?*) toward a functional and relational ontogenetics of becoming (*What effects/affects does it perform? How does it work? What might it translate or evolve into?*).

Quite naturally this shift toward relational modes of ontogenesis has been accompanied by radical empirical interests in how human subjectivity is materially distributed among non-human agencies, technologies, and intelligences (Hayles 1999; Latour 2005; Whatmore 2002), extensible beyond locally embodied space (Adams 2005),

and emergent through material-affective interactions that precede and exceed subjective appropriation (Anderson and Wylie 2009; Thrift 2008). These re-imaginings of subjective agency as contaminated and dispersed amalgamations have thoroughly – and positively – undermined the essentialist notions of the sovereign human(ist) subject as thoroughly self-contained and self-determinate. Arising to fill this void in new geographical accounts of the social has been a variety of more-than-human assemblages and posthumanist discourses which, despite their divergent tacks, all aim to unsettle habitual ways of thinking about agency and embodied experience in this expanded socially-relational landscape of geographical thought.

However, while this posthumanist outgrowth of the new geographies of association offer exciting new paths for rethinking subjective experience as a *relational effect* rather than a *constituted agent*, it is equally hindered by a lack of theoretical coherence and clarity. Indeed, despite recent commentaries that have sought to explicate a critical posthumanist agenda in geography, it is still far from certain exactly how this ‘analytical-philosophical position’ (Castree and Nash 2004) is situated in relation to humanist, transhumanist and antihumanist modes of thought (cf. Braun 2004; Castree and Nash 2006; Murdoch 2004). I shall later return to explore, in particular, the uncertain tensions between humanist and posthumanist modes of thought. However, for the moment my point is to emphasize how posthumanist critiques of subjectivity fit into the larger fabric of these new geographies of association. Thus, my concern for how these new geographies risk losing sight of ethically human(ist) matters of concern does not

begin and end with posthumanism, but rather bleeds through into other strands of thought in this radically social fabric.

One of the more unfortunate ways human(ist) matters of concern risk being left behind by new geographies of association is due to the decidedly enthusiastic turn towards a relational ontology of space. In a recent review of relational space, geographer Martin Jones (2009) described this ontology in terms that firmly situate it within the fabric of what I am calling the new geographies of association:

Relational thinking is a paradigmatic departure from the concerns of absolute and relative space, because it dissolves the boundaries between objects and space, and rejects forms of spatial totality. Space does not exist as an entity in and of itself, over and above material objects and their spatiotemporal relations and extensions. In short, objects *are* space, and space *is* objects, and moreover objects can be understood *only* in relation to other objects – with all this being a perpetual becoming of heterogeneous networks and events that connect internal spatiotemporal relations (p. 491).

Relational theories of space as the on-going outcome and ‘stuff’ of relations, and space as open-ended, multiple, dynamic and coeval with time (Massey 2005), have without doubt been one of the greatest achievements in geography in recent decades. To be sure, this move toward thinking space as ontogenetically co-formative *with* relations has literally breathed new life into the concept of space and, as such, the discipline itself. This relational theory of dynamic space (Massey 2005) stands in sharp contrast to static understandings of Cartesian space as a fixed container or a blank page in which the action of life unfolds.

Furthermore, through visions of relational space we can perhaps best glimpse what is at stake politically and ethically in the new geographies of association. I find two primary ethico-political messages here. The first demands a radical reconsideration of on-

going social practices and states of affairs – particularly those that tend to create artificial boundaries of care (i.e. the political borders of nation-states) – in light of our unavoidable ‘throwntogetherness’ within a world composed of complex and uncertain entanglements (Massey 2005; Haraway 2008). This might be summarized as an ethical politics of affect (the capacity to effect and be affected) in a posthumanist world populated by proliferating matters of concern that demand new ways of caring and relating. The second seeks to combat the closure of certainty by affirming how future possibilities for something new are always held out in the still-to-come, or the not-yet (Anderson 2006a). This might be summarized as an ethos of hope or openness toward “the uncertain affective potentiality of the eventful encounter as that from which new ways of going on in the world might emerge” (McCormack 2003, p. 503). These closely related ethico-political imperatives of new geographies of association sparkle with clarity in Massey’s (2005) description of the “productive characteristics” of a relational ontology of space:

[I]ts potential for the happenstance juxtaposition of previously unrelated trajectories, that business of walking round a corner and bumping into an alterity, of having (somehow, and well or badly) to get on with neighbours who have got ‘here’ (this block of flats, this neighborhood, this country – this meeting-up) by different routes from you; your being here together is, in that sense, quite uncoordinated. This is an aspect of the productiveness of spatiality which may enable ‘something new’ to happen (p. 94).

In no way do I wish to blunt these ethico-political imperatives or challenge the ontological rigor of these new geographies of association. Rather, I want to affirm the need for (more) accounts of the world that follow this kind of thinking and relating.

However, I am convinced that a social approach which worlds matters of concern

according to modes of relationality and radical materiality should not become the *only* way we think and care about existence and the world as geographers.

Beyond social matters of concern

Indeed, where in this ordering of life and space is there a place for non-relational concerns of passivity and impasse? What of the absolute failures to relate, to mobilize, to affect, and to make connections? In new geographies of association, what becomes of the inaccessible kinds of solitude and suffering which “[end] up erasing everything that belongs to my social and public persona, everything that makes me externally recognizable and identifiable by others” (Romano 2009, p. 178); yet by being beyond reach “makes it a limit experience where selfhood itself, though holding itself, teeters on the brink of the abyss of its collapse” (ibid, pp. 179-180)? Does not this ‘voiceless cry’¹³ pass all too silently in new geographies of the social (except, see Anderson 2006a; Bissell 2009, 2010; Darling 2010)?

In a rare critique of the relational paradigm in geography, Harrison (2007a) offers a careful assessment that opens up space for non-relational thought without deflating any potential from new geographies of association:

Why does absence seem so very absent from the prospective ‘relational turn’...? It seems to me that in the proliferation of biophilosophy, the unstoppable materialisation of actor networks and constructivist totalisations of the social or the cultural, few have been asking about breaks and gaps, interruptions and intervals, caesuras and tears... Not for a moment would I want to argue against the burgeoning ‘gay science’ of nonrepresentational ‘theory’ and the affirmations of summoning life..., nor do I want to sound as though I disagree with an ethics of affect, with the desire to connect and a ‘fidelity to the event’... Far from it, for how in all good faith could one argue against such prayers and promises, how could one not seek – and at the same time

¹³ “Silence is perhaps a word, a paradoxical word, the silence of the word *silence*, yet surely we feel that it is linked to the cry, the voiceless cry, which breaks with all utterances, which is addressed to no one and which no one receives, the cry that lapses and decries” (Blanchot 1995, p. 51).

understand the necessity of – the taking up of a hopeful and affirmative disposition toward the future...? And yet I wonder in all of this where the concern is – and care – for distance, withdrawal, and disappearance, for, as I understand it, a gay science is inseparable, and only gains sense and significance from a context of tragedy, from the instant of the “loneliest loneliness” and the trial of the “heaviest burden” (p. 592, with quote from Nietzsche 1974).

Indeed, should not the brilliance of relational space consequently alert us to the possibility of its negative: an absent space of faltering existence that never quite reaches the empirical light of day, or attains the positive status of affirmative manifestation?

What of those negative experiences of suffering when life departs without explanation from the steady streams of associability, like blips falling off the radar of accountability?

Where in the currency of relationality is there a way to defer to non-relational ruptures of existential distance; an absolute “space and time of an infinite difference, of an interruption incommensurable with all the attempts at passage, of bridge, of isthmus, of communication, of translation, of trope, and of transfer” (Derrida, unpublished, quoted in Hillis Miller 2007, p. 265)?

This is not to say that relational thought does not account for radical uncertainties, differences, and unforeseeable futures. To be sure, these considerations are central to theories of relational becoming. Rather what I want to consider here, drawing heavily from the work of Paul Harrison, is how relational ontologies have become perhaps “too full” (Harrison 2009) of potential, fluidity and flow to account for the intransient situations of being; predicaments when existence is vulnerable to passivity, withdrawal, failure, flagging, limitation, suffering, and constraints; when things are likely to stagnate, dissolve and dissipate; and when the “potential does not necessarily become an actual” (Jones 2009, p. 493). Indeed, as Harrison (2008) aptly notes “if the world is constantly in

the making it is also always falling away; it is perhaps this necessary corollary which has, for the most part, been missed” (p. 425).

Can we not (re)affirm humanism as one way to care about the intransience of being as a matter of *human* concern? I contend that humanism offers a good approach for addressing the intransient ‘dead ends’ of existential conditions like suffering, confinement and oppression. This is due to humanism’s idealistic ethos which *believes* in our collective human capacity to transcend our shared burdens of suffering, isolation and oppression, despite the many good reasons we have for doubting our transcendent potential and resigning ourselves to the present realities of our burdens. This ethos of idealism is found in humanism’s “laudable aim [of] emancipation, a concern to free humans from onerous and harmful relationships,” (Murdoch 2004, p. 1356). Perhaps no geographer has better extolled this ethical ideal of liberation than Anne Buttimer, who writes that “humanism could be defined as the *cri-du-coeur* (liberation song) of humanity articulated at times and places where some dimensions of thought and/or life has been ignored or suppressed” (1999, p. 106).

While the shift towards more thoroughly materialist accounts of the world is generally a positive development, there is nevertheless a risk that these realist accounts overlook how ideal (human) intentions and purposes still fundamentally matter. As Heidegger (1962) famously argued, *why* and *how* we care about a thing in the first place determines what it becomes in our hands. While our ontologies should not always be tightly bound to human ideals and perspectives, we can neither afford to lose sight of the

fact that we fundamentally rely on human faculties of self-reflection and critical introspection in order to produce intelligent accounts of the world (Cooper 2007; Wolfe 2009, 2010). Idealism is inescapably a part of who we are as humans. After all, the projection of such ideals as the desire for personal respect and admiration are in great part what drive social innovation, including the kinds of intellectual progress in academia that are at stake in our debates over ideas like humanism and posthumanism.

Without eliminating newer social, relational and posthumanist perspectives, I argue that we need a ‘weak’ revival of the humanistic perspective in geography. This retrieval would aim to affirm that existential human experiences continue to live on with powerful implications in the world, regardless of whether or not we choose to explicitly acknowledge them in academic writing. Regardless of whatever we might write, the human continues to thrive in a world that extends beyond our writing. Let us better acknowledge the (material) reality and persistence of human idealism, in which less-than-rational feelings, beliefs, and intuitions often matter more fundamentally than the rational logic of empirical facts.

However, before we can start erecting a weak humanism that would be capable of surviving in the current intellectual climate, it is necessary to address some additional concerns regarding the status of humanism. Here I would argue that, unfortunately, the damage being done to human(ist) matters of concern extends beyond benign neglect. Indeed, I see troubling grounds for arguing that there is an ethos of strategic elimination at work in some posthumanist discourses which seek to crudely define humanism so that

it may be summarily dismissed as an untenable mode of thought. Thus, before I introduce a weak humanism, I find it necessary to rescue humanism as an evolving mode of inquiry from the brink of strategic elimination.

One danger I sense in the direction that the new geographies of association are generally headed is a steady drift away from performances of meaning that resonate with human ideals and experiences of the world. Overall, this distancing away from anthropocentric performances of meaning – in order to more fully embrace posthumanist biophilosophies, hybridities, and material complexities – has been an incredibly creative and constructive enterprise. This is especially true in the context of geography, where an embrace of the vitalistic social turn has undoubtedly made the discipline more relevant to interdisciplinary social theory. However one problem I find in how this turn is playing out, is the degree to which humanism has been crudely mischaracterized in some of the more critical posthumanist discourses in geography; a point that both Murdoch (2004) and Simonsen (2012) have noted in recent articles that have dealt with the status of humanism in contemporary geography.

Indeed, far from simply being overlooked, humanism has all-too-frequently become normatively and strategically redefined as unfashionably out-of-bounds in new geographies of association. In particular I argue that these redefinitions prop up an impoverished ‘straw humanism’ so that this mode of inquiry may be summarily eliminated as an outdated and uncritical way of performing geographical meaning.¹⁴ For

¹⁴ See Pile (1993) for a parallel discussion of an earlier attempt to “murder” humanist geography with structuralist logic, which was mainly perpetrated through Gregory’s (1981) pointed critique.

instance, in an exchange about the future of posthumanism in geography, Badmington (2004) openly celebrates the demise of the humanistic tradition, proclaiming that “it is the best of times, for the present moment is one in which humanism finds itself in a state of crisis more acute than ever” (p. 1345). Shortly thereafter, he crudely condemns humanism to be “an obstacle, an ideology, a myth” (p. 1349) that has for too long impeded the progress of critical thought in the social sciences.

While such anti-humanistic sporting is by no means pervasive in posthumanist discourses, its troubling frequency is persistent enough that it should merit, at the very least, greater critical concern for what political ends these hostile negations of humanism seek to achieve. Given this lamentable state of affairs, I vociferously concur with geographer Johnathan Murdoch’s (2004) observations that “posthumanist critics and commentators have been rather too hasty in jettisoning humanistic perspectives” (p. 1357); and that “crude versions” of humanism clearly are “gaining the upper hand in academic circles where the term ‘humanist’ is more often than not used as a form of intellectual abuse” (p. 1356).

Despite the insistence that the ‘post’ in critical posthumanism signifies a thread of progressive continuity with humanism rather than an antagonistic break from it (cf. Castree and Nash 2006; Wolfe 2010), evidently little to no real effort has been made by critical posthumanists to trace this thread of continuity across the (ever yawning) humanist – posthumanist divide in geography. Indeed, contrary to discursive appeals of inclusiveness, there seems to be a strategic move at work in critical posthumanist

discourses to distance their positions as far away as possible from ‘straw humanism’.

This straw humanism seems to function primarily as a polarizing straw figure, representing everything that the former aspires *not* to be.

Regarding this strategic campaign, I wish to recall what Isabelle Stengers (2007) wrote about how the weapon of materialism was wielded to eliminate philosophical rivals during the notorious ‘science wars’ which tore entire disciplines apart in the 1990s:

[M]y point here is not about what we know, and what we do not know, or refuse to know. My point is that as soon as materialism is identified with eliminativism – with elimination as an achievement in itself, accompanied by the proud opposition between those who believe and those who know – the connection with struggle is lost. It becomes a matter of mere rivalry for a very disputed title: who is the thinking brain of humanity (p. 7).

Like this critique of eliminativism conveys, I am equally concerned with how the humanist – posthumanist relationship has become defined in new geographies of association in the dialectical molds of old/new, regressive/progressive, and wrong/right. My argument is that abusive (mis)treatments of humanism advanced to further the work of posthumanist ‘social’ geographies represent reckless practices of deconstructive violence which affirm new modes of thought only at the expense of invalidating other, still-valid modes of thought. Far from representing intellectual progress, it seems that efforts to eliminate humanism signify a dangerous form of disconnection in which important modalities of existence become framed out of bounds.

How does this ontological marginalization of the human affect our abilities to sympathize with humanity and, more importantly, to respond to the call of human suffering that speaks to us in the world? Do we no longer have the ears to hear the call of the human? What I want to suggest that we need a variety of modalities for measuring

and caring about existence because not all existence is absolutely the same, in terms of being thoroughly material. Existence takes on heterogeneous forms to which we must differently relate. To include a humanist mode of relating to existence, albeit one that adopts a more humble and speculative estimation of the human, only strengthens our collective accounts of the world, our geo-graphies.

Non-eliminativistic basis for divergent modalities of existence

Fundamentally, the argument I want to make is not one that finds faults with radical social modes of thought. Rather, it is to demonstrate the inherent limitations of any singular mode of thought, and to advocate for an embrace of non-eliminativistic divergence in geography. The difference, as I understand it, is not about better and worse ways of attending to worldly concerns, or about having to choose one modality over the other. Rather, it is about non-dialectically affirming divergent modes of performing meaning based on heterogeneous worldviews and perspectives. This idea builds on Stengers's (2007) ethos of non-eliminativistic scholarship, about which she writes that:

The point is not to choose, but to escape. Here this means that practices do not [have to] contradict each other. Rather, they [can] have diverging ways of having things and situations matter. They [will] produce their own lines of divergence as they produce themselves (p. 14; my parenthetics).

My point is to provide not only a foundation for a plurality of non-eliminativistic perspectives in geography; it is also to emphasize how imperative it is that we allow a diversity of modalities for “intelligencing” (Thrift 2008) the world to thrive in geography. Thus, while relational modes of thought represent extremely new and hopeful paths for geography, we cannot afford to allow these new modes to become normative

prescriptions for *the* way geography ought to be performed, closing off other modes of thought in the process.

More pointedly, I am skeptical of the idea that moving ‘beyond’ human(ist) matters of concern is desirable, or even possible, in geography. To this point I have intentionally neglected what is certainly one of the most curious, yet not inconsequential, invocations of humanism in geography during the past decade; one that takes a more thoughtful approach to humanism. This concerns Thrift’s (2008) rather vague insistence that non-representational theories “retain a certain minimal humanism” because, likely sensing that it is being targeted for elimination, “dropping the human subject entirely seems to me to be a step too far” (p. 13). While Thrift does little to explain *why* and *how* humanism should continue to matter in geography, the brief acknowledgement nonetheless admits a place for it to belong in the contemporary theoretical landscape of geography. However, if we are to retain even a ‘minimal humanism’ in geographical theory, we need a better understanding for *why* human(ist) concerns should still matter and *how* it can comport with geographies of the social. This is precisely what I hope to build in the second part of this chapter through a construction of a weak humanism.

Towards a weak humanism

A similar concern for the uncertain status of the human is what recently drew geographer John Wylie (2010) to further reflect on Thrift’s sparse comments regarding humanism’s place in the contemporary theoretical landscape of geography. Set in the larger context of his commentary, in which he criticizes humanism’s “romanticism” yet

also admits an admiration for its “transcendent messages” and “authorial presence,”

Wylie eventually reaches a conclusion that embraces a minimal humanism:

I seem to always find myself in the space between the two citations from Thrift...the space between ‘modes of perception which are not subject based’, and a ‘certain minimal humanism’. I’d like to think that this is a plausible and potentially productive space to be in, perhaps precisely because it is so tense and irresolute. On the one hand, I think that to have argued for the extension of agency, affectivity and sensibility into all manner of non-human and trans-human materialities, processes and emergences is a significant achievement, (and its certainly not one accomplished wholly or even chiefly by non-representational work). On the other, I still wonder about and want to explore the minimal remainder of the self within this array of perceptions and sensibilities – even if this self is something necessarily already lost, bereft, astray, estranged, and haunted (p. 111).

Clearly, it seems, there is still a place for a humanistic ethos in contemporary geography, despite the criticisms that have been raised against it. However, in many ways the world has changed in light of *events* that have fractured illusions of an integral and ‘strong’ human(ism). Thus, if humanism is to have any place in the contemporary theoretical landscape, it must be reconstructed in a way that is symbiotically adapted to the climate of this ‘new world in light of events’. In other words, if we want to accommodate a humanistic perspective premised upon an ethos of responsibility, then we require a new human ontological vehicle to get us to this ethical destination. We also need more than just vague claims that support a ‘certain minimal humanism’; for although these vague claims *are* helpful, they do little to construct what this humanism should look like in the new landscape of geographies of association. In this section, I want to outline what kind of humanism this would be. If ‘strong’ humanism is dead, let us raise a ‘weak’ humanism.

Any reconstruction of humanism in geography must begin with an appreciation for how the world has changed ‘in light of events’ that have unsettled the traditional

metaphysical foundation, particularly with regard to conceptions of subjectivity that were discussed in the previous chapter. According to traditional metaphysics, the subject was regarded as the ‘ontic substratum’ (Romano 2009; Raffoul 2010) for appraising the objectifiable world. Subjectivity was therefore always worthy of perfect rationality, which is to say capable of fully understanding the exterior world without excess or remainder. As a result, the world came to be conceived as lawful and orderly; fully appropriable as an object of proper knowledge; and rationally accountable within an economy of cause and effect.

What seems to unify deconstructionist interventions that challenge conventional metaphysical thought is a critical concern for the *incommensurability* and *irrationality* between: (a) the world as it materially unfolds through events, and (b) the world as it is incompletely appropriated through faculties of perception and cognition, and imperfectly represented through language. This critical concern for the aporetic distance between these two worlds – between the world as it improperly takes place and the world as it is properly understood – is what seems to occupy a central place in post-deconstructive thought; the predominant climate of intellectual thought within which the ‘relational turn’ in the social sciences has occurred.

With regard to this critical concern, any kind of humanism which stands a chance of making it in this post-deconstructive intellectual climate must be able to acclimate to modest and limited conceptions of selfhood and human agency as fundamentally responsive and derivative, not originary and intentional. It must also be able to acclimate

to the primacy of impersonal events, which arrive without cause or reason, to restructure, reconfigure, and, at times, shatter our meaningful human worlds that we fashion and compose out of what is materially afforded to us. In essence, humanism must become derivative and responsive in order to defer to the primacy of impersonal events; what Blanchot (1995) calls the “sovereignty of the accidental” (p. 3). Events are the “impossible which happen” (Anderson and Harrison 2010b). They simply happen to no one in particular, yet in their presentation, their calling and their arrival, they affect irrevocable changes to the lives and worlds of those they touch. In light of events, selfhood becomes a lifelong journey of answering for oneself and searching for oneself in the aftermath of what happens. In light of events, selfhood becomes a transitive “adventure without return” in Romano’s (2009) eventual hermeneutics.

In light of events, (life-)worlds become fragile and contingent clearings of illumination amidst an infinite expanse of darkness. In light of events, we must think *beyond, before, and after* the comfort of dwelling as a static mode of being-at-home-in-the-world. *Beyond* in order to account for the latency of eventualities that ‘fall outside’ dwelling and always threaten to upend it (Harrison 2007b). *Before* in order to depart from the rustic ‘homeliness’ of a humanism premised on being “always already in place, of place, *before* the event of dwelling eventuates” (ibid, p. 634, emphasis in original). And *after* in order to better account for how human actions are fundamentally responses to personalize and socialize the impersonality of events that affect us. By doing so, it becomes imperative to reimagine our lifeworlds not as enclosed biospheres secured by

sovereign human agents, but rather as vulnerable extensions exposed to the pure potentiality of events which exceed prediction, appropriation and comprehension.

In the language of Continental philosophy the eventuation of pure events becomes a stranger that interrupts the holistic integrity of our lifeworlds, as theorist Adriaan Peperzak (1997) evokes below:

[Y]our entering into my dwelling place interrupts the coherence of my economy; you disarrange my order in which all things familiar to me have their proper place, function and time. Your emergence makes holes in the walls of my house. If I could see and treat you as a being amidst other beings ... as an element of the universe unfolding its riches before my mental eye, you would be bereft of everything that justifies me calling you by the pronoun 'you'. You would be a particular part of my realm (p. 66, quoted in Harrison 2007b, p. 639).

This stranger is impersonal like an atmospheric event, like rain, lightning or a capricious wind (Nietzsche 2005; Romano 2009). After a disastrous bolt of lightning strikes our dwelling, there is no 'one' to blame. It just happens, like the miraculous gift of a benevolent rain just happens for a drought-stricken land. This is the capricious and impersonal nature of events.

Existence and being human

In light of events, we must rethink what makes a human *human*. Of course, 'human animals' are corporeal beings materially composed of sensible flesh and vital organs. However, after posthumanism, any possibility that embodiment alone could serve to define our humanity has been appropriately foreclosed. As animal studies have effectively demonstrated, our material corporeality, in itself, is a very poor marker for distinguishing humans from the remainder of the animal kingdom that is also fleshy, vital and capable of affect (Wolfe 2010). Furthermore, as technoscience has compellingly

exhibited, we have always been and continue to become more-than-human ‘extensible’ and ‘distributed’ networks of agency (Adams 2005; Haraway 2008; Hayles 1999; Latour 2005). Thus, substantively, there is no singular essence or property that is definitively and exclusively human.

Given that the human can no longer be the “ultimate ontological *fundamentum*” (Romano 2009, p. 131) if we are to truly defer to the primacy of events, humanity by implication can no longer have any a priori foundation or essence. Half a century ago when Sartre set out to relate his existential philosophy to humanism, he decisively broke with the idea of an essential ‘human nature’ by declaring that “existence precedes essence”:

What do we mean here by ‘existence precedes essence’? We mean that man first exists: he materializes in the world, encounters himself, and only afterwards defines himself. If man as existentialists conceive of him cannot be defined, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself (2007, p. 22).

One idea that comes to light through Sartre’s description of the human is that its being is not a static essential form but rather a transitive becoming of *autopoiesis*, or self-creation. This is reminiscent of what Heidegger meant by Being-in-the-world, which refers not to a static place within a snow globe-like world, but instead to an interactive event of existence in which self and world perpetually *différer* (to) one another in an ongoing process of hermeneutic dis/re/placement and de/re/formation.

Another important idea that begins to come to light is the idea of a fundamental difference between Being and being, or what Levinas (1978) distinguished as existence and existents. While the latter in these pairings refers to individuated *forms* of personal

existence ('my' self), the former refers to the transitive, impersonal and all-encompassing *event* of existence. This distinction is what allows Sartre to claim that the human "encounters himself, and only afterwards defines himself." This distinction also imbues the fact of one's existence with a temporality: an irreducible gap, interval or delay between Being – the pure event of existence – and being – an understanding of one's place and situation within the differing and evolving contexts of Being.

Assembling these ideas, we can appreciate the duality of B/being and the temporality of existence in a passive and transitive sense. Existence is thus existing in an impersonal, biological and material sense of bare life. However, existence – at least for anyone reading this – is also supplementarily *human* in a personal, symbolic, meaningful and spiritual sense. But before we are human in an existent, personal and meaningful sense, we exist in an impersonal, vulnerable and passive sense. The spatio-temporal responsibility of answering for extensive Being from a finite place of existent being-a-part is what we can begin to appreciate as, perhaps, what makes us human. Being human is not something that ontologically *is*; rather the human is a kind of transitive 'effect' (Braun 2004) or 'response' (Harrison 2007b; Romano 2009); one that always comes after the primacy of events. Contrary to the liberal theses of essentialized human nature and subjectivity, we do not exist ahead of events of the world. Rather, we are perpetually 'too late' (Blanchot 1995), always finding ourselves only in the aftermath of what has already happened.

This grappling to find ourselves in the aftermath of impersonal events is crucial to Continental theorist Claude Romano's (2009) construction of human existence in his eventual hermeneutics. Indeed for Romano "selfhood signifies nothing other than the capacity for change, the power to refashion myself, to happen to myself differently, starting from the events that punctuate my adventure" (p. 97). Here, as with Sartre's account of the human, the self is not utterly deprived of agency and will; rather it is simply, but utterly, deprived of its inventive autonomy; its ability to *act*, *think*, or *speak* in an original way. There is a potential for agency and choice; however this potential can only ever take the form of a response to events that have already come to pass. What makes us human is inherently secondary and weak in comparison to the primacy of events.

Importantly in this account of human existence, we do not navigate through events or even undergo events in any active or egoistical sense. Rather, we are delivered by events as they literally throw our finite, existent selves into *being differently* in the transitive, ecstatic sense of existence. Events pass or deliver our existent, egoistical selves to new existential situations or stations in life; to new situations of possibility and limitation for our being-in-the-world. To be sure, this is not to say that existence transcends its material trappings during events. Indeed, an enduring part of us, our fleshiness, is always 'there' from birth until death. This is sometimes excruciatingly evident in the sense that there are times – during instances of intense pain, suffering or shame, for example – when we want more than anything to transcend our corporality and

flee our material predicament being riveted to embodied experience (Levinas 2003; Tuan 1998). Rather, what it means to be passed by events is that in the virtual pass-ion of events our pure, unmediated and *impersonal* existence becomes lost to self-comprehension and self-determination.

Radically, then, according to an eventful ontology of responsibility, we are no longer the sovereign subjects from whom the rest of existence is deduced (I think, therefore x exists). Rather, we are the ‘genitive subjects’¹⁵ of absolute existence (There is, therefore I think *in response*) (Raffoul 2010). Events literally transform our existent selves and our phenomenal worlds into something different and wholly unforeseen each time they arise, or arrive. This unforeseen quality of evential transformations is what is alternatively described as being miraculous and disastrous in that, as both these terms imply, they real-ize the impossible. Events have the potential to open up new and better possibilities for our lives, like the miraculous encounter of “bumping into an alterity” (Massey 2005) who might become our lover, just as they have the potential to disclose more horrific possibilities, like a freak accident that, in a fraction of a second, forever deforms one’s body or takes one’s lover away. Miracles and disasters are imminent and ubiquitous, always latent just beyond and just ahead of our phenomenal horizons of space-time.

In order to survive and continue existing in a personal sense, we must find ourselves in the aftermath by attending to the intermedial rupture between impersonal

¹⁵ This term of Raffoul’s (2010) neatly expresses the idea that subjectivity exists only derivatively, as subject to the absolute power of impersonal events.

existence and personal selfhood. We are always faced with the task of remaking ourselves in the aftermath of events that are unforeseen and unwilled by us. This process of constantly having to find oneself in the *pass-ion* of events is what Romano (2009) calls the *advenant*, a transitive “term for describing the event that is constantly underway of my own advent to myself from the events that happen to me [*m’adveiennent*] and that, by addressing themselves to me, give me a destiny: adventure without return” (p. 51).

Describing how we are transformed by events, he writes:

By shattering our solitary world, by introducing eventualities to it that are in no way prefigured in it, an encounter always signifies the advent of a new world for an *advenant* – an advent that Kafka, echoing Pavese, strongly emphasizes (“my world is collapsing, my world is rebuilding itself”) as a genuine birth, in which joy and terror are mixed. An *impersonal* reconfiguration of my possibilities, and nevertheless one that is *addressed* and *assigned*, an encounter does not happen in the world but opens a world and exposes me to the raw light of outdoors, the too-intense radiance of birth, which is not a mere metaphor (ibid, p. 124, emphases in original).

However, for Sartre (2007) and Heidegger (1962), we must not simply find ourselves following whatever may come; more importantly, we must ‘choose ourselves’ in the aftermath. Here is a humble basis for a weak agency or responsive will in the simple decision to respond to events that befall us. In striving to make sense of this impersonal reconfiguration, to assign it personal and social meaning, and to find new possibilities and new paths for ourselves in this foreign land, we “will ourselves after being thrown into existence,” as stated Sartre (2007, p. 22). Like perpetual nomads, we are always having to reclaim ourselves and make new homes in the foreign lands to which we are thrown. To be human is to exist nomadically and transitively in-between place-to-place and moment-to-moment. As theorist Costas Douzinas (2007) has written in a recent essay concerning the current state of humanism, “humanity is not a property shared, it has no

foundation and no ends, it is the definition of groundlessness. It is discernible in the incessant surprising of the human condition and its exposure to an undecided open future” (p. 5).

Being human through limitation and vulnerability

What begins to emerge in light of events is a notion of the human far removed from free will, autarchy, and the ability to initiate any truly original and independent action. Rather than being characterized by might and ability, the transitive human adventure must become characterized “through its *adynamia*, its impotentiality, its intermittence, misalignment, dislocation, and withdrawal” (Harrison 2009, p. 1006, emphasis in original). Our existent selves are always, in essence, one step behind the advent or unfolding of impersonal existence and the events to which we must always *advene*¹⁶ our selves (Romano 2009). Our humanity is bound up in this spatio-temporal interval between events which have already come to pass and the task ahead of making sense of our finite selves – our constructed histories, our recontextualized worlds, and our rearranged future possibilities – in light of events. Romano describes this eventual hermeneutical interval between past and future as an “a priori [that] is nonetheless given [as an] a posteriori, such that this a-posteriority belongs to the meaning-character of it’s a-priority” (p. 136). Thus, while our bare existence is wholly open and exposed to anything and everything that could happen, our existent selves are limited to willful action only within this spatio-temporal interval and only in the form of a response to what

¹⁶ Per the *OED*: “to be superadded, as part of something, though not essential.”

lies before us. As such, it becomes possible to say that we are utterly exposed, vulnerable and infinitely capable of being affected in bare existence, while also being limited and finite in existent selfhood. This is what Levinas (2003) had in mind when he declared that “limitation is the mark of the existence of the existent” (p. 70).

What this notion of limitation means is that selfhood does not fundamentally originate immanently through willful, original acts of self-determination. Rather selfhood is defined through responsibility to difference and otherness. This is perhaps Levinas’ greatest achievement. Inverting the thesis of traditional metaphysics he declared that the human is a passive subject of another, held hostage by an alterity, rather than a sovereign subject that possesses or understands the Other. Remarking on this Levinasian concept, Harrison (2008) asserts that “the subject does not form itself; it is incapable of folding in on itself or pulling itself together. Rather, it is closed from the outside by the touch of the other” (p. 438). Our existent selves are defined by an infinite and non-relational beyond, or Other, that ‘enises’ us on all sides and casts us as self-same (Hillis Miller 2007).

However, this difference between self-same and Other cannot be reduced to an absolute dialectics of interiority/exteriority and relational/non-relational. Both of these false dialectical pairs are undermined by eventful, one-way transmissions from outside to inside which give our existent lives a sense of adventure: the infinite novelty of unforeseen experiences to undergo, impossible miracles to rejoice, and unthinkable disasters to fall powerless before. This one-way transmissibility is expressed by Blanchot (1995) as follows:

In the relation of *myself to the Other*, the Other exceeds my grasp. The Other: the Separate, the Most-High which escapes my power – the powerless, therefore; the stranger, dispossessed. But, in the relation of *the Other to me*, everything seems to reverse itself: the distant becomes close-by, this proximity becomes the obsession that afflicts me, that weighs down upon me, that separates me from myself – as if separation (which measured the transcendence from me to the Other) did its work within me, dis-identifying me, abandoning me to passivity, leaving me without any initiative and bereft of present (p. 19, emphases in original).

As Blanchot conveys, the Other is not only imminent in its approach, it is also immanent in its presence within us. Indeed our bare existence is, in part, always Other and non-relational in the sense that the existent self is always passive and ‘too late’ with respect to its impersonal eventuality.

This “involvement” between self and Other, which Harrison (2008, p. 439) describes as a “rapport without relation,” is premised on the paradoxical spatial notion that self and Other are infinitely distant yet immediately proximate. There is an *infinite distance* between self and Other in the sense that the self can never appropriate or accede to the infinite Other. To transcend our finitude in such a way would essentially mean becoming an absolute God that exists infinitely in everything. However, paradoxically, despite this infinite distance we are always in *immediate proximity* to the non-relational Other, which envelopes and invades our exposed dwelling. As Blanchot conveys above, this spatial paradox is resolved by the difference between actively affecting and passively being affected. In the sense of our self-willed incapacity to apprehend the non-relational Other, there is an infinite distance which makes our complete apprehension of it impossible. Yet in the sense of our passive capacity for being affected by otherness, our existent selves are wholly encased in the vulnerable closure of immediate proximity. The enveloping proximity of an infinite Other – all we are not – is what closes and *de-fines* us

as finite beings defined by limits and limitations. Yet the closure of intimate proximity is never a secure closure, like a wall or a shell of armor. Rather it is a vulnerable enclosure like a lighted clearing surrounded by an infinitely vast forest in which the darkness looms in every possible direction.

Extending this symbolics of light and darkness, Susan Stewart (2002) describes the limited brilliance of selfhood as an insecure, tentative and laborious accomplishment defined by the enveloping, indistinct and cumbersome threat of darkness:

The darkness presses against us and yet has no boundary; without edge or end, it erases and mutes the limits of our being – not as an expansion, but rather as a contraction, of whatever the mind can hold as an image of the human. It is unbearable, this loneliness of the mind working on its own to maintain the outline, the figure, of the person (p. 1).

Indeed, long prior to our being defined extensively through social relationality – our connections, linkages, and relationships in the illuminated world of mediation – we are first defined by a vulnerable enclosure with respect to the proximal and imminent darkness of the non-relational: that which affects, upends, and passes us; that which enisles us. Thus, for Harrison (2008), “vulnerability describes a thoroughly social body; however, crucially, this is a sociality antecedent to any identity and recognition... a sociality primarily described by a nonintentional and differential rapport or relation with alterity that *is* the event of exposure and susceptibility” (p. 425, emphasis in original; see also Rose 2011).

Humility, experience, and the im/personal

What seems to be often overlooked in discussions of Latour’s actor-network theory is his admirable candor concerning the ever-so-finite limits of human

understanding, which in his radical empiricism becomes limited to our ability to infer relational associations in a world that includes but far exceeds us. Indeed, in reading Latour (2005), it is possible to discern a modest reverence for our “‘astronomical’ ignorance” (p. 245) in the face of unexplainable events that literally shoot holes through our understanding of the world:

Why do fierce armies disappear in a week? Why do whole empires like the Soviet one vanish in a few months? Why do companies who cover the world go bankrupt after their next quarterly report? Why do the same companies, in less than two semesters, jump from being deep in the red to showing a massive profit? Why is it that quiet citizens turn into revolutionary crowds or that grim mass rallies break down into a joyous crowd of free citizens? Why is it that some dull individual is suddenly moved into action by an obscure piece of news? Why is it that such a stale academic musician is suddenly seized by the most daring rhythms (p. 245)?

A pragmatic materialist, Latour describes the relational world as an expansive and morphogenetic network of associations and assemblages. The non-relational spaces outside the ‘network’ of relations – spaces which are “not made of social stuff” (p. 244) but give rise to unexplainable events such as those mentioned above – Latour describes as constituted by a non-formalizable plasma.

Whether described as plasma or darkness, this undefined outside is recognized in every instance to absolutely envelop the space and the stuff of the relational. The absolute beyond preserves the mystery of existence and defines through enclosure our finite worlds of relative understanding. About this Latour is quite honest:

The world is not a solid continent of facts sprinkled by a few lakes of uncertainties, but a vast ocean of uncertainties speckled by a few tiny islands of calibrated and stabilized forms. ... To every action I have described so far, you have to add an immense repertoire of missing *masses*. They are needed to balance the accounts, but they are *missing*. The good news is that social paraphernalia do not occupy much space; the bad news is that we don’t know much about this outside (2005, p. 245, emphases in original).

This frank admission imbues his actor-network theory with a refreshing dose of *humility* which, I would argue, is ultimately one of the foremost ethical points of his critical treatise to the social sciences. He urges not overarching explanations of the social, but modest, ‘ant-like’ descriptions that acknowledge their own tentativeness, better account for uncertainty and relish in controversies that are given by our incomplete theories about how the world works.

Humility is truly a liminal intuition, rooted in the complex feeling that one understands just enough to know that one does not know *enough*. With humility, we become limited by a *sense* of excess that is proximally but infinitely beyond our weak ability to grasp. Situations of humility emplace us within the twilight interval between the unmediated, bare realm of material existence (the impersonal) and mediated, representational realm of ideal existence (the personal). In this sense, humility takes place across the limits of the non/relational, the im/personal, the im/proper, and the non/representational; all of which refer to different scales and perspectives of the same common and worldly existential condition of being-with-without.

Whereas actor-network theories engage with senses of humility caused by our predicaments of embedded uncertainty through approaches that are thoroughly decentered and non-anthropocentric, non-representational theories tend to deal with this liminal sense/predicament through perspectives that are thoroughly non-subjective but not entirely anti-human. This distinction situates non-representational theories’ emphasis of concern closer to scales and perspectives that resemble human experience, even if they

are not anthropocentric. Thrift (2008) again alludes to a diffuse affinity with humanism when he seeks to distinguish NRT from ANT:

[A]ctor-network theorists tend to recoil with horror from any accusation of humanism. Quite rightly, they fear the taint of a centred human subject establishing an exact dominion over all. But the result of their fear is that actor-network theory has tended to neglect specifically human capacities of expression, powers of invention, of fabulation, which cannot be simply gainsaid, in favor of a kind of flattened cohabitation of all things. But human expressive powers seem especially important in understanding what is possible to associate, in particular the power of imagination (p. 111).

Here non-representational theories' interest in retaining a 'minimal humanism' becomes somewhat clearer. This hesitant acceptance seems to suggest the following dilemma: non-representational theories wish to care about "specifically human capacities" such as expression and imagination, yet they are obviously weary of 'strong,' or liberal, notions of humanism that are rooted in subjective agency. In the final sections of this chapter, I wish to consider how this impasse between humanistic and non-representational perspectives in geography might be overcome were we to reimagine the human as vulnerable beings of responsibility who are deprived of the original autonomy of subjectivity.

By embracing extra-representational faculties of evental intelligence such as affect, non-representational theories effectively aim to account for the priority of the im/personal and the "antecedent sociality" (Harrison 2008) between the self and otherness. In order for the humanistic perspective to *matter* (again) in geography following the 'relational turn' it must become more thoroughly involved in the ruptures, intervals and excesses of spacing that separate the material and presentational domain of experience from the symbolic and representational domain of experience. In a word,

humanism must become more responsible to the non-representational, affective and material aspects of existence (cf. Simonsen 2012).

Being human through suffering and responsibility

Feelings and experiences are never fully ours, yet we are forever condemned to fully feel and experience them. In unwillingly, irrevocably and un-substitutably being affected by them, we are made to suffer the gift of whatever they inspire within us. In this regard, suffering is an inevitable outcome of vulnerability and exposure. It is *the* archetype of genuine experience (Hegel 1977; Romano 2009). Affirming suffering as the basis for existent selfhood, Harrison (2007a) writes:

That other affective or emotional states bear the trace of suffering should come as no surprise given the mixed etymologies and meanings of the terms affect, suffering, emotion, and passion, all of which describe – to varying degrees – a displacement or a forced movement of the body and the self rather than a movement by will (p. 594).

Suffering is indeed a common – but not exceptional – human predicament that we share across infinite spectrum of our singular differences. Suffering establishes a commons of possibility for human understanding, solidarity and compassion. We are all equally vulnerable before it. Indeed, “to be human is to undergo experience in suffering, to suffer what one is given to undergo in the every event of *being born human, and being only human*” (Romano 2009, p. 161, emphasis in original). There is no choice in the matter of whether or not to suffer experiences. We are always already suffering so long as we are worthy of being human. This absolute and infinite *passibility* to being affected is what requires humanism to be rethought in the image of weakness, un-power and suffering.

In suffering we are beholden to the experience of events in the im/personal mode of struggling to understand and give form to what has happened. It is because of suffering that experience is always a toilsome journey to shed light on the immanent darkness and give form to the stranger who has already entered our dwelling.

Suffering is traversing the interval and enduring the duration between the impersonal call of events and the personal responsibility to make sense (Romano 2009). What is always at risk in suffering experience are the myriad possibilities of losing oneself to the weight of impersonal existence and to the capricious anarchy of impersonal events which care nothing about our fragile needs for integrity and wholeness. Suffering is being gripped by im/personal uncertainty and being pushed to the limits of selfhood in the sense that “suffering is always on the verge of worsening, always threatening to pass beyond consolation or endurance. Suffering does not have a limit; like an event which does not concern you it continues regardless of the point where you can no longer go on” (Harrison 2007a, p. 594).

Yet through suffering in the *passability* of experience, we are given the gift of a finite responsibility for the infinite. To this extent, our ability to respond – our responsibility – to suffering defines who we are as ethical human beings. If ethics implies a sense of arbitration and intentional decision making, then responsibility truly becomes the basis for agency in a weak humanism.

An ethics of responsibility concerns the *imperative* to answer for oneself by accepting the perilous trials of the im/personal that events inaugurate for our singular

existence. The arrival of improper otherness does not ask for our permission to manifest itself in our worlds as material ruptures of sense-beyond-sense. Rather, its senseless and unforeseen arrival demands us to answer for ourselves in response to our world's changing circumstances, possibilities and constraints. Improper otherness burdens us with an ethical question of how to respond to specter of the non-relational.

Following deconstruction, the human must cease to be imagined as a formal essence or subject, and it must become reimagined as a functional ethical responsibility that strives to relate to the non-relational *despite* the impossibility of this (ideal) task. In this ontologically diluted and speculatively materialist version of humanism, being human becomes a uniquely ethical predicament of being bound by the double burden of responsibility for suffering and suffering in responsibility. By emphasizing the burdens of human responsibility, a weak humanism offers critical ports for launching new vessels of inquiry into the uncharted recesses of being-in-the-world, in order to continue humanism's mission to "increase the burden of awareness" (Tuan 1977, p. 203).

The first critical port concerns *responsibility for suffering* and offers a point of embarkation for more distinctly ethical styles of inquiry into the limits of our singular and collective abilities to relate to the non-relational in others. This humanitarian concern of responsibility for suffering engages with the more practical-ethical questions about how to better attend and alleviate suffering in the world by making it more public, more visible and more material. Because suffering's negative passions do not readily lend themselves to being illuminated, associated, and accounted for through relational modes

of intelligence, it requires a special kind of intelligence that operates at the (ethical) limits of our ability to relate across distances of incommensurability. Suffering in others must be approached through a humanitarian intelligence of *com-passion*; one that labors to reach out to otherness and share its suffering despite this impossibility.

The second critical port concerns *suffering in responsibility* and offers an outlet for linking up to non-representational theories' concern with formation and generativity, which occur along the limits of experience. This link provides a shared concern for how “‘events’ elude the presence of representation, the grasp of comprehension and the fullness of narrative meaning” (Harrison 2007a, p. 591). Or, in a weak humanist vocabulary this is how existent selfhood suffers in the im/personal mode to make sense and respond to the impersonality of events that befall him/her. Regardless of semantic differences, in both cases it is based on the absolute premise that our response to events – which is to say our form-ative ways of representing sense and experience – always “falls short” (ibid). This falling short inevitably leaves an excess of experience and, indeed, a remainder of ourselves outside the realm of relationality. This remainder that representation fails to cart into the light of association is what haunts us. It is the basis for our suffering passions and our compassion for suffering in others.

Conclusion

The premise of humanism requires a leap of faith and trust in a transcendent idea(l) that is beyond verification. This the idea(l) of humanity. Indeed, weak humanism, being ontologically founded in the absolute singularity and transitivity of im/personal

experience, cannot be absolutely verified. As Romano (2009) relates, “humanity is not given as a generic, transempirical, and transindividual essence, apart from singular men and women. It is only arrayed across the irreducible singularity of ex-per-i-ence, as what singularizes *me*. Humanity *happens* on each occasion only as singular” (p. 159, emphases in original).

Like testimony, humanity can only ever be *willed* through trust in an absentee truth that transcends the here and now. Critical to this correlation between testimony and humanity is the distinction between evidence and testimony. While evidence is empirical and subject to verification and reconstruction, testimony is ultimately an ethical affair asks us to relate to an im/personal experience that cannot be verified or replicated (Harrison 2007a). While testimony and humanity are both fundamentally ethical matters of concern, unlike the former which is always singular, humanity is always shared. Perhaps, then, humanity *is* the shared testimony of the im/personal.

The paradox of humanity, as Agamben (1999) discovered, is that it is never purely immanent (egocentric, ‘subjective’, same) nor entirely transcendent (alien, exotic, other). The essence of humanity, if we are inclined to believe in it, is nowhere to be found *in* something because it is always held in tension *between* individuality and community, the singular and the multiple. The truth of humanity is precisely this tension between gathering and distribution, between the absolute and the relative, which keeps the idea of humanity in play. Humanity is everywhere but nowhere to be found. This understanding accords with Korf’s (2008) recent call for the development of a “skeptical,

postmetaphysical humanism” in geography that is grounded in openness, possibility and the “ambiguity of human life.” In a weak humanism, humanity becomes elevated to the speculative status of affects that circulate and events that transpire.

Through circulations and transpirations of humanity the absolute burdens of im/personal experience becomes relativized as collective and shared burdens of human experience through a transcendent sense of affinity with others. Thus, following McGreevy (2001), by believing in humanity, singular individuals are given over to a “locus of ‘we’” to share and distribute the burden of the absolute void, the infinite darkness, against which our finite and singular existences are defined.

As a field of care for humanity, weak humanism resides at the limits of experience where the relational and the non-relational are infinitely distant yet immediately proximate. As an ethical practice of outreach, weak humanism asks us to *relate to the non-relational*: that which does not fully achieve ‘objective’ status yet through its affective qualities far exceeds ‘subjective’ status. The im/personal experiences that haunt our singular beings – the ungraspable feelings that keep us up at night, the suffering passions of being in love – these are the diffuse, affective ‘nothings’ that make a *sense* of humanity possible. Humanity is a sense of collective passibility: the ability to be moved to by the wild passions of the world.

Our ability to speak of the sense of humanity is infinitely finite. Words about humanity become exhausted long before the im/personal sense of humanity could be captured. To write about humanity is, inevitably, to become exhausted by the

inexhaustible sense that cannot be exorcized onto the page. Speaking of humanity is forever doomed to trail off into ellipses. The im/personal sense of humanity haunts us by resisting apprehension. Humanity is forever a “secret void of mystery which no elaboration could ever fill” (Blanchot 1995, p. 58).

Just as ethics transcends ontology, requiring action in the face of the unknown, perhaps also when it comes to issues concerning humanity, we should liberate our compassions to soar beyond the humble limits of knowledge. Given this onto-ethical dilemma, perhaps as Cooper (2007) has argued in his painstakingly detailed treatise on existential humanism, we should not take the ontology of the human *too* seriously.¹⁷ Given that so much of what makes us human is given to us through the aesthetically *ir*-rational faculties of sense, feeling and intuition, we must grant the humanities creative liberties to explore these limits of experience without the (inessential) burdens of formal resolution. This argument is rooted in a Levinasian ethos of responsibility, which Barnett (2005) explains as follows:

Rather than modeling human relations on structures of knowledge of some sort, which depend on relations of identity, Levinas argues that there is a structure of responsibility built into human relations that precedes other forms of relating such as knowing or perceiving. Levinas asserts the primacy of the ethical in human relations – this is what he means by ‘ethics as first philosophy’ (p. 8).

An ethos of responsibility demands that we release ourselves from the formal strictures of accountability and throw ourselves without abandon into concerns that “involve us in

¹⁷ Similarly, Nancy (1997) cautions: “If there is an illusion from which one must protect oneself today more than ever, it is the illusion that consists in getting hung up on *words* (history, philosophy, politics, art...) as if they were immediately equated with *things* (p. 5, emphases in original).

[their] questioning” (Mugerauer 2008). What concern could ever so involve us as questions of humanity?

Rational deconstructive thought teaches us that the human is nothing but a “fiction” (Badmington 2004). However, thankfully, rationalism does not come anywhere close to exhausting the existential sense of being human. Words like suffering, passion, sympathy, fascination, mystery and – perhaps the most *irrational* of all – resilience, speak to but fall short of this excess of meaning in being human. If anything characterizes humanity, it is an irrational resilience of transcendent survival, outreach and overcoming in the face of suffering adversity. Like existence itself, humanity is a miracle of ‘rising bodies,’ to borrow Caputo’s (2007) words, that persists through the impossibilities that happen:

One rises again – from a sick bed, which is a kind of death, which even threatens death, and one says one has one’s life back; life has been restored after having been taken away. In a larger sense, we rise again from defeat, from stunning setbacks, which are a kind of death, when everything says the cause is dead, but we refuse to give up (p. 85).

Chapter Five

Traumatic Ruin

“[T]o call into question the nature of crisis is to expose the shallowness of our thought to the depth of the phenomenon itself; to really think about crisis requires that one be willing to undergo the crisis of thinking” (Miller 1988, p. 4).

“Any analysis of suffering must encounter this traumatic ruin or transport beyond communicability, this mortal movement towards the loss of distances, perspectives, and orientations” (Harrison 2007a, p. 595).

Introduction

In this chapter I want to consider the epistemological and ethical challenges that suffering poses to human abilities to represent and relate. Common to most if not all phenomenal accounts of suffering is a sense of dissolution in which the boundaries and distinctions between self and world come undone. The resolution of one's proper identity and the singular integrity of the world come unfettered, upset and unwound. In suffering nothing makes sense, yet the senseless sense of suffering keeps coming anyway. Suffering dissolves meaning and enisles the sufferer into isolation. And yet suffering very much exists *in* the world as a material and public affliction that is exposed on the surfaces of places, bodies, eyes, words and images; and tangible in atmospheres we encounter and inhabit.

As an affective sense of the world, suffering has been a long time coming on the horizon of geographical thought. A diffuse sensitivity for how suffering contributes to the creation of certain places and environments of human experience can be faintly discerned in humanist and feminist geographies, as well as in geographies of disability (Rowles 1978; McDowell 1999; Gleeson 1999). More recently, with the turn towards emotional,

affective, and non-representational geographies, concern for embodied and atmospheric senses of being-in-the-world, including pain and suffering, appear to be gaining attention within the discipline. It now seems entirely plausible to think that suffering is well on its way to crystallizing into an ‘object’ of concern in these geographical subfields, much like hope (Anderson 2006a, 2006b; Anderson and Holden 2008), fear (Gregory and Pred 2006; Pain 2001; Pain and Smith 2008; Valentine 1989), and care (Conradson 2003; Parr 2003; Lawson 2007; Milligan and Wiles 2010) have managed to achieve. Yet beyond several fleeting – if not brilliant – forays into suffering as an affective sense of the world (see, for instance, a few paragraphs in Bissell 2009, 2010; Harrison 2007a; and Rose 2010), explicit and sustained consideration for the place of suffering in geographical thought remains woefully underrepresented.

However, my concern with suffering is not merely to advocate for greater accountability, as if better awareness for the role that suffering plays in the world of ongoing relations could somehow ‘close the gap’ that suffering exposes. This is not to say that there is not a time and a place for an applied politics of suffering in geography and in social analysis more generally. Rather, what I want to consider in this chapter is the phenomenal manifestation of suffering prior to its representational capture as a determinate object of analysis with defined causes and outcomes. In doing so, I aim to cast into doubt the basic supposition that suffering can be ‘ready-made’ (Raffoul 2010) to resolve meaning about the world. In other words, if analysis requires that the analyst provide an account, and if the sense of suffering offers not resolution but rather

dissolution, how could suffering ever be made accountable within the relational structure of the preexisting world? How do we incorporate the event of suffering into ongoing narratives and frameworks of understanding? What kinds of value, meaning or insight about the world could suffering possibly affirm? How could absolute suffering ever *resolve* anything other than its own naked dissolution of sense? More ominously, how might suffering (un)work to ruin relational thought, just as it (un)worlds to draw worlds into ruin?

By thinking suffering along these lines of ruin, I would like to reach out for new ways to make contact with impenetrable question of ‘relating to the nonrelational’ that Harrison (2007a) has posed to the discipline. In his account, Harrison draws heavily upon Levinas’s ethics of responsibility in order to expose a fundamental impasse that suffering, among other non-relational challenges, presents to social analysis. For Harrison, the non-relational stands for an ethical and ontological double-bind involving issues of responsibility and representation with which social scholars must contend. On the one hand, it is imperative that social analysis respond to suffering in the world and speak for the voiceless who are consumed by suffering. Yet on the other hand, by attempting to draw suffering into social accountability through representation, social analysis cannot but violate and efface the “constitutive loss” (Butler 2001) that ‘constitutes’ the process of suffering. Regarding this double-bind Harrison writes:

As social analysis approaches the other it perpetually substitutes the fragility and obduracy of the other’s passion and suffering, recuperating and appropriating it through a series of analytic and interpretative reductions into an avatar for something else. Indeed this appropriation is of the very nature of social analysis insofar as it operates by necessity with and within a concept of ‘the social’, ‘the cultural’, ‘ideology’, ‘identity’, or ‘the everyday’ and their associated regimes and

modalities of explanation. Social analysis *cannot* but translate suffering and thereby put it to use, making it into an example or a case of something else (2007a, pp. 596-597, emphasis in original).

In this chapter I want to delve deeper into this ethical and ontological double-bind that social analyses of suffering must confront.

Theories of sense, I will argue, offer a unique approach for thinking the impasse that the non-relational poses for our ability to relate to suffering. While sense is by no means new to geographical thought, I would contend that its applicability has been thus far largely limited to notions of physical touch involving a determinate body-subject. Rather, following the work of Jean-Luc Nancy (1997, 2000, 2008a, 2008b), I want to suggest a more basic but expanded notion of sense as the communal opening of existence, which takes place prior its *sharing out* into *proper* jurisdictions of subject, object, self, world, interior, exterior, mine, other, body, mind, real, imagined, nature or culture. This is sense as a common spacing of the world, and the world as a common space of sense (Nancy 1997). Following Butler (2001), we might say that this space of communal sense takes place in a “prehistorical” context of impersonal existence, prior to subjectivization. This prehistorical context would be “a domain in which the grammar of the subject cannot hold, for dispossession in and through another is prior to becoming an ‘I’ who might claim...to possess itself” (p. 36). This notion of a prehistorical, material context of existence which precedes subjective appropriation is similar to what Pickles (1985) has articulated in his writings about geographical phenomenology:

Man’s relation with the world is...originally and primordially not a cognitive or theoretical relation, but is one of *Dasein* – of ‘being-there’. Theoretical knowledge and science are only special modes of man’s orientation toward the world, in which this primordial relation has been made manifest beforehand (p. 128).

Sense, as such, suggests that the bare materiality of existence – by not yet being proper(ty) to *anyone* – is always inherently communal and originally impersonal. Thus, the properly individuated body-subject is always secondarily shared out, or derived from, a pre-historically communal *corpus* of sense. By further developing this notion of sense as it occurs in the space-time of a *prehistorical commons*, I wish to consider how the ruin of suffering exposes the performative practices of *sharing out* that take place in the span between impersonal and personal existence; sense and meaning. Ultimately what suffering draws our attention to are the imperfections and failures that characterize this *praxis* of being human. In this, suffering serves as the ultimate breakdown in one's ability to properly account for the happening of impersonal existence or, as Nancy might say, the coming of sense.

To this thread of sense, I wish to tie in studies of agoraphobia. In doing so, I am not so much interested in agoraphobia as a pathology or proper social object, but rather what comes together under this name to dissolve and to be resolved. In many ways this coming together is not unlike actor-network theory's interest in radical social formations as a means to disrupt "a sudden *acceleration* in the description" (Latour 2005, p. 22, emphasis in original). Except, however, what emerges under the name of agoraphobia are existential senses of suffering that cannot always be shared out into proper "figurations" of agency that translate and inform, to borrow Latour's vocabulary.

To this extent, I find that singular expressions of agoraphobia point to a common dissolution of sense, in which not only the *boundaries* of self and world become

confused, but also their respective *agencies* as proper entities of subject and object. Under the name of agoraphobia, the ‘doing’ of organized worlds comes undone so that, even though sense is there and things are happening, it is difficult to account for the proper attribute(s) of sense and activity. What might this mean to have a local sense that does not branch out into a social world of relations, does not translate, and, therefore, does not defer our attention onto something else?

Accounting for agoraphobia

Agoraphobia is generally considered to be a condition involving persistent, yet diffuse anxieties about one’s physical exposure in public and social spaces which are unfamiliar or in which unpredictable encounters or threatening situations are potentially imminent. Literally the term means fear of the *agora*, which is the Greek word for a public square or place of gathering within a city. However, in reality, the lived geographies of agoraphobia are far more varied from case to case and fluid across time than this static definition allows. While some diagnosed agoraphobics are effectively shut-ins who rarely set foot outside their homes, others are able to maintain more socio-spatially mobile lives that include daily commutes to the office, visits to family and friends, and regular errands to the grocery store, the bank, doctor’s visits, and the like (albeit not without a heightened degree of anxiety and struggles to manage panic-like symptoms).

As a clinically-defined psychiatric condition, agoraphobia is classified as an anxiety disorder that affects roughly between two to three percent (2-3%) of the adult

population in the United States (Kessler, *et al.* 2005). In the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM IV TR)*, agoraphobia is defined as a subtype of a group of anxiety disorders that also includes post-traumatic stress disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, social phobia, acute stress disorder, and separation anxiety disorder, among others (American Psychiatric Association 2000). In the *DSM IV TR*, the disorder is described as follows:

The essential feature of Agoraphobia is anxiety about being in places or situations from which escape might be difficult (or embarrassing) or in which help may not be available in the event of having a Panic Attack or panic-like symptoms (e.g., fear of having a sudden attack of dizziness or a sudden attack of diarrhea). The anxiety typically leads to a pervasive avoidance of a variety of situations that may include being alone outside the home or being home alone; being in a crowd of people; traveling in an automobile, bus, or airplane; or being on a bridge or in an elevator (*ibid*).

This persistent anxiety that characterizes agoraphobia is typically preceded by and related to highly eventful panic attacks in which one's exposedness to perceived environmental threats becomes absolutely overwhelming and terrifying to the point that the sufferer often thinks that he or she is literally dying.

Often sufferers are able to trace the origins of their agoraphobia back to a singularly traumatic event: a first or otherwise extraordinary panic attack which happened to take place in a public or social setting, like a mall, supermarket, doctor's office, party, or workplace. As a response mechanism, ostensibly to prevent further trauma, sufferers withdraw, to a varied extent, from the 'outside world' as their embodied rhythms of presence and mobility out in the world spatially contract to the confines of well-defined 'safe zones' or 'secure bases' which are typically centered around the home (Holmes 2008). Given this, a common understanding among analysts would be that agoraphobia

signifies a highly complex cluster of physiological, biochemical, psychological, social and environmental interactions that defy the dialectical categories of subjective/objective, internal/external, and imagined/material.

As one analyst has noted, “the clinical literature on agoraphobia is immense, highly repetitive and inconclusive,” while “the non-clinical literature is the opposite: sparse, ambiguous and highly creative” (Carter 2002, p. 8). Among the non-clinical literature, two distinct trajectories can be discerned. The first is what geographer Ruth Bankey (2004), in a review of this literature, describes as the metaphorization of agoraphobia. These are historically contextualized social and cultural studies that engage with the symptoms of agoraphobia (fear of public space, social isolation, anxiety, etc...) as representative metaphors for the ills, fears and anxieties of modern urban life (cf. Callard 2006a, 2006b; Carter 2002; Milun 2007; Vidler 2000). This is akin to the way that schizophrenia has been appropriated as a broader social metaphor for critiques of postmodernity and advanced capitalism (cf. Jameson 1990). While these metaphorical appropriations of agoraphobia yield some fascinating theories about the ways that urban life is socially and spatially composed in (post)modernity, the fact of the matter is that these accounts do not actually engage with agoraphobia as a lived condition. Rather, as it is frequently noted in this literature, these studies are more about the social structures and aesthetic conditions of the *agora* itself as a historically situated built environment of social organization and public interaction.

The second, non-clinical trajectory of agoraphobic research is one that more directly engages with issues of agoraphobic embodiment and identity from a feminist perspective (cf. Bankey 2001; Capps and Ochs 1995; Davidson 2000, 2001a, 2001b, 2003a, 2003b; Holmes 2008). These feminist accounts strive to construct embodied understandings about living with agoraphobia. Among these accounts, geographer Joyce Davidson's work distinguishes itself as the most compelling in terms of describing what it feels like to be existentially emplaced within embodied and social contexts of agoraphobic panic, anxiety and vulnerability.

Based on ethnographic research that Davidson conducted with a small group of female agoraphobic sufferers, and drawing from an impressive range of existentialist, phenomenological and social theorists (including Sartre, Kierkegaard, Merleau-Ponty, Goffman and Foucault), her work succeeds in constructing a complex understanding of *embodied agoraphobia* as composed across different physical, social and emotional layers of experience. In doing so, she problematizes pathological discourses that construct agoraphobia as purely a mental deficiency. In contrast to these pathological discourses, Davidson interprets agoraphobia as a boundary crisis that dissolves the integrity of the embodied subject. Describing this sense of crisis, Davidson writes:

Following the onset of anxiety...there is a loss of *trust* in the integrity of the body. The accounts of agoraphobic respondents utilized throughout this book repeatedly emphasize that the individual sufferer fears being betrayed by their body, and is constantly on the look out for breaches of bodily boundaries that might be visible to others. ... The intensely *embodied* nature of these 'emotional' states necessitates a reconfiguration of the subject's conception of herself. The disorder seems to initiate a sense of *separateness* from one's body, not just momentarily, as in the fleeting depersonalization of the panic attack, but in the more general sense of creating a constant anxiety which hovers over the question of our bodily and mental identity (2003a, p. 15).

In line with the original aims of post-structural feminist theory, Davidson's work deconstructs the idea that the self is an absolutely coherent, contained, stable and homogenous entity in which the mind and the body cooperate in perfect harmony to produce a singular entity of self-autonomy. Davidson carefully engages with the lived experiences and feelings of agoraphobic sufferers, and in doing so she constructs a compelling critique against this essentialist notion of the sovereign self:

Agoraphobia is a disorder which, as I argue throughout this book, radically problematizes the subject's bodily boundaries. That is to say, it effectively disrupts the ordinarily stable, and largely taken-for-granted boundary between inside and outside, person and place. Certain environments are felt to be threatening and invasive, so much so that subjects increasingly withdraw from social space, describing their worlds as 'getting smaller' as their condition progresses (Davidson 2003a, p. 106).

In this way, the work of Davidson and others who have contributed to this feminist trajectory of non-clinical research (*see, in particular*: Bankey 2001, 2004; Capps and Ochs 1995), offer important pathways for examining agoraphobia in terms of the embodied senses of exposure, confusion, disruption and vulnerability that it exposes within the horizons of the agoraphobic lifeworld.

However, for as much as Davidson and her feminist colleagues are able to expand non-clinical understandings of agoraphobia in the direction of these bare senses, there is a strong tendency in these works to essentialize agoraphobia as a feminine spatial disorder produced within hyper-politicized realms of masculinist social space. Summarizing this politicized discourse of gendered agoraphobia, geographer Joshua Holmes (2008) writes:

An important theme in feminist discourse, emerging from the analysis of the clinical phenomena of depersonalization and derealisation, is the fragility of the agoraphobic self. The female psyche is seen as inherently more at risk than its male counterpart, and links with the susceptibility of people experiencing agoraphobia to the gaze of the other. People with agoraphobia typically feel 'visible' in public spaces, fear that they will 'make fools of themselves' and consequentially avoid

the anxiety associated with such imagined ridicule. The individual with agoraphobia feels penetrated (a metaphor bringing together the Freudian sexual viewpoint with feminist emphasis on female vulnerability); stripped bare of her public self, her privacy and bodily functions are liable to erupt into public view (p. 377).

This feminist argument about the gendered nature of agoraphobia is based on both biological and social premises about this spatial disorder. The first is the premise that agoraphobia is primarily a ‘female disorder,’ given that empirical evidence suggests that agoraphobia may be overrepresented among women by as much as a factor of 2:1 (Bekker 1996; Davidson 2003a; Holmes 2008). The second, illustrated quite well in the quote above, is the premise that agoraphobia is characteristically a ‘feminine disorder’ whose domestic tendencies and whose symptoms of public anxiety are symbolic of the ‘weaker sex’ trope. These biological and social premises for gendered agoraphobia become concretely interrelated through politicized and starkly dialectical discourses about the body, as evident in Davidson’s (2003a) discussion below:

Women have said that being ‘stuck at home’, for example, during late stages of pregnancy, looking after young children, or in one case, because of a back injury, can, in a sense, cause you to ‘forget’, or lose the habitual body sense of what’s involved in going out. In a sense, you forget how to project your own lived space, necessary for freedom of movement, over and against those of other people (p. 100).

While I find much of value in the phenomenological descriptions of embodied agoraphobia that the feminist approach has produced, in this work I intend to get away from this gendered interpretation of agoraphobia that has predominated over non-clinical research into the lived experiences of agoraphobia. There are two closely interrelated reasons for this decision.

First, while there is empirical evidence to suggest that agoraphobia may be significantly overrepresented among women, there is also empirical evidence to suggest

that agoraphobia and other related anxiety disorders are significantly underreported by men (Shear, *et al.* 2000). As a result, empirical findings about the relationship between gender and agoraphobia remain muddy and too inconclusive to serve as a solid foundation for social research. Additionally, there are some serious downsides to focusing exclusively on women's experiences of agoraphobia, as many feminist scholars have done (Bankey 2001; Capps and Ochs 1995; Davidson 2000, 2001a, 2001b, 2003a). The most obvious problem with this is that the experiences of agoraphobic sufferers who happen to be male become muted and marginalized in non-clinical studies of lived agoraphobia. However an additional problem is that, by fixating on gender, we miss out on opportunities to explore and write about the more universal condition of the human struggle with agoraphobia that transcend the politics of identity.

Second, and closely related to this first rationale, I find a troubling "acceleration in description" (Latour 2005) in feminist accounts that seek to *explain* agoraphobia through gendered social discourses about masculinist power, sexuality and 'the gaze' which are all predictably familiar. Describing a process of accelerated social explanation not unlike what I find in feminist accounts of gendered agoraphobia, Latour (2005) writes:

When sociologists of the social pronounce the words 'society', 'power', 'structure', and 'context', they often jump straight ahead to connect vast arrays of life and history, to mobilize gigantic forces, to detect dramatic patterns emerging out of confusing interactions, to see everywhere in the cases at hand yet more examples of well-known types, to reveal behind the scenes some dark powers pulling the strings. Not that they are wrong since its perfectly true that older social relations have been packaged in such a way as to seem to provide a ready explanation for many puzzling subjects. But the time has come to have a much closer look at the type of aggregates thus assembled and at the ways they are connect to one another (p. 22).

Along these lines, there is a point at which gendered discussions of agoraphobia stop being about the *suffering sense* of living with agoraphobia and instead become subservient to greater political discourses about gender, society and public space. Rather than remaining an object of descriptive care, gendered discourses of agoraphobia risk turning agoraphobia's non-relational sense of suffering, disorder and confusion into a relational agency that functionally *works* to explain how the greater economies of social power are reproduced at the scale of the body. This accords with Bankey's (2004) general observation that:

The vast majority of writings in the social sciences and humanities on agoraphobia use agoraphobia as a platform, 'structure of signification' or metaphor from which to discuss and examine a wide range of social, cultural, philosophical, gendered and geographical issues (p. 347).

Through discursive practices that relate agoraphobia to broader social structures, conditions and divisions of power, agoraphobia gains the political agency to speak authoritatively about broader social problems. At some point, however, by making agoraphobia socially relational, we defer its significance onto other things, inscribing it into thematic, symbolic and discursive constellations of meaning. This practice is necessary if we want to have anything meaningful to say about agoraphobia.

However, relational practices of situating agoraphobia within preexisting constellations of meaning seems to be an extremely risky experiment with finite *solutions* of sense. There is only so much agoraphobia can be, that its account can contain, before it becomes something different, an account about something else. At what point are we no longer really talking about the bare sense of agoraphobia anymore? This is a question posed, but not addressed, by Paul Carter (2002), whose work has more to do with the

unexplored role of “repressed space” in psychoanalytic theory than about the lived experiences of agoraphobia. Concerning the different approaches taken to analyze agoraphobia, he writes:

Th[e] variety of symptoms presents the temptation to treat agoraphobia as R.D. Laing and others once treated schizophrenia. The alienation characterizing it is a symptom of a generalized social estrangement, whose cause lies in the discontents which the fragmentation of social life under capitalism produces. If the symptoms of the agoraphobe are discounted, this is the same argument feminist psychologists put forward when they contend that agoraphobia is a symptomatic reaction to the social, economic and political construction of women under patriarchy. The drawback, though, is that this approach seems to attribute to agoraphobia sufferers an insight they don't have. It risks discounting the suffering, the actual, chronically debilitating unease (p. 209).

Indeed, at what point does the bare sense of agoraphobia as existential *suffering* escape consideration? Are we saying too much about agoraphobia, thus effacing its bare materiality of suffering sense?

By emphasizing suffering in experiences of agoraphobia, I want to make the wager that if agoraphobia is reducible to any generalizable essence – and this remains uncertain – it would be that agoraphobia exposes a *human* struggle to come to grips with non-relational suffering. In this way, I want to suggest that what is at the heart of agoraphobia isn't an affirmation about anything, but rather a desperate struggle to come to grips with a negative sense that interrupts being-in-the-world, both as an ongoing, formative practice of identity and as a metaphysical model for describing how existence takes place.

By approaching agoraphobia along this alternative line of thought, one of my primary aims is to grapple with ways to ethically respond to the negation, uncertainty and traumatic ruin of agoraphobic suffering in ways that do not efface or otherwise explain

away their senseless and non-relational qualities. Can we attend to an *ethics* of human suffering in agoraphobia in ways that affirm this traumatic ruin?

On the thought of suffering

Pure suffering demands the impossible task of thinking negatively. This negativity does not simply refer to pessimism, ugly feelings, or depressing social conditions, which are not entirely impossible to imagine given their prevalence in the world. Rather this negativity ultimately refers to thinking in a way that does not add up, resolve, clarify or make sense, but rather tears away, ruins, confuses and dissolves. To think negatively might be what de Certeau (1984) had in mind when he spoke of “exploring the night-side” of things, “a night longer than their day” (p. 41).

Thinking negatively, along the lines of Miller’s (1988) and Harrison’s (2007a) comments that opened this chapter, is forever impossible to achieve in totality because ultimately thought is always formative. To write about suffering means, inevitably, to efface its reality which is ‘filled’ with absence, ruin and disintegration. Suffering, as sociologist Arthur Frank (2001) has described it based on his personal ordeal with cancer, is “the hole” of one’s existence which is “unspeakable” and “incomprehensible” (p. 359).

Elaborating on this characterization of suffering, Frank writes:

Suffering is loss, present or anticipated, and loss is another instance of no thing, an absence. We suffer the absence of what was missed and now is no longer recoverable and the absence of what we fear will never be. At the core of suffering is a sense that something is irreparably wrong with our lives, and wrong is the negation of what could have been right. Suffering resists definition because it is the reality of what is not. Anyone who suffers knows the reality of suffering, but this reality is what you cannot ‘come to grips with.’ To suffer is to lose your grip. Suffering is expressed in myth as the wound that does not kill but cannot be healed (ibid, p. 355).

Suffering similarly has been described as “unbearable decay” (Nancy 1997) and “utterly passive, withdrawn from all sight, from all knowing” (Blanchot 1995, p. 3). Likewise, elaborating on Levinas’s phenomenology of suffering, in which the condition materializes as a purely disabling absurdity which destroys the subjective will, Edelglass (2006) adds that “the essence of suffering is disproportionate to our senses, an excess beyond the measure of our faculties” (p. 47). As a consequence, suffering becomes “lived as the breach of the totality we constitute through intending acts” (ibid). Like a terrible infection, the affliction of suffering “corrodes all the structures of meaning that we project into the world” (White 2012, p. 114). Pure suffering – a kind of material, embodied suffering which has no redeeming value or divine purpose – can be nothing other than “a concrete and quasi-sensible manifestation of the non-integratable, the non-justifiable” (Levinas 1998, p. 180). What, then, is there to say about an experience so negative that it gives nothing but a subtraction that cuts and robs, wounds and takes away? How, then, are we to account for pure suffering?

As Harrison (2007a) and, earlier, sociologist Iain Wilkinson (2004, 2005) have argued, our ability to account for and relate to suffering is always condemned to fall short of the sense itself. To seriously attend to this non-relational impasse is to resist forcing suffering into a binary model of essentialism/nihilism in which it must inherently have meaning or else none at all. With the former, suffering acquires mythic-religious value as trial and sacrifice set against a future horizon of transcendental redemption, purification and reward. With the latter, suffering becomes nihilistically devalued as meaningless, at

which point the overwhelming fullness of suffering's emptiness becomes egregiously negated. In either case, though, what these extreme lines of thought represent are 'full-proof' solutions that ostensibly answer the problem that suffering poses.

To subscribe to either, however, is to efface the enduring uncertainty of dissolution that suffering actually exposes. If I could know for certain that *my* singular suffering were either entirely meaningful or absolutely meaningless, I could in essence resolve my suffering so that, strictly speaking, I would no longer be suffering. This is precisely the point that Continental theorist Juan Manuel Garrido (2009) makes when he states that:

Suffering has no sense or meaning, reason or destiny – suffering only suffers of not having sense, meaning, reason, destiny. What else, indeed, could be properly called suffering? Suffering susceptible of overcoming its absolute senselessness – through meaning, reason, mourning, destiny, history memory or any other possible form of representation – would not be suffering (p. 136).

As intellectual devices for thinking suffering, essentialism and nihilism turn out to be inadequate solutions that function more to 'censor' (Frank 2001; Baudrillard 1998) the incomprehensible hole or wound that suffering exposes than to confront this rupture in the lining of one's world. As intellectual devices, they defer attention away from the bare sense of suffering itself, as they are more about assessing what suffering might mean in a broader context of social relations, than about describing how suffering initially *takes place* in a local and prehistorical context as an unresolved commons of sense (Frank 2001).

This is similarly the case with *social suffering*, an established field of study in the social sciences which considers how systematic kinds of group suffering are perpetuated

by and reproduced through social processes of marginalization, exclusion and inequality (Bordieu, *et al.* 1999; Das, *et al.* 2001; Kleinman, *et al.* 1997a; Renault 2009). In their work dedicated to this idea, for instance, Kleinman and his colleagues (1997b) describe social suffering as resulting “from what political, economic, and institutional power does to people and, reciprocally, from how these forms of power themselves influence responses to social problems” (p. ix). While social suffering certainly represents a critically important research agenda, it does not really deal with the non-relational question of how suffering phenomenally unfolds. Rather, with discourses of social suffering the meaning of suffering is always already resolved within extralocal and historicized accounts that share out moral and political responsibility for social injustice among an extensive array of identifiable actors, relations and causalities. In doing so, the focus is not what suffering *is* as an existential sense of being-in-the-world, but rather how suffering, as an already-objectified social problem, is (re)created within existing structures of power.

In this way, it might be appropriate to say that social suffering is primarily interested in accounting for suffering as a moral-political problem whose responsibility can be judiciously meted out to intentional agents of suffering who merit blame. This frames suffering squarely within what Raffoul (2010) terms an “institution of responsibility” which “expresses the desire to find guilty parties by identifying agent-causes to whom one can impute guilt” (p. 113). While social suffering is an immensely important topic within the social sciences, it does not fundamentally deal with the caesura

of existential suffering. As such, discourses of social suffering seem to be more interested in suffering as a determinate, political good than as an uncertain sense of dissolution and ruin in a virtual and singular context of indeterminate (un)becoming.

In the remainder of this chapter I want to think about suffering as it takes place presently, singularly and incommensurably in a space-time that I have been referring to as a prehistorical commons of sense. To treat suffering in this way is to attend to a material sense of suffering prior to processes of signification which resolve to make this sense commensurable with and relational to extralocal systems and structures of predeterminate meaning. To think suffering in a phenomenally eventful mode is to enframe its taking-place within a singularly enveloping world, or sphere, of existential immersion. This entails, in other words, inhabiting a space of present experience in which suffering's draining dissolution is as absolute and enveloping as the world itself; with an 'outside' to suffering being only an impossible dream of another world beyond reach. It is to affirm the agonizing reality that suffering is always originally an existential crisis, and that this existential crisis is always a world unto itself; estranging, isolating and absolutely enveloping. This is how Frank (2001) described his "feeling of being disconnected from [his] life as [he] had been living it and from the lives of those around [him]" following his cancer diagnosis:

Suddenly, they (including my recently healthy self) were standing on one shore, and I was in a small skiff being carried toward an opposite shore. I could call to them and they answered, but the distance separating us was growing rapidly. In contemporary academic usage, I was becoming other to the person I had been and to those who knew that person (ibid).

In circumstances of existential suffering such as this, the integrity of the self becomes attenuated across receding spaces and times of a world becoming more vast, vacant and alien. To treat suffering locally is to give priority to the swelling sense of estrangement and dissolution that disrupts the fragile composition of one's lifeworld.

Ethically, to attend to the *engulfing presence* of suffering as it singularly takes place is to grant suffering its total and engulfing presence, which dissolves worlds and bodies of meaning thoroughly, mercilessly and absolutely. This is based on the premise that *objectified* suffering – as a figured thing that makes sense within extralocal contexts of meaning – is achieved only at the price of literally losing touch with the ruinous sense of *existential* suffering as it takes place presently within the horizons of one's world.

Suffering as non-relational breakdown of sense

The engulfing presence of existential suffering is an absolute sense of the world and self dissolving into one another. In this way, the 'doing' of material suffering becomes an impossible *con-fusion* of subject and object, interior and exterior, and activity and passivity. Suffering becomes a commons of senseless sense in which this common becoming simultaneously works and unworks, falling apart even as it consolidates into something impenetrably real and materially present. This commons of sense exists in the locality of its taking-place during a time of impersonal existence that was discussed through the concept of *Mitdasein* in an earlier chapter, and that Butler (2001, 2005) refers to as a 'prehistory' of experience. Regarding this time, she writes:

Indeed, consider that the way in which that prehistory continues to happen is that every time I enunciate myself, I undergo something of what cannot be captured or assimilated by that 'I,' that I always come too late to myself...and, in that sense, can never provide the account of myself which both certain forms of morality as well as models of mental health require, namely, that the self deliver itself through coherent narrative. The 'I' is the moment of failure in every narrative effort to give an account of oneself (2001, p. 37).

Building on this idea, and borrowing from Nancy (1997), I would like to suggest that we think of this prehistory as a *span* of human existence prior to its narrative accountability; a span which implies both temporal *and* spatial qualities. In thinking of this prehistory as a span of space-time rather than predominantly in terms of time, as Butler does, I would like to expand this notion towards a greater appreciation for the spatiality of its taking place. This is the direction, I would argue, that non-representational and non-relational theories pushes geographical thought. This span of existence can be regarded as 'excessive' in the sense that things take place in this space of time / time of space that cannot be drawn into accountability.

Generally speaking, non-representational and non-relational theories might both be regarded as approaches in geography for attending to this span of bare excess beyond language and comprehension. Both theories also maintain a critically complex relationship with language, regarding it as an inadequate yet necessary device for communicating experience. However, following Harrison, whose corpus of work might be read as an extended, oblique effort to differentiate between "multiple ways of thinking the 'non-'" (2010, p. 174), I want to attempt a crude distinction between the two. The difference, I would suggest, ultimately comes down to two divergent interpretations for how to think bare excess. In this way, they are not competing interpretations for an

absolute truth about a homogenous excess; rather, their difference speaks to a plurality of different kinds, or modes, of bare excess that take place in the material world beyond language and before the actualization of personal and social kinds of understanding.

For non-representational theories, this excess generally is envisioned through a “leitmotif of movement” (Thrift 2008, p. 5), so that its ‘object’ of excess comes to acquire transmissive qualities of potential, flow, circulation and vitality. Based on these qualities, non-representational approaches seem to take an interest in the excess of bare life as *spans of openness* and *gaps of possibility* that become exposed in ongoing systems of association. As such, this perspective generally tends toward visions of excess as possible openings for new and different states of affairs and kinds of relations to come about in the future. Thrift (2008) has described this very outlook of openness in terms of a “forward-looking ethics of the moment” (p. 19). Often, this ethos becomes incorporated into non-representational discourses through narratives of hope (Anderson 2006a, 2006b; McCormack 2003). Because of this future-oriented approach, time seems to occupy a central place in non-representational accounts of excess. This temporal interest in excess is likely the product of non-representational theories’ strong interest in Bergsonian and Deleuzian inspired philosophies which are closely affiliated with theories of affect. Appropriately, the ‘agency’ (potency, potential) of this excess is generally described in terms of *affect*, which Thrift (2008) describes as a “sense of push” (p. 182). This ‘onflow’ agency becomes “the ceaseless work of transmutation which drives the ‘social’” (ibid, p. 21), in a Latourian sense. Given its concern for future possibilities, non-representational

approaches seem to lend themselves quite well to political agendas that seek out *better* ways to practice our being-togetherness in radically expanded social contexts of material relations.

This interpretation of excess stands somewhat in contrast to that of the non-relational approach in geography, which I interpret as primarily sustained through the work of Paul Harrison (2000, 2002, 2007a, 2007b, 2008, 2009, 2010). Indeed, I would argue that non-relational theory illuminates an entirely different spatio-temporal problematic or dimension of excess. Rather than being characterized by future-present concerns for spaces of openness and agencies of enabling flow, the ‘object’ of excess in non-relational theory is one characterized by past-present concerns for spaces of rupture and passions of disabling breakdown. Because of this quality of breaking down, what becomes seen as ‘opening up’ in non-relational dimensions of excess are not new associational possibilities but rather the *collapse* of ongoing structures of relationality themselves; the crumbling deconstruction of relational infrastructures and the immobilization of relational agency, functionality and potential.

In this way, non-representationality is primarily oriented toward extensive and constructive horizons of opening in the world. Non-relationality, on the other hand, is primarily oriented toward intensive and deconstructive ruptures of breakdown in the world. However, these very different visions of opening up – one extensive, the other intensive – should not be seen as contradictory. Rather, they literally should be regarded as attending to different kinds of excess. Non-representational approaches seem to be

primarily interested in a thoroughly material excess that is outside of and future to ongoing processes of social accountability, in which accountability is tied to a politics of representation and visibility (what matters, what counts). Non-representational approaches often borrow from the natural and technical sciences in order to outline dimensions of this material excess. Likewise, they utilize biophilosophies and biopolitics to endeavor to bring this material excess into the representational realms of accountability. Non-relational approaches, on the other hand, seem to be more tightly framed around an excess alterity that is local to and present among singular instances of im/personal answerability, in which answerability is tied to a Derridean and Levinasian ethics of responsibility. With an ethics of responsibility the issue forever becomes *how* to respond to the urgency of a present *common exposure*, a local space-time of phenomenal encounter in which myself and something(s) else are present to one another in ways that exceed and confound practices of accountability. This is an ethical burden that is singular, singularizing and un-sharable; an im/personal responsibility that is “infinite and overwhelming,” in which “the subject carries the whole weight of the world on its shoulders” (Raffoul 2010, p. 17). The ethical obligation of responsibility becomes: how do I account for the presence of otherness which is present yet beyond my grasp?

In this light, non-relational approaches take seriously the notion that we are exposed to and haunted by things in the world for which we cannot account through language. As such, the pressing issue for non-relational theory becomes a cumbersome question of epistemology and ethics. This is how to attend to the local, material excess of

exposure (which I shall soon discuss in terms of *sense*) that literally defies the metaphysical conventions and normative demands of narrative accountability. Speaking of this non-relational aporia in term of an ellipsis that interrupts language, Harrison (2007a) writes:

These three points of suspension...punctuate a text and interrupt articulate discourses; three dots to mark a resistance to translation, to entering into a correspondence. Three dots to trace the nonrepresentational as the nonrelational, as that which, if it may be said to appear at all, appears as the fragmentation or ruin of appearance, as a hole in the world, as a 'blindness that reveals the very truth of the eyes' (Derrida 1993b, p. 127) and which if it may be said to take place at all, takes place as a being 'held-toward-another', as being held-toward that which 'resists being drawn into and subsumed by relation'. Three dots then to mark the analytic 'gaze veiled by tears' (ibid); *How shall I say it...* (p. 603, emphasis in original)?

Critically, then, the 'object' of excess in non-relational theory is confined to a local space-time of exposure that is indeterminately con-fused: within-without, familiar-unfamiliar, present-absent. To impersonally be-in-common-with is to *share in* a sense of excess greater than oneself that offers no accountable dividends or ideal returns in the way of determinate subject-object relations. The ruinous 'agency' of non-relational excess is like a natural disaster that destroys ideal meaning and syntactic relations – the infrastructures of language, identity and accountability (Harrison 2002).

In this way, the non-relational does not refer directly to the material relations of our being-togetherness, per se, which is perhaps the domain of non-representational theories. Rather it attends to a prehistorical commons of impersonal and transimmanent experience that cannot be properly translated into ideal forms of meaning and proper relations. The non-relational is precisely this *exposure* between world and word which overturns their relations of commensurability. Furthermore, it is always an existential, solitary and absolute sense of the world that only an 'I' can experience. The 'I' can

experience it as a witness or participant, yet it can never grasp it as something properly ‘mine’. The non-relational, then, occurs locally and transimmanently along the confines of im/personal experience as *sense* in excess of *significance*. In this way, one does not grasp the non-relationality of sense. Rather one is passively gripped by the non-relationality of sense, detained under the weight of its incomprehension. ‘I’ become trapped by something with me (immanent) yet beyond me (transcendent) to which I can marginally sense but not fully relate.

Having established a crude contrast between these two ‘non-’ approaches to spans of excess, in the following section I want to consider how Nancy’s theory of sense might offer new avenues of thought for ‘relating to the non-relational.’ In doing so, I want to draw attention to the intimate spaces and senses of excess that are *common to* “the all-too-human course of living – dying” (Harrison 2007a, p. 595), yet become nearly impossible to talk about, account for and understand. Ethically, perhaps one of the most pressing among these is suffering; an “abandonment of the self” in a “here and now divested of the possibility of relation, refuge, or dwelling” (ibid). Unlike the excessive *jouissance* of pleasure, a joyfully ecstatic commons of sense, suffering is drowning in a commons of dissolution, confusion and breaking down; a space-time of non-relational existence that “no thing...can bridge” (Frank 2001, p. 355). “Suffering is what lies beyond such help” (ibid).

Sense as local commons

In many ways Jean-Luc Nancy's theory of sense may be seen as intimately linked to a discourse of proximity in Continental philosophy; a discourse which spans the work of Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Levinas, Derrida, Blanchot and Bataille (*see* Libertson 1982), and which has been taken up by Harrison (2008) to draw attention to non-relational dimensions of experience. In this latter context, Harrison describes proximity as "an attempt to phrase and describe the relation between the self and alterity, between the same and the other, between interior and exterior," in such a way that the relation is "not contained in knowing, grasping, or comprehending but traced in their condition in exposure" (*ibid*, p. 439). In essence what proximity offers is an alternative approach for thinking the fundamental difference that binary 'couplings' such as these pairings imply without normatively positing their difference with respect to a privileged perspective of authority and appropriation of the other. In doing so, proximity becomes at once an ontological, epistemological and ethical strategy to think the 'rapport' of difference without the normative assumptions that are built into the most basic grammatical and narrative structures of subject-object relations. This strategy is executed by exteriorizing sites of mediation (formerly seated in the interior depths of subjective perception) into eventful contexts of mutual encounter and reversible exposure 'out in the world' so to speak.

By relocating the site in which mediation takes place to a time prior to representation and space exterior to subjective appropriation, it becomes possible to think

the event of mediation as a singularly holistic and reversible ‘being’ unto itself. The being-ness of this event can be discerned through a problematic which came to be, according to philosopher David Morris (2010), a primary concern in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology. This problematic concerns “how meaning comes into the world, not by being drawn from some already given origin..., but through a sort of creative operation within being, an operation of being that generates new sense” (Morris 2010, p. 141). As the framing of this inquiry already suggests, Merleau-Ponty became deeply committed to the Hegelian idea of *ek-sistence*: that being takes place ecstastically or “outside of itself” (Simpson 2009, p. 2560). Spatially, this is to say, the ‘being’ of sensation always takes place in what Nancy (1997) calls a “beyond-scheme,” which “combines the values of *on the edge of, beyond, across, and along*” the confines or limits of sensation qua mediated difference (p. 40, emphasis in original). In other words, employing a famous example of Merleau-Ponty’s, we might say that the plural sense of difference that one hand feels when touching the other hand is co-constitutive *with* the cumulative ‘being’ of sensation – an ecstatic singularity of sense which is literally shared *between* the two hands in a beyond scheme of mediation. This sensation qua an ecstatic unity of being is always *reversible* in the sense that the distinction between the touching hand and the hand being touched are infinitely alter-native; literally a relative outcome of their shared difference-in-common. This ‘being’ of sensation is spanned by a common *spacing of différance*¹⁸

¹⁸ Like the Derridean concept of *différance* which signifies a relationship that is both spatial-synchronic (differs) and temporal-diachronic (defers), the post-structural concept of *spacing* refers to a relationship of *différance* that is both spatial and temporal. Nancy (1997) also utilizes the term *span* to signify this

which is, somewhat paradoxically, constituted by a plurality yet proper to no singular constituent.

Through this discussion, it is possible to enter into a thought of this ecstatic commons of ‘being’ as *sense* itself. This notion of sense is critical to the work of Nancy, who is regarded as a ‘post-phenomenological’ vanguard in the French school of Continental philosophy (James 2006). Historically, Nancy’s philosophy takes place in a post-ontotheistic world that no longer *has* sense in terms of ideal meaning, but rather *is* sense as a material composition (Devisch 2006; Nancy 1997). This post-ontotheistic context describes the present moment of secular Western thought in which we have arrived at the terminal end of a mythological, cosmological worldview of unitary, universal meaning. This ‘end of the world’ historic context represents the teleological terminus of critical deconstructive practices which have resulted, argues Nancy, not merely in the fragmentation of unitary meaning into pluralities of difference but its pulverization into absolute nihilism. Describing this historic moment following deconstruction, Nancy (1997) writes:

There is no longer any world: no longer a *mundus*, a *cosmos*, a composed and complete order (from) within which one might find a place, a dwelling, and the elements of an orientation. Or, again, there is no longer the ‘down here’ of a world one could pass through toward a beyond or outside of this world. There is no longer any Spirit of the world, nor is there any history before whose tribunal one could stand. In other words, there is no longer any sense of the world (p. 4, emphases in original).

And yet, despite the collapse of structures of ideal meaning, the material world continues to *matter* in a very grounded and geographical sense with ethical and political

dynamic “spatiality or spaciousness [which occurs] before any distinction between space and time” (p. 14). See also Massey (2005) for a more extensive treatment of these ideas in the context of geography.

implications. Indeed, in the very moment that we are facing this crisis of *world-making* we are confronted with the challenges of *becoming world-wide* through material processes of globalization (Nancy 2008a) and the subsequent state of our ‘throwntogetherness’ (Massey 2005). The convergence of these counter-related global challenges (the falling apart of singular meaning during the coming-together of our globalized, material (inter)relations) raises questions about how to practice our co-existence; questions which have become pressing political and ethical concerns in contemporary social thought.

For Nancy the ethical question of *praxis* (how to practice our relational co-existence) is inseparable from an ontological question of *thought* (how to conceive of our relational co-existence). In a nutshell, Nancy argues that Western metaphysics has been and continues to be caught up in a regime of accountability which demands that the world *make sense* in transcendental, ideal realms of meaning. Essentially, this regime of accountability demands that the materiality of the signified world (the ‘naked’ exposure of the world ‘as such’) *make sense* within a transcendent sphere of significance (a meaningful cosmos or context) which encapsulates the world absolutely. This idealistic regime of accountability assumes a fully understandable world, which, in turn, assumes a subjective “figure of a *cosmotheoros*, an observer of a world” from which the world may be properly grasped in its universal integrity (Nancy 2007, p. 43). For Nancy the entire question of the ideal meaning *of* the world – including nihilism, which supposes a *known* essence that just happens to be empty rather than full – is bound up in a subject-based

regime of accountability which Nancy describes in terms of a unitarian, monadic onto-theology.

Importantly, however, the issue that concerns Nancy has little to do with religious practices, per se, but rather how we think the ‘world’ following the so-called historical ‘end of the world’ (Nancy 2005a). For Nancy, the whole problem with onto-theistic cosmologies is the notion of the “container topology,” (2007, p. 44) in which the world has value in relation to some transcendent-historical constellation of signifiers. Cosmologies such as these presuppose an idealized facsimile of the world against which actual events and relations in the material world are held to account.

As such, Nancy urges us to think the world as a radically *acosmic* space of reversible *difference* with no outside nor inside, no center nor periphery, no above nor below, no subjects nor objects (Nancy 1997, 2000, 2007). This is a radical alternative to an onto-theological metaphysics in that it turns away from the whole assumption of the world inherently *making sense* or *having meaning* in some transcendent context of significance. There is no *relation* that transcends the world because the world is the infinitely expanding and formative totality of the shared ‘being’ of universal sense (*see also*: Garrido 2009).

Nancy’s ontology of sense offers a compositional approach to thinking the world in terms of its materiality, which geographers Ben Anderson and John Wylie (2009) define as “that which is common across other distinctions,” or “that which is shared across differences” (p. 319). Like actor-network theory’s descriptor of assemblage, sense

functions as a kind of binding or gravity that draws a plurality of heterogeneous things into a composition of “provisional unity” (Anderson and McFarlane 2011, p. 125). In this way, both assemblage and sense are conceptual strategies that seek to account for relations between things without formally defining the *terms* of these relations through conventions of subject-object, or actor-acted upon. By doing so, both assemblage and sense may be said to resist the closure of certainty with regard to the relations between things. In both relational imaginaries, things are plurally different *and* singularly in-common at the same time. Both give endlessly equivocal responses to the question as to whether a composition of things is absolutely different or the same; plural or singular. According to these relational imaginaries, things are neither absolutely different (separate) nor same (unitary) but always somewhere in-between these binary extremes. As a result, there always remains a certain degree of spatial openness and transitive formativeness in these ontologies, precisely because things always resist fixity, closure and final formation.

This dynamic openness lends itself to thinking of relations in terms of distributions and spacings, parts and components, arrangements, compositions and corpuses, and translations and feedbacks. In doing so, it becomes possible to think of relations as the primary building blocks of compositional and functional assemblies, as opposed to being a ‘secondary layer’ of linkages, connections and interactions which take place after and atop a ‘base layer’ of proper forms that are fixed and bounded in space. In

the relational imaginaries of sense and assemblage, the emphasis becomes the co-formative and in-formative nature of material interactions.

In particular, though, the relational framework constructed by Nancy around the material imaginary of sense offers an excellent way for thinking about these more embedded and emplaced perspective of being existentially engulfed *within* an extensive world-in-formation. Whereas the imaginary of assemblage seem to work particularly well for tracing material relations that are objectively empirical, sense does a better job at tracing material relations that are affectively empirical, intimate, quasi-subjective and, above all else, human(istic). The parts, or shares, of existence that sense critically illuminates are ones in which we become *humanistically* exposed to, affected by, and responsible (be)for(e) things which we cannot grasp or understand.

Within these intimate and ethical dimensions of human relating that sense opens up, we confront a vertically dynamic world riddled with folds, barriers, valleys, curves, extensions, chasms, and fractures whose topography is more multidimensional than of the imaginary of assemblage (cf. Rose 2011). This is a world in which lines are not only potential connections to be traced between things ($x - y$), but also limits of sense to be confronted (x / y). For Nancy, sense always describes a limit that unlimits, in that sense is an opening that opens onto another that is infinitely other. Sense is always an improper, material relation with another that cannot be drawn into proper, ideal relation. For Nancy this difference-in-common is only a matter of *sense*. Everything that is exposed through sense is equally a *material* part of the world: from the most divine

presence to the most banal feeling, and from the most abstract thought to the most concrete surfaces of the earth. Indeed, Nancy (1997) writes:

[T]he sense of the word *sense* traverses the five senses, the sense of direction, common sense, semantic sense, divinatory sense, sentiment, moral sense, practical sense, aesthetic sense, all the way to that which makes possible all these senses and all these senses of ‘sense,’ their community and their disparity, which is not sense in any of these senses, but that which comes to sense” (p. 15, emphasis in original).

All things possible which are *sensible as such* exist as equally real and equally material parts of the totality of the ‘mundus corpus’ of relations of sense (Nancy 2008a).

Everything that ‘is’ *takes place* through sense and, hence, co-exists in community. This vision of the world is acosmic because it lacks a subjective figure of author-ity to properly grasp its objective whole:

We do not yet have any cosmology adequate to this noncosmos, which moreover is also not a chaos, for a chaos succeeds on or precedes a cosmos, while our *acosmos* is neither preceded nor followed by anything: on its own, it traces – all the way to the confines – the contour of the unlimited, the contour of the absolute limit that nothing else delimits. But it is a cosmology of this sort that we need, an acosmic cosmology that would no longer be caught by the look of a *kosmotheoros*, of that panoptic subject of the knowledge of the world (Nancy 1997, p. 38, emphasis in original).

For Nancy, this ‘acosmic cosmology’ requires turning away from ideologies of ‘conquering space’ which are inherently underwritten by *cosmotheoretical* ideals of appropriation, as well as by demands that the world make sense within a transcendent context of significance (Nancy 1997, 2007).¹⁹

Instead, Nancy proposes an alternative *sense of the world* in which space is truly co-emergent with the arrival of sense of another, others, something(s) different whose difference is expressed through the spacing of space and time. This yields a world in

¹⁹ See also Sloterdijk (2005), who similarly argues that it is “impossible to be monotheistic without postulating in one way or another the existence of a central point from which all of divine space radiates” (p. 233).

which “[t]here is not ‘subject’ and ‘object,’ but, rather, there are sites and places, distances: a possible *world* that is already world” (Nancy 1997, p. 61; emphasis in original). This ‘already world’ is the impossible totality of absolute fragments (many different beings) and fragmented absolutes (many different perspectives of Being, or world) whose truth/essence is shared in the ecstatic intervals of their (inter)relations; their intermedialities. This space of encounter proper to no-thing is the *transimmanent* opening of the world; an opening which takes place between things in a beyond scheme of difference-in-common (Anderson 2006b; Devisch 2000, 2006, 2007; Nancy 1997, 2000, 2007; Romanillos 2008; Simpson 2009). Recalling Merleau-Ponty’s problematic of sense, this is the creative operation of the world from within its own ‘Being’ of sense. It is a world of internal exposures of sense in which the singular comes into being through mediations of the plural, and vice versa.

Revising Heidegger’s notion of being-in-the-world, Nancy argues that being does not happen *in* the world; rather being happens *with* the world as a reversible exposure of sense. Here Nancy (1997) explains:

World means at least *being-to* or *being-toward* [être-à]; it means rapport, relation, address, sending, donation, presentation *to* – if only of entities or existents *to* each other. ... Thus, *world* is not merely the correlative of *sense*, it is structured as *sense*, and reciprocally, *sense* is structured as *world*. Clearly, the ‘sense of the world’ is a tautological question (p. 8, emphases in original).

This spacing of the ‘-to-’ is precisely the mediated commons (or fold) of *sense/world* through which (a world of) differences come into being through a structure of *sharing* [*partagé*], meaning “that which is shared in common but also that which is divided or shared out among a number of different parties” (Perpich 2005, p. 77). Ultimately, what

Nancy's thinking offers through its transimmanent foundation in sense is a non-binary, reversible structure for thinking existence as equally and simultaneously *plural* (multiple, relative, relational, fragmented, dispersed, shared out, excessive) and *singular* (individual, absolute, essential, common, local, present). Through this structure of sense, *being* becomes *being-singular-plural* (Nancy 2000). Articulating this idea, Nancy (1997) writes that:

It is not a matter of adding to a postulation of individuality or autonomy a certain number of relations and interdependencies, no matter what importance one may accord to such addenda. The 'someone' does not enter into a relation with other 'someones,' nor is there a 'community' that precedes interrelated individuals: the singular is not a *part* of a group (species, gender, class, order). The relation is contemporaneous with the singularities. 'One' means: some ones *and* some other ones, or some ones *with* other ones (p. 71, emphases in original).

Thus the plural and the singular, the relation and the individual parts, become two different inflections of the same common 'being' of sense.²⁰ This requires an ontology in which existence is always co-existence and being is always being-with; an ontology in which *nothing* (no-thing, no prior ontic subjectum, no preexisting structure of the world, no prior history of being) 'produces' the Other/others. Rather absolute difference coincides with relational commonality, and vice versa. This singular-plural structure of mediation parallels Paul Adams' (2009) recent examination of borders as "form[s] of communication" (p. 87), in which "the boundary is a performance that calls various forms of difference into being" (p. 88). This ontology casts into doubt clear distinctions

²⁰ This *sense* of being-singular-plural shares much in common with Harrison's (2007b) discussion of dwelling as a *conceptual praxis* for "think[ing] of space neither as a Kantian a priori nor as an outcome or an attribute... Neither a given nor a result" (p. 627). According to this understanding, dwelling becomes a "middle term" from which "'subject' and 'world', 'inside' and 'outside', 'private' and 'public' are lines or planes descending from the event of dwelling" (p. 628). For similar geographical discussions of this interpretation of dwelling, see: Greenhough 2010; Ingold 1995, 2008; Thrift 2004.

between relationality and non-relationality. It suggests that every relation is also a boundary and every boundary is also a relation. Both, in essence, communicate difference-in-common.

Importantly for the discipline of geography, this ontology also requires rethinking the world as *groundless yet impenetrable*: groundless because it is without precedence or reason, and impenetrable because its constitutive ‘being’ of sense is a material reality that literally exceeds appropriation and representation. This means breaking with a Cartesian tradition that thinks the ‘world’ in the image of any singular, autonomous beholder (God, Man, Subject). The issue, however, is not about denying the very real, material sense of the earthly, the natural, the cosmic, the heavenly, the hellish, the human and the subjective. Rather it is about exposing the impossibility of representing the world in the image of any presupposed essence that could exist beyond or before the world as its *ground* or basis for creation and apprehension. Thus, for Nancy (1997) the ‘end of the world’ represents nothing but the end of ideal thought about the world:

[T]he words with which one designates that which is coming to an end (history, philosophy, politics, art, world...) are not the names of subsistent realities in themselves, but the names of concepts or ideas, entirely determined within a regime of *sense* that is coming full circle and completing itself before our (thereby blinded) eyes (1997, p. 4).

In other words, the demand of ‘living on’ after the end of the world is one that requires us to confront a material world whose bare exposure of sense infinitely exceeds our finite, signifying grasp in every possible regard (Harrison 2007b, 2008; Raffoul 2010). Thus, the ‘end of the world’ signals nothing more than a profound ontological shift in which an integral world premised on ideal excess (meaning beyond sense) gives way to a

fragmented world premised on material excess (sense beyond meaning). With this structural shift, what ‘ends’ is nothing more than the cosmological vision of a finite world beholden to an infinitely greater, omniscient subject of apprehension.

‘Living on’ thus requires a thought of being-toward-the-world structured according to a *finite sense of the infinite*.²¹ This is a sense of touching upon and being touched by things that exceed one’s proper grasp; a feeling of presence or being-with that exceeds cognitive understanding; an affective intuition that exceeds representation. To have a finite sense of the infinite, however, means not just positing an infinitely greater world of difference beyond the finite limits of a coherent, autonomous, pre-constituted self (*i.e.* subjectivity). While this certainly places new limits on the subject’s ability to interpret and grasp a world beyond itself, it still clings to ideals of proper ontological boundaries existing between the self and the world. Its basis for the sense of existence still originates from an immanent, ideal ground of subjective identity. Rather, a finite sense of the infinite must be thought as groundlessly taking place through transimmanent mediations of being-singular-plural, or difference-in-common. A finite sense of being,

²¹ This idea closely parallels Derrida’s (1993a) thought concerning ‘the possibility of the impossible’ which structures his aporetic understanding of the origin of responsibility (*see*: Raffoul 2010, pp. 282-299). Indeed, Nancy (1997) draws heavily on Derrida’s thought to describe the plural ‘possibilities’ for multiple perspectives or ‘shares’ of *truth* which are interpretable from the same singular commons of *sense*. This aporetic relationship also structures Nancy’s theory of *meaning*, which he regards as sensibly real but impossibly ‘exscribed’ beyond all possible limits of signification (*see*: Nancy 1990; Perpich 2005). Thus, for Nancy absolute meaning is always a matter of interpretation and negotiation, whose singularly impossible reality takes place in a transimmanent space of commonality *between* multiple shares of truth. Applying this to religion, for instance, we might say that divine meaning takes place *in* the world somewhere in between a plurality of different truth-interpretations shared among all possible religions. Each shares a common *sense* of the divine, yet no one in particular owns the exclusive rights to its comprehensive truth/essence. Rather each only has claims to a partial share of its real but impossibly incomprehensible whole.

therefore, does not take place immanently within the limits of a proper body(-subject) as its possession, but rather transimmanently along the confines *between* bodies of material difference (Abrahamsson and Simpson 2011; Nancy 1997, 2008a; Perpich 2005).

This in-between space in which the sense of being *happens* or *takes place* is the local commons of sense; a shared opening of the world that is proper to nothing. As such, a finite sense of being which takes place under the heading of a ‘self’ always in fact takes place *beyond* the body in an ecstatic commons of sense. Hence, Nancy (2008a) writes, “I’ll never know my body, never know myself as a body *right there* where ‘corpus ego’ is an unqualified certainty” (p. 31). What becomes an unqualified certainty, in other words, is this *sense* of being (singular-plural). What becomes uncertain are questions of the proper boundaries and relations between things, both of which ask the same (impossible) question about the common *spacing* of sense, or the *opening* of the world. Where does one body end and another begin? From where does this present sense originate? Who is responsible as its agent, its author and its creator? Or, as Nancy (2008a) ponders, “who can know, here and now in this moment, what body addresses, is addressed to, what other body” (p. 59)?

This clarification of what is certain, or finite, and what is uncertain, or infinite, in sense has two major implications for an existential sense of co-existence or being-with-the-world. The first is primarily ontological, the second primarily ethical. The first concerns notions of the body as the ontic subjectum for the ego-self; its spatial domain, its foundation, and its property. What is finite, or certain, in sense is *not* an ego that

resides fully within a proper body-subject. Rather what is certain is an ecstatic origin of ego that takes place in a transimmanent beyond-space *between* multiple bodies. In other words, ‘I’ am a certainty in sense – indeed, the entire notion of sense qua *feeling* requires an existent basis of being exposed as a finite something. However, this ‘I’ does not correspond to a proper space of the body but rather to a shared and improper space of sense/world:

What then *is* someone? This is precisely what one cannot ask – even though this is *the whole question* – because if there is someone, then there has already been a response to the question (*s/he* has already responded). But there is someone, there are numerous someones, indeed, there is nothing else. *They* are unto the world. This is what ‘makes’ up the world and ‘makes sense’ (Nancy 1997, p. 70).

To get away from this ideal of the ego qua proper body without evaporating certain affective-material bases of sense that support our very real experiences of being a finite self, Nancy develops an alternative notion of *corpus* to “record the fault lines of the self’s identity, lines that both separate and join the self with itself and the rest of the world” (Perpich 2005, p. 85). Whereas body suggests integrity, definition, completion and essential property, corpus suggests an open, loosely defined collection of shared, fractal parts. Expanding upon this distinction, Nancy (2008a) writes that:

[Corpus is] a catalogue instead of a logos, the enumeration of an empirical logos, without transcendental reason, a list of gleanings, in random order and completeness, an ongoing stammer of bits and pieces, *partes extra partes*, a juxtaposition without articulation, a variety, a mix that won’t explode or implode, vague in its ordering, always extendable... (p. 53, emphasis in original).

Interestingly, what begins to emerge as Nancy progressively develops this notion of corpus is that, like Perpich suggests above, the material distinctions between self and world begin to dissolve into the notion of an infinitely extending *mundus corpus* of

absolute fragments, or parts, which share a common world by virtue of their common spacing of sense.

Within this commons of a mundus corpus, which Nancy (2008a) describes as a “strange country” (p. 55), the self does not always already *have* a properly defined place (subjective site qua body). Rather the self transitively *arises within* a local commons of sense whose spatiality exhibits qualities of both *place* (singularity, gathering, localization, absolute fragment, point, perspective, synchrony) and *space/spacing* (plurality, distribution, area, span, relation, excess, diachrony, diffusion, difference, sharing). This is a finite experience of the infinite: a life-long journey from station to station across a strange country of sense; or, as Nancy puts it, “an itinerary that can never anticipate its trace in foreign places” we encounter (ibid, p. 55). Life is taking-place as a finite part of an infinite corpus of sense. A corpus of ‘partes extra partes’ whose boundaries of relations constitute the sense of the world. In each instance, being is “a possible world that is already world” (Nancy 1997, p. 61).

What these ontological considerations suggest is that subjectivity is not an ontic given whose inviolable material foundation would be the body proper. Rather, it is itself a kind of singular-plural mediation or reversible exposure that takes place along the confines between corpora of *sense* and *language*. Subjectivity is, as Nancy (2008a) writes, a “fine wire” stretched between “two I’s, strangers to one another (but touching each other)” (p. 169). It is a span of relations of *différence* between material and symbolic registers of sense; a transitive *performative praxis* which weaves together impersonal

presence and impersonal signs into narrative threads of personal and social significance (Butler 2001, 2005; Loxley 2006). This performative practice of ‘selving’ is always simultaneously one of ‘worlding’ as well, in that sense must always be *shared out* into proper figures, accounts and relations of meaning that re-present the primal extensivity of being-*with-the-world* (Nancy 2008a, 2008b).

However given the beyond-scheme structure of sense, the ongoing performances of selving and worlding cannot be rightly regarded as anything but imperfect practices in which signifying relations of representation inevitably fall short of appropriating the more “basic and irreducible” relations of sense qua the material exposure of being-towards (Harrison 2007a). Following the ‘end of the world’, however, this is a falling short not before an ideal excess of meaning, but before a material excess of sense:

It should be a matter of sense insofar as it does not signify, and not because it consists in a signification so elevated, sublime, ultimate, or rarefied that no signifier could ever manage to present it, but, on the contrary, insofar as sense comes before all significations, pre-vents and over-takes them, even as it makes them possible, forming the opening of the general signifyingness... (or the opening of the world) in which and according to which it is first of all possible for significations to come to produce themselves (Nancy 1997, p. 10).

This is a thought of sense as the creative operation that keeps the world in play. Sense is the spark that generates and inspires ongoing practices of signification; practices of selving, othering, sharing out, contextualizing, situating, naming, comparing, judging, ordering, thematizing and relating. These are relational practices that are imperfect and always liable to fail, but that nevertheless constitute an essential and necessary responsibility of being human. This is being human not as a proper body of matter or meaning, but as a transitive ethical praxis of *signifying sense*. This supports a practice-

based understanding of re-presentation not merely as an abstract intellectual practice of *coding*, but as a creative, material and ethically weighted performance of *worlding*; an ongoing process of de/re/construction which simultaneously forms and informs our being-together as a shared world.

Given these considerations, representation is never this mechanical, automated process of repetition or reproduction, as if experience took place as an assembly line and the world came down this line as tailor-made parts suited to our models and habits of assembly. This notion of representation as an ideal correspondence between world and word does not hold following the ‘end of the world’. However, more importantly, this notion of representation as commensurable violates sense by refusing to grant it its primal excess of material impropriety. This is an *atmospheric* excess of local difference-in-common that metaphysically confounds and materially con-fuses the logic of property – proper places, proper domains, proper possessions and proper boundaries in-between – upon which the entire structure of signification depends and demands.

To exist is always to be exposed to a local confusion of sense whose extensive corpus of ‘Being’ always exceeds the limits and abilities of the proper body-subject (Adams 1995, 2005). ‘I’ am always a point of singular and finite awareness which comes-into-being *with* a proximal, fragmented and multifaceted *areality*, or environmental remainder, of sense (Nancy 1997, 2008a). This areal spacing of sense is tangible, intimately present and part of my being(-with); yet it is also inaccessibly distant, o/Other, strange, spectral, mysterious, divine, uncanny, horrible, sublime, otherworldly, ruinous and ecstatic. My

finite sense of being *comes* from beyond, from without, from another. One's limits do not declare a proper integrity (identity, body-subject, sameness). Rather they mark the difference within and the self without; a fragmented sense of being "[s]trange to myself, without estranging me" (Nancy 2008a, p. 168). This is a presence (*praesentia*) whose exposure is more revelational than representational, as Hetherington (2003) has noted. In this way, *prae-sentia* is an exposure to sense/world which calls us into being in a way that we cannot account but only respond. We should perhaps do best to refer to this response as process of *signification*, a term which best connotes the impossible, ongoing demands of performing our (co)existence as possible worlds that are already a world. This performance of signification is the challenge of 'relating to the non-relational' that is at once ontological and ethical, impossible and imperative, imperfect yet lacking nothing (Harrison 2007a).

Conclusion

Ultimately pure suffering is perhaps *the* archetype of non-relational experience in that it is a materially ruinous sense of the world that does not illuminate, explain or add up to anything in an affirmative sense. To take seriously the non-relational reality of pure suffering, I contend that analysis must *dwell* more fully in the primitive, indeterminate and prehistorical space-times of phenomenal revelation, confrontation and struggle that far precede the closures of accountability. In essence, the moment that any inquiry into conditions of existential suffering begins to account for suffering by relating it into meta-narratives about structures of power or about greater social causes, drivers and outcomes,

it ceases to *respond* to the subtractive ruin that suffering materially exposes for those who are actually engulfed by its cosmic impropriety.

This is not to say that efforts to clinically or socially account for suffering are not incredibly important scientific endeavors. I simply wish to argue that if we want to better understand the primitive materiality and spatiality of pure suffering – its subtractive agency, its dark passion, its negative phenomenality – we need to develop *speculative* and *interrogative* styles of analysis that are solely responsible to/for the *sense* of pure suffering. This would be a style of analysis that would hover over the wounds, dwell in the ruins and delve into the cavernous recesses of absence that suffering unearths – or, un/worlds.

In the context of agoraphobia, non-clinical feminist analyses have undoubtedly demonstrated a high degree of sensitivity for the presence of suffering in the agoraphobic condition. This is especially true of geographer Joyce Davidson's groundbreaking work on agoraphobia as spatial disorder that calls into question the subjective ideals of having sovereign boundaries and invulnerable authority over territories of the self. However, for as much as these accounts regard suffering as a significant part of the agoraphobic experience, they do not directly confront the non-relational *adynamia* of suffering-with-agoraphobia. This is to say, these account do not fully *dwell* in the primitive and unresolved nature of suffering-with-agoraphobia in terms of endlessly *not* being able to grasp it, understand it and make sense of it; in terms of inappropriately *not* being able to get the upper hand and subdue its intruding passion. Building on material

phenomenologies of sense and existence that I have developed so far in this work, I turn into the following chapters to dwell on this problematic of relating to the non-relational experience of suffering-with-agoraphobia.

Chapter Six

The Unworlding of Agoraphobia

“We do not know sensation: we might as well say that it occupies this black box” (Serres 2008, p. 129).

“Without public spaces to engender a world held in common, human existence is bewildering, and qualities of nonrelatedness and non-sensicalness prevail. And with this our world becomes dimly lit. In darkness we are inhabited by forces whose nature we hardly grasp” (Curtis 1999, p. 74).

Agoraphobia’s Impropriety

Agoraphobia takes place in the space between things as an improper sense of the world. It is improper because agoraphobia devastates, unseats and displaces the settledness of one’s world without reason or purpose, like the cruel indifference of a natural disaster. Except, the unsettling of agoraphobia takes place more slowly than any natural disaster. Its unworlding pace is far less sudden and sensational, occurring closer to timescales of weathering and erosion than to timescales of landfall and eruption. It is almost always this drawn-out sense of breaking down and slow unraveling that consumes the structures of a world and loosens the seams of its pieced-together coherency. Agoraphobia is not a proper, identifiable thing in the world. It is an improper event of un/worlding that disrupts the relational integrity of the world; the entirety of Being.

Based on my encounters with agoraphobic testimonies made public in the Commons, in this chapter I consider how agoraphobia primally manifests itself as an improper sense of the world (Being) whose disturbing passion unworks the proper coherency of an interrelated, holistic world. This is a fundamentally improper understanding of agoraphobia as an out-of-place sense and displacing event of suffering

passion that deforms and unworlds the integral composition of a world. Agoraphobia, it seems, is not a proper thing that can be analyzed or studied, much less fully grasped as an appropriable object. Rather, by paying heed to the inappropriate fog of suffering passion expressed in testimonies of being-with-agoraphobia, it becomes an improperly enveloping and atmospheric force of negative agency that confuses and dissolves a singular-plural sense of properly being-with-the-world.

As an improper, atmospheric event, agoraphobia surfaces along the disintegrating confines of the relational joints and seams of a world like a gas rising through a network of cracks and fissures in the earth's surface. It never seems to come from some determinate place or source but instead surfaces as this diffuse and atmospheric sense that is present about the world. Agoraphobia always seems to surface in the middle of things as a confusion of sense that defies the appropriateness of proper domains, categories, boundaries and attributes of sense. It is a reversible con-fusion of invading and evading sense; a gathering and evacuation, intrusion and diffusion that exposes as imperfect the authoritarian practices of signification; of locating, arbitrating and assigning sense a proper place in the world. Agoraphobia is not a property with content and meaning but an areal region of confused sense about the world.

Agoraphobia is a slow unworlding that composes a spacious sense of world-wide confusion and vulnerability as it decomposes the cartographic ideals of a proper world of well-defined relations amongst autonomous domains of sense. It is a sense of something taking place that does not have a place in the known world; an acosmic disaster which

does not belong to *this* world. Agoraphobia cannot be domesticated into this world like the more mundane confusions, intrusions and controversies of sense which we are in the habit of resolving without much thought or effort. Most scandals of sense come to pass like fleeting encounters, flashing exposures, near glances, superficial blows or momentary flights of ecstasy. For a moment something spectacularly impossible flares up in the world, and then it is gone. Done. Already passed. Perhaps not grasped or understood, but sensed in passing as its burning intensity summarily exhausts itself.

However, like all forms of pure suffering, agoraphobia is a relentless sense of impossible breakdown that keeps coming yet never seems to pass. It is an attenuated sense of unworlding, like the feeling polar bears might have when, piece by piece, the ground on which they have been living starts to break up, enisling them to a world retreating into an expanse of empty ocean. Like other kinds of suffering, agoraphobia is this enisled sense of spacious space opening up as proximities of proper relations becomes attenuated. It is a sense of the coherent world coming apart at the seams to expose something else; a possible other-world that is already, and terribly still, a world. No longer is the world this integral network of pathways, connections and transits. Rather it is the fragmentary spacings of what remain after these systems of relations break down. No longer is the self this well-traveled agent that makes these connections, always arriving on time and intact. Rather, it is a breaking down along the way, a being detained, derailed and coming undone. Agoraphobia is a sense of being stilled and stunned by a

“glitch in the projects we call things like the self, agency, home, a life” (Stewart 2007, p. 19).

If suffering signifies a singular event of non-relational affliction that “actively undermines and overwhelms the subject’s own projection of meaning” (White 2012, p. 115), then we must fully consider how suffering’s impropriety destabilizes the entire scope of the secured *relation* implied by ‘subjective’ notions of projection, intentionality, meaning and possession. In other words we need to consider how the always singular event of *impropriety* – a term which I shall henceforth use to signify the inappropriable essence of pure suffering – undermines not just subjectivity (the “projector,” or the “receiver”) but also the entire project (the entire “broadcast”) of the world itself.

While there is certainly much of value to be gained from investigating agoraphobia as a generalizable, sociological-cum-geographical phenomenon that is readably characterized by certain spatial patterns and social habits which deviate from the norm, my interest with the disorder, as I have already discussed in some detail, lies elsewhere. Specifically, I am not interested in the more mundane asocial habits and patterns of spatial non-mobility that typically concern non-clinical analyses of agoraphobia. Rather, I am interested in the primally phenomenal and existential experiences of confronting and responding to the corrosive and suffering impropriety that constitutes agoraphobia as a singular, unprecedented and catastrophic event of impropriety.

As one patterned way among many in which impropriety manifests itself in the world, agoraphobia is an impossible breakdown in the on-going project of worlding. It is a suffering sense of being estranged from what is proper, in the midst of what is not. Agoraphobia is not this proper body or thing but an areal corpus of fractious confusion whose dis-harmonious difference-in-common reverberates like a white noise between the surfaces of many things. Between surfaces of sense and thought; surfaces of affect, drives, compulsions and triggers; surfaces of pain, illness and disease; surfaces of medicine, doctors' offices, side effects, and chemical interactions; surfaces of religion and science; surfaces of ideology and discourse; surfaces of different places real and imagined, and different times past, present and future; surfaces of memories, scars and nerves; surfaces of norms, conventions and expectations; surfaces of desire, dreams and hope. It is an ominous coming together that is also a ruinous falling apart; a grinding down and wearing away that is also an accumulation and building up of something terribly new. However agoraphobia never really adds up. It is an improper, turbulent presence that comes between things, like the surfacing of bad vibes that expose the fragmentedness and unsettledness of one's world. Agoraphobia is this unworldly breakdown.

Compositions of world

To have a proper sense of the world is to feel like things more or less fit together in a way that conforms to situated expectations and ideals about how the world should be. It is the chance fortune of the world being composed in such a way that makes sense and

fits, more or less, with one's existing frame of world, or *frameworld*. These fortunate compositions are the synchronic space-times of our lives in which the world is functionally well-composed and harmonious. These compositions of a harmonious world are 'good' in the sense that they *positively* reinforce our habits for relating to and accounting for the world.²² Fortunate compositions are never ideal in the sense that what's given would be perfectly compatible with our expectations and desires. Instead fortunate compositions are, at best, rough translations. They never make perfect sense, but they are well enough understood to carry on habitualized ways of interpreting, structuring and signifying experience.

Like a gift of inheritance, good compositions of the world are material fortunes that we as humans simply 'come into', as opposed to something we could actively autonomously realize through a sovereignty of sheer will.²³ Sometimes things just fall into place and, at least for a while, all is right with the world – or at least good enough in a pragmatic sense to more or less work and make sense. In space-times of harmonious composition the world works in an automated, hands-free, inconspicuous kind of way. It becomes an inhabitable and functional dwelling-place. When this happens, the world falls

²² In instances in which the world makes sense but in a way that is unpleasant, painful or depressing, the world might be an *unfortunate* composition. It would be mostly legible, but what happens would be mostly bad and unwanted.

²³ Compare: "[Y]ou were born by chance, and all the decisive turns in your life – that you were born in a suburb in the richest country in the world or in a hovel in the vast outer zone, that you had a normal human body or a genetic defect, that you had the brains to get through school or perhaps the university, that you happened to meet someone you fell in love with, that you are of an expansive happy disposition or melancholic, that you were free to release your superabundant energies or were constricted fearfully to your needs and wants – all that was each time a matter of good or bad luck. This repeated sense of blows of good or bad luck leaves you gaping open to an outside where unintelligible, visibly random forces hold sway" (Lingis 2007, p. 75).

into place and there is a *good fit* between all the many parts and pieces that make up the corpus of a proper world. Out of the random cacophony of noise, harmonies and symphonies begin to emerge. The figure of a properly functioning system with coherent rhythms starts to resolve itself. Good compositions are a world coming into focus, or higher resolution, without ever becoming completely ‘in focus’ or fully resolved. A good composition is a well-received sense of the world that is felt but not entirely grasped, or touched on but never fully understood.

There is certainly a subjective aspect to this sense of good composition of the world. But there is also, reversibly so, a material geography to the way things relationally come together in certain space-times of life to create good ways of being-with-the-world. This proper sense of world-composition is more than a feeling, in the diminutive sense of a subjective property. It is an ideo-material rhythm and harmony of good relations: a singular-plural sense of being in-time, in-step and in-tune with the rest of the world. A good composition is a spatial arrangement of sense / sense of arrangement that has long occupied a primary interest in the subfield of environmental aesthetics, albeit not always explicitly described in this way.

What kinds of things go into the making of worlds that are decent and well-composed? Although this question has been on the agenda in geography since the humanist turn, we have still only begun to imagine – and, especially, to incorporate together – all the different parts and relations that might go into the making of good compositions of the world; a world that geographer Ian Shaw (2012) defines as “the set

of meaningful practices, equipment, and sayings that relate to a *relational whole*, of which Dasein is practically immersed and cares about, as ‘being-in-the-world’” (p. 617).

There are many modes, durations and intensities to good worlds. Sometimes the decency of a world is latent, inconspicuous and taken for granted, like an envelope or bubble whose atmospheric security is only appreciated after its compositional integrity has been compromised. Perhaps this sense of proper decency is what people intend to signify when they talk about previous worlds, or *pre-worlds*, before crises like 9/11, the Holocaust, or profound personal tragedies shatter the latent put-togetherness of a world. Other times the good fortune of a world burns white-hot with a conspicuous intensity of overdrive that we try to savor because we intuitively know it is *too good* to last. The latter are fleeting worlds that always seem to pass as quickly as they came. Still other times a good world is only absently present from across an insurmountable distance of otherness; a tangible yet inappropriate proximity like the other side of a border (Polkinhorn, et al. 1995; Casey 2011) – a world of fortune and possibility that is close enough to sense yet far enough away to remain unattainable. And still other times, a good world is something unproblematically simple and magical that we grow out of over time; an adolescent world that fades into the past but lives on as a lasting impression of youthful wonder and reverie.

To lose touch with a proper sense of the world that is well-composed is to forever know of a better world; a more ideal possibility for being-with-the-world.

Scandals of sense

“The horizon of universal intelligibility is opened up and cleared with a bloody stroke” (Lyotard 1998, p. 34).

Agoraphobia is never this integral or well-composed thing, as its tidy name might suggest. Rather it is always this improper and diffuse corpus of improper sense shared among a diachronic space of many things, spread out across space and time, that somehow ‘compose’ into this confusing, mixed-up sense of the world. Panic attacks from decades ago mix with more recent episodes, drawing together a heterotopic confusion of places, times and situations: the soup isle at the grocery store where the last panic attack was suffered becomes con-fused *with* the school cafeteria line where the first one occurred, which becomes confused *with* other places and times somehow also drawn into the common space of agoraphobia’s improper sense. Lots of other things also get drawn into the *mix* of agoraphobia’s impropriety. Things like memories, desires, needs, beliefs, affects, places, environments, ideals, social norms, social problems, discourses, doctors, drugs, chemistries, genetics, physical disabilities, accidents, chance encounters, chronic pain and illness²⁴, life cycles²⁵, and improper drives (such as anxiety, but also

²⁴ This is particularly the case with fibromyalgia, which seems to have a significant correlation with agoraphobia. Anecdotally I observed this correlation during my qualitative research of agoraphobic testimonies. Clinical studies have also documented a comorbid relationship between fibromyalgia and affective disorders such as agoraphobia (Hudson, *et al.* 1992; Thieme, *et al.* 2004). This relationship exposes a dimension of *physical pain* common with agoraphobia, which tends to get overlooked in critical social analyses which seek to account for the disorder through politicized social discourses. As I argue elsewhere, these explanatory accounts tend to reduce the senseless improprieties of *pain* and *suffering* common with agoraphobia into an overly-simplified, accountable social problem whose (ideal) resolution becomes clear to the analyst, even though agoraphobia’s possible origins and resolutions are *never* this clear (or this politicized) to the sufferers themselves. Accommodating the complex materialities of pain and suffering with agoraphobia requires that we admit a larger degree of uncertainty and open-endedness in our accounts of the disorder (Latour 2005).

compulsions like cutting, which is common with agoraphobic suffering). These incompatible parts, pieces, spaces and times correlate somehow to compose agoraphobia as a confused sense of impropriety about the world.

Agoraphobia, as an improper sense of the (singular-plural composition of) world, is present in trace amounts with all of these things; not residing in any one of these parts but shared diffusely across the common space of their confusion. This not being able to make proper sense of agoraphobia is perhaps the most anguishing part of suffering with its unruly disorder. The diachronic spacing, or limitless drawing-out, of suffering is what remains to be accounted for in conventional narratives of agoraphobia. This dissolution is what makes agoraphobia into a drawn-out scandal of sense: a lasting event that erodes, unsettles and decomposes certainties about the world. Like an ink blot that cannibalizes its own kind as it bleeds across the page, agoraphobia is an improper de/composition of the world that dissolves what was formerly proper, coherent and sensible.

This mixed-up sense of agoraphobia materially takes place somewhere in the commons of confusion between subjective and objective domains of the world.

Agoraphobia is experientially never entirely familiar nor absolutely alien, but somewhere in the shared space of their difference. It is like a foreign bond that one shares with a slightly strange, slightly distant relative to which one is somehow related but also worlds

²⁵ For example, Davidson (2001a, 2003a) has written anecdotally about a possible correlation between pregnancy and the onset of agoraphobia. Davidson suggests that this might be due to the loss of a sense of control over one's body, in concert with the public gaze upon the socially 'indecent' spectacle of the pregnant woman. While agoraphobia is by no means exclusive to pregnancy, this documented correlation between the two is generally supported by a corpus of clinical research. However the possible drivers attributed to this potential correlation between pregnancy and agoraphobia widely vary among a range of social, psychological and physiological factors, thus complicating Davidson's analysis (Bandelow, *et al.* 2006; Cowley and Roy-Byrne 1989; Klein 1996; Watson, *et al.* 1984).

apart from. Or better yet, it is like a face encountered on the street that registers somewhere in the space between recognizable and unknown; a marginal sense of non/relation that is too familiar to dismiss yet too improper to resolve.

Except, to imagine what agoraphobia feels like, we would have to scale up this minor sense of confusion to an elevated, worldwide crisis.²⁶ Agoraphobia is a *co-existential confusion* that is far more profound than the sense of something being out-of-place in the world, as Heidegger (1985) spoke of singular things becoming unworlded from their “referential totality” (p. 187). Rather, it is a crisis of the totality of the world itself: its frameworks, its structures and its apparent systems of order and meaning. Agoraphobia is an excess of confusion / confusion of excess that reverberates and corrodes through proper structures and foundations of a world like a disastrous chain of events. Its unbounded areality does not just upset a coherent sense of self. Agoraphobia’s reverberating improprieties unsettle the entire, interdependent order of the world. Its disorder is spatially and singular-plurally worldwide. Alluding to this diffuse and extensive sense of disorder, one poetic testimony about agoraphobia posted in the Commons reads:

What is this?
It’s not right.
I’m in control,
I’m sure I am.
I need to run,
Never stop running,

²⁶ In concert with Nancy (2008a), who is undoubtedly influenced by Heidegger’s concept of ‘worldhood,’ this notion of worldwide primarily refers to a systematic logic of relations: “This, then, is what *world-wide* means first and foremost; it’s not necessarily something that occupies the whole planet...but what, in place of a cosmos and its gods, in place of nature and its humans, distributes and gathers bodies, the space of their extension, the exposition of their denuding” (p. 79).

I can get away from this.
Just stop,
You are mine,
Do I control you?
Do you control me?
So frightened now,
You have won!
...
You always prevail.
But do I let you win?
Are we allies?
Wasn't it me pulling the strings all along?²⁷

Agoraphobia is always this profound scandal of confusion between self and other, internal and external, acting and acted upon, control and powerlessness. Because of this improper confusion agoraphobia is intensely upsetting and unsettling in ways that defy properties of agency, causality and accountability. This upsetting scandal of sense, which takes place uncertainly *between* self and world is what the (clinical) term 'affective disorder' should signify whenever we use it in the context of agoraphobia, or any other affective crisis of being-with-world for that matter.

When sufferers give witness to co-existential 'disorder' in their life-worlds, this lack of order never properly inheres within the boundaries of the self. Rather, this abstract sense of disorder is so diffuse as to describe a being-with-the-world in general (relational co-existence). To think about 'disorder' in this way, as a singular-plural disjuncture between self and world, means to situate its referential sense in an improper space *between* things, so that its proper provenance, identity and causation are forever suspect, scandalous and subject multiple theories and accounts. All we can definitively say about

²⁷ Excerpt from forum posting "A verse....for the Panicked Mind," written in 2010.

agoraphobia is that there is disorder with, or about, the world; a common disharmony that is reversibly wrong with the world and wrong with oneself.

Can we talk about this excessive sense of dissonance without pinning its meaning onto something determinate *in* the world? Can we adopt an ethos of compassion and say, in unison with those who suffer with agoraphobia, that we cannot say for certain what exactly is happening, beyond something definitively unsettling about the world? This would require treating agoraphobia less as a properly enworlded sign, symbol or symptom of something else, and more as a diffusely areal sense about the world which takes place improperly between things, in their common space of confusion. To do so would be to let agoraphobia remain *open*, which is to say at least partially undetermined and unaccounted for. This must be done if we are to appreciate how agoraphobia is *suffered* as a singularly lived scandal of sense.

Agoraphobia is a scandal of sense because it exposes flaws, imperfections and holes in the social logics of a proper world, as a seamless relational totality that neatly fits together and makes integral sense. Like all scandals of sense, agoraphobia takes place in the space between two diametrically different versions of the same thing; a space of confusion that spans the distance between what one thought to be proper and decent about the world and the material impropriety and indecency with which one is now confronted. For those of us who are fortunate, we grow up in developed worlds where there is a proper place, answer, explanation, norm, cure or solution for almost everything.

For the most part, we are collectively afforded the luxury of feeling that the world is, for the most part, secure, decent and well-composed.

As a scandal of sense/world, agoraphobia overturns this fortunate sense of dwelling, like the unsettling feeling that circulates through a community suddenly gripped by an outbreak of serial violence. It exposes something inappropriate and indecent in the heart(h) of one's own world: proximally lurking yet elusively on the loose like the dark presence of a fugitive terror among us. Except the scandal of agoraphobia is typically not this sensational, in the sense that it does not play out as this public spectacle of collective fear. Rather agoraphobia is mostly an intimate scandal of sense/world whose impropriety takes place for one alone, confronted from the solitary bunkers of domestic safety zones (Holmes 2008). Nevertheless, it unsettles illusions of propriety, order, and security of a world-in-place just as surely as a community gripped by an elusive terror. Like a fugitive-at-large, agoraphobia leaves an unsettling trace of its impropriety on everything that touches it. As a scandal of sense, agoraphobia is this diffuse, lurking, violate presence that is tangibly present and concrete yet elusive, diffusely abstract and (still) at large. The fugitive sense of agoraphobia remains at large somewhere among all the things improperly drawn together by its scandalous and violate impropriety. Like a spectral presence, it resides close enough to sense in one's midst yet far enough to remain beyond apprehension. Its presence is only negatively discerned in the bereft traces of theft and ruin it exposes.

Unworlding

“To have a system, this is what is fatal for the mind; not to have one, this too is fatal”
(Frederick Schlegel, cited in Blanchot 1995, p. 61).

Making, or resolving, sense is very much a necessary but contingent human practice of world composition, or worlding. Necessary, because there is a material ‘sense of push’ (Thrift 2008) that is always unsettling compositions of world to some varying degree. Our singular existence is premised on our ability to resolve disturbances and disagreements of sense, whether minor or severe, which unsettle the put-togetherness of our worlds and our properly situated places within them. Yet this resolute practice is also always contingent because our ability to respond is always to some varying degree imperfect and unfit to resolve the improper affects/effects of events which confront us. We always struggle – and inevitably fail – to some degree with our projects of worlding. As such, performances of subjectification and worlding are always areal approximations of sense which yield translations that are not precise but proximal at best. It is as if there were a slight asymmetry between impersonal sense and personal signification and, because of this, there is always this non-relational space in which improper experience takes place; a sense of the world that affects us and touches us deeply yet cannot be definitely resolved or figured into something properly understood (Harrison 2007a). This is an unsecured opening in the world; a space of common impropriety.

This improper, or non-relational, space of experience is liminal and undefined in an areal sense; not entirely absent or present, nor absolutely within or without, but “transimmanent” (Nancy 1997). It is a *truly communal* space of sense / sense of space,

meaning that it is proper to no one in particular but shared among different things at large in the world. This improper space of sense / sense of space becomes indexed to things like the unconscious, the imprint of an alter-ego (the other within), the revelation of a spirit, the trace of something building or dissipating, or the haunting presence of a spectre or ghost. More generally, this non-relational space is where the impropriety of affect takes place. It is a space of experience beyond the limits of our frameworlds where ecstatic confusions that range from being intoxicatingly pleasurable to sufferingly terrible happen. Ecstasy is always described a spatial confusion of sense, as well as a diachronic sense of spacing out, becoming areal and diffuse.

In the case of pleasure, Levinas (2003) describes this intoxicating sense of coming undone as follows:

There is something dizzying to pleasure's unfolding... The being feels its substance somehow draining from it; it grows lighter, as if drunk, and disperses... We therefore note in pleasure an abandonment, a loss of oneself, a getting out of oneself, an ecstasy: so many traits that describe the promise of escape contained in pleasure's essence (p. 61).

With pleasure there is a sense of escaping the rigid confines of a framed-in world to experience a sublime sense of transcendent freedom and weightlessness that is cut "adrift from all conceptions of the world and worldviews – from all significations of the world" (Nancy 1997, p. 39). Pleasure is floating high; a liberating sense of becoming "unriveted" from the burdens of propriety (Levinas 2003). Pleasure is willfully and self-indulgently abandoning the drags of a proper world, replete with all the trappings of appropriate norms, confining boundaries, conforming frames and banal routines of sameness. Ecstatic

pleasure is a self-indulgent spacing out like hopping a flight out of town or hitting the open road; an intoxicating sense of leaving one's world behind, at least for a while.²⁸

However, with suffering the ecstatic feeling is closer to a sense of ruinous abandonment and unwilling disintegration than to one of transcendent liberation (Frank 2001; Harrison 2007a; Miller 1988; Scarry 1985). While liberation implies transcending proper boundaries, disintegration implies the dissolution of proper boundaries into a confusion of common impropriety. It is a sense of the world burning down with one trapped inside, unable to escape the engulfing disaster. This is a sense of ruinous unworlding that is common to other experiences of suffering with illness, schizophrenia, depression, abuse, addiction, bereavement, anxiety, panic and other existential crises that grow to become worldwide disasters. These are some of the terrible things that are not supposed to happen in our worlds and to our worlds; improprieties violate and violent that do not simply un-self the self, but also un-world the world. With ruinous unworlding there is no transcendent sense of getting out. Rather there is a terrible sense of everything proper and good un/systematically coming undone – the world, oneself, proper boundaries and relations between things. This ruinous unworlding is being-with – being riveted, exposed to and vulnerable before – a common sense of disintegration which transimmanently exceeds proper boundaries between self and world, inside and outside, mine and other. Unworlding is an ecological disaster that disrupts the flows of a system and unsettles its delicate achievements of order. Disintegration pulses through the very

²⁸ Levinas (2003) does a masterful job of describing the impossibility of permanent escape from our existent, embodied, and situated contexts of being. Much of his thesis on escape was developed while Levinas was imprisoned in a Nazi war camp for Jews during World War II.

channels of a world like an explosion that shines light on the very pathways it is in the process of tearing apart.

The ruinous unworlding of suffering is this improper sense of space / space of sense in which the proper boundaries between self and world become confused spaces and diffuse spacings-out. It is an undoing that is not properly one's own nor that of another but improperly somewhere diffusely in between, mixed up. In her brilliant exploration into the affective dimensions of panic, including her own panic attacks, Jackie Orr (2006) writes of this surge of improper dissolution in terms of a "traumatic 'experience' [that] breaks unto and breaks open the bounded subject or 'self,'" and "takes place in the shattered borderlands of any subject/object distinction" (p. 21).²⁹ This metaphysical confusion, I want to suggest, is a way to abstractly conceptualize the material sense of unworlding that is common to the many different ways of human suffering. Unworlding intends to imagine what this relational shattering and breaking up feels like; a coming undone that involves yet exceeds the proper limits of the self.

There is a palpable, yet incredibly subtle sense of unworlding that traces itself across the corpus of personal testimonies of agoraphobia. Unworlding describes an areal and complex space of sense / sense of space which is exscribed along the fringes of agoraphobic testimonies. It is an improper space/sense which analytical accounts of agoraphobia have yet to capture because it does not fit in the mold of proper relations. This complex sense of unworlding is something that Davidson (2003a) vividly – if not all

²⁹ See Leys (2000) for a similar account of trauma.

too briefly – touches upon in a chapter of her book in which she presents a short ethnography of a middle-aged agoraphobic sufferer named ‘Linda.’ Conveying a feeling similar to the one Orr describes above, Davidson tells of a “confusion Linda experiences in the boundaries of her phenomenal body, an *intolerable* and unsustainable confusion of internal and external space” (p. 98, emphasis in original).

She clearly loses the ability to project a protective boundary around herself and, as a result, is both assaulted by external space, *crumbling* inwardly under its pressure, and unable to prevent internal space from *exploding* outwards. Both sensations indicate a lack of containment, the *crack* that permits dispersion of self into its surroundings (ibid, emphases in original).

This sense of unworlding surpasses that of exposure to reveal an active process of confusion: invasion with evasion, violation with liquidation. It is an active-passive spacing of disintegration: the coming together of the coming undone, the happening of undoing, the appearance of withdrawing. Unworlding describes this improper sense of diffuse confusion in which the boundaries between internal and external spaces begin to dissolve.

Unworlding describes the diachronic *spacing* of these boundaries, in terms of a proper world coming undone. It is a spacing of sense / sensing of space in which the relational propriety of boundaries and agencies come undone, like cosmic organisms being torn apart by some common force of impropriety which diffusely tugs on being from all directions. Unworlding is a way to speak of these improper agencies of chaos and confusion which wreck lifeworlds. Evoking the elusive, dark and atmospheric materiality of this agency, one agoraphobic sufferer writes:

The loneliness envelops me, surrounds me, but it’s not my companion. It’s not like the gentle, comforting, and warm feeling of being wrapped in a blanket of care and understanding. Rather it’s like being surrounded by a hurricane, but by no means am I the calmness of the central eye.

Instead I'm my own tempest within the hurricane, being battered and tossed everywhere, feeling as though, if I do not hold on really tightly, my own limbs will be torn off and become whisked away into the storm of oblivion.³⁰

Unworlding is this transimmanent and transitive sense of the world – including oneself – coming apart at the seams. With unworlding the proper boundaries between things – which also serve as the pathways for meaningful relations – break apart and space out like a fragile globe shattering in slow motion while some force of destruction still continues to pass through it. This acosmic force of unworlding is similar to how Mick Smith, Joyce Davidson and Victoria Henderson (Smith, *et al.* 2012) have recently described the “disturbing spatial transformations” that affect the lifeworlds of phobic sufferers more generally. Describing a kind of cosmic-existential decomposition that is strikingly similar to the concept of unworlding I am developing here, they write that “when the specific ‘objects’ that trigger [disturbing] events enter the phobic’s orbit, the emotional forces associated with them warp the phenomenology of the everyday world in ways analogous to the spatial/temporal distortions exerted by strong gravitational fields” (p. 61).

Agoraphobia is unworlding, but it is also a mode of living on after the end of the world. It is a living through the disaster of unworlding, managing to somehow endure it without entirely losing a sense of one’s singular identity; that constellation of meaning which extends all the way to the limits of one’s world, as Paul Adams (1995, 2005) has vividly conveyed. In the falling apart of proper boundaries and relations the self becomes

³⁰ Excerpt from forum post “Is it that difficult...?,” written in 2008.

this diffuse sense of being fragmented and spaced out. An agoraphobic testimony posted in the Commons speaks to this sense of becoming undone:

When I cracked I shattered into millions of pieces and all the ugly that was silently inside me poured out. My soul felt broken, the pain was so intense, I was utterly raw. I observed myself from outside my own body, as if I were hovering above. I sensed feelings I could not describe, I shook terribly. ... I sensed people's presence that I could not see. I was gone and I was what remained.³¹

Unworlding is the non-relational force of destruction which is evocatively exscribed just beyond the margins of this account; the improper agency of otherness that somehow does the undoing, fragmenting, invading and spacing out of the self in this account.

While much attention has been paid in social analyses to the synchronic sense of movement inhibition and spatial boundedness with agoraphobia, little has been written about its diachronic sense of spacing out, dissolving, unworlding. Yet, we need both in order to try to account for agoraphobia. Agoraphobia is not simply a walling in or a closing off (secondary response). It is also, prior to this, an improper intrusion, evasion and scandal of sense (primal call). Agoraphobia takes place in the space between call and response, unworlding and worlding: a tearing apart and a walling in; a non-relational process of breaking down and a relational practice of piecing together, reforming and rebuilding. Unworlding is the call of agoraphobia.

Span of suffering

To say that agoraphobia is fundamentally a kind of suffering is to think of its taking place not purely in terms of synchronic space but also in terms of diachronic spacing. This means paying special attention to the different temporalities of space, and

³¹ Excerpt from forum post "My Disaster," written in 2010.

in particular to the areal qualities of worlds/selves which span space and time in ways that defy straightforward representation (Adams 1995, 2005; Hägerstrand 1970; Massey 2005; Parkes and Thrift 1980). We tend to think of agoraphobia as an inhibited sense of confinement, and certainly there is much truth to this synchronic experience. However, there is also a diachronic *spacing* of attenuation, breakdown and coming undone which describes a transitive sense of living-with-agoraphobia.

Alphonso Lingis (2007) has written that “impassioned experiences, which erupt, endure and come to an end, contain a vivid sense of time – of a stretch of personal time cut off from the public or common time as from the time of nature” (p. 16). Citing an example, he states that “the time of anger or shame is that of the immediate past still flanking the present” (ibid). Indeed, there is a burning intensity to anger or shame, which tends to diminish as the immediate past drifts into an immemorial past. Equally so, we might say that impassioned experiences contain a vivid sense of space – a stretch of personal space cut off from the social world. In this regard, the *spacing* of anger or shame would be that of proximity; a spacing of intensity which diminishes with distance (and time). As an impassioned experience, agoraphobia, on the other hand, is a spacious distance which builds across space and time. Like all forms of suffering, the spacing of agoraphobia is that of a withdrawing expanse which intensifies with distance and time.

Agoraphobia is constituted not so much by the episodic punctuations of panic as by the *empty* intervals afterwards and in-between which mark a passive spacing of withdrawal. There is an areal and ethereal quality to these intervals of space and spacing

which mark the growing emptiness of a world fragmented and attenuated by agoraphobic unworlding. In the testimonial narratives of agoraphobic sufferers there is often an overwhelming sense of distance and decay that defies representation:

I once had a completely normal life until I was hit by [agoraphobia] in my late twenties. I had lived in various cities including NYC, rode the subway on a regular basis, had many friends and often went out partying past 4AM. The last job I had outside the house was fantastic, I was forced to give up stock options worth a quarter of a million dollars because this affliction was leading me into a downward spiral. At the time I assumed I was still young enough to overcome it and climb my way out.

Now I am in my mid forties, and I basically have not had any relationships since then. Along the way I have managed to make a few new friends here and there, but more or less I hold on as best I can to the relationships I formed back when I was "normal". I'm pretty close with my in-laws and siblings, so that helps. But they're all becoming progressively frustrated with me as time goes by, and I am with myself as well. I often look at pictures from the past on my Facebook page, and it is almost as if I am looking at another person. Growing up I would throw parties with hundreds of guests at my house, now that seems so distant.³²

However, it also implies the presence of something undeniably human in the midst of agoraphobic unworlding; a *voice* that wants to be someone and have a world. A voice that stands out against agoraphobia's unworlding as distinct and opposing, even as it is engulfed and under siege. This human voice is a material corpus made up of both physical and ideational parts. It comes from an improper place in the midst of agoraphobic unworlding, an out-of-place place where it was never supposed to have ended up; a place of losing and being lost; a place in the midst of a world displacing, cracking and crumbling. This is a voice that speaks of human desire. The desire to *dwell*: to arrive at a restful place of settlement where one can feel at home *in* the world.

It is also a voice that speaks of human survival. A surviving voice that is somehow still holding on and keeping it together despite being exposed to the ruinous

³² Excerpt from forum post "searching for contact with other agoraphobics," written in 2011.

elements of unworlding. The voice of survival is always a witness to unworlding. This voice is someone who can testify to what it means to have a (fleeting) grasp of the world, only to lose one's hold on it. This voice tells of surviving a world that does not cease to exist or disappear altogether, but rather one that indefinitely dissolves out of one's grip, diffusing out of hand and drifting out of reach without ever entirely disappearing.

But, painfully and overwhelmingly so, this is also a voice that speaks of human suffering. If agoraphobic unworlding indexes a sense of things falling apart, suffering indexes a clear sense of *being* and *having* a world; a clear sense of something worth living and fighting for. This is a sense of being that not only synchronically confronts the 'felt-fact' (Scarry 1985) of agoraphobia at each moment along the way, but also accompanies its diachronic span of functional and relational breakdown:

I was once incredibly confident, social and energetic. Now I'm NONE of these things. I live with anxiety all the time. I can NEVER relax.³³

This is suffering as co-present with the other-worldly terrors and anxieties of unworlding; a being-with unworlding in the paradoxical sense of intimately being a part of something that is coming apart. It is a transimmanent sense of things falling apart around oneself and within oneself. Suffering is the *human* part of the corpus of agoraphobic unworlding.

The voice of suffering tells of a *proper* sense of world that has been and continues to be attenuated by the spacing of unworlding, like something being stretched to the breaking point. This voice of suffering present in testimonies about living-with-

³³ Excerpt from forum post "Dealing with a Panic Attack," written in 2008.

agoraphobia speaks to a functional decline and a relational unbecoming across extensions of space and time:

I have let days slip into weeks, weeks slip into months, months slip into years of pain and anguish ...I have to put a stop to this...Something inside me needs to change, hurt and sadness have to come to an end...I need to draw a line...³⁴

Suffering is this sense of being drawn out by the draining, centrifugal sense of unworlding. There is rarely, if ever, a sense of stasis in testimonies that speak to the event of living with agoraphobia:

i'm coming apart at the tattered seams of my life, nothing makes sense, everything is confusing me. i cannot see clearly, i have lost faith in myself, i am so mad and yet i feel so worn out. i am always crying and yet sometimes i'll realize i'm laughing at the same time even though there's nothing to laugh at, the tears burn my tired face as they fall.

what's the purpose of all this, i feel very helpless and don't know if i'll ever be stable again, i have endured this for too long and now i need to make it stop, completely stop.³⁵

Rather, there is more often an unsettling sense of the sliding and hemorrhaging release of unworlding, from which sufferers resolve to insulate themselves by drawing lines, imposing boundaries, building walls, and bunkering down into 'safe modes' of dwelling.

Within this struggle, the voice of suffering is a voice of resistance that is embroiled in but opposed to the disaster of unworlding. In agoraphobia it is a voice that struggles to properly resolve and repair the limits of oneself amidst the swirling improprieties of unworlding. Rather than being properly limited as insularly within, this is a voice that tells of endlessly becoming unlimited across spans of space and time like a finite solution diffusing into an areality of improper sense. Describing this areal quality of improper sense through the allegory of night, Merleau-Ponty (2002) expresses:

³⁴ Excerpt from forum post "I'll have to let ya know later..." written in 2011.

³⁵ Excerpt from forum post "i need help," written in 2009.

Night is not an object before me; it enwraps me and infiltrates through my senses, stifling my recollections and almost destroying my personal identity. I am no longer withdrawn into my perceptual look-out from which I watch the outlines of objects moving at a distance. ... [I]t is pure depth without foreground and background, without surfaces and without any distance separating it from me (Merleau-Ponty 2002, p. 330).

Enveloped within this metaphorical night, suffering is a tenuous but resolute voice that tells of becoming undone, but also still being someone and having a world in which one properly belongs. In testimonies about living with agoraphobia, suffering seems to trace the attenuating distance between being and unbecoming:

I am not the person I once was. I am worn down... I'm depressed. I'm tired of losing everything and always being stressed out. On top of all this I feel more alone than ever and need to figure out how to conquer this before it takes from me absolutely everything.³⁶

There is always this proper sense of being-in-place and being-in-rhythm with the world which precedes the unsettling disruption of agoraphobia. Agoraphobia requires an a priori relational sense of rhythm, emplacement, positive resonance and good fit between self and world; good and decent relational situation to become voided, unsettled and displaced; a human to become dehumanized; a self to become othered; and a community of relations and a fitness of meanings to become disrupted, broken down and disfunctionally thrown off-line. In total, agoraphobia presupposes and requires a (proper) world to become unworlded.

The span of suffering measures the estranging distance of coming apart; becoming unsettled, displaced and dispossessed. Thus, suffering with agoraphobia is not merely a question of synchronic *space*. Also, if not more so, it is a question of diachronic *spacing*: the attenuated unraveling of one's lifeworld across space and time. Suffering is

³⁶ Excerpt from forum post "Utterly defeated...", written in 2011.

the straining costs of holding on and holding out hope; of struggling to keep it together somehow, this fragile sense of something proper, decent and right about the world. In this way, the thread of suffering follows unworlding into acosmic (and indecent) expanses of sense beyond sense, and world beyond world.

Suffering tells the story of agoraphobic unworlding; a chronicle of the journey that transgresses these ruinous limits. It testifies to living *with* agoraphobia, in the diachronic sense of somehow enduring all that its impropriety destroys, violates, and dissolves across the spaces and times of the unworlding process. In the testimonial accounts about agoraphobia, suffering often tells of relationships lost, opportunities missed, cherished parts of one's life-world coming undone and things getting out of hand. This eventual spacing of attenuation is particularly evident in the lived testimony below, which was posted in the Commons:

I have agoraphobia. I have lived with it for more than 5 years. I had the initial panic attack on the way to a party on a congested freeway. I did not recognize what it was all I knew was that it frightened me!

Gradually I began staying closer to home and avoiding places that would require me to have to use the freeway. Eventually it got to the point that I wouldn't leave my house or travel long distances.

There is SO MUCH that I have missed out on in my life and every day I feel terrible about this problem.

I decided to write a list of all the things that this has prevented me from doing and all the hurt it has caused.

I could not:

1. Go visit my dad before he passed away.
2. Go watch my son at his school athletic events.
3. Go on vacation.
4. Go see my family.
5. Go catch up with my friends.
6. Go to the doctor.
7. Go shopping.
8. Go out to eat.

9. Go with my son to his medical appointments
10. Go to my son's school
11. Go visit Dad's Burial Site.

Consequences:

1. Lost my whole business.
2. Lost many friends.
3. Family became angry with me.
4. Lost several boyfriends.
5. Caused me to lie way more often than I'd like.
6. Caused my health to worsen because I can't visit the doctor.
7. Caused my teeth to decay because I can't go see the dentist.³⁷

So much of living with agoraphobia is composed of this drifting sense of losing touch with cherished parts of one's world without ever fully breaking free of their hold on one's sense of self. Suffering with agoraphobia is this diachronic sense of drift, estrangement and loss; a world becoming ever more fragmented and areally distantiated with each arriving wave of agoraphobic sense. With this sense of drift and dissolution that constitutes unworlding, there is an accompanying sense of areal destitution which can be felt in Lingis' (1996) description of existential emptiness, as follows:

The things scattered about no longer support and sustain and demand one. The layout about one loses its relief; it extends bleak and indifferent to one toward featureless horizons. The landscape and its past drift off, the future which the environment marked out in paths that invited one and tasks that summoned one darken over. Emptiness opens up between oneself and the environment, one feels oneself drifting in this void (p. 3).

As a diachronic space, agoraphobia is this suffering, attenuating sense of things getting out of hand without ever entirely going away. Agoraphobia is a shattering and fragmenting world, and suffering is the measure of and witness to this unworlding.

At every moment, these unworlding worlds are 'composed' of negative spaces or atopic holes; vacant gaps where something proper should have been, or used to be. These are spaces which can only be accounted for negatively as (non)places of absence. In

³⁷ Excerpt from forum post "Page One," written in 2008.

many ways, agoraphobia is like a network of un-connections which spans all these spaces and spacings of loss and absence; a common span of absence and suffering which brings these different non-relations together into a narrative of an unworlding world.

This thread of suffering also spans the singular-plural distance between different versions of the self spread out across the space and time of agoraphobic unworlding. Speaking from this common space of improper in-betweenness, one agoraphobic sufferer posted the following in the Commons:

There are clearly two very different versions of me. Who I was and who I am. What separates them is a series of months that disassembled what I knew to be me. In a rapid deterioration to a non functioning person which retained the knowledge of what was going on. Shocked by the rapid spiral, nauseous, as I crumbled.³⁸

Suffering measures this terrible distance of unworlding displacement: of being unseated, de-situated, and dislocated like a broken thing tenuously hanging together across space and time.

Agoraphobia is one name for a fugitive agency that disintegrates and displaces self from self, and self from world, in a way that irrecoverably estranges and distantiates without ever entirely breaking free. Suffering-with-agoraphobia is forever losing and loosening without ever reaching a liberating finale of release. It is a limitless thread of drawing-out. This infinitely attenuating sense of suffering-with-agoraphobia is what we have yet to consider; and what can only be considered by turning towards a diachronic appreciation of the *spacing* of unbecoming across space and time. This sense of the

³⁸ Excerpt from forum post “My decline,” written in 2010.

diachronic spatiality of suffering-with-agoraphobia is evoked in the following testimony from the Commons:

My boy kept asking me “what are we going to do today?” He was full of enthusiasm and eager to get out and do something fun. I began asking myself “why me?” Why can’t I just get out there and do something with my son? Why can’t I take him some place really exciting like the zoo or the children’s museum? It caused me remember the person I used to be. It made me unhappy. It made me miss that person. Where did she go?

That person was fearless and able to do anything. She travelled through Europe ALL BY HERSELF for several months. She didn’t think about things like the number of people in a store, the route to take to get home, or worry about getting trapped somewhere. Her apartment was on the top floor of her building. She didn’t have to coach herself or quiet her nerves before venturing out to go shopping. She would go to restaurant on the other side of the city. She could calmly wait at a stoplight listening to music in her car, instead of gripping the steering wheel and feeling like a nervous wreck. She felt good about her place in the world.

...All these thoughts make me feel really down and I can’t help but feel a huge sense of loss for that person that I used to be.³⁹

Because of this quality of spacing, agoraphobia is never simply a synchronic situation of immanent confinement. Rather, agoraphobia is always also this diachronic span of being improperly distantiated, estranged and attenuated.

Improper confusion

“How do you become a representation to yourself? ... And where, then, does it go, that potent, silent evidence that was holding things together so uneventfully” (Nancy 2008a, p. 163)?

The sense of unworlding’s disintegrating loss is reversible with a sense of becoming lost. Across the corpus of agoraphobic testimonies are traces of a common sense of having lost one’s way somehow, somewhere along the line. They are reminders of how quickly and easily we can get thrown off track and become disoriented within a world coming undone. To become lost is never to be wholly without world. Rather it is to

³⁹ Excerpt from forum post “The Person I used to be...,” written in 2009.

be tenuously overextended *beyond* the proper limits of the world in a drawn-out sense of becoming estranged: displaced yet still attached; tethered but drifting away from all that is right with the world. To become lost is to suffer the passions of unworlding – that terrible sense of cherished things, places, connections and lifelines retreating into a spacing of distance. These lengthening stretches of distance measures the difference between the improper (un)world coming into resolution and the proper world growing more distant. This growing distance/difference is what makes becoming lost such an awful feeling of being pushed to, and beyond, the limits of what's proper in every sense imaginable. With the passing of space-time in becoming lost, one drifts farther away from everything decent about the world. Agoraphobia is this exposure to a reality that is not right.

Field navigation exercises teach that, with the passage of space-time, trajectories that are off by as little as one degree will eventually space out into an impressive distance between where one *should have been* and where one *is*. Retrospectively, stories of agoraphobic suffering often begin with episodic improprieties, like a panic attack, that are intensely unsettling but quickly pass. A passing tremor, a moment of un-grounding skip, a slight shift in the alignment of being-with-the-world. Yet with time it becomes evident that one's lifeworld has shifted off track by the smallest of margins, but enough to affect a compounding spacing of disorientation across space and time. Diachronically, one is not plunged into agoraphobia with the suddenness of a shock. Rather agoraphobia is come into little by little across slight increments of space and time, like a slow-growing

wedge of estranging distance. Unworlding expresses an existential crisis of Being that is extensive, functional and relational in scope, as one testimony from the Commons adequately relates:

I feel like I have no direction in life.

I once had direction, goals, a sense of purpose. But my accomplishments only brought me brief moments of pleasure, not fulfillment.

Somewhere along the path of my life, I became side-tracked by despair, anxiety and agoraphobia...

I lost my direction, motivation and sense of purpose. The things I desired – a successful career, material wealth, all of a sudden became unimportant to me. Money and possessions only brought me temporary happiness. I gave up my career and stopped working. I got out of some relationships that were harmful. I gave up a whole lot. And when there isn't much left you begin to question the point of life. What's my purpose? What should I be doing with my life? Is there anything fill this void I feel in my heart?...

The difficulty is that I do not know how to start over. I don't know where I'm going in life. I have no direction. I'm no longer sure of what I want out of life. I feel like I don't even know who I am anymore?? :(

Is this what it means to have an existential crisis?⁴⁰

Suffering with agoraphobia is living through this compounding sense of crisis / crisis of sense. It is a disorienting sense of getting sidetracked and having lost one's way, so that nothing seems right anymore – neither the world nor oneself. Agoraphobia is this falling out-of-step, out-of-time, out-of-place, and out-of-tune with the (rest of the) world.

Unfortunately for its sufferers, agoraphobia offers little fortunes of integrity and resolution. Rather it impoverishes and devastates any clarity of sense / sense of clarity with regard to agency and identity. Its otherness is fugitively proximal, which is to say, transimmanently confusing within and without. Agoraphobia is an endless series of questions about who is fighting whom, which side is which, where are the boundaries and

⁴⁰ Excerpt from forum post "Searching for direction in my life," written in 2009.

what is the meaning of this (un)worldly disharmony? Agoraphobia is an exceedingly indecent mix-up of a/cosmic proportions that never should have happened, as one testimony terribly relates:

I'm 26 years old and enrolled in a university program that is really stressful...I've moved in with my sister's family and I'm not working right now because of my busy school schedule. I don't really have any friends here so no one really calls me on the phone and I don't go out very much...but it's not like I even would now that I have an overwhelming urge to avoid situations that I cannot control.

Even as I struggle to put this into words, it is really scary because this is not who I am. I am not the person I am supposed to be. I am enslaved to my emotions and controlled by fear. What can you do when you feel like your mind and your body are constantly at war with each other? I should have faith and confidence in my instincts...but they betray me. How can I get out of my own way?⁴¹

Agoraphobia's unworlding describes an irrational interruption of improper difference; an improper difference which can only be registered as a manifestation of worldwide confusion, dissolution and unbecoming. It is as if all the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle world became shuffled and dislocated by agoraphobia's disaster, so that the figures of self and world confuse into a common mess of disorder and impropriety about the world.

Agoraphobia is a name for this diffuse materiality, the fugitive agent of sense, that dissolves the existential sense of being in relational harmony with the world. It is a solution of impropriety that threatens everything that is proper about the world, including a resolute sense of self. This diffuse sense of unbecoming is expressed in the following testimony:

I used to live as if I couldn't be broken but I've discovered that I can. I do have limits and they are constraining me more and more. I'm tired but the fire rages on, nagging at me.

I admit that I'm lost. The more I try the less I know who I am. I am exhausted all the time and feel so beaten down. Sometimes I question if all the hurt I feel is worth it. I have these thoughts that

⁴¹ Excerpt from forum post "Crimson," written in 2007.

are absurd, like whether I should quit taking my medications or stop looking for a therapist who will be able to help me??? But right now I'm on a roll so I keep holding on to see if things can get better.

But I constantly ask myself, what is me and what is the disorders? Will I improve or will I uncover something too difficult to handle.⁴²

To suffer unworlding is also reversibly to suffer the unbecoming of oneself. This is what makes agoraphobic unworlding so terribly obscene: it plays by no rules, it respects no limits, and it recognizes no sovereign entities or sacred meanings. It has no decency for the limits of what is proper, decent and humane. It is not of the proper world of ideal accountability. It has no function or place in *this* world, despite our best attempts to domesticate its wild impropriety into something that can be appropriated, mastered, and controlled at will.

Conclusion

There are at least two distinct spatialities to the agoraphobic experience. There is the synchronic space of being bound and contained in space and time. This is the more apparent spatial dimension of the agoraphobic experience; one of static confinement. Then there is the diachronic *spacing* of becoming relationally unbounded and attenuated by agoraphobia's sense of impropriety as a transitive event of unworlding; a falling-apart and coming undone that spans both space and time. The latter is much more difficult to represent in our accounts of the agoraphobic experience because its spatiality is constituted by negation, loss, withdraw and absence that defy the positivity of presence. These are negative eventualities that do not 'produce' affirmative sense or give new meaning to the world, but rather take away and unwork them.

⁴² Excerpt from forum post "When will things change?" written in 2010.

In this chapter I have tried to better account for this eventful phenomenality of *suffering-with-agoraphobia* through the spatial imaginary of unworlding. Unworlding acknowledges that human experience is a relational contingency that extends well beyond the limits of the body-subject. By taking seriously the relational premise of being-in-the-world, it is able to approximate the magnitude of pure suffering as a phenomenal event of global impropriety that does not just unwork the self but dissolves the entire logic and integrity of the world. As an eventful spatial imaginary, unworlding tries to inhabit this enveloping space and experience this attenuating spacing of suffering's cosmic impropriety.

Chapter Seven

Worlding a Commons of Agoraphobic Compassion

“The human story is both personal and universal. Our personal experiences of pain and joy, grief and despair, may be unique to each of us in the forms they take, yet our capacity to feel grief, fear, loneliness, and rage, as well as delight, intimacy, joy, and ease, are our common bonds as human beings” (Feldman 2005, p. 14).

Introduction

In the previous chapter I endeavored to piece together testimonial fragments about the dark passions of disintegration, attenuation and breakdown that are phenomenally given with agoraphobia. With these fragments I sought to tell about a common existential process of unworlding which speculatively describes what agoraphobia might feel like as a singular event of the world’s suffering dissolution. As an existential event of undergoing a catastrophic breakdown of sense, unworlding describes an attenuation and disintegration of the relational integrity of one’s extensive Being. It describes a spacing of loss and unbecoming which has the unlimited potential to unravel the entire fabric of one’s existence all the way to the farthest edges of sense. Ultimately unworlding tells of the *spacing of suffering* as an attenuated event of unbecoming across space and time; a spacing whose lengthening span progressively disorders and decomposes the integral, relational harmony of Being-through-extension. In this way, we might say that unworlding narrates the progression of suffering as its cosmic disaster unfolds across space and time. Unworlding testifies to the experience of living through suffering, an experience which is always singular, transitive and existential but also cosmic, global and atmospheric.

In this chapter I want to broadly consider a profound capacity we share as human beings for repairing the unworlding of suffering, both in our own worlds and in others with whom we come into contact. This is the capacity of *compassion*. Drawing on a number of recent theoretical inquiries into compassion (Edelglass 2006; Harris 2007; Johnston 2007; Schrag 2002; White 2012; Young-Eisendrath 1996), I argue that compassion is a transformative capacity that we have recourse to as human beings to interrupt the unworlding breakdown of suffering and repair what has been broken in the process: not just an intensive sense of being ('self'), nor just an extensive sense of being ('world'), but their intermingled, co-instantial, relational whole (being-in-the-world). Compassion describes the greatest capacity and highest calling of humanity, which is its *responsibility* to suffering in another (Levinas 1998). Compassion *interrupts* suffering, opening it up to new possibilities for becoming different and otherwise. But because compassion interrupts suffering, it has to come from somewhere else; a space outside of suffering.

Broadly speaking, this chapter is devoted to speculating about where human compassion comes from and what it has the capacity to achieve in terms of interrupting and repairing suffering. More concretely, I shall explore these grandiose, humanistic questions about the structure, spacing and restorative capacities of compassion through the 'grounded' context of a specific virtual, public space in which agoraphobic sufferers gather together online; a space that I have already been referring to as "the Commons." Interweaving a broad concern for building compassion with this specific virtual context

of agoraphobic gathering, I develop a theory about the Commons as an ethically and politically charged *space of repair*.

The ethos of repair

When drawn in comparison to the celebrated arts of creation, repair can seem like an unglamorous and mundane practice. To this effect, repair has been described – in the context of advanced capitalist societies – as an “invisible work” (Star 1999) that remains veiled, in the sense that repair typically takes place behind the scenes, out of public view; and its success is typically defined by how well it obscures its own labor, or covers its tracks. As a result, argue Graham and Thrift (2007), what also tends to get obscured is the extent to which the relational systems and built infrastructures of our social organizations are inherently unreliable, highly contingent, and always vulnerable to failure and breakdown. Because repair is typically performed “backstage” (Goffman 1959), it is easy to fall into thinking that the basic structures supporting our existence are reliably solid and permanent, when in fact they are not.

Perhaps the most compelling account to explain why societies work so hard to veil the work of repair is offered by philosopher Elizabeth Spelman (2002). In her book, which is entirely devoted to the subject of repair, she speculates that we obscure its essential role in the reproduction of everyday life because its highlights the fallibility, impermanence and brokenness of life itself:

In any event, repair is necessary because...we are manifestly imperfect creatures in an imperfect world. We are reminded of this any time something or somebody or some relationship needs fixing. You can't bring up repair without thereby bringing up all manner of facts about humans and the world we inhabit that perhaps for the most part we just don't like being reminded of – that we are damaged goods, that we live in a world of damaged goods. Repairers deal with the used

objects of the world, with those things bearing evidence of the trajectory toward destruction and termination. As repairers, they undertake to halt the march toward extinction, but their very existence reminds us that such extinction is inevitable (p. 136).

However, for as much as repair calls attention to the terrible ruptures through which life is constantly falling apart and passing away into an infinite night of oblivion, there is something uniquely affirmative about the quiet will and humble resolve of repair.

Working off an ethos of repair broadly outlined by Spelman (2002), and fortified by Heidegger's (1962) hermeneutics of existence, I want to think about the subtle affirmation that repair brings into being (or 'worlds') as a distinct kind of *caring* responsibility. Alluding to care as a particular mode of responsibility which is performed through labors of repair, Spelman writes:

Repair wouldn't be necessary if things never broke, never frayed, never splintered or fell to pieces – or if we didn't care that they did. A world in which repair was not necessary would either be filled with unchanging unbreakable eternal objects (a version, perhaps, of Plato's world of Forms) or a junk heap, things, people, and relationships abandoned when they no longer functioned in the requisite manner. To repair is to acknowledge and respond to the fracturability of the world in which we live in a very particular way – not by simply throwing our hands up in despair at the damage, or otherwise accepting without question that there is no possibility of or point in trying to put the pieces back together, but by employing skills of mind, hand, and heart to recapture an earlier moment in the history of an object or a relationship in order to allow it to keep existing (pp. 5-6).

Setting aside for the moment the temporal problematic of returning something to its past, which seems to be attributed to repair by Spelman here, what is conspicuous about an ethos of repair is how it inherently affirms, remembers and foresees a temporal 'wholeness' of transcendent value in its object even though it may be flawed, broken and imperfect at present. Thus, in contrast to an ethos of careless disposability that predominates in neoliberal and consumer-oriented social economies, repair signals a

broader commitment to and hopefulness about its thing of care. It buys into possibilities of recovery and believes in the potential for renewal and second chances.

In further refining a dialogic of repair in relation to disposal, we might say that while disposal is future negating, repair is inherently future affirming. Disposal gives finality to the life of a broken-down thing. It negates not only the existence of a broken-down thing in the present, but also its virtual potential to become something new, better and different in the future. With final abandon disposal gives up on the potential for its object to become anything other than broken and useless. On the other hand, repair sees ‘hidden’ or unrealized potential in the object present before it; a deferred value extending back into the past and forward into future which effectively transforms an immanent and static ‘object’ of brokenness, limited to the here and now, into a transcendent and more-than-present *thing of care* (Heidegger 1962, 2001). This thing of care is transcendent in the diachronic sense that its wholeness of being includes the immanent state of brokenness but also *extends beyond* it to include other conditional space-times of potential, recurrent and speculative possibility, such as the ‘not yet,’ the ‘once was’ the ‘could be (again)’ (Amin and Thrift 2005; Anderson 2006b; Rose 2010).

With this more comprehensive understanding of care in mind, repair implies more than being merely hopeful or optimistic in a passive sense of anticipation. It further implies a resolute project of taking responsibility to bring this future-beyond-brokenness into existence. This future-oriented concern for a thing’s wellbeing – in which the resolution to take responsibility in the present is ‘called’ into action from the future of the

thing's potentiality-for-Being – is fundamentally a temporal hermeneutic of responsibility that Heidegger (1962) names as care [*sorge*]. Building on this deferred structure of care, we might say that repair refers to a particular resoluteness of care that responds not just to the brokenness of things present but, perhaps more importantly, to their future *potential* to become something better as well. In this way, repair is always a bold, decisive and visionary labor that works in an *ethical* space of responsibility which is ahead of the actual and before the potential. Its responsibility labors along the outermost limits of what's possible, responding affirmatively and resolutely to a calling of potential that is not entirely absent, but not yet present.

As an unfolding event of responsible care, repair is always an ethically precarious undertaking that risks the actual life of a degraded thing in pursuit of better possibilities for its future. In order to repair a damaged organ, for example, we must first expose it to a number of possible risks, such as infection, that are always liable to inflict even more wounds – fatal or otherwise – on the already-degraded thing. Risks such as these, which are always imminent in the *event* of repair, remind us that repair is never simply a routine procedure. Rather repair is always a *flight* of suspended uncertainty that irrevocably departs from a present condition of degraded vitality and flies with hopeful abandon toward a projected condition of enhanced vitality. However, in that the flight of repair opens up a gap of vital uncertainty in the life of a thing, we must acknowledge that repair is also a material *interruption* that does violence to a broken thing in order to make it better. On this point, Spelman (2002) is intent on making it clear that repair is its own

kind of interruption that “destroys brokenness” (p. 134). This violence and the uncertainties that its project risks in the quest for redemptive salvation are what makes repair such an ethical affair.

However, for as much as I have labored to address the responsible and ethical dimensions of repair, I have yet to address the logic of repair which this goal of redemptive salvation proposes. Unlike the pure becoming of progress and creation, which both follow a linear logic of temporality, repair follows a more problematic, circular logic of temporality which proposes that something be enhanced in the future by returning it to a prior state of existence that has already expired in the past. Indeed, this difficult logic is evident in Spelman’s contention, already quoted above, that the aim of repair is “to recapture an earlier moment in the history of an object or a relationship in order to allow it to keep existing” (p. 6). Logically speaking, this proposition of return is simply impossible in a world of singular becoming where life moves only in one direction. This impossibility of return is also a mortal truth that the experience of suffering teaches, as one learns that one will never be the same person one was before a disaster or catastrophe. Life offers no forgiveness when asked to undo or redo something. It is never the same – and we will never be the same because of it. And yet, still, there are felt rhythms and material ecologies to life that wax and wane, coming and going through elliptical patterns of repetition, recycling, replenishment, restoration and recovery (Lefebvre 2004). In this sense, to say that repair is impossible would be tantamount to denying a host of vital renewal functions that sustain life itself (Daily 1997; Graham and

Thrift 2007; Spelman 2002). Given these two different realities, how can we reconcile a singular logic of repair so that its ethical imperative can matter to social thought?

The solution I propose is one that hinges on a distinction between two different understandings of repair, one of which is *formal*, and the other of which is *functional*. If I tear the tendons in my knee, no amount of repair will ever be sufficient to return it back to its original, formal condition. There will always be knots of scar tissue built up around the tendon. This kind of *formal repair*, which would return a substance to its original condition, is impossible. However, if I commit to years of physical therapy, perhaps one day I will regain most of its functional capabilities so that, once again as I did before, I may be able to jog on the running trails, play racquetball with friends, and ride my bicycle through the city streets in the evenings. Unlike the impossibility of formal repair, this latter understanding discloses real possibilities for a thing to regain some degree of its former *functional* capabilities. Alluding to a functional understanding of repair and the variable range of enhanced possibilities to which it can lead, Graham and Thrift (2007) write:

Repair and maintenance does not have to mean exact restoration. Think only of the bodged job, which still allows something to continue functioning but probably at a lower level; the upgrade, which allows something to take on new features to keep it contemporary; the cannibalization and recycling of materials, which allows at least one recombined object to carry on, formed from the bones of its fellows; or the complete rebuild, which allows something to continue in near pristine condition (p. 6).

This kind of functional repair, which would allow a prior capability to be at least partly reclaimed or restored, is always a real possibility.

The Commons

“The Commons” is a proper name I use to refer to a particular space of encounter in which agoraphobic sufferers come together to collectively world their shared senses of suffering the unworlding passions of agoraphobia. It is a *virtual place* of gathering which does not properly exist as a location in physical space; but nonetheless it functions as a locus of gathering that is every bit as materially and meaningfully real as a church, town hall or community center (Adams 1992, 2009). The Commons is a real, bounded yet unrestricted place that can be remotely accessed, explored and inhabited via the Internet by virtually anyone who wishes to do so. In this way, it might be said to occur as what Adams (2009) calls a *space in media*. However, with the Commons I endeavor to evoke a phenomenal space of encounter which is more than merely a website or a networked space that can be diagrammed, linked and located within the Internet. With the Commons I wish describe a ‘thick’ virtual space of eventful encountering whose essence and dimensionality exceed the superficial surface of the digital mediations that enact it. Building on Adams’s (2009) four-fold typology of communication geography, with the Commons I want to refer to what might be called a *phenomenal* space in media, as opposed to an *objective* space in media.

By employing the pseudonym of the Commons, I want to disrupt conventional ways of thinking about the qualities of virtual spaces that are instantiated by information and communications technologies (ICTs). I would argue that conventional understandings of virtual space offer two exaggerated parodies, neither of which is very

faithful to our lived experiences of this kind of space. The first is a hyper-objective parody which imagines virtual space as a cold, rational and inhuman domain composed across wires, electrical signals, codes, machines, artificial intelligences and infrastructures of hardware and software. The second is a hyper-subjective parody which imagines virtual space as a fantastic, superficial and other-worldly domain which exists apart from the ‘real world’ and therefore has little to no bearing on what happens in the latter. Despite their apparent contrasts, what these hyperbolic imaginations both manage to achieve is to drastically limit the potential for virtual spaces to become meaningful places of experience and community that really matter.

In recent years, however, a new paradigm of thought oriented around notions of hybridity, flatness and assemblage has allowed more nuanced interpretations of virtual space to come into being. However, whereas these interpretations have pursued new understandings of virtual space according to what is often referred to as an ‘object-oriented’ approach, what I want to pursue in this chapter is a phenomenological investigation of virtual space as an extension of lived space. This means (re)turning to a mode of inquiry that is embedded and felt (though not necessarily fully ‘embodied’ in this space). Through this existential mode of inquiry, what I aim to accomplish is not any formal inquiry into what virtual space ‘is’ in a categorical sense. Rather, I seek to inquire into what virtual space functionally accomplishes as a transcendent space of eventful encountering, gathering and outreach that takes place beyond the purely physical limits of embodied existence. What new (co)existential possibilities for being and being-together

do our virtual encounterings disclose? This is not so much a novel question about an entirely new kind of space that is unique to the digital age (see: Adams 2009, unpublished). Rather it is the re-pairing of the phenomenological mode of inquiry to new extensions and contexts of virtual communication whose proliferation has, in a sense, eluded and outpaced phenomenological inquiry in recent years. In this way, an underlying theoretical aim of this chapter is to explore new ways to investigate virtual spaces instantiated by ICTs from a distinctly phenomenological and humanistic perspective.

The Commons as a virtual public space

What makes a space *public* is not only its potential to create “chance encounters” (Massey 2005) between strangers and, in the process, create new and unexpected kinds of social relations and collective gatherings. Prior to this, it is also defined by a space’s open capacity – its spaciousness – to allow things the room become *given* over to difference and released to becoming otherwise (Arendt 1998; Heidegger 1962, 1966). In a foundational sense, public space allows a finite thing the freedom to *ex-ist*, or to become otherwise and to evolve in ways that are surprising and unexpected. Indeed, in his essay on freedom, Nancy (1993) declares that ““Surprising itself” ...is a proper mark to freedom” (p. 15).

In line with this understanding of public space as a *free space* where new becomings and unanticipated ways of being-(differently)-in-the-world can “hatch” (Nancy 1993), I wish to think about the Commons as a public space where the privative,

draining and negating passions of agoraphobic suffering can be affirmatively given and released to become the free and founding *basis* for something materially different and better in the world.

For agoraphobic sufferers, I argue that the Commons serves as a foundation or ground for the ephemeral virtualities and transient possibilities of progress, repair and compassion to materialize as real vitalities with the material potential to affect substantive and demonstrative changes for the better. In this way, the Commons furnishes a public space where the fleeting, virtual and contingent senses that give sufferers reasons for hope can be affirmatively realized as materially durable, sharable and instrumental through representation, as one Commoner relates:

I am writing this to remind me of some of the situations I've recently encountered and was able to successfully handle. Sometimes we forget about the little victories we are able to accomplish and instead only see the big monster confronting us. So here are a few little reminders:

- Went to the beach for several days without my safe person (although my back-up safe person was with me), and managed just fine when we got stuck in traffic trying to cross a major bridge.
- Got caught in a big traffic jam on my drive to work one morning, had to bail out at the first exit, but did not have a major freak-out.
- Had my wisdom teeth taken out, didn't cancel the appointment like I had considered doing, and actually felt like it was not so bad. I survived!!⁴³

By accounting for the “little victories” in the space of the Commons, agoraphobic sufferers concretely give the ephemeral sense of progress – the virtual materiality of its passing and fleeting presence – a more grounded, definite and lasting place in which to exist. What threatens to elude definition – the virtual potential of progress – becomes

⁴³ Excerpt from diary entry “My Latest Victories,” written in 2010.

performed into a more public and determinate reality through the ground(ing) that written testimony instantiates.

Written testimony gives the evaporating, fleeing, virtual singularities of sense – and the affective potential that it non-representationally communicates – the freedom to become more extensively, instrumentally and autonomously potent in an extensive world shared with others. It preserves their affective essence much like the canning process extends the vital duration and durability of a perishable good into spaces and times beyond its bare, original and unmediated potential. Inscription mobilizes the *epi*- of the episodic, the epiphanic and the ephemeral by performing their finite singularities into the more durable and transferrable objects of words and symbols that can be exchanged and circulated more broadly. This idea is also conveyed, albeit in a quite different manner, through Elaine Scarry's (1985) classic argument about how language publicizes the privacy of embodied feelings by (re)materializing them, or allowing them to show up, as communicable objects. On this she writes: "The mute facts of sentience (deprived of cultural externalization) are wholly self-isolating. Only in the culture of language, ideas and objects does sharing originate" (p. 256). In this way, representation "opens into a wider frame of invention" (p. 22). It allows the ephemeral, virtual and singular realities of sense to become not only socially *coded* in a detached, objective sense, but also socially *worlded* in a phenomenally shared sense into a more public, autonomous and common reality whose free and sovereign presence we compelled to acknowledge and account for in the world.

However, writing does more than just mobilize a non-representational sensation or event into something that can be socially extended, broadcast and shared with others. Drawing on the work of Paul Adams (forthcoming), we can also say that writing fixes virtual experience to determinate places of inscription. Writing grounds virtual experience to sites and places of representation; concrete, relatable and accessible nodes of experience that found the foundation for new kinds of gatherings and associations. Writing establishes public places of dwelling that can be visited and inhabited by others, including oneself in the future.

As an archive of testimonies about being-with-agoraphobia, the Commons is full of public, communal hearths of intimate gathering in which the ephemeral fires of hope, progress and functional repair are built, sustained and replenished by offerings from those who draw strength from its material yet spectral intensity. The Commons is replete with places of gathering where the restorative fires of healing and progress are sustained to give warmth and illumination to all who gather around the hearths that they instantiate, as the following exchange among several Commoners relates:

The sense of freedom did not happen overnight. I began gradually, with short trips to the grocery store. Piece of cake, right? I had been shopping at this same grocery store for nearly a year. HOWEVER, I had yet to do it alone. It had been a long time since I had done anything alone. Since I did not have my own car, I always had someone with me no matter where I went. Suddenly I was venturing out on my own.

Without a doubt, it was difficult at first. However as I gained confidence in venturing out by myself, and going into places alone, I began to feel like a million bucks. Often times it's the little things that give us happiness. When I ran out of food, I went to the store to get more. When I needed cigarettes, I was able to go out and buy cigarettes. It may seem trivial, but when you've had to depend on others for so long, it's incredibly liberating to be able to do things for yourself.

It is still never entirely easy. Whenever I visit a new place for the first time, by myself, it is usually pretty difficult for me. I remember when I went alone to the video store down the street for the first time. It reminded me of a scene from Ferris Bueller when Cameron could not decide whether or not to drive over to Ferris' house. I got into my car, then went back inside. Went back to my car, started it, turned it off again, then returned back inside. I paced back and forth. It was very silly. But eventually I overcame it, gathered my strength, and I did it. Did I have a panic attack? Hell yeah. But I returned home with a new movie, the first I had seen in several years.

...

Progress with agoraphobia is such a gradual process that it is often difficult to notice. But as I compare how I am now with how I was a year ago, two years ago, and three years ago when my agoraphobia first started, I am able to notice dramatic changes. And each day it gets a little better, even if I don't always recognize it.

↳ Reading about your improvement to get out and go shopping has given me the courage to put myself out there as you have. I'm not anywhere close to making the strides you've made, but I'll keep working at it. You've helped me so much, although I am still hoping for my life to become more giggles and less shit ☺.

↳ I too have watched you over the last year and learned so much from you. I know how humbling it has been for you to have to rely on others, but you have remained an honorable young man. In some of my darkest hours I would read your posts and say to myself "if this guy can keep fighting why can't do the same?" ... Love ya buddy to the moon....

↳ Seeing this post has given me hope. I have not driven anywhere in over 2 years and I haven't gone anywhere alone for almost 6 years now. Whenever I go somewhere, I have to have my husband and son with me. I haven't gone out of town in several years and I can only go a limited distance away from my house until I begin to have panic attacks that make my heart race. Agoraphobia is such a slow process. [...] To be honest reading this has given me hope that someday I'll be able to go out by myself or just be able to go somewhere with my son.⁴⁴

By fixing the tenuous, diffuse and passing sensations of reparative hope and progress to places of writing in the Commons, agoraphobic sufferers give these virtual affects a greater potential to become real, permanent and lasting fixtures of a world shared with others. Writing *différs* their ephemeral, limited potential into something more publicly visible, extensively possible and enduringly manifest. Writing memorializes spaces and times in the lives of agoraphobic sufferers when functional healing and growth was

⁴⁴ Excerpt from diary entry "Moving Forward," and comments in reply, written in 2011.

undeniably present and happening. It allows these ephemeral events and their potent affects to life on and become something extensively greater. Writing establishes a *terra firma* where the fleeting and weightless possibilities of hope and progress can become collectively realized as publicly real, instrumental and vitally present at work in these places of gathering. Writing is always a powerful performance of translation; a bold and often desperate act which seeks to transfer the vital essence of a fleeting, ephemeral, already-passing sense of progress, hope and repair into a fuller, wider and more grounded future of potential and possibility. Writing is a *gift* of presence that we offer to others, including ourselves in the future, with the unguaranteed hope that this singular moment of presence will live on and become more real through its future freedom/autonomous potential to touch, surprise, change and affect others. Writing, in this purely testimonial sense, offers to give the virtualities of singular experience the chance to flourish and live on in an extensible world beyond its bare, limited and unmediated potential. “[T]o be present when a person moves up out of that pre-language and projects the facts of sentience into speech is almost to have been present at the birth of language itself,” writes Elaine Scarry (1985, p. 6). To give this sentience a chance to freely flourish, affect others and grow into something more worldly through writing is not to fully capture and account for sense, but to furnish it a place for its vitality to diffusely dwell.

Staging progress, performing repair

“This unique moment of being-together, this moment of sharing, prepares us to all face the night and the darkness, the outer limits of our small community” (Korhonen 2006, np).

For as much as the non-representational turn has highlighted the failures of representation – experiences it cannot capture, feelings it cannot convey – and, in the process, opened our eyes to neglected spaces of experience beyond accountability, what seems to have gotten lost in the process is a simple appreciation for representation as a ritual practice for convening and sharing humanity. Just as there is an entire world to non-representational experience whose surface we have only begun to scratch, so too is there an entire world to representation as a performative mode of human relating whose evolutionary drives, affective functions and deeply-embedded, socio-behavioral codes are anything but clear.⁴⁵ However we do not need to understand the innermost complexities of representation in order to appreciate its phenomenal capacity to transmit light into dark places, to interrupt isolation and evaporate distance, and to establish ritualistic hearths of human gathering in which the illuminated passions of being-together (com-passions) can be generated and sustained to keep the surrounding darkness at bay. The rituals of story, poetry and myth – no matter how apparently contrived – have the capacity to become hearths of communal gathering through which we summon the courage, share the strength, and find companionship in the night.

Drawing upon Lévi-Strauss's (1985) reflections on the value of ritual performance to human societies, Nancy (1991) characterizes myth as follows:

[I]t is perhaps the stage upon which we represent everything to ourselves or whereupon we make appear all our representations, if myth, as Lévi-Strauss would have it, is primarily defined as that

⁴⁵ The work of social psychologist James Pennebaker (1990), whose research has empirically shown that the mere act of expressing a painful emotion can have a measurable positive impact on physiological wellbeing, illustrates just one example of the little-understood complexities inherent to performances of representation.

with which or in which time turns into space. With myth, the passing of time takes shape, its ceaseless passing is fixed in an exemplary place of showing and revealing (pp. 44-45).

Myths re-present in a scenographic manner virtual experiences, events and impressions whose 'essences' exceed or cannot be contained in the full-blown present. Myths fight the fading, impermanent and negating ravages of time by translating its groundless, continuous passage into grounded, discrete scenes and scenographic narratives, as Ken Foote (1997) has so thoroughly documented with events of violence and tragedy and their memorialization on the American landscape.

In the Commons, agoraphobic sufferers erect representational markers and build up scenographic accounts to memorialize, publicize and generally document the unworlding spans of their suffering; representations which were explored in the previous chapter. However, the Commons is not only a memorial space in which histories of suffering are staged. It is also an eschatological space in which futures of hope, progress and functional repair may become staged. Whereas a memorial space seeks to represent the absence of something lost in the past, an eschatological space might seek to represent the future coming of something yet to arrive or fully appear; something not-yet or not-quite. What I suggest is that ritual, mythic and scenographic performances of representation are intentional strategies that agoraphobic sufferers employ to found eschatological hearths where the elusive, tenuous and often faint possibilities of hope, progress and functional repair can be collectively worlded into more demonstrable realities and continuously nourished, fed and sustained by singular-plural gifts and offerings of their distributed possibilities and potentials shared out among its virtual

congregants. Through the singular-plural gifts of sharing and gathering distributed possibilities of hope and potentials of functional repair into places of incorporation, the future possibility of becoming better is continuously revitalized, reanimated and reaffirmed as a real, enduring and worldly presence worth pursuing. The Commons furnishes a public space for agoraphobic sufferers where the extensively futural, distributed and diluted sense of hope and progress can be gathered and concentrated into places where their presence takes on a more definite and enduring public reality. The “Agor army’s daily victories” thread – one of the most popular and longest-running discussion threads in the Commons – illustrates how the ephemeral, diluted and shared-out sense of progress becomes gathered, concentrated and publicly worlded into a more enduring and definite reality:

I’ve decided to start a thread that I hope will be on-going at all times. I’d like for you all to post your daily victories with agoraphobia to prove to everyone that it CAN be done. This thread should be really positive so please use it only to talk about the successes you have had, no matter how minor they might seem. I think that the sadder stories get lots of attention, so here I want to emphasize the positive. When this thread is 50 pages long, we will all look back and be able to realize the positive strides we’re making toward healing. Please, don’t hesitate to post your little victories here, as they are just as important to our recovery as they are to yours.

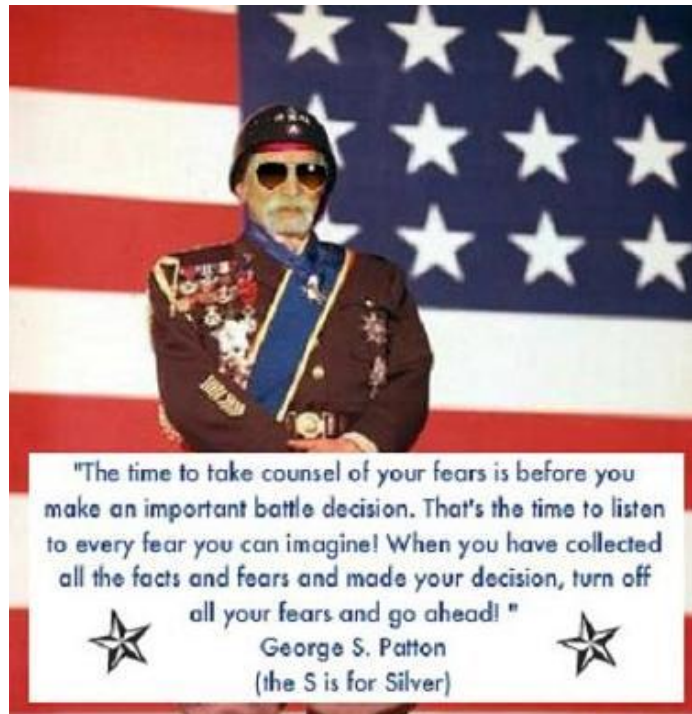
...

BE ALL THAT YOU CAN BE!

Private.....	0-30 days.....	under 1 month of service
Corporal.....	31-60 days.....	1 month of service
Sergeant.....	61-90 days.....	2 months of service
Lieutenant.....	91-150 days.....	3-5 months of service
Captain.....	between 6-7 months of service	
Major.....	between 8-9 months of service	
Colonel.....	between 10-11 months of service	
General.....	12 months or more of service	

Declare your name, rank and serial number. Below are a couple of examples!

Marilyn, General, 82309 (your serial number is the date when you joined)
 Leah, Major, 120409
 Richard, Corporal, 61810



↳ Brian, General, 091410

Ventured across enemy lines to acquire food rations. Successfully went through the checkout line – two times! Stocked up on snacks and the like. Brought my wife along and she encouraged me to buy something new and out of the ordinary for myself. I chose Red Baron frozen pizza. Heading back to my barracks to recuperate ☺.

↳ Lucinda, General, 080409

After gathering the courage, I walked the dogs in the FRONT yard for a reconnaissance mission. Noticing that special forces were approaching our position, I held our ground...and didn't retreat! A car drove by and I proved that I am not a yellow belly! Okay, I admit I got a case of jelly legs but I remained in front of the house for nearly half an hour.

↳ Excellent work troops!

↳ Diana, Captain. 012610

Gathered mixed signals on my recon this morning sir, but activities this afternoon included heading out to the bank, the ATM but not inside, and going to Burger King! I also stopped by a neighbor's to help her wash her bedding and visited for a while. (She is pretty frail due to diabetes) poor thing, she has nurses almost round the clock working to stabilize her.

↳ Constance, General ~ 071509

Made a reconnaissance mission to Boise. Even though the tank had mechanical problems, our squadron succeeded in making contact with home base. The mission was more than 800 miles round trip. I faced up to the panic monster with bravery and even though I felt

the need to be alone several times during the trip, I survived. Today was a day for debriefing on my sofa. Tomorrow will be the beginning of a brand new day and the start of another mission!⁴⁶

The mythic scene that becomes ritualized in this “daily victory” threat is one in which agoraphobic sufferers are allied troops fanned out along the ‘frontlines’ of a conflict with a common enemy. What might otherwise pass as singularly isolated and unrelated events of ephemeral progress becomes staged as a series of related, momentous and collective victories for the allied cause. These mythic rituals make a place for hope and progress to come into being in the Commons.

Through the staging of mythic, collective narratives, Commoners contribute their singular offerings of ephemeral progress to sustain the collective fires of hopeful possibilities and healing potentials burning in the hearths of the Commons. As philosopher Calvin Schrag (2002) eloquently notes, stories are the media through which we give, or *gift*, ourselves to others in ways that exceed representation:

Stories told by givers and receivers of the gift provide testimony of the actions and transactions of the gift’s working. We thus come to understand that storytelling is inseparable from the eventing of the gift within the economy of our daily life. The gift becomes manifest more decisively in the throes of narrative disclosure and rhetorical showing than in demonstrative proofs and formal argumentation. The gift is an event rather than a being. Events are told rather than inferred. And the telling that occurs in narratives of the gift is that of an acknowledgement and attestation rather than a recognition and representation. Events are the stuff of narrative knowledge in advance of epistemological criteria and protocols (p. 139).

In the exscribed spaces of the Commons we can only sense the deferred presence of materialities of hope, progress, compassion and repair circulating in the margins and intervals of what’s represented.

⁴⁶ Excerpts from discussion thread “The Agor Troopers! Our Allied Victories!,” written in 2010.

Worlding compassion

“Through our own suffering we come to understand the suffering of others... When we in our turn see concern in the faces of others and express our pain to the best of our ability, our own pain will be related to the pains of the people among whom we live. Our isolation will be broken” (Harris 2007, p. 76).

I imagine compassion to be a profound human capacity that is improperly independent of our subjective will to create, produce and possess. Rather than being an individual human agency, I imagine compassion to be structured as a relational human agency which arises intermedially through relations of mutual interdependence, trust and care, and whose affective capacity is always greater than the sum of its individual shares of contribution. In other words, compassion is not a subjective capacity that we can sovereignly possess, accumulate and expend at will. It is never ours to give. Rather it is only *given through* the sharing of suffering, which becomes in instances of pure suffering all we properly have to give. Compassion is a sovereign capacity of a relational collective that can only take place through the *sharing* of community. This makes compassion into something of an impersonal, semi-autonomous, *life-enhancing* force of vitality [*élan vital* (Bergson 2002)] whose ‘essence’ is always improperly greater than that of any singular individual.

Compassion does not just happen in any kind of gathering or social arrangement. We intuitively understand this as soon as we pause to think about how rare and exceptional is the benevolence of compassion; about how difficult it is to find it in the world. It is much easier to find places in the world where compassion is absent, instances in which compassion did *not* happen, than it is to find affirmative examples of its

presence. I want to suggest that compassion is rare because it requires more open ways of being-together whose relations are structured not according to what makes us different, separate and unequal, but according to what makes us common and equal as human beings: our vulnerable susceptibility to the unwilled and unpredictable passions of material suffering.

As such, I argue that compassion requires a special kind of *public space* where the vulnerable wounds of suffering can be publicly disclosed, presented, and given over to the trust of others to heal and repair. Because compassion arises only through collective labors of *sharing suffering*, what is necessarily a prerequisite for compassion to occur is a common space where the unworlding *privations* of suffering can be released, given and freed to become something other, different and better. In order for us to be able to *publicize* suffering and thereby *free it* to become something else in the world – namely, a shared basis for the flourishing of compassion – we first need public spaces where we can feel free to reveal ourselves not through forceful shows of impregnable sovereignty, complete self-control and unlimited self-determination, but through vulnerable demonstrations of our precarious, tenuous and contingent predicaments of being-in-the-world (Butler 2005). In order for compassion to take place, we need public spaces where we can acknowledge our common predicaments of being passively exposed to and defined by the sovereignty of improper events and passions which have the unlimited potential to unwork our Being and make us suffer. For compassion take place, we need public spaces where we can vulnerably show up as susceptible to being wounded,

breached and unworlded by suffering. As such, compassion requires an alternative kind of public space premised upon a relational ethos of co-dependence and care, rather than upon one of atomic independence and division.

The Commons is a place of gathering where agoraphobic sufferers singularly-plurally come to disclose their suffering. As so many agoraphobic sufferers have testified to, the Commons affords a *safe place*; a refuge for exposing suffering wounds and being broken. It offers a public space where the unworlding privations of suffering can be given the freedom to *différer* into something better and greater in a space outside itself; in a speculative world beyond its infinite gulf of darkness. However, to ‘give suffering’ its freedom through public disclosures of testimony means to present oneself as mortally broken, flawed, wounded and lacking; as precariously exposed to the turbulence of the world’s swirling, vital passions. It means to *risk* exposing oneself as contingent and imminently vulnerable to being dissolved and annihilated. Any space in which we publicly risk this truth about ourselves – our essential predicaments of “unintegration,” as psychoanalyst D.W Winnicott termed it (Phillips 1988) – is, by definition, an *ethical space*.

There is always a risk that this truthful disclosure about our essential predicament, our tender *gift of suffering*, will be ignored, misunderstood or abused by others upon being given away. But with these risks, there are attendant possibilities that the singular, non-representational truth that the gift is meant to primitively convey might be affirmed in community with human others. With these risks, there is the possibility that the most

truthful kinds of disclosure we can give of ourselves to others – our gifts of essential unintegration and suffering – will acquire in their freedom the potential to become something different, other and more than a present truth of absolute brokenness and unintegration (Schrage 2002). These are the hopes that every act of giving, every truthful disclosure about our singular predicaments of being-in-the-world, projects and potentializes for the future.

In order for human suffering to have any chance of *différing* into something better, it must first be risked, disclosed, given over to the care of others, and freed to a world of otherness beyond itself. But in order for us to give truthful disclosures about our suffering, we need places of public disclosure where we can feel free to re-present the truth about our essential predicaments of vulnerability; the underrepresented, repressed and unavowed truth about our singular-plural human predicament that simmers just below the surface of our ‘proper’ social exchanges and interactions. We need places where we can collectively feel comfortable and safe *letting* this wounded sense of being human; public spaces we can let it go, let it show up as accountable to others and let it be given over to difference and otherness. We need places of public disclosure where the givenness of suffering can be invited into community with others; places where its gift is always welcomed and received in its alien otherness with care, hospitality and acceptance. We need places where our gifts of suffering can be entrusted to a community of others; others whose presence gives our suffering the unlimited potential to become different and make a difference. In order for human suffering to become more publicly

accounted for (or ‘better represented’), we need places of compassion where its impropriety can be publicly accommodated, shared and affirmed.

Places of public compassion such as these require cultivating intentional spaces of gathering where suffering can be entrusted to receive what Schrag (2002) calls a “fitting response.” This essentially means that others can be trusted to care about one’s suffering to the same degree that it vitally *matters* to one’s ownmost existential predicament. This is, of course, an incommensurable question of fidelity. What *is* a fitting response? How could we ever know whether our response to another’s suffering is enough – or not enough? These are incommensurably ethical questions to which we have no standard for measuring what is appropriate.

Furnishing human suffering, vulnerability and brokenness a public space where it can be freely given, exchanged, and intermingled into new potentials of compassion is fundamentally also a political affair. How much suffering never sees the light of day because there are no places within reach where the singular truth of one’s suffering can be entrusted to receive a fitting response of compassion? Given this unfortunate social reality, building (counter)public spaces of compassion should be regarded as not only an ethical concern but also a political endeavor to clear a space, establish a ground, and furnish a refuge where disclosures of suffering can be entrusted to a faithful reception and good care by a community of impassioned others.

For agoraphobic sufferers, the Commons is just such a (counter)public space where one’s suffering can be entrusted to the care of others with the utmost confidence

that it will receive a fitting response of unconditional acceptance. In the Commons, no gift of suffering however distant, no disclosure of passion however obscure, goes unanswered. Every gift of suffering given over to the Commons becomes an affirmative basis for compassion, humanity and solidarity:

I'm really overwhelmed, overwhelmed, and I just can't handle the pressure and strains of life :-(

↳ Well, we can just be overwhelmed together. At least that's better than doing it alone.
*hug*⁴⁷

What is amazing about the Commons is how much serious labor goes into maintaining and cultivating the ethos of compassion that founds this place. Never were any of these sufferers asked to take on the serious burden of caring for distant and impersonal strangers they met on the Internet. In fact, if anything, the impersonal and distanced nature of this space almost seems to invite opportunities to duck the responsibilities of compassion that characterize this place of gathering. Yet, despite these improbabilities, there is a tremendous, group effort always underway to ensure a truly open and compassionate public space of inexhaustible compassion and unlimited acceptance. The work that goes into ensuring that every gift of suffering is received and affirmed in the Commons is an endless responsibility. And yet, this gathering seems to possess as a collective corpus an infinite capacity to acknowledge and affirm the reception and value of every singular gift of agoraphobic humanity that risks itself in this space.

I showed up this forum and exposed myself as broken, full of shame and disgrace. I have revealed my deepest secrets and fears. I have shared with strangers nearly all of the pain in my life. I arrived here without hope or faith or the will to survive...and you all have accepted me for who I am. I trip and fall, lose my footing or become disoriented...and you all give me the encouragement to try and try again...you all accept me for who I am.

⁴⁷ Diary entry "Overburdened," and comment in reply, written in 2010.

You all have become my trusted friends, confidants, family. Whether I am wounded or frustrated, happy or depressed, you all are considerate and don't judge me. You all accept me for who I am. As I continue to heal and strengthen, discovering more about who I am and who I want to be, I am certain that...you all will accept me for who I am.

↳ We don't just accept you Kathy!... We LOVE you! We LOVE having you here. While you see all that is damaged inside you, we see all that is beautiful in you! We're all human, no one is perfect, and that's just the way it is. But, we all belong here. All of us have the right to be happy! The only mistake you've ever made is not treating yourself with the respect you deserve! Who rocks? Kathy rocks! ☺⁴⁸

Despite its lack of physical context and its impersonal quality, there is an enduring constancy, groundedness and concreteness to the Commons that makes it a meaningful and reliable place of dwelling and community for agoraphobic sufferers; a public space where they can disclose themselves to the world more truthfully as wounded and unintegrated. For those who constitute its gathering, the Commons is a unique and incredibly valuable place whose meaning far surpasses what we conventionally imagine to be possible in “virtual spaces” on the Internet:

I need a place where I can be honest and open up about the hurt in my life. I feel like I'm safe here because I know that we all share similar kinds of feelings. Reading others' posts and diaries has been so helpful for me, particularly the totally honest entries when the author is not trying to come across as cool but tells it like it is warts and all. I'm so grateful...because sometimes I feel like I'm going crazy, and that nobody would want me in their lives if they knew about the darkness that keeps me awake at night and makes me feel like I'm all alone in the world. You all give me the feeling that I'm not alone, and that there's light at the end of that really dark tunnel.⁴⁹

There is a tremendous, common effort of solidarity and collective responsibility happening in the Commons that can only be described as the feeling that the word ‘community’ originally meant to convey before the concept became suspect and corrupted in social thought.

⁴⁸ Diary entry “ACCEPTANCE” with comment in reply, written in 2010.

⁴⁹ Excerpt from diary entry “random thoughts and partial reflections,” [no date].

Sharing community

Community has become banal, strained, and exhausted in social thought as of late. It has been declared everything from dangerous and irresponsible (communitarianism), to hopeless and naïve (multiculturalism). Community has become a derelict and condemned structure on the landscape of critical, social theory; a profane structure which graduate students visit on the tour of deconstructed ruins. Spend enough time in this world and community starts to feel like a bad dependency we would be better off without.

But spend enough time in the Commons and community starts to feel like something vital and materially present; something elemental, contagious and widespread that circulates through its dense nodes and illuminated hearths of gathering. Spend enough time in the Commons and one begins to sense that community is not some tired construct that is ‘finished,’ but rather an elusive and on-going possibility whose essence remains unfinished, unrealized, future, and still improperly out there:

This is by far the most spectacular group of people I’ve ever met in my life. Positive, thoughtful, caring, loyal, entertaining...I could go on and on. I have felt incredibly happy and supported ever since I joined this group. We all have our own struggles and healing processes, but here there is always a sympathetic ear, a shoulder to lean on, absolute wackiness to bring out the kid in all of us, and hope.

The love I have in my heart for everyone here, I just can’t put into words...thank you.⁵⁰

To imagine community as unfinished means that we must suspend all formal inquiries into what community absolutely *is* as an object of analysis. It also means that we must suspend all final judgments about what community absolutely means ‘in the end’ or ‘at

⁵⁰ Excerpt from forum post “Thrilled to be here!,” written in 2009.

its essence'. By releasing our uncritical attachments to these structures of thought, community may become 'rewilded' as a fluid, transformative and fragmentary possibility that is materially *at work* in the world. It may become the unfinished busyness and workings of transcendent flows, circulations and contagions of sense that put us in touch with real possibilities for our being together. In this way, rather than being a final outcome or finished product that has certain enduring and representational properties, community may remain an eventful *in-completion*, which Nancy (1991) urges us to imagine "in an active sense, however, as designating not insufficiency or lack, but the activity of sharing" (p. 35).

This is how we must boldly reimagine community following the pulverization of its proper formality in thought. Community must now become unbearably and improperly *light*: a weightless, dispersed and virtual presence/present which is in-transit but intransitively⁵¹ suspended in the intermedial passages of our encounters with others; real but unrealized, material but improper. Furthermore, it must become tragically *impermanent*: a vital but perishable event of communication that always expires short of its potential; a sharing of possibility / possibility of sharing that always evaporates prior to its consummation into something solid, enduring and properly understood. This is community as a speculative inquiry into what 'incompletions' of sharing might come to pass in middle of our encounters with human and animal others. Only by making it less properly understood can community be restored back to a more primal state of being

⁵¹ Per the *OED*: "Expressing action which does not pass over to an object."

more phenomenally present and potently alive in the world. This is community (re)animated as a dynamic *event* of gathering and sharing incompleteness.

Spend enough time in the Commons and one begins to sense something radically unprecedented and transformative working through this space; a powerful disruption that blows open new horizons of possibility and new frontiers of potential for Being that were previously nonexistent:

Reaaaaaallly jazzed about all the friendships i have found here :) it's been a long time since i've been this close to others :) High school, sure, college, yeah, but not since then. how awesome is it to have such total acceptance and support, it's just dropping through me :) an elating feeling, i can be completely honest and expose my greatest fears, and know that there's someone who gets it! sometimes it blows me away so much that i feel like a lightning bolt of emotions! exhilarating.

↳ It's an incredible feeling to discover so many people who you can totally connect with, isn't it? With agor we get accustomed to hiding our feelings from others who maybe won't understand us. So it is very liberating to have a place where we can expose our real selves. Nothing can compare to sharing our feelings with others who get it. I'm so happy you have found support here and have been able to make so many friends. And in turn you have been a source of support and encouragement for others. I am so glad to count you as my friend. Knowing you has changed my life ☺.⁵²

The Commons discloses an ecstatic space of community and compassion through which agoraphobic sufferers may perform new relations and functions that transcend suffering. By affording a transcendent space for building new relations in and connections to a greater world beyond suffering, the Commons offers agoraphobic sufferers a place for repairing the relational and functional vitality of being-human-in-the-world.

Imagine the phenomenal experience of being lost at sea. This experience is not limited to a synchronic space of the static, physical setting. Rather, it amplifies and draws out across the diachronic spacing of the unfolding event of becoming more and more lost at sea. With the successive passing of time and drifting of space, one's proper world of

⁵² Diary entry "lightning bolt!," and comment in reply, written in 2012.

personal identity and functional connectivity slowly recedes into the distance as it is unworlded by the sea's growing and compounding emptiness. Now imagine, in the midst of this process of unworlding, catching sight of a faint glimmer of light in the distance; the possibility of something worldly, meaningful and human on the horizon. This is perhaps the best way to describe what the event of community might feel like for agoraphobic sufferers who discover the radiant light of its possibility in the space of the Commons:

this is more or less, the first time in my life when i've been able to talk to others who have gone through some of the same things i have, i am able to connect with these people in ways that are just as strong as blood. simply thinking about this group brings me strength in the toughest of situations. What an incredible feeling.⁵³

The Commons functions as a beacon of humanity whose appearance on the horizon, no matter how distant and finite, serves to halt, to violate and to limit the absolute reality of suffering's unworking. Perhaps the Commons does not fully save agoraphobic sufferers from their suffering; perhaps it just illuminates a tiny portal on the horizon pointing to the possibility of another world beyond their suffering. Perhaps the Commons is this tiny opening in agoraphobic sufferers' worlds of unworlding through which radiantly new kinds of affirmative possibilities for being-in-the-world originate and well up to establish a limit to the world's unraveling breakdown. The Commons is this narrow opening in the world, this ecstatic space of worlding possibility, through which the affirmative materialities of hope, illumination and salvation penetrate the dark gulfs of agoraphobic

⁵³ Excerpt from diary entry "courage," written in 2010.

suffering. The Commons is this tiny, eventful opening through which a new world begins to present itself and world itself into being.

Imagination that cuts

“We always think of the imagination as the faculty that forms images. On the contrary, it deforms what we perceive; it is, above all, the faculty that frees us from immediate images and changes them. If there is no change, or unexpected fusion of images, there is no imagination; there is no imaginative act” (Bachelard 1988, p. 1; emphases in original).

In *Air and Dreams*, Bachelard (1988) offers what might nowadays be characterized in non-representational geography as an ‘atmospheric’ (Anderson 2009; Stewart 2011) or ‘aerographic’ (Jackson and Fannin 2011; Martin 2011; Olwig 2011a) phenomenology of imagination. Common to all three of these threads of thought is a careful attention to the materially and affectively unbounded sense of existence; a worldly sense of spatial extension and immersion that defies the limits of subjectivity. What Bachelard proposes is that we think of imagination not as something produced by subjectivity, but as an atmospheric event which takes place extensively and materially in the world. His critical phenomenological insight exposes us to the fact that imagination is never a subjective capacity that arises from within. Rather, it is always a worldly, autonomous force that surprises, interrupts and bursts forth from outside; “outside any given thing, outside any given sense, outside actuality,” adds Massumi (2002, p. 134) about the provenance of imagination. This produces a way of thinking about imagination as an animated, worldly and wildly unregulated materiality that literally “grabs our attention” (Bishop 1994). Continuing his thought presented above, Bachelard adds:

If the image that is *present* does not make us think of one that is *absent*, if an image does not determine an abundance – an explosion – of unusual images, then there is no imagination. There is only perception, the memory of a perception, a familiar memory, an habitual way of viewing form and color. The basic word in the lexicon of the imagination is not *image*, but *imaginary*. The value of an image is measured by the extent of its *imaginary* aura. Thanks to the *imaginary*, imagination is essentially *open* and *elusive*. It is the human psyche's experience of *openness* and *novelty* (Bachelard 1988, p. 1; emphases in original).

In this way it becomes possible to rethink imagination as spontaneous reactions which erupt in the '*inter-*' of our worldly interactions and in the '*cum*' of our communications with human and non-human others. Instead of being subject to our innate ability to manufacture images in our heads, imagination becomes subject to our relational *availability* to being summoned by an outside into new spaces of animated freedom and possibility.

In contexts of unworlding, imagination becomes a serendipitous gift of interruption that draws us out into new spaces of lightness and possibility. "Imagination gives us the gift of freedom in our suffering," writes existential theorist Ingrid Harris (2007, p. 87) in a wonderful essay that explores possibilities for meaning to arise in suffering. Imagination opens up new spaces, horizons and atmospheres of possibility by *worlding*, or furnishing a material context for, their (virtual) reality to grow, thrive and become more real and more present. Imagination worlds virtual realities of hope, possibility and potential; realities that are material, felt and deeply moving, but deferred, elusive and not yet actual. Imagination's pointed passion surprises suffering from beyond its enveloping horizons of bleakness. Its arrival violates the compounding (pre)sense of suffering and interrupts the building trajectory of unworlding. Its passionate disruption tunnels new openings into virtual beyonds for relationally and functionally transcending

the dark and engulfing (un)world(ing) of suffering. Like a rescuer's pick axe breaking into the subterranean prison of a collapsed mine shaft, imagination's material *punctum* pierces the totality of suffering's atmosphere by flooding it with light and fresh air from an impossible world beyond; relieving its compounding and constricting atmosphere of pressure. In a phenomenal sense, imagination violates the totality of suffering and interrupts the *telos* (thread, narrative, trajectory) of unworlding by exposing spaces and passages beyond and counter to suffering.

Harris (2007) has something quite similar in mind when she describes imagination as disclosing transcendent dimensions of a world beyond suffering:

Imagination opens the prison gates of the deterministic hell into which we may find ourselves thrown as a result of strict cause-and-effect relationships. Imagination provides us with alternatives, other possible ways that things may be. When, on the one hand, we accept a system of thought as a totalistic view, we become bound. Rejecting such totalization, on the other hand, means that we are free to ask different questions, to get different answers, ones that reveal different dimensions in the world (p. 87).

Like Harris, I conceive of imagination as a materially powerful agency that carries the potential to puncture the totalizing sphere of pure suffering. However, whereas Harris seems to associate imagination with subjective agencies of individual choice, I want to think more critically about imagination as something more autonomously free and worldly than a subjective matter. I want to think about imagination as spontaneous and material events of freedom – violent and full of earth-shattering possibilities, like an explosion – that take place in the intermedial spaces of our encounters with others.

While this theoretical difference may seem trivial at first glance, I want to argue that it has practical implications for how we think about the treatment of suffering. If pure

suffering is improperly *mine*, engulfing and enisling, then the gift that interrupts its composition must come from outside and beyond. It must be entirely other; an unforeseen, foreign agency that punctures the capsule of suffering and cuts the unraveling thread of unworlding. In short, imagination requires public space, encounters with strange others (in the most liberal, post-human sense imaginable), and unscripted interactions. It requires a freedom of space in which its potential ‘shareholders’ (each of whom have a share in the corporation of the imaginary (Nancy 2008a)) or ‘actors’ (each of whom participate in the production of an imaginary event (Latour 2005)) may spontaneously intermingle, cross-pollinate and perhaps ignite into a cutting and earth-shattering explosion of pure imagination.

Furnishing a free space for imagination to gather and compose its autonomous spontaneity is one of the most important functions of the Commons. Just as there are places of gathering in the Commons oriented around sharing suffering and build compassion, so too are there other places characterized by more creative and experimental kinds of gathering in which the collective goal is to alchemize new matters of imagination. While I have described the former places of compassion as “hearths,” I want to consider the latter places of imagination as “laboratories.” Like a laboratory, places of gathering oriented around the cultivation of the imaginary – which, in its purest form is always impossibly fantastic (Tuan 1989) – are environments of controlled chaos. These are places in which we tinker with the basic ingredients, elements and structures of life in an experimental effort to produce new kinds of solutions, compounds, agents and

agencies that will enhance our lives. These are places in which we carry out risky experiments which are always liable to unleash evil and cause harm, injury and irrevocable destruction. In order to lessen the potential for destructive volatility, lab clinicians cooperate in the (re)production of carefully managed environments so as to ensure, to the greatest extent of their collective ability, that the spontaneous reactions that take place within the lab space will be life-enhancing, not depleting.

The Commons is filled with all kinds of laboratory spaces of imagination. Some are ephemeral places, like the weekly happy hour gatherings every Friday, where agoraphobic sufferers become transformed by the power of imagination into average, workaday folks sharing (virtual) drinks at the bar, buying (virtual) rounds for one another, and sharing in the reverie of the mundane concerns and superficial diversions of ordinary life:

└ More miller light for me... Everyone's next round of drinks is on me. I feel rich with love tonight.

└ nice line

└ Thanks, Stoney. I'm not one to step on other's toes... Everybody knows how sacred beer is to me, so if I can share that, I can surely share the lovely women here among us tonight.

└ Oh Dave, you shouldn't tease a drinkin' girl, you silly boy!!!!
Else you'll be really sorry in the morning. I'll take a gin and tonic.
Now let's turn up the music! I think Jennifer just arrived!!! That girl knows how to party.

└ Hey Jennifer, Kelly just took off. would you like to dance?

└ *hands Mary a gin and tonic* I'll probably regret it in the morning if it's gonna make me sore.

└ Oh yeah, you'll be sore alright. you let loose an agoraphobic on the dance floor and watch out!!
Anything could happen. So Stoney is dancing with Jennifer. What shall *we* do?

└ Let's get our groove on.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Excerpts from discussion thread "FRIDAY NIGHT CELEBRATION!!!!," written in 2009.

Other laboratories of imagination in the Commons are more permanent spaces in which the alchemies of imagination grow to become tremendously storied and complex. One of the most fascinating examples of this a truly fantastic place called the “Agor Lodge,” which, as its founder explains below, began as an offhanded joke but unexpectedly grew into a dynamic place/thread in which imaginations of community become performed and elaborated into (virtual) reality:

With all the new people that have joined our group lately I think it’s time they know about the Agor Lodge. The Agor Lodge is a fantasy place we’ve all created through pictures and posts. It’s a luxurious resort in the Blue Ridge mountains. Of course, I actually purchased it for the sole purpose of inviting my attractive yet lonely friends to come stay with me for as long as they want. So many of us live alone or sometimes just need a break from our families, so I knew this place was certain to be popular. It’s located on the pristine shores of Pine Bluff Lake up in the mountains. We also have a working ranch next door to the lodge that funds our elegant lifestyle. If you decide to visit you’ll have to pitch in so that we can continue offering assistance to our fellow Agors.

The original thread about the Agor Lodge was an incredible success. It seems like everyone really desired for this place to exist so they could really come and visit it. What began as a joke has grown into a fantasy lifeline and it’s exciting to believe that a place like this actually exists. I, for example, was totally drawn to the ideas that this place represents. So if you happen to hear about the Agor Lodge in a discussion thread now you’ll know what we’re talking about. Below is the picture that got the whole thing started.⁵⁵



The Agor Lodge demonstrates that the imaginary is not separate from the material world, but rather the creative transfiguration and reconfiguration of its material elements into

⁵⁵ Excerpt from discussion thread “Agor Lodge News!” written in 2009.

alternative compositions of reality and projections of possibility for this material world. In this way, I contend that the Agor Lodge does not so much offer a ‘fantasy space’ for escaping the ‘real world,’ as it offers a ‘creative commons’ for agoraphobic sufferers to experiment with and collaborate on new formulas (“solutions”) for their being-in-the-world; and a shared, material space for formulating more enhanced ways for relating to the world:

└ Hold on... you mean to tell me the lodge doesn't really exist? And here I was thinking about visiting next weekend 😊

└ Of course it's real Kevin. It is alive in me and you at least. It's so real that I have looked at property, online, that is. I am in love with this place and I want it!!!!

└ Over the winter we updated the kitchen and it turned out magnificent. Ramona did most of the renovations herself and of course I oversaw the whole operation and drank Dave's Miller Light.



└ Yeah, I'm becoming a real expert with home renovations, if I may say so myself. Of course this place is real, look at all these callouses on my hands!!!!⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Excerpts from discussion thread “Agor Lodge News!” written in 2009.

In a sense, the lab spaces of imagination created in the Commons – of which the Agor Lodge is one incredibly sophisticated example – offer agoraphobic sufferers a material *work-space* for collectively experimenting with creative fixes, patches and repairs for the broken infrastructures and damaged relations of their worlds. These work-spaces are a vitally important venue for collectively and practically working out ways to get back ‘on-line’ in a functionally enhanced and relationally holistic sense of having a world. These laboratories of imagination are virtual but material workshops of collective labor for *functionally repairing* what all agoraphobia has broken, damaged and disintegrated in their worlds; namely the diffuse, humanistic senses of belonging and being at home in the world:

└ It's almost Saturday night! I hope to see you all at the lodge. I built a fire in case it gets chilly tonight.⁵⁷



⁵⁷ Excerpt from discussion thread “Agor Lodge News!” written in 2009.

Conclusion

Images like the one above help us to conceptualize virtual places of gathering and sharing humanity, such as the Commons, in more conventionally physical terms as an embodied space that we can actually inhabit with our bodies. And, yet, images like the one above are not actually ‘representative’ of the virtual places they are intended to represent. They are highly imaginative, symbolic representations of a place that cannot be absolutely indexed to a ‘grounded’ location on Earth. Over the course of its history, there seems to be strong bias against the study of non-physical, diachronic, virtual places in geography because, ostensibly, if these places could not be formally represented in empirically physical terms, they did not really exist. However, following the non-representational turn, what seems to be dawning on the collective geographical consciousness is that the inadequacy resides not in the material inability of virtual places to be fully real, but rather in our mental inability to imagine how places that really matter to human experience could be groundless, speculative and beyond the synchrony of the full-blown present.

In this chapter I have endeavored to trace the humanistic contours of a virtual place of gathering not in terms of its *formal* qualities, but in terms of its materially and affectively *functional* capacities. From an individual perspective, agoraphobia manifests itself as an improper affect that eludes one’s grasp, attenuates one’s sense of subjective propriety, and unworks the composure of one’s world. According to this solitary point of view, agoraphobia takes place as a phenomenal upwelling of impropriety that robs one of

one's personal possessions of meaning, identity, and a proper place in the world. It names a violate, impersonal agency that unsettles a proper sense of being in the world. By doing so, agoraphobia presents itself as an improper arrival of sense that attenuates, dissolves, and calls into question the resolution of one's being-in-the-world.

However, the phenomenality of agoraphobia becomes something different when it is confronted in community with others who are also struggling with similar passions of unworlding impropriety. Instead of appearing, as it does from a *private* point of view, as an enveloping impropriety that absolutely overwhelms one's world, in community it becomes possible for agoraphobia to appear as something more finite, tolerable and relatable, even if only by the slightest of margins. In community, the absolute nature of agoraphobia becomes relatively *common*. What was absolutely engulfing for one alone becomes a relative gulf shared amongst a community. The Commons offers a vital space for sharing the improprieties of suffering and, in the process, transforming it into a shared and concrete basis for building compassion, igniting the fires of community, and staging enduring scenes of progress, hope and repair.

Conclusion

In a recent article in *Progress in Human Geography*, Ian Shaw (2012) urges geographers to become better attuned to the ways that the world is constantly being transformed by eventful forces that assume a variety of forms:

We are all children of events, thrown into a world of revolution and change. Volcanoes bubble and boil, oceans heave and toil, nuclear bombs flatten cities, and protestors topple brutal dictators... Exactly how one is to articulate these moments is important for taking hold of the politics and possibilities rooted in the very texture of the planet – indeed, in the very folds of existence (p. 613).

In many ways, attending to what Shaw terms an “evental geography” is nothing new for geomorphologists, who have long devoted themselves to studying how the earth’s physical surfaces are made, unmade and remade by elemental processes including weathering, erosion, sedimentation, flooding, earthquakes and typhoons. In the words of Shaw, natural processes such as these represent “geo-events” which carry the transformative potential to *affect* change – to impact human and non-human others, to inaugurate new contexts of existence, and to bring about new states of worldly affairs.

Illustrating this idea, Shaw declares:

A geo-event is an inherently affective event, given that previously unfelt or oppressed affective forces are unleashed when inexistent objects topple the transcendental makeup of a world. So-called ‘natural’ disasters are an obvious example of a geo-event – given their capacity to instantly change a world. As Clark (2011) writes, the disaster ‘is the event so severe that in its tearing away of the foundations, structures and relations that make the world legible, it also deprives those it afflicts of their capacity to absorb and process the event, to render it intelligible’ (Shaw 2012, p. 624).

It is relatively easy to conceptualize natural disasters as geo-events. These are events which carry the forceful potential to upset the functional and relational composition of the world; to disrupt its structure, to upset its equilibriums, and to break the accord of its

on-going state of affairs. Beyond what they accomplish in a purely physical sense in terms of visible, singularizable and representational damage to and on the earth's surface, geo-events unleash a broader array of *material* affects and effects which reverberate also through other dimensions of existence that *matter* to our lives and to our worlds (because they are felt, sensed, presenced), but do not readily show up in the world because they are diachronic, diffuse and non-representational in nature.

When Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans in 2005, we all watched helplessly as a colossal geo-event unfolded before our eyes. The entire network of the city's infrastructures literally dissolved beneath a rising tide of opaque floodwaters. Then the vital services and functional ecologies that sustained life in New Orleans slowly began to erode, dissipate and break down. But, like the visible tip of an iceberg, this account of Katrina only tells a fragment of the entire corpus of material affects, effects, forces and passions that this event unleashed upon the cosmos. How have we even begun to account for all the existential costs and damages (including the "human costs") that happened in the world and to the worlds of all those who suffered through the geo-event of Katrina?

What was stunning was how quickly everything began to unravel in New Orleans. The utter contingency of our worlds become apparent during spectacular geo-events like Katrina. So too does the sovereignty of the improper, which in this case surged violently through the city first in elemental shockwaves of wind and water, and later in the afterburning passions of suffering and violence. Katrina rode many different vehicles of impropriety as her senseless, wrathful agency translated and mutated across the city,

tearing through and tear apart the foam of New Orleans – including all the millions of tiny, bubble-like lifeworlds it sustained.⁵⁸ All of this, in turn, highlights the *passibility* of the human predicament of being-in-the-world. Katrina exposed not only our fundamental vulnerability as human lifeworlds to being breached, but also the limits of our ability to control and make sense of improper geo-events that happen *in* and *to* our lifeworlds, yet exceed the reaches of human agency and understanding.

It is relatively easy to discern the contingent structure of a world, the negative presence of improper agencies, forces and passions, and the passability of the human condition in unworlding geo-events, like Katrina, that come in the form of spectacular natural disasters. Their effects are, in a sense, ‘ready-made’ for representation, mass publication and broadcast, as they tend to be highly physical, highly visible, highly sensational, highly public and highly concentrated in a physical geographical locality – which, in essence, makes a ‘ready-made’ community out of all those who suffer together *in-situ* in concentrated zone of a natural disaster.

What is relatively more difficult is to discern the unworlding effects and affects of geo-events that are just as material, forceful and improper, and just as potentially devastating to a world as natural disasters, but not as physically ‘ready-made’ for representation, publication, broadcast, and social accountability. These would be what I have described throughout this dissertation as material (or affective) disasters of sense.

To broaden our ability to discern and publicize geo-events that happen in the world and

⁵⁸ This imaginary of bubbles and foam to describe the singular-plural structure of our world(s) can be attributed to the work of Sloterdijk (2011). In many ways, it offers an improvement to spatial-compositional imaginary of *fabric* by attributing a three-dimensional quality to our intermingledness.

overturn worlds in ways that are more-than-physical, geographers must become committed a new logic of radical materiality; one that allows us to *multiply* and *expand* questions about what matters into new areas of concern and spaces of care beyond what has, heretofore, been deemed as properly ‘geographical’ in nature (and society). This imperative that we start to *care* about these other material realms of existence/Being/the world is not merely a groundless ethical appeal or an ‘emotional’ appeal for geographers to get more in touch with their feelings. Rather, what is at stake in this issue are questions about the empirical competency of geography to ‘speak for’ and remain accountable to realms of spatial experience that are material and affective in quality. In this regard, geography cannot refuse to open up to a broader *material world* that contains but also exceeds the terrestrial, measurable, cartographical, singularizable *physical earth*. We can no longer afford to ignore these other layers, dimensions, qualities, spaces and extensions of sense that take place in and as the world.

Articulating this move toward a broader scope of materiality in a paper that has become a crucial signpost in the non-representational turn in geography, Ben Anderson and John Wylie (2009) write:

Materiality, in this reading, is multiple: the term indeed connotes forces and processes that exceed any one state (solid, liquid, gas), and are defined ultimately in terms of movement and process rather than stasis. It is also relational insofar as these materialities/mobilities are the very sparks which ignite passages of perceptions and sensations, and concordances or dissonances of bodies and things (p. 326).

...

To set materiality free from its traditionally lumpen role with respect to thought and discourse is necessarily to set the concordant task of reimagining relations between the material, perceptual, affectual, and discursive... Matter thereafter becomes a *question* posed: simultaneously, a provocation, incitement, enigma, and promise. This is potentially the basis of an agenda aiming to write through materialities anew (p. 332).

In this work, I have attempted to write through the improper and suffering materiality of agoraphobia anew, and in the process illustrate the presence and affective qualities of material geo-events, like agoraphobia, that carry the forceful potential to inundate and dissolve the functional and relational composition of a human world. Agoraphobia does not just affect an ‘individual’; it always affects an entire world – which is always *the* entire world, to the farthest edges of cosmic sense and beyond, for the human someone that dwells, riveted to and predicated within its absolute sphere. In this regard, agoraphobia is spatially and temporally extensive, areal, diffuse and atmospheric in a way that always and infinitely exceeds the limits of human ability qua “subjectivity.” Agoraphobia, as a phenomenally material and affective geo-event, carries the real potential to (un)systematically break down our worlds like an event of cosmic disintegration that trails out across the rippling extensions of space and time. Heeding to its excessive, non-representational dimensions of suffering, about which we can only speculate from a distance, agoraphobia becomes ‘rewilded’ as an improper materiality that is present in the world but infinitely beyond our finite human abilities to properly grasp. By attending to its improper material qualities of sense, agoraphobia becomes reanimated in thought as eventful, engulfing, atmospheric, morphologically active and volatily unpredictable.

In the preceding chapters, I have endeavored to describe the excessive, improper and extensive process of being- and becoming-with-agoraphobia in terms of unworlding events of suffering attenuation, breakdown and disintegration. Attending to eventualities

of worldly existence, I argue, is a vitally important mission for human geography after the non-representational turn because it corresponds to the more extensive and improper dimensions of experience in which human suffering happens, or takes place, across extensive and extending *spacings* of rupture, attenuation and dissolution. By becoming better attuned to geo-events that are *affective* in nature, geography can develop a competency, a vocabulary and a set of spatial imaginaries for describing the ways that human worlds are constant *labors* – provisional *things* – that are always vulnerable to coming undone, always being compromised by new kinds of improper gravities, forces, intrusions and passions, and always undergoing repair. Suffering describes spaces and times when this labor becomes unbearable, arduous, tenuous and seemingly hopeless. Suffering calls out when the negative and improper materialities of unworlding reach thresholds of disaster, crisis and catastrophe. Responding to these calls is at once both an ontological and ethical imperative of geography, as ignorance in either regard is simply unacceptable.

Somewhat ironically, the speculative material turn in social thought – a central tenet of beliefs about material existence that posthumanism, non-representational theory, actor-network theory, relational theory and (post)phenomenology all share in common – opens up a space of possibility for *questions* about the human experience to become put back ‘into play’ in accounts of what matters and what counts as real, meaningful and worldly. This is slightly ironic because, in many ways, speculative materialism defines itself in reaction to the very kinds of idealisms, subjectivisms, universalisms and

essentialisms that liberal humanistic thought has come to represent following deconstructionism.

In nearly every respect, the material turn into which deconstructionism and post-structuralism have evolved represents a progressive achievement within geography. This turn has inaugurated critical (re)imaginings of the world as hybrid, networked, ecological, affective, relational, eventful and more-than-human. It has also challenged geographers to critically attend to the extensive spaces, prehistorical dimensions and non-representational layers of sense that exceed, precede and predicate subjective experience. In all of these ways, the material turn represents one of the most important developments in geography in the last fifty years.

However, there is at least one respect in which the material turn has failed us. This concerns our ability to attend to matters of concern that are, if not uniquely human, at least intensely and definitively human. When we strip the humanistic endeavor down to its most basic and foundational premise, it becomes no longer tainted, corrupted and burdened by the ontological trappings mentioned above. Rather it becomes liberated, enlightened and unleashed as an ethos that traces, searches for and reaches out toward the *elán vital* (vital spirit or passion) of a speculative humanity that is present here with all of us, circulating among us and offering itself to us an improper occasion for community, solidarity, responsibility and compassion. By stifling humanism wholesale, we are refusing to admit even the *possibility* for these things to exist – now, or in the future. As Kristen Simonsen (2012) recently remarked in a paper that explores this very issue: “If

ideas of creating a better world – more human, just and hospitable – are to make sense, they have to be granted existence somehow or other” (p. 13).

Building on the methodological, theoretical and ethical pathways that I have endeavored to forge in this work – one which non-eliminativistically integrates sense *with* significance, the improper *with* the proper, and the material *with* the human – I call on human geographers to rise to the challenge of reanimating humanity and resurrecting the humanistic ethos in radically material world of incomprehensible magnitude. Let us find newer, more modest and speculative ways to *world* humanistic materialities of sense, possibility and potential that very much circulate through our worldly encounters and relations with one another. Let us develop new spatial sensitivities, intelligences, imaginaries and vocabularies for worlding events of humanity in our geographical accounts of the world. Let us become reinvigorated and re-encharmed once again by the *possibilities* for community, solidarity, responsibility and compassion to exist as powerful, material forces at work in the world.

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VITA

Mason Russell McWatters was born in Austin, Texas, in 1980, years before it would be discovered to be a weird place worth keeping weird. He is the son of Michael Russell McWatters, of Pittsburg, Texas, and Sheila Ann Bower, of Beaumont, Texas, and the descendent of many generations of farmers, teachers and preachers that have made a home in the piney woods and deep thickets of East Texas. Mason earned a Bachelor of Arts degree at Wake Forest University in North Carolina, worked on a ranch in Wyoming, and suffered through a stint in the corporate legal world in Washington D.C., before returning to Austin, in 2004, to pursue a Master of Arts degree in Latin American Studies at UT. On the hottest day of the year in 2010, he married Catherine Matthews in a non-air conditioned, but magical, ceremony on the shores of Lake Austin. In his spare time, Mason enjoys restoring old furniture and looks forward to stripping away the years of torment and abuse that his desk has endured during the writing of this dissertation.

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