Searching for a “Community of the Cave”: Imaginings of Past and Future in Urban Foraging

by

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INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 2011, I was doing research on a project examining the media’s focus on hygiene in its critique of the Occupy Wall Street encampment in New York City when I came across an interview in The Believer with Robin Nagle, director of the John W. Draper Interdisciplinary Master’s Program in Humanities and Social Thought at NYU and Anthropologist in Residence with the New York Department of Sanitation. At the time of the interview, Nagle was working to complete Picking Up, an ethnographic study of sanitation work and the workers who do this work. For a period of time, Nagle had a route through the Bronx on which she delved into both the disciplining of her own body-in-uniform and the “folk archaeology of contemporary household trash on the curb.”

I was captivated by her re-intimation with trash, her desire to expose our waste as intimate. “Garbage is generally overlooked because we create so much of it so casually and so constantly that it’s a little bit like paying attention to, I don’t know, to your spit or something else you just don’t think about,” she remarked to interviewer Alex Carp. “You—we—get to take it for granted that, yeah we’re going to create it, and, yeah, somebody’s going to take care of it, take it away. It’s also very intimate. There’s very little we do in twenty-four hours except sleeping, and not always even sleeping, when we don’t create some form of trash. Even just now, waiting for you, I pulled out a Kleenex and I blew my nose and I threw it out, in not even fifteen seconds. There’s a little intimate

1 Carp.
gesture that I don’t think about, you don’t think about, and yet there’s a remnant, there’s a piece of debris, there’s a trace.”

Around the same time, I was asked to write a statement of poetics for a writing workshop. The statement, in revisit, seems a mapping of the space from where I began the exploration that led to this thesis, of where I was as this project began to occupy me:

[You asked *What is your input?*

“It’s hard to separate the past from the present,” says Little Edie in the opening of the Maysles brother’s cult documentary *Grey Gardens.*

I’m thinking about disorientation, and about claustrophobia. About transcribing the compulsion of a confused space—who is authoring the dreamscape? Am I assembling the dia/picture-logue in that liminal space between awake and sleep? Am I cultivating it?

Which of my thoughts are just the chatter of brain synapses? (sin-aps-ees).

It’s incredibly claustrophobic to inhabit this one body all the time. This body I can’t shed which can’t shed me. What does it mean to be intimate in my body, to time stamp all its processes?

I’m trying to break apart my text, to infuse it with the experience of body making sense of itself—to break apart as an inclusion, as a way of dissecting the veins of censorship which distill this body, these thoughts to something sensical at all. The embarrassment.

The secretion.

I learned today that bodies emit varying levels of sulfur, and the metals we touch rust at varying rates accordingly.

When we’re touching, those atoms in between our surfaces—we’re never really touching. What does it mean to be intimate?

John Waters in an interview with Hilton Als for Grand Street’s 53rd issue, “Fetishes”: *I always use sexual fetishes because they look so ridiculous ... There are whole magazines about [“sploshing”] that show dressed-for-success women—you know those horrible suits that women lawyers wear—sitting on pies. Does sitting on a pie work? I’m not ruining an outfit to try it out, but it is fascinating to see these people who are so serious about it. I’m thrilled that I can still be surprised by people’s behavior.*

I think television, the shared text of our present, is so desperately lacking a Marquis de Sade. I’m interested in how the desirable body is constructed here, laid bare in public, the biology we leave out.

I’m interested in how women on the CBS reality game show *Survivor* never grow body hair.

I’m reading interviews with mactors hired for such shows. (Mactor: model actor, an industry term).

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2 Ibid.
We’re afraid of blemish. We refrigerate obsessively. I want my poetics to be a thawing of these frozen fruits. The ovaries, pituitary glands, the sweat molecules in ice cube trays.

Alex Carp interviewing Robin Nagle, anthropologist hired by the New York Department of Sanitation, for The Believer: Garbage is the negation of culture. And William Rathje, whom you mentioned just before, has noted that humans are the only animal species not drawn in by garbage’s smells and colors.

What are we leaving out?

As I turned to texts by Georges Bataille, Roger Caillois, Michael Taussig, and others the following semester, these themes and queries continued to swirl around me. I was caught by the transgression in a continual intimation with garbage—the revisit of the sanitation worker, the ritual (ritual defilement? I asked) of my friends who dumpster dove regularly. And I continually turned to Nagle’s work, her efforts to make those bodies visible.

I began to pursue Professor Nagle. I emailed her asking where her research would take her over the summer, and if there was any way I could participate—or even simply be around it. I called her office and left messages. Eventually she called me back, and we agreed that I would do a summer internship with her.

I lived in New York City from the period of June to August, 2011, during which I was introduced to the city’s garbage systems through two vastly different ways: Through my work with Nagle, I was exposed to the sanitation archives and completed transcript edits and reformatting for her sanitation oral history website. Simultaneously, I began to learn Brooklyn and Manhattan through its edible trash. Partly encouraged by Nagle and partly by my own interest in the practice of urban foraging, I developed my own circuits and joined
so-called “trash tours” organized by members of freegan.info, a hub for freegan organizing. Every week, my increasing knowledge of these routes would be punctuated by material Nagle gave me to read, watch, and listen, as well as by places she encouraged me to visit and take note of. On several occasions we took field trips together: to Dead Horse Bay, for example, a poorly constructed landfill used right when plastics were first coming into use, or to the Upper West Side on trash collection day, to do research on an article Nagle had been asked to write.

It continually stumped me as to what Nagle was getting out of this arrangement. She was essentially teaching an individual tutorial for free, mentoring me both in and out of the world of discard studies, and although I would complete tasks for her, they always seemed infinitesimally small in comparison to what she was giving me. I would assemble feedback and grammatical edits on the final draft of the soon-to-be released ethnography *Picking Up*, for example, but what we would end up focusing on as I handed them in would be all of the questions I had about her research, all of my queries into garbology. Often we would sit down and work through a history or a documentary she had given me—another opportunity for her to guide my own research. I am continually grateful for this generosity, this selflessness, this willingness to teach.

In the meanwhile, I had developed a route through Park Slope, which I would complete several times a week, usually with friends and sometimes on my own. I would explore other areas (mostly in Brooklyn) as well, often drawing from a directory I found in freegan.info, but it was with this particular collection
of upscale groceries and bakeries that I became most familiar, settling into the
rhythms of their day-to-day operations, acutely aware of when the trash would
be put out on the curb and when it would be picked up by private contractors in
those big trash collection trucks. Occasionally, I would meet other urban
foragers at these places. Young people or those in groups would usually invite
me and my friends to partake, and would often give us tips on other locales (a
good curb in the area to find coffee, for example). It was clear that this was a
choice for them, a statement of politics and a recognition of the advantage in
having others join them. Conversely, I tended to stay away from older
individuals who were on their own. For those for whom urban foraging seemed
like more of a necessity, it felt advantageous not to allow me or us into their
harvesting. I respected the distance I felt they demanded from me, and this
important dimension of urban foraging, largely absent from the pages in this
thesis, remains a critical inquiry for future studies.

For the most part, my interactions with those passing by were through
friends who had come along (but didn’t forage) with me or via the laughter of
grocery store workers who came across us. But, on a few occasions, I was
actually questioned by pedestrians astounded not by what I was doing (trash
picking, after all, is not such an uncommon practice in a city like New York), but
by the bounty revealed. I would offer these people some of my finds, showing
them how much I would be leaving behind anyway, but only on one occasion
was I taken up on that offer. On one other notable occasion, early in the summer,
before I had established a route or a practice, a friend and I were approached by
a reporter writing on urban foraging as an extension of the Occupy Wall Street movement.

It was on Nagle’s suggestion that I first attended a “trash tour” led by members of the freegan.info community, which I later wrote an article about for the blog Discard Studies, a platform Nagle is involved with. It was at this first trash tour that I was introduced to a more cohesive freegan community. At first trepid of my intentions, or rather wary of the specific type of media attention freegan practices like dumpster diving usually attract, this small collection of people quickly became more open and welcoming as I related my experiences and they related theirs at the tour leader’s house the following night over a foraged feast.

At that point in my research I was cautious about allowing a freegan lens to dominate my experience of urban foraging for fear of missing varying orientations of that gather. Perhaps, even, de-politicizations of that space. With time, however, I came to realize that these freegans’ philosophy was an excellent entry point into the subversive imaginings of the human body that had driven my interest in garbage in the first place. In this thesis, therefore, I draw on my brief but intense encounters with these members of freegan.info extensively, and I also remain grateful to them for embracing me so generously.

Upon returning to Wesleyan in the fall, I delved more directly into the philosophical renderings of the human body, its termed animality, that underlie an urban foraging conscious of itself. In the materials I found on freegan.info and elsewhere I was drawn to that dark nostalgia for prehistory, for the life of the
cave. From a fluidity of person with the materials of body that make person animate, which can be found in the imagined Paleolithic psyche, or to put another way from a continuity between human, animal, and the material world that surrounds each, I began to ponder that continuity carried over to address the materials that go into body—food, and the resulting ontology in my terming of food as trash. And so, I cycled again back to the freegans, their indictments of the fragmentation of capitalism and the exploitation inherent in its systems of food/food waste.

In mid-fall, I was involved in the harvesting of dear meat enabled by an accidental death, the turning of the carcass of a wild doe into food. This encounter set me off-kilter; it seemed to at once relate so completely to my project, and yet to be an entirely separate entryway to those themes I had turned to in my library research. I wrote in a journal entry for my thesis tutorial:

I'm becoming more interested with intimacy—forcibly inserting oneself in a food production system normally devoid of contact with food before it is food: food as living matter. But I keep questioning whether one experience, as personally moving as it was, can qualify as intimacy. So I'm thinking about the momentary—that anecdote—as opposed to a prolonged intimacy …

I've been thinking more about ideas of sentience—the animal, the food product, and where our perceptions of sentience enter in harvesting that animal to turn it to food product. How we separate ourselves/our overlapping qualities in the commodification process. Those ontological transformations that occur. The image of packaged meats I found in garbage bags this summer has really stayed with me in this regard. I've been wondering, also, if the seasoned [contemporary] hunter still experiences the sort of connection I felt with the animal when I ate that bit of venison, or if the differences lie elsewhere for him (in the taste, perhaps, or in the pride of resourcefulness, etc.) or if that meat is experientially no different to him than packaged meat from the grocery store.

Along these lines, I'm having trouble deciding whom I want this thesis to focus on. I know where I am positionally, I know where my "we"
emanates from, but I’m not sure how broad I want the conversation to be...

...[And back to] the bizarre/liminal state of meat in its raw form, and all the different steps it takes to disassociate meat from the animal and turn it to food. How all of the issues of hygiene and contagion are heightened with the very real issue of [raw] meat’s ... indigestibility. As well as the varying levels of over-anxiety placed in the uncontrollable nature of a body. A vegetable, a fruit, etc. can be contaminated—it can mold or have worms/bugs inside it—and meat can to, but even without these contaminates it remains so much messier. In a perceptive or sensory way. And then also, its contaminations are more microbial. Its illnesses are often ones we too can catch, as members of the animal world...

I’m trying to negotiate the line between fully conveying the intense contact, being inside the animal and then the animal being inside us, our stomachs, without seeming to exploit the graphic. In some ways I feel the graphic nature of these pictures [taken while harvesting the doe], this writing, is completely necessary. And in others, I hold myself suspect.

The work that follows is primarily one of working through the conundrums in this early rendering of my project. It can only speak to one locality, one temporal space of body. I draw from conversations with the freegans I met through freegan.info, with other urban foragers I met while in New York, with friends who dove with me and on their own; from the words of people interviewed by sympathetic and unsympathetic interviewers; and from theorists remarking on animal/human/humanimal bodies, on trash and other related subjects—it is a conglomerate and thus a creation. And while I make claims, I do so with this disclaimer: These claims are only a momentary perception, held up in mirrors so as to multiply themselves, a faceted collection of what I sense in this body, but what perhaps becomes the work of a fabulist as I pave over them in words.
ONE BEGINNING

The more a conceptual purity is sought [in modernism], the stronger is the return of the repressed hybrid ... in a distorted form, poisoning the attempted purity of the human-animal opposition ... The silence or incomprehensibility of the animal has forced the same modern rationalists to invent the psychological concept of ‘instinct’ to explain away the animal in us, or to provide a neat conceptual cage for our animality ... The repressed animal then also returns in distorted, inflated concepts – not only in symptoms of body, but also of mind.

Alan Bleakely³

They open up a body that is a lesion in the tissue of words and discourses and the networks of power.

Alphonso Lingus⁴

Crouched, I work my fingers into knotted plastic. Loose, square knots tend to indicate somebody has been here already. The knot before me takes time. It is just when I’m about to give up that the arms of the bag start to slide, and

³ Bleakley, 29-30.
⁴ Kapil, vii.
suddenly my hands are inside. I feel as though I have found a fistula in this stomach, and peeling back the plastic covering I witness the digestive process. I interrupt the stomach outside body.

Although it is dark out, my motions are spot lit in florescent hues by the Park Slope grocery front. On less well-lit streets my senses of touch and smell precede sight as I sift through the garbage bag contents. Here, any plunges toward sliminess are somewhat preempted by a visual scan—Is it worth it? Still, the task is one of sorting, sorting out. And so my hands run through the material content to make tactile inventory: cherries in and out of plastic sleeves, emptied plastic containers, yellow squash (some of it beginning to rot), melon rinds, dented boxes of microwavable popcorn (some soggy, their structural integrity defiled by another substance), Styrofoam trays of plastic wrapped chicken breast, empty containers of milk, and full ones, too.

The list for each bag on its own isn’t so expansive; rather, melon rinds will be in one bag with other salad bar discards, vegetables or fruits in another, boxed imperfections in a third, and then items from the store’s refrigerated shelves keeping each other cool in a fourth. Usually bathroom waste and other small discards merit their own, separate bag as well. It’s easy to imagine the discarding process; the garbage bag filled in each section of the grocery store, the sorting that precluded my own. Or rather, the weeding out: the negative image of sorting. Here is what didn’t make the cut.

I move from bag to bag in this curbside depository, meeting the friend I’ve come with when we both reach the middle of the heap. Together we decide
what to bring home with us and what to tie back into these strange plastic stomachs piled on the street. Organic matter is brought to the nose, felt for ripeness, and, later, back at home, contemplated as food and tasted. The website freegan.info describes its philosophy on foraging in the following way: “We see wild foraging as a way to reconnect with our roots as a gatherer species. Many also see urban foraging as an adaptation of gathering to the realities of our throwaway culture.”

The terming of food acquisition through urban foraging as a gathering process, a gleaning in which all the senses are relied upon, places trust in the legitimacy of the physical body despite its alienation in today’s mechanized age of industrial food production. The website continues, “We harken back to older ways, where people lived as participants, not masters in the continuum of life. We remember our nomadic foraging ancestors.” Our “older ways” depend on those senses believed or imagined to be inherited from a prehistoric time when human was not the opposite of animal—when humans rather thought of themselves as animals in a relation of kin to other animals. Or, at the very least, when they recognized the remnants of a fleeting animality, a sometimes cherished, sometimes despised animality, which nevertheless could be honed in on and utilized.

This could be thought of as a moment of in-between: Bhanu Kapil writes of the semi-mythological bodies of two girls supposedly found in 1921 living with wolves in the Bengal jungle. These feral children howled and walked on all

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5 Freegan.
6 Ibid.
four limbs; their hip joints apparently aligned themselves according to such movement. Kapil inhabits their bodies, names them “humanimal.”

The urban forager seizes this attuned body, which ze imagines to have guided the hunter-gatherer of the past, ciphering information from hir surrounding landscape, and which allowed for the kind of fluidity of belonging of the “Bengali wolf girls,” Kamala and Amala, in relation to the pack they ran with. In re-joining taste with those other facilities of the body considering each food item drawn from a garbage bag, the urban forager imagines hir modern body instilled with these same humanimal abilities. We can trust the body to negate issues of disease and contagion by eliminating offenders through its sensory capabilities—through the tools believed to have once equipped our animal bodies and provided this negation ability through their very animality, rather than through microbial information garnered by the expert in a lab and relayed to the consumer via expiration date or FDA label.

This is a way of thinking of the animal, the human animal, through a lens of bodily repression—of desire. That is, this way of thinking denies the repression of these “instincts” and refuses the separation of a “higher” self, a human self, from the “despicable” animal body. It is a way of revering the animal once again, instilling this body with reverence, with want. By placing the animal before the human, in a way inverting Darwin’s hierarchy of evolution, by distancing ourselves from our attempted mastery of the animal body, a gap

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7 Kapil.
emerges, something to be filled through a relearning of mechanics: through
crouching, sifting, touching, smelling, tasting.

Alan Bleakley draws on Jean Baudrillard’s discussion of the sacred animal, its order of reference in placing the human in the animal world, to state the following: “Human cultural ‘advance’ (sublimation, mediation, interpretation, representation – Lacan’s order of the symbolic) [offers] lack in relation to the powerful immediacy of the biological (aesthetic self presentation – the order of the real); the cultural [is] then destined to always be plagued by fantasies of the biological.”

In this way, acting out the animal body makes that body a vessel through which our ideas of animality are brought in continuance with the cultural, with all we perceive to be human in a way that makes us not-animal. Foragers find within the modern human an animality that we have not lost completely. This animality is, to be sure, a human concept, a fantasy that enables a transgressive blurring of boundaries between human and animal. It is a conscious subsuming of animality—a movement of Hegelian dialectics in the sense of overcoming and preserving. The humanimal emerges not because human is an animal species, in this instance making bare an inherent animality, but because human here is acting out its imagined animality. It’s a wearing of species and tensions within

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8 Bleakley, 33.
apparent speciation, rather than a revealing of some true species, some true form.

Studies of hunter-gathering rituals find that they rely on fluidity between the biological and spiritual, the literal and dream-like. Poet Clayton Eshleman spent thirty years studying Paleolithic cave art in southwestern France, drawing from these images a mediation of animal desires which finds its locus “inside the material the surface of which was being painted or engraved ... from the ‘other side of Nature’ as well as outwardly [with] no fixed boundary or ‘reality principle’ within the fluidity of the imaginal and the observational.”9 Here, animals are painted through the images of them from human dream life rather than naturalistically, from “real” life. According to Bleakley, this leads Eshleman to wonder, “If the human cannot be fully biological, can the mediation of the biological through the realm of the imaginary, rather than the symbolic, offer a unique form of animal existence for the human—an animality of the human psyche that does not suffer from the absolute severance from animal life of the symbolic realm?”10

In other words, although purely fictional, the animal inhabited by the human in dream life, and then in that dream reproduced through art or performance in waking life brings the human closer to animality conceptually, and thus the animal emotionally, than that human comes to by simply accounting for the animal’s surfaces. The symbolic animal could also then be understood as the “realistically” rendered one—an animal drawn from

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9 Eshleman, xxvi.
10 Bleakley, 38-39.
observation, but whom in these cave paintings only stands in to evoke
something that is not the animal directly versus these exaggerated animals from
the dream who evoke the animal’s interior life as the human imagines it. While
the symbolic animal remains uninhabitable, without psyche, vacant, this latter
representation of the imagined animal brings the human psyche in closer
continuity with an animal psyche it is impossible to actually inhabit but through
empathy, through imagining—as delusion.

And so, if claiming the prehistoric body is also claiming a more diffuse
space of mind, of animal personhood, if we are to see the biological
reformulation of the humanimal body as also productive of a humanimal mind or
psyche, can it also be said that the very imagination lubricating this process of
transference (i.e. the artist laying claim, i.e. the humanimal emerging) is animal
itself? Or to state it another way, what does this view of the animal as something
to be inhabited, but also some-body one is entirely overcome by, produce? Like
the shaman who visits the animal in a dream and is consumed by hir, who
communes with the animal and is spit back out stronger for having entered hir?

The humanimal is not a concept of what it is to be animal purely, or what
the animal experience is through observation, but rather what we can draw out
of our existing bodies to constitute the animal. As the hunter-gatherer paints, as
the forager performs hir dance of gathering, each makes space for hir inclusion,
for empathy. It is these empathetic motions that coat the mind in animality as
well, animality which confuses ownership of that very space of intellect.

Writes Eshleman:
We continue to be in multiphasic Expulsion from a paradise we unconsciously rejected when we separated ourselves from animals. It took thousands and thousands of years but we did create the abyss out of a seemingly infinitely elastic crisis: therio-expulsion—and we have lived in a state of 'animal withdrawal' ever since. The pictures from the abyss that flicker our sleep and waking are the fall-out that shouted us into dot and line and from which we have been throwing up and throwing down ever since.

Dream of discovering a unique animal in the Weinberger living room: a small delicate tiger whose stripes looked like Arabic script. It was resting in a sphinx position and regarding me. Luminous orange, covered with a filigree of racing, dipping, tying stripes. Origin of the alphabet? an animal alphabet? Language as lace, black on orange, or orange on black, as in the sky at sunset, or the autumns on which my dreams are traced.11

To find oneself in an animal alphabet, deciphering. Who is considering whom in this body: who is reading the body, not only taking control of it but making sense of its actions? The humanimal experience is one of distinctions, of dialectics. Within this body are two separate species, who continually turn each other inside out—animal, first, wearing the human, and, then, the human wearing the animal in its moments of speechlessness, of sensorial intensity, of gather. Here, there is some subversion of a more common narrative: that of the human spirit, which occupies a body despicably animal for only a scant amount of time. Dominick LaCapra writes, “Through a form of self-fulfilling performativity, the animal must be ‘brutalized’ to become the image of brutality that in actuality characterizes particularly vicious and humiliating human practices in the treatment of others [victimization, torture, genocide], perhaps more than it characterizes animals.”12,13

11 Eshleman, 217.
12 LaCapra, 156.
13 Emphasis my own.
Here body is the corporal chain that links us with the past, always threatening regression towards an amoral animality and away from the purity of that human spirit. LaCapra writes of the “emphatic, seemingly secular tendency to dismiss the sacrificial as irrelevant and to assert that the animal is (or in modernity has been made into) raw material or mere life adapted to purely human purposes.”\textsuperscript{14} The human projected beyond humanity shares this fate, to be reduced to its materiality in a way devoid if not of human spirit in a mystical sense, then of human spirit in its secular incarnation—the reasoning individual occupying body, and the perceived uniqueness that lingers as we conceive self despite awareness of our neurobiology. That is, the humanimal is placed outside reason: made infantile or, conversely, placed on another plane of reasoning unreachable to most, divorced from the realities of a normal adult life.

An \textit{Oprah} episode broadcast several times, most recently in 2010, asks its audience, “How far would you go?” In the show’s first segment, reporter Lisa Ling follows freegan Madeline on a “trash tour” of Manhattan and then into her home for a freegan meal. When the three sit down with Oprah, Ling relates her initial shock at seeing the quantities of perfectly edible food found on the dumpster diving tour. She says, “Freegans believe that, in a way, we are slaves to buying. When you think about it, we work so hard, but for what? To buy more.

\textsuperscript{14} LaCapra, 159.
Whether it’s a house payment or a car or food, we just want to continue to consume. Freegans have decided to kind of try and turn their back on it completely and stop buying stuff”\textsuperscript{15}

In addition to Madeline, who quit her six-figure salary job as a Barnes & Noble executive when she decided to adopt the freegan ethic, the show includes interviews with other freegans: Daniel and Amanda, a Nashville couple who relate their ideas on consumption to their “Christian values of sharing and generosity,” and a young man who tells us of his investment banker past and resulting choice to live with less. The show’s subjects convey sacrifice. Madeline, in particular, has become somewhat of a freegan media darling. Articles in the printed and online media puzzle over her divestment. While Oprah and Ling make strides in presenting the urban foraging practices of Madeline and their other subjects as safe and reasonable, they still project them on the other side of a void. These people are martyrs, beyond mere human.

At the beginning of the show Oprah says to her audience, “As you’re watching, obviously I know you’re not going to go on a trash tour after this show, most of you, but I do want you to start thinking about, as I have started to think about, how much you consume. Every time you throw away a paper towel, every time you are wasteful with food in your house.”\textsuperscript{16} It’s strange, given the usual model of self-improvement through consumption closely guided by middle-class

\textsuperscript{15} Ling.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
standards and values that Oprah otherwise endorses. But nonetheless, the stories that follow act as fables, warning the audience of what future awaits a consumption-obsessed, throwaway society. The freegans exist at the end of this timeline. They are not what the audience should wish to emulate but what it should learn to see as the future bodies mutated to live in our waste.

Within this logic, there is a certain level of coercion. To be sure, Madeline, Daniel, Amanda, and the ex-investment banker all emphasize their choice in adopting freeganism, but at the same time that moment of choice is presented as irreversibly transformative—it seems impossible to envision these subjects donning suits and re-entering the capitalist spaces they have vacated. And then there’s the second segment in the show, also answering the question, “How far would you go?” In it, Ling follows Marian, a 43-year-old mother of three who works to support her family as an exotic dancer in an Atlanta gentlemen’s club. Again, there is a sense of martyrdom as Ling and Oprah frame Marian’s occupation as “an emotional challenge,” a sacrifice she has been forced to make to support her family. Set alongside one another, the segments bring to the forefront narratives of shame and overcoming. They are about learning to be proud of the sacrifice of (a shameful) body towards more noble ends.

17 Kathryn Lofton writes on Oprah’s combination of charismatic capitalism with millennial capitalism to form a “spiritual capitalism.” According to Lofton, Oprah takes on a “prescriptive behavior,” guiding her viewers through hallmarks of tasteful consumption that further the idea of consumption as the framework for experience and engagement. This “prescriptive behavior” uses “the teleology of these practices [in which] the end is [Oprah].” The focus is on defining and disciplining the body, ritualizing this spiritual capitalism through the relics of commodity and pilgrimage to the sites of their consumption. Lofton, 23-25.
Enacting the humanimal entails a twofold recognition: first of the divide between the disciplined body and what is undeniable in the functioning of that body as a mammalian, secreting entity and secondly of the need to reconfigure the valuing of that divide. As Madeline remarks to CNN, “[Humans are] hardwired to be foragers.”\textsuperscript{18} For her, what is natural is not to suppress these foraging instincts and deny the hands that initiate the gleaning process, untie bags and feel their contents, or the nostrils that breathe in what smells emanate from the foraged produce in her refrigerator as she decides what to cook for dinner, but to reclaim and celebrate them. To maintain that the forager in hir animal motions draws the animal rightly out from within—that the human spirit is not being consumed by the animal body always on its surface, but that an animality is breaking through the confines of a human body made rigid only through a particular socialization, disciplining—confuses the normal ordering of this body. It is an action of chaos.

Bleakley writes, “Such an animality would constitute a form of imagination in which the animal is neither reduced to instinct (as a misconceived attempt to recover the realm of the real, or ‘Nature’), nor wholly enslaved as linguistic tropes, as signs, symbols, or allegories.”\textsuperscript{19} The humanimal, refusing shame, claims a form of animality in the very humanness of it and recognizes that it is a construct, but that it is also more than a mere tactic of discourse. This animality is inscribed in the body, in performance, and in something outside words.

\textsuperscript{18} Jio.
\textsuperscript{19} Bleakley, 39.
Here we turn to Georges Bataille’s sense of silence and poetry. A sensuality, or a sensory that cannot be expressed in words, which strips the human of hir intellect, pushing that human subject to experience instead its animality as a transgression. Bataille writes of the destruction of the bourgeois “project” through the intimacy of animality, and the breaking down of expression and individuation—and the utility of each—in this light. Lucio Angelo Privitello describes moments of social life which give way to feelings of “the sacred, anguish, ecstasy, terror, and in rare moments (sovereign moments) poetry or evocations which slip into silence” as being at the “core of Bataille’s disciplined indiscipline.”

Part of foraging’s rupturing of the bourgeois, capitalist project lies in the humanimal body, in its intimacy with consumption and refusal to fully allow the displacement of the links between consumer and consumed as happens within systems of creation of food as commodity. LaCapra writes about Agamben’s “vision of the indistinct human-animal relation as marked by both a radical divide and ... an imperceptible intimacy,” saying the following of the kind of future that contemporary urban foragers presumably imagine: “A pole of one striking opposition is an image of blissful immanence in ‘the hieroglyph of a new in-humanity’ ... in which ‘something for which we perhaps have no name and

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20 Privitello, 179.
which is neither animal nor man settles in between nature and humanity and holds itself in the mastered relation, in the saved night.”

“The vanishing point at which the obscure opposites meet [blissful immanence and central emptiness—the radical divide in which man is to risk himself],” continues LaCapra, “would seem to be the longing for désoeuvrement or radical disempowerment ... that stops action, history, projects, and the ‘anthropological machine’ and purportedly holds out the promise of pure possibility as the most open of the open.”  

This end of history, which ties into the end of Bataille’s sense of project, is again found at a point of what could be deemed a reduction or, alternatively, a realization. That is, “mere or naked life”—animality.

Friedrich Nietzsche’s sense of history, or the historical project, becomes illuminating here as we turn to the mythology of the human animal, the prehistoric body, and the humanimal crouching before the garbage bag. Nietzsche describes history as a “haunting,” with memory and forgetfulness out of the control of the individual in ways that produce moments of uncontrollable revisit, bringing into doubt, as Vanessa Lemm remarks, “the possibility of a mastery over the past by means of reason and historical consciousness.”

This forgetfulness is an emblem of animality, seen by Nietzsche as “prior to and more primordial than human memory ... reveal[ing] that memory is an artistic force ... and that historiography must therefore be understood as a work

21 LaCapra, 167.
22 Ibid, 168.
23 Lemm, 100.
of art rather than as science.” Historiography’s effectiveness emerges through the work of the artist, who constructs the narrative through which the person of the past emerges and morphs into the person of the present. Or in the case of the humanimal, the performance is one of reverse morphology. In this way, the forager’s origin myth is enabled by the same forgetfulness that is productive of the more common disjuncture of the human from its biological past (and present).

In “On the Use Abuse of History for Life,” Nietzsche himself takes the approach of the artist. Lemm writes that Nietzsche is the “poet who imagines the life of the animals, whose thoughts on the animals are imaginary, illusory, and fantastic rather than scientific, rational, and true.” This, the “dreams, illusions, and images, rather than truth and knowledge,” she posits, “are in fact the enhancing and invigorating carriers of future life.” Future life: the mere ability to imagine how we can continue living on this earth.

And so forgetfulness becomes also the state in which we cross Agamben’s gap, the moment in which we forget ourselves. As Kenneth Grant writes, “Abyss: The Gulf between the unreal and the real, i.e., between phenomena and noumenon. Crossing the Abyss is the most critical event on the spiritual path, and to take the Oath of the Abyss is the most serious responsibility [that is] possible to assume. Only the total abolition of the ego, or limited individual

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24 Ibid, 7.
consciousness, makes a successful crossing possible.” It is through effacement, self-effacement, that we allow encounter.

Ally Bernstein stands before a mass of balled fur, pencil erasures moving center-ward and out again, a mutation. “I want to draw something that’s gone too far,” she says. “Something out of natural order, whatever natural means.” To her right cockroaches, some sized like today’s insects and some like she imagines tomorrow’s, swarm where the floor meets the wall. They climb into columns, maybe into legs. A car sinks into a stream of fungi.

Looking towards the mythological, Arnold I. Davidson uncovers forms of subjectivity germinated in coupling with monsters, forms which take shape in ways that upset orders of morality and nature and “problematize the boundary between humans and other animals.” He writes of the body as a “moral and theological cipher.”

The landscape Ally is piecing together is both post-apocalyptic and post-human. There is no human form that remains post-eco-Rapture to walk among her visionings of life continuing. I ask her if a species like the cockroach, which lives in human excess, human waste, would survive in an environment vacant

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26 Grant, 201-202.
27 Bernstein, ”Beginnings.”
28 Davidson, 36.
from our garbage. How would the cockroach adapt? And what would the human body look like in this space?

After mass human die-off, the remaining scavenge. They forage. Hunt and gather. In many ways, the post-apocalyptic body is being enacted, too, in today’s foraging. For Ally, her work is an alarm sounding—for her, it’s not too late to divert what ecocatastrophe seems looming just at the cusp of our own lifespans. For the freegans, too, the performance is designed to be a wake-up call for the casual passerby. This is not an act of isolation.

“Consumption, especially in North America, is out of control. It’s hard to extricate yourself [from those patterns of consumption] without isolating yourself—and that’s sad and lonely,” Ally tells me. Hearing this, I am taken back to “future life”; to how we continue now.

Nietzsche’s artist historian, who articulates past movements in a building of mythology, imagines “the past to be like an oracle that speaks a secret language decipherable only by those who are ‘architects of the future’.” It is therefore the very art of interpreting the past that crafts new ways of living in the coming present. The artist historian “affirm[s] the contingencies of time as a source of strength, as something that challenges [hir] virtuosity and the refinement of [hir] historical sensibility.” Rather than an articulation of mastery or domination, this affirmation recognizes the conscious act of bringing back the past as separate from memory. It recognizes the limits of control and the importance of imagination.

29 Bernstein, “Beginnings.”
30 Lemm, 100.
Rather than fashion a past which relocates the subject fashioning outside of the present, outside of the body, the past emerges through re-sensitizing the body in the present, enabling it to pick up the past that lingers. The artist historian dwells in the readiness to grasp the encounter, a moment of inherent present-ness, and in the attentiveness required. This type of artistry is forever bedded with an animality—in relocating the faculties of the animal that lubricate perception and thus the intake of that constructed memory emerging from encounter. Lemm writes, “Tied to a world of memory and memories, the bliss of forgetfulness seems forever inaccessible to the animal who has learned how to be human, how to remember, speak, and reason, and has forgotten how to be animal, how to forget, keep silent, sense, and intuit.”

Silence: “Not a soundlessness from the absence of being,” writes Privitello, “but from what Bataille sees as the ‘horror in being...the repugnant animality whose presence I discover at the very point where the totality of being takes form.’ The domain of silence is that of the sovereign, for the ‘instant is silence,’ a foreignness in familiarity that draws laughter out of the experience of a loosening of personal thought, a bloodletting of joy through hazarding another's word.” Silence: the stillness of sifting, of multiple hands replicating each other and the imagined movements of thousands or even millions of years lost. Laughter emerging from the stickiness of the encounter.

The forgetfulness of the animal, the silence as it waits, is repackaged as destroyed instinct in Nietzsche’s discussion of the historical scientist, with hir

31 Ibid, 89.
32 Privitello, 183.
lack of mythology, hir lack of animal imaginary. From the animal made irreverent, stripped of the divinity of its senses, evolves a human “fainthearted and unsure, [who] dares no longer believe in itself: it sinks into its own interior depths, which here means into the accumulated lumber of what it has learned but which has no outward effect, of instruction which does not become life.”

Lemm elaborates this line of argument, writing that the modern historian brings forth not human but instead forms of “historical pseudo-education” or “thinking-writing-speaking-machines.” And so, it is the stripping of this certitude that facilitates a human history. From the myth directly, and from the enactment of myth enabled by animal forgetfulness, Nietzsche’s true human is drawn out—the being of both biology and intellect, versus machine. For Nietzsche the humanimal is the true human, and the human castoff is merely machine.

“The cave is like a frozen flesh in a moment of time,” says Werner Herzog as his camera pans first the arching façade of Chauvet Cave in southern France and then its internal geography: hallows that spiral and mimic the outer archery in dripping intricacies, without the smoothness its weathered outsides convey. Herzog’s encounter in these caves, captured in his documentary Cave of

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33 Nietzsche, 84.
34 Lemm, 101.
35 Cave.
*Forgotten Dreams*, is a crafting of continuity, of an encounter with the sacred. The limestone interior of Chauvet contains the oldest known cave paintings from our Paleolithic ancestors. How “fresh” these paintings look, remarks Herzog, as though they had been painted yesterday—as though today’s viewing of them is a condensing of lineage, an inheritance.

The overlapping animals given presence by their materialization in human terms, that therio-expulsion of animal desires, in some places date 5,000 years apart. This is a sequence unimaginable today, posits Herzog. “We are locked in history, and they are not.”

What does the recognition of this contact, its queering of time, give way to in the experience of the artist historian? In the body moving forward?

Herzog asks his film crew to be silent, to listen to the silence in the cave. Is it our heartbeat or theirs that we hear?

Or is it in the landscape, in the staging of its temporality as “operatic,” remarks Herzog. Scientists have determined that humans never lived in these caves; while many animal skeletons have been identified and dated, not a single human skeleton has been found in the caves themselves. The caverns were only used to make paintings and possibly for ceremonies attached to those paintings. And so, the cave is not a place of practicality, of habituation, but rather of Bataillan religiosity and grandeur. Again, of silence. As it is now, a ritualized visit: loose, square knots tend to indicate somebody’s been here already.

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36 Ibid.
Herzog remarks to one scientist, who meticulously maps the cave using sonar technology as a way of creating narrative, creating stories of what occurred there in prehistory, “It is like you are creating the phone directory of Manhattan, four million precise entries, but do they dream? Do they cry at night? What are their hopes? What are their families? You will never know from the phone directory.”

“Definitely,” says the scientist, “you will never know, because the past is definitely lost. We will never reconstruct the past. We can recreate a representation of what exists now, today ... you are a human being, I am a human being.”

Herzog asks him about his first experience in the caves and listens to him talk about his shock and the dreams that followed. He asks, “And you dreamt of real lions or paintings of lions?”

“Both,” says the scientist.

“And you were scared of them?”

“No. I was not afraid of them. It was more a feeling of powerful things and of deep things, a way to understand things, which is not a direct way.”

For Bataille, what is remarkable in this surviving document, something between phonebook and complete transference of the prehistoric mindscape, is that the painters left not their own image on the walls but instead “innumerable pictures of the animality they were shedding—as though they had felt obliged to

\[37\] Ibid.
cloth a nascent marvel with the animal grace they had lost.”

This point is staccato-ed by the “extreme self-effacement” before the animal and before the animal turning human: the fact that depictions of man among these intimately fleshed beasts are made completely rudimentary, representational rather than naturalistic in body or psyche. And almost always we see the part-man, part-animal; his body a fictive creation or the human form hiding behind an animal mask, we will likely never know.

Bataille names this the “greatest effacement that can be conceived.” The tension here: between the human psyche emerging conscious of its difference—if only made so by the very cognizance of difference, of speciation—and its continual bow to the animal, the animal toward which the human at once feels a kinship and desires to possess. Here lies the origin of the desire that saturates the humanimal relationship to animality and that leads to a move towards suppressing what is markedly human rather than what is markedly animal in the body: The very choice to make the “poetic image” that of the bison rather than that of the human, to let this be the origin of seduction, or again, of desire. The human here longs to be the animal.

In some regards, this bow is only a performance. The bison is depicted in a state of domination, his entrails spilling as arrows speckle the surface of his hide. For Bataille, these images are an act of expiation, “an excuse, so man will be able to accomplish without remorse what he has already apologized for doing.”

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38 Bataille, Lascaux, 115.
39 Bataille, Cradle, 60.
40 Ibid, 78.
But even within this faltering humility lies a tang of reverence for the indeed poetic image of the beast, for that which was still near kin, and a reverence within this kinship for the taboo on killing, which is to say, murdering. In comparison to this grandeur, Bataille remarks, humans must have looked at themselves—their simple, naked bodies—and laughed.

But within this comedic comparison is a deeper paradox: the desire to kill and eat that which we love. It is an ultimate proximity expressed through the intensity of feeling we imagine the painting, in its ritual moment, to have inspired; a “feeling of proximity of the inaccessible monster ... of profound harmony ... as if men, obscurely and suddenly had the power to make the animal, though essentially out of range, respond to the extreme intensity of their desire.”41 For in painting the animal with empathy, the human experiences at once this overwhelming communion (who inhabits whom?) and control over the image of the dual body.

This moment of extreme intensity is fleeting; think of the overlapping paintings in the Chauvet Cave together becoming an object of compressed temporality, the moment when one was drawn over another. In this action, there is a disregard for the sanctity of past action, of history, a denial of the paintings on the wall as art objects at all. Instead, in this moment what becomes all-important is the present taking form. In the Lascaux paintings that Bataille writes about, it is “the animals, which would appear suddenly, making their

41 Ibid, 51.
presence tangible in response to the intensity of [the painter’s] desire ... [T]heir meaning was in their apparition.”

This tangibility is of uttermost importance; it is a rendering of a present body. In contrast, the rudimentary human depiction alongside it can never hold such presence given the three-dimensional human form painting. The human is already fleshed. To bring both bodies spatially together—the real and the imagined—is tenuous; it allows for a space in which the nonphysical and the physical interact. Again, for delusion. It is at this very moment that entropy begins, as the animal body is imagined in full form as the ritual draws to a close. In the confusion of the composition, the inherent chaos within these eliding bodies, is a “continual, lively negation of the durable object.” And in the elision: movement, grace.

And so the prehistoric human negates hir body and the products of it as the forager imagines hirself, always in relation to the animal, or if not so directly stated, in relation to derivatives of the animal—sensory capability, instinct. The forager is always untying, refusing to lie complicit with the byproducts of its participation as a body inextricable from capitalist networks. Both perform a dance of humility and awe, “manifesting the animal and letting it loose to live out one of the roles in the drama of the hunt.”

But is this jump possible? Or is the recognition of ontological transformation, and the sacred contact this entails, merely a ritual bow? What

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42 Ibid, 77-78.
43 Ibid, 78.
44 Ibid, 51.
does urban foraging, the individuation of parts within collective “garbage” and their transformation back into food, have in common with the hunt? Stuart Kendall asks in an introduction to Bataille’s work, “But what would it be to forget, in the silence and isolation of the cave, one’s solitude? Can there be, today, a community of the cave?”

“A larger sense of family is a radical idea,” Chuck Collins says to The New Yorker writer Ian Parker. Collins, great grandson of Oscar Meyer and heir to a half-million dollar inheritance, gave away all of his assets to charity twenty years prior to speaking with Parker. They are now discussing the gifts of a man called Zell Kravinsky, who like Collins divested himself of a fortune, although his was many times that of Collins’—forty-five million, to be exact, made in real estate deals over the years. Kravinsky, however, didn’t stop at his monetary assets. He donated a kidney, an organ of which we all carry a duplicate, and thus to Kravinsky an organ that it seemed selfish to keep. The donation was non-directed, meaning it went to a recipient Kravinsky had no personal relation to.

Kravinsky, and Collins to a lesser degree, have met much criticism for these extravagant gifts, these gifts that flaunt the unspoken rules of giving that must respect one’s circle of kin. Arguments against the pair seem grounded in a certain utility of selfishness and a biological altruism which not only capitalist

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46 Parker, 60.
society via its fetishism of the nuclear family, but to a degree the perceptively natural world via its own familial structures operates around. As Parker notes, “Arguments about philanthropic extremes tend to be arguments about families.”

In this context, complete self-divestment (be it only monetary or, as in Kravinsky’s case, bodily as well) becomes an asocial or even anti-social act that denies familial structure as that sacrosanct building block of a functional society. With their prodigality, Kravinsky and Collins are not only denying themselves a safety net and the class advancement implicit within this, they are also denying their offspring (or, in the case of Collins, potential offspring) the same. They are shucking the bourgeois values of safety, saving, hoarding, and projecting to the future—Bataille’s bourgeois project—and that close lineage through which the resulting sum filters down.

As M.I.T. philosopher Judith Jarvis Thomson comments about Kravinsky, “His children are presumably no more valuable to the universe than anybody else’s children are, but the universe doesn’t really care about any children—yours or mine or anybody else’s. A father who says, ‘I’m no more concerned about my children’s lives than about anybody else’s life’ is just flatly a defective parent; he’s deficient in views that parents ought to have, whether it maximizes utility or not.” In the most basic sense, criticisms of Kravinsky’s actions are an argument of genetics. Biologists call this “inclusive fitness”—the ability to

47 Ibid.
48 Ibid, 61.
preserve a self that survives through others, through the shared genetics of family. It’s why birds will participate in the mating dances of their brothers.

Robert Sanders writes for UC Berkeley News, “For wild turkeys, at least, helping your brother find a willing and eager mate is a better way to pass on your genes than chancing the mating game alone ... The American wild turkey is a textbook example of cooperative courtship, where subordinate male turkeys help dominate males attract a mate, even though they themselves do not get a chance to breed.”49 Quite simply, the seeming self-sacrifice ensures a larger carrying on of self through present. The key is that this self remain within bounds.

But what of the Vervet monkey or the common squirrel, who raises an alarm call to alert nearby members of hir species, directly related as well as unrelated, of the presence of a predator whilst putting hir own self in danger? What of the ant colony, the wasps, bees, and termites, whose social structures involve sterile workers who have no genetic family, who work for, indeed, this “larger sense of family” Collins speaks about?50 These instances of altruism, on the level of the wild turkey dancing for his brother and on a far greater scale that makes clear a greater guiding cosmology that knows no family as close as “brother,” are models of behavior in nature that crystallize in community, in collectivism.

Kravinsky says to Parker, “The sacrosanct commitment to the family is the rationalization for all manner of greed and selfishness. Nobody says, ‘I’m

49 Sanders.
50 Okasha.
working for the tobacco company because I like the money.’ They say, ‘Well, you know, I hate to do it, but I’m saving up for the kids.’ Everything is excused that way. To me, it’s obscene.”

What happens when we reconfigure community, deny ourselves what Kravinsky sees as the next-of-kin excuse, and allow a different sort of sociality to lend structure to our everyday life? Can there be, today, a community of the cave?

Answering the question “What is a freegan?” freegan.info introduces itself with the following line: “Freegans embrace community, generosity, social concern, freedom, cooperation, and sharing in opposition to a society based on materialism, moral apathy, competition, conformity, and greed.”

If this seems broad, that’s because it is meant to be. The freegan project is an expansive one that lends itself to many varying efforts and causes. But at its core, the work is one of imagining; it’s about envisioning alternative ways of living now. And more than simply a thought exercise, it’s about imagining how to fashion these alternatives materially or in the material circuits of our economy, and make them something living that breathes and moves, that occupies. Freegans envision themselves: They envision these alternative bodies and then inhabit them—and so, they craft the very space for their inhabitance.

Freegans self-identify in a multitude of ways and define freeganism through this multiplicity, but they all hold this in common: They are all operating an imagined post-apocalyptic body through the very capitalist structures that serve (for them) as harbingers to that apocalypse. It is important to note the

51 Parker, 60.
52 Freegan.
significance of this forceful embodiment, the radical implication of asserting oneself as both a human body and a post-apocalyptic one. We tend to address impending ecocatastrophe in one of two ways: either as a problem solvable by more technological progress or as the oncoming inevitable end to our species. In their own ways, each of these approaches fosters inaction in the layperson rather than action.\textsuperscript{53}

In an essay published on freegan.info, Adam Weissman lays out several “everyday revolutions,” by which he means existing “practices and institutions for living beyond capitalism.” These include not only waste recovery ("dumpster diving, curb crawling, trash trolling, urban scavenging, or just plain garbage picking”), but also wild foraging, rewilding (“adopting a primal, wilderness-based existence, living in birch bark lodges, building stone tools, cooking on an open fire, and living in an interdependent community, healing with traditional medicine and wild herbs”), freecycles/markets/stores, squatting, guerilla gardening, sustainable transportation, alternative media, holistic medicine, collective healthcare, mutual first aid, mutual aid disaster relief, collectively-run community centers, and infoshops.\textsuperscript{54} With the individual body crouched before a garbage bag as the beginning of the thread, Weissman weaves a new community of individuals focused on their collectivity. A collective body.

Bataille qualifies bourgeois habits of accumulation and of spending for itself—those values of individualism that deny this collective body in favor of the smaller familial unit—as “sterile.” The limiting of altruistic behavior to one

\textsuperscript{53} Thanks to Caleb Corliss for this thought.
\textsuperscript{54} Weissman.
direct genetic line is not regenerative but rather destructive of the greater network in which that line wraps itself and necessarily comes with. Its severance is “obscene.” Instead of continuing this isolating bend towards privatized consumption, Bataille argues that we need to consume collectively, and end ideas of prudence in opposition to the building of social networks through social spending (welfare and art). This, writes Bataille, is a necessary reopening of communication among individuals currently separated by obsessions of individualism and productivity. It is only through this Copernican revolutionary overturn towards shared expenditure that we connect and are reproductive of our(larger)elves as a society again.

It is along these lines that classic Russian Anarchist Peter Kropotkin writes in *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*, which is linked on freegan.info:

[Louis] Büchner’s work begins with a hymn to Love, and nearly all its illustrations are intended to prove the existence of love and sympathy among animals. However, to reduce animal sociability to love and sympathy means to reduce its generality and its importance, just as human ethics based upon love and personal sympathy have only contributed to narrow the comprehension of the moral feeling as a whole. It is not love to my neighbor—whom I often do not know at all—which induces me to seize a pail of water and to rush towards his house when I see it on fire; it is a far wider, even though more vague feeling or instinct of human solidarity and sociability which moves me. So it is also with animals. It is not love, and not even sympathy (understood in its proper sense) which induces a herd of ruminants or of horses to form a ring in order to resist an attack of wolves; not love which induces wolves to form a pack for hunting … It is a feeling infinitely wider than love or personal sympathy—an instinct that has been slowly developed among animals and men in the course of an extremely long evolution, and which has taught animals and men alike the force they can borrow from the practice of mutual aid and support, and the joys they can find in social life.

The importance of this distinction will be easily appreciated by the student of animal psychology, and the more so by the student of human ethics. Love, sympathy and self-sacrifice certainly play an immense part in the progressive development of our moral feelings. But it is not love and not even sympathy upon which Society is based in mankind. It is the conscience—be it only at the stage of an instinct—of human solidarity. It is
the unconscious recognition of the force that is borrowed by each man from
the practice of mutual aid; of the close dependency of every one's happiness
upon the happiness of all; and of the sense of justice, or equity, which brings
the individual to consider the rights of every other individual as equal to his
own.\footnote{Kropotkin, 4-5.}

The suppression of our animal selves does not end in the body, it can be
seen also in the suppression of this (imagined) "instinct" towards codependency
in modern bourgeois capitalist ways of living. It continues in the denial of aid
beyond that first circle of humans we see as our inheritors, as our future selves.
Freeganism may be a diffuse movement, its allegiances varied, but its own
stretching creates network, a web of community. Or, as Kropotkin might put it, of
human solidarity. Errico Malatesta writes in "Mutual Aid: An Essay," “The needs,
tastes, aspirations and interests of mankind are neither similar nor naturally
harmonious; often they are diametrically opposed and antagonistic. On the other
hand, the life of each individual is so conditioned by the life of others that it
would be impossible, even assuming it were convenient to do so, to isolate oneself
and live one’s own life. Social solidarity is a fact from which no one can escape: it
can be freely and consciously accepted and in consequence benefit all concerned,
or it can be accepted willy-nilly, consciously or otherwise, in which case it
manifests itself by the subjection of one to another, by the exploitation of some
by others.”\footnote{Malatesta.}

The Bataillan anti-bourgeois project, the freegan anti-capitalist project, is
one of practicing mutual aid as a way of accepting our interconnectedness,
ending the inherent exploitation as we fragment ourselves and our labors in ways that hide the oppressors from the oppressed and of learning to live in affirmation of, in solidarity with each other. The sentiment (essentially, to care more widely) is at once so simple, and yet as Kropotkin points out more nuanced than the derisions of it (love, sympathy). It involves an active empathy, an unclipped giving, collective expenditure. This is what freegans choose to see as the “natural” state: that continuity between ourselves and other. A disinterest in species, even, in favor of an interest in a more tangled community of species.

In this sense, the communal is not limited to what operates as human within it. The website remarks elsewhere, “We work to create a world where we, as people, recognize our kinship and solidarity with all life. We envision a world where people reject the arbitrary boundaries that have been used as justifications for oppressions. Regardless of our species, race, gender, sexual orientation, or any other constructed boundary, we are all one.”57 Note here, leading this list of identity markers, the inclusion of “species.” Wearing its humanimal body, the freegan deconstructs speciation as a vehicle for belonging at all.58 But a freegan world is not only a non-human-centric one; it is one in

57 Freegan.
58 Varying freegan philosophies seem to contradict each other on the subject of animal and in particular consuming the animal, an act that could be framed as inherently otherizing. As freegan.info explains, “One perspective holds that anything from an animal source, no matter how obtained, should be shunned, because consuming such products legitimizes the idea of using animals as raw material. Others feel that to waste products of animal exploitation makes the death and suffering of the animals exploited for them even more meaningless. Moreover, consuming animal products from trash does nothing to support the corporations who benefit from animal exploitation. By not consuming these products, we are just taking up more landfill space. For those who see foraging
which humanness, and the fetishism of individuation “human” has come to connote, becomes arbitrary.

“Before production, before industry, before agriculture, even before the advent of the ritual hunt,” writes Weissman, “humans provided for themselves through direct communion with nature’s bounty ... The land was not owned and food was not a product ... The only producer was Earth itself ... Humans existed as equals with other animals and the earth, not as owners, conquerors, ‘stewards,’ or destroyers.” To create a “continuum,” a route for “direct communion,” is to dissolve the molecules of human. For human is the colonizer, its initial separation of itself the first enabling of a conscious exploitation.

Perhaps freeganism proposes not a wearing of animal/ity, not a continual inversion of bodies as they move between spaces of inhabitance, but rather an undoing of the boundaries between these bodies everywhere, in the everyday. That is, to be humanimal is to deny both human and animal. To disintegrate into earth as the dead do, as the rotten fruit does, that one piece of the pear tree once fallen—be it eaten, discarded, or merely subject to Earth’s gravitational pull.

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as a way to rekindle our connection to ancient human foragers, it is compelling to note that even before humans hunted, it is not unlikely that they occasionally consumed the remains of an animal killed and partially eaten by a carnivore.”

Over the course of the summer, I met vegan, vegetarian, and meat-eating freegans. Ibid.

59 Weissman.
The wine is sweet, but strong. Made from dandelions collected in Brooklyn’s Prospect Park, it has a slightly sedative effect, which pulls me deeper into the crevice of my seat. I don’t want to seem younger than I am, so I get up to reload my plate from the dishes that outnumber the people at this gathering, hoping more food will absorb this strange alcohol. There’s a medley of root vegetables, a tofu and squash stir fry, noodles with vegan cheese, noodles with non-vegan cheese, leafy greens, fruit salad, and some kind of cobbler—to name the contents of a few plates.

I’m in the basement of an attachment to Nanette’s^60 house in Queens. A public high school teacher, fifty-year-old Nanette has been involved with freegan.info for years now, leading dumpster diving tours in Manhattan and hosting freegan feasts from the collected bounty, celebrations of prodigality. The previous evening I had attended one such tour, meeting Nanette, several other self-proclaimed freegans, and twenty or so curious but uninitiated individuals in Union Square. Before beginning, we had sat in a wide circle on the pavement and discussed the ethos of freeganism. Several passersby stopped for a moment and asked if this was part of the Occupy Wall Street movement that had saturated the city in previous months. The date was June 19, 2012.

Usually fairly shameless about diving for meals inside curbside bags, I hung back at the first stop on the tour. I had always been taught that certain

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^60 Pseudonym.
codes of conduct apply when foraging the consumer’s graveyard: first and foremost, leave each site cleaner than when you came. I watched a woman tear through the thick plastic before her. The elastic skin heaved out and then shuddered, spilling its contents onto the New York City street. “It’s just trash,” she said, disappointed, holding open the carcass to show the thirty or so people around her. Trash—bleached paper waste, plastics, crumbling organics—and yet none of the undigested “live” matter our tour guides had promised would be revealed inside black stomach lining. No animal swallowed whole and waiting for us inside this garbage bag predator.

The fingernails tearing at those fleshy bags appalled me. I thought we were searching for food through a labor of gleaning. The whole event seemed sensationalized, the grime of it fetishized. There was no slowness to this, no ritual; instead, separate hands reached into wet insides with competitive fervor. Each movement was fragmented from the others.

I’m not used to competition. I’m used to the cooperation of an imagined Paleolithic gathering, a slow sifting where the finds are divvied among friends. I’m used to wading through the bags’ contents, almost cultivating them, the foods within freed from their death sentence. And that was, in fact, what began to happen as the tour dwindled down to merely ten, most leaving as the carnival was reined in and quieted. I suddenly felt calmer as a woman and her granddaughter pulled me aside at a Gristedes grocery store the rest of the group had skipped and filled the plastic bag I held with flowers from one of the garbage bags. This, they told me, was their favorite place to stop when they went diving
together. They didn’t mind letting me in on the secret—there were more flowers in the garbage bags than our own bags could carry, waiting for another improbable collector to pick from.

The newcomers let loose at the earlier stops brought a blood thirst devoid of any economy of effort. What I saw instead was the individuality typical of a certain understanding of hunting as sport. It is impossible to say how many of those on the tour’s earlier stops held in mind freeganism’s subversive anti-capitalist ideas, but in looking purely at the mechanics of motion, it seemed we were still working within the dynamics of community undone. Each hand grabbed for the freshest pieces of produce, each body rushed towards the bags and moved between them to lay claim on that one prized stash of packaged goods lying amidst coffee grinds. We had become a group of lone hunters feeding not on the frenzy of collectivism but on the frenzy of gain.

Not only did this differ from how I understood gathering, it differed from my previous experiences with hunting and hunters: from how I remembered my family gave reign to another neighboring family of hunters over our fields during deer-hunting season and how they shared meat freely with each other and with us. Nobody in my own family hunts, but I remember being taken inside camouflaged hunting stands—watching the body of the animal unaware of our own stillness, our own silence.

The frenzy of the lone hunt was in part enabled by a lifting of the usual blanket of invisibility granted to those who find themselves among the city’s refuse. Although I find no shame in the actual activity, there is always a certain
level of self-consciousness in the proximity of what others have discarded, which we are told to deem unusable, untouchable, polluting. On a solo dive one hot night in the city, I found myself acutely aware of the stigma of being perceived as homeless. I almost wanted someone to confront me, so I could explain that this was a *choice*, just as the subjects of the Oprah special had emphatically proclaimed. It’s hard not to feel just as splayed as the bags before you, their insides your insides.

On the tour, there was no question of remaining unseen. Even the purposeful un-seeing that occurs as a passerby glances the singular trash-picker and then quickly moves hir line of vision further on down the street was undone by our numbers, an unbridled volume that made us (for some) an unavoidable eyesore. In the comfort of a pack, we became bold. We were sure of what we were doing. We were reckless. And so the hunt was able to proceed with a general un-containment: the innards spilled *outward* from organs ripped. At those first stops we left remains as poachers do, in a mess of unwanted filth.

The most explicit shift to a freegan dynamic happened at the last “official” stop (the tour continued to several more grocery stores, with only the very committed following to the end). Before a display we had created from salads, zucchini, melon, cartons of eggs, and bags of popcorn, one of our tour leaders reminded us that this was not simply a free-for-all. The introduction to urban foraging was meant, rather, to be an exposure of the ugly underbelly of contemporary systems of food production, distribution, acquisition, and consumption: the waste stream’s discharge from which we ate, sure, but also
who and what were implicated in its very edibility. Through foraging, through intimate contact with that “trash,” we were being lead to think about how waste is made from non-waste. We were asked to question the comfort found in that “image of abundance” that greets the person entering a grocery store and to instead recognize the “hostility” embedded within it. The hostility, perhaps we could call it the violence, of an abundance that necessarily ends in waste, which degrades both our environment and our ability to feed each other while so much food—life-sustaining, living matter—ends up in trash bags as nonfood: decomposing matter.

A great many on the tour that night had flitted towards the novelty of it all: Our most ecstatic stops were at Party City, where we donned gigantic sunglasses, and then among the sugary remains outside Crumbs bakery. But a few found themselves sifting and considering every object, the culminated excess, which when left behind became waste, a catastrophic expenditure, as Bataille might say, but when collected became instead an abundant bounty to be expended gloriously. Conversations between stops began to change. Those who hadn’t already been involved with freegans, and who stayed until the very end, sounded like they were searching for a community of re-thinkers. It was at this moment that Nanette chose to invite the stragglers into her home, to feast.
My plate filled, I return to the circle of chairs, and notice how much smaller it is than the circle that had begun the dumpster diving tour—only seven of us have come to share this meal, and of the seven only three had been in attendance, with Nanette at the helm, the previous night. Most people here are, if not completely freegan, practiced urban foragers. Re-sensitized to the sort of abundance gleaned from city streets, we delight in unexpected finds. The ethos of desire and scarcity that might otherwise produce disappointment—that the perfect apple is nowhere to be found among so many bananas—seems absent. In a community devoid of competition, there is a faith that the curb will fill in the necessary gaps as individuals search through bags not just for themselves, but for each other as well.

From here a certain prodigality emerges. We cook everything we have collected, more than we can eat. The thing is, we can be picky. In the actual gathering, we often are. And yet here, how could we not share it all, consume it all? What else is there to do—save what will be on the street tenfold tomorrow and the next day and the next? Our gluttony is another acknowledgment of excess. As Weissman writes, “Foraging embraces a number of deep-seated cultural taboos. In a culture of mass-overproduction, the notion that excess will be reclaimed is a clear and present danger to the success of the market place. To prevent massive numbers of people from realizing that they can obtain the same goods for free that they are forced to spend money on, scarcity must be manufactured.”

61 Weissman.
Marshall Sahlins discusses market obsessions with scarcity and the kind of challenges to such obsessions hunter-gathering economies, past and present, offer. “To assert that the hunters are affluent,” begins Sahlins, “is to deny then that the human condition is an ordained tragedy, with man the prisoner at hard labor of a perpetual disparity between his unlimited wants and his insufficient means.”62 That is, to assert that hunters are affluent is to deny that humans are fundamentally prisoners of want.

In this article, titled “The Original Affluent Society,” Sahlins wants to achieve a reversal of logic. To reach material wellbeing, Sahlins argues, one must follow one of two paths: the Galbraithian Way, in which a society wants much and therefore produces much, or the Zen Way, in which a society desires little and makes do with just an adequate quantity. These two ways lead to radically different lifestyles and ethos. Consider this: Hunter-gathering societies work significantly fewer hours in the day than their capitalist counterparts, sleeping more during the daytime and enjoying more leisure time generally. Referencing Martin Gusinde, Sahlins writes, “We are inclined to think of hunters and gatherers as poor because they don’t have [many things]: perhaps better to think of them for that reason as free. ‘Their extremely limited material possessions relieve them of all cares with regard to daily necessities and permit them to enjoy life.’”63

Furthermore, hunter-gathering societies seem to operate on the expectation of a perpetual continuance of this leisurely pace, on stasis regarding
the size of their economy met by fulfillment instead of on perpetual growth. Despite what many may consider harsh conditions, hunter-gathering societies operate on the expectation of abundance. As the urban forager grows to expect an excess of waste, and thus an excess of food, a trust forms in the bounty of the street. Similarly, the more traditional gatherer forms a trust in nature’s bounty. To each, the depth of resources in the environments they inhabit becomes consistent and dependable, even if somewhat fluctuating on a day to day basis, negating any need or desire to save, accumulate, hoard. These bodies are instead forever grounded in the present, in forgetfulness, tuned into the rhythms of their surroundings—in a silence not unlike that of the animal waiting.

And so, after a successful hunting-gathering expedition, we feast. It is this act of consuming all that sets itself in most direct opposition to the greater milieu in which we rest. In feeding each other, and feeding each other well, even in wasting some of what we have gathered—I can only finish half of the leftovers I take home before they begin to rot in my fridge—we begin to break apart the illusion of scarcity. We begin to deny that the human condition is an ordained tragedy. And it’s done in the most basic of ways: through nourishment, through body, through performing this organic function of life—eating—as art and politics.

Freegans recognize scarcity, but on different grounds. They work towards exposing the tragedy of scarcity’s construction. Sahlins writes, “In some ways the economy [of the hunter-gatherer] reflects dire ecology, but it is also a complete
inversion.” The dire ecology today’s urban humanimal exposes and even mocks is linked to the fact that the experience of abundance and the experience of scarcity take place along class lines. Sahlins speaks of this when he remarks, “One-third to one-half of humanity are said to go to bed hungry every night. In the Old Stone Age the fraction must have been much smaller. This is the era of hunger unprecedented. Now, in the time of the greatest technical power, is starvation an institution. Reverse another venerable formula: the amount of hunger increases relatively and absolutely with the evolution of culture.”

An institution of starvation: lubricated by that very bourgeois drive to accumulate, to build a monolith of material possession. Where else do we find justification for its continuance if not in the naturalization of this drive, in the lineage of economists building their models on scarcity, in the projection of infinite economic growth? John Quiggan finds the source of this “dangerous speculation” of inevitable scarcity in Thomas Malthus’s “Essay on the Principle of Population.” Considering John Maynard Keynes’s case for the leisurely life as something that is reachable, in the projected future, not simply for the aristocrat but for every person, “Malthus argued that, even if a technological innovation or redistribution of wealth could improve the living standards of the masses … inevitably, the exponential growth of population would outstrip linear growth in the mass of subsistence. In a short time, the poor would become poor again.”

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64 Ibid, 92.
65 Ibid, 94.
66 Quiggan.
With the exception of Karl Marx, every standard economic model has followed this projection of growth as a necessity. Karl Polanyi finds basis for the resigned attitudes we have in the face of inevitable scarcity in a fearful selfishness. He writes in part metaphor of the market economy, “Animal dependence upon food has been bared and the naked fear of starvation permitted to run loose. Our humiliating enslavement to the material, which all human culture is designed to mitigate, was deliberately made more rigorous.”

This is, perhaps, a different concept of animality essentialized, one removed from a general altruism and focused on the bare instinct of survival, of individualism. The age-old phrase, “It’s a dog-eat-dog world.” And yet, is this merely human reflected in the animal? A stake on identity, in the singular.

Quiggan continues, “Avarice and usury, as Keynes called them, are worshiped on an unimaginable scale … We need a vision of a genuinely better society. For this reason, the time is right to re-examine Keynes’s vision of a future where economic scarcity, real or perceived, no longer dominates life as it does today.” Quiggan goes on to make adjustments to Keynes’s projected timetable, mapping out a feasible “end of scarcity” by the year 2060. But then he asks, Will we want this? Or is it, as sixteen economists concluded in the volume *Revisiting Keynes*, in our human nature to always bend towards individuation, to always want more for oneself and be willing to work harder to advance one’s self-interests, enabling forever-increasing desires of consumption?

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67 Polanyi, 115.
68 Quiggan.
Quiggan and the New York freegans I ate with that summer evening in June disagree. With the same optimism, Quiggan cites “the end of the American love affair with the motor car” as “the most striking emblem” of today's waning culture of conspicuous consumption. With fewer people willing to drive, he states, there has also been a decline in the demand for bigger suburban dwellings, and with this decline comes smaller spaces to fill with things. Quiggan believes this will result in “less appeal for a privatized life based on private consumption” generally. It is an interesting conundrum within freegans’ strategies against a consumption-obsessed culture: If they are to truly succeed, they would do away with the sources of their subsistence. The purest goal is to no longer be able to eat from the street's bounty, to curb this excess.

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So then how does this future body, the future humanimal, take shape? One might say that it is only through the labor of gleaning, through the body in motion, that animality is enacted. Truly, is felt. So what if there is no longer a bounty to reap? Where does the humanimal find himself if no longer crouching in the sensate world, if bent towards leisure rather than labor? We could consider again the hunter-gatherer, who enjoys a far more leisurely life than that known to most of today’s non-gathering populace. From this place the question arises: Who does leisure belong to? To the animal who drifts in and out of daydream, or

69 Ibid.
70 Ibid.
to the individual who’s made their millions, lies poolside (as the image goes)?

Does it dwell in silence, in an escape from writable thought, or in the written offspring of leisure devotees—in the libertine text, perhaps?

It is interesting how the individualism of the Marquis de Sade could enter discussions of a freegan present. The Marquis and the freegans each orient their philosophical body magnetically against a certain practical or functional individualism: that which fosters the capitalist work ethic. But the two do so in such diametrically opposed ways, one towards a supposedly natural fluidity among human and animal and plant and machine, and the other towards fragmentation through individualism. An anarchy devoid of consensus—each body pleasing itself with disregard to infringement on any other body and even towards negation of a mutually occupied space. The freegan does not advocate for disorder but rather for reordering and reorientation based on the de-classifying of species and subspecies. The blindness of the cave.

But their mutual appreciation for the heightened senses in this dark space remains. It’s how we find each other. So biblical, what separated us. Harriet Ritvo writes, “The dichotomy ... is so old and automatic that we scarcely notice it. It was enshrined near the beginning of our tradition, in the second chapter of Genesis, when God presented the animals to Adam one by one ... In the end, of course, none of them would do, and God had to provide Adam with a creature more like himself. At least since then, the notion that animals are radically other, on the far side of an unbridgeable chasm constructed by their lack of either reason or soul, has been a constant feature of Western theology and philosophy.
It has completely overshadowed the most readily available alternative, which would define human beings as one animal kind among many others.”

How can leisure be understood if not as primordial? In a space where animal sleeps with man?

At some point, my words become abstract games of Text Twist. I grasp for something more concrete: Constantine Samuel Rafinesque, whose work cataloguing the American West predated and then rivaled Lewis and Clark’s before the tragic drowning of his records, is the only person to have ever done significant research on the Kentucky snake mounds without harming them. Rafinesque is also renowned for his studies of Mesoamerican ancient linguistics. But his eccentricities, which made him a predecessor to Darwin’s evolutionary work, led his contemporaries as well as current historians to discount much of his other “research” as fabrications.

And John Jeremiah Sullivan, writing on the naturalist’s expansive career:

Last in his list of misplaced virtues is this: his natural science makes a marvelous metaphysics. He was among the first to appreciate the implications of humanity’s rediscovery of itself as an animal, as an actual physical projection over eons of the material universe. “Nature does not make leaps,” had said Leibniz, one of Rafinesque’s guides. If we are part of nature, then we are synonymous with it at the metaphysical level, every bit as much as the first all-but inorganic animalcules that ever formed a chain of themselves in the blow hole of a primordial sea vent. There is no magic rod that comes down three hundred thousand years

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71 Ritvo, 68.
ago and divides our essence from the material world that produces us. This means that we cannot speak in essential terms of nature—neither of its brutality nor of its beauty—and hope to say anything true, if what we say isn’t true of ourselves.

The importance of that proposition becomes clear only when it’s reversed: What’s true of us is true of nature. If we are conscious, then nature is conscious. Nature became conscious in us, perhaps, in order to observe itself. It may be holding us out and turning us around like a crab does its eyeball. Whatever the reason, that thing out there, with black holes and the nebulae and whatnot, is conscious. One cannot look in the mirror and rationally deny this. It experiences love and desire, or at least thinks it does. The idea is enough to render the Judeo-Christian cosmos sort of quaint. As far as Rafinesque was concerned, it was just hard science. As for what this thing, this world is—who knows. That part is mysterious. “She lives her life not as men or birds,” said Rafinesque, “but as world.”

The image comes to me as Silly Putty: pulling apart/together, continuous.

A world netted as it separates, holes opening between its parts like a jaw stretching for breath, and yet still operating, as an ant farm. The intimacy of our common molecules, an intimacy that also allows us to disown them. Perhaps this is just even more word play, or perhaps the point is embracing an ongoing morphology, the inherent amorphous-ness.

Otis tells me of a foraged deer harvest: “The actual act was simultaneously delicate and incredibly clunky and intentionally clunky. There were moments when I just pulled … You take a chair and you pull hard enough and you can pull it apart. There’s something about that. Something beautiful about that. I know this great mechanic who I worked with all summer on this farm and he was the catchall; he knew all the mechanic work, and all he would do was kick the fucking thing. He just knew the right place to kick. Take a hard metal object to another hard metal object. He hit the tractor in the right spot and

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72 Sullivan, 212-213.
73 Pseudonym.
the implement would fall into place, or the nut would loose, and he was able to clean up the carburetor. That was so cool to me, that he had cultivated this awareness and this skill that was simultaneously pinpointed and delicate, but also sort of clunky."74

But here I get ahead of myself.

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74 Heyrman.
All societies produce strangers; but each kind of society produces its own kind of strangers, and produces them in its own inimitable way. If strangers are [those] who do not fit the cognitive, moral, or aesthetic map of the world ... if they, therefore, by their sheer presence, make obscure what ought to be transparent, confuse what ought to be a straightforward recipe for action, and/or prevent the satisfaction from being fully satisfying, pollute the joy with anxiety while making the forbidden fruit alluring; if, in other words, they befog and eclipse the boundary lines which ought to be clearly seen; if, having done all this, they gestate uncertainty, which in its turn breeds discomfort of feeling lost—then each society produces such strangers, while drawing its borders and charting its cognitive, aesthetic, and moral map. It cannot but gestate people who conceal borderlines deemed crucial to its orderly and/or meaningful life and are thus charged with causing the discomfort experienced as the most painful and least bearable.

Zygmunt Bauman

The first thing I see in our headlamp lights is the rope. I hadn’t realized she would be dangling already. I think about the hoisting, her weight, and the

75 Bauman, 1.
expertise of the knots secured around each leg. We park, get shovels from the shed, and make our way to the second acre. We’re digging a hole for her innards, and the parts of her we will not eat.

I haven’t knowingly touched meat in over four years. It hasn’t been entirely intentional, just a lack of contact beginning with the decision to become a vegetarian and an increasing distance produced by the repugnance I began to feel toward the idea of eating muscle. So I ask, first, if I can touch her. My hand flutters down the ribcage, then settles in. I’m holding her. Her coat sheds into me.

I ask if I can see her. It’s about as strenuous as it sounds. I watch Charlotte do it first, cutting into the flesh of her front leg and then through the muscle, the bone, and out again. When the leg is dangling, nearly severed, it becomes more of a pulling—tugging off this small piece of her. When both front legs are off we make incisions around the skin of the back legs and begin to peel this first layer back, cutting into the fat beneath to separate it from the muscle.

This takes a long time. We follow instructions from an iPhone about how we should be able to tug the skin away in one piece, but her skin seems more connected. It makes small sucking noises as we try. Eventually we must remove her udder, the sponge of tissue underneath. It’s pinker than the rest of her; I imagine it an implant.

The message on my phone went like this: *Hey Claire, this is actually Leah*. I’m calling from Charlotte’s phone, and I’m out on the farm with Charlotte and Otis now. I think it’s like 9:30 or so, and we are actually butchering a deer that

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76 Pseudonym.
died on the farm earlier this afternoon/late evening, and we thought it might be something of interest to you for your thesis about [her words are unintelligible to me here; there’s the word “touching” and “food”]. So we’re heading back to the house to look up butchering techniques because we just spent some time getting it, and if you’d like we’d be happy to pick you up...

The doe had gotten caught inside a fence on Long Lane, the student-run farm at Wesleyan. A couple passing by had let a dog in to try to herd her out, but the doe, terrified, had thrown herself against the fence so many times she began bleeding from the nose and dropped dead shortly after, probably from a heart attack. I had missed the “field dressing,” the way hunters refer to the process of gutting the animal right where it died to help preserve the meat by cooling it down. I had missed Charlotte cutting open the stomach by accident and the undigested grass inside. The smell.

I know her body must smell right now, but I can’t seem to pick up on it. My housemates tell me the next day that my clothes and the black plastic trash bag with her legs that I placed in our freezer do in fact stink. Right now I just see the steam coming off her eviscerated body despite or perhaps because of the bags of ice that lie in the hollow inside. It is the same steam that rises from the organs we pile into a hole on the ground, where they slide and move on top of each other as though each still living in their own right.

The skin is heavy. It falls to the ground, where we pour cups of water from a bucket over the surface and then transfer it into a white trash bag. We’re not quite sure what to do next. Before turning to instructions online, Leah’s
stepdad had given them all directions over speakerphone, but still the deer is large and heavy and the task is daunting. Eventually we decide to halve her, and take turns sawing from the anus down to her neck. Halfway through, Otis severs the head. It’s the wettest sounding of the cuts.

Sawing through the spinal chord is difficult. We approach it with vigor. It’s tiring. Leah takes pictures on her camera, pictures that later seem the most graphic, perhaps disturbing or humorous or impressive. After this is done we cut down one side and let it fall to a wooden picnic table lined with white garbage bags.

This is the part we rely most on the internet for. None of us, it turns out, are big meat eaters. We decide to first cut away the back strap, then each leg, and then the ribcage, which is slow roasted the next day in their house, for a poetry reading. The spare parts we put in a bag to bring to the hole along with the head. This takes time as well. But once we’ve done the first half, the second is easier.

The white translucence of the fat had muted the muscle underneath, made it blue. But now it seems a deep red. The stickiness, the pilling quality of the parts we cut away is now replaced with slickness. I wipe my hands on my shirt wanting to preserve the traces of this experience. It’s strange, I feel I want a memento, but the making of that object seems crude, artificial. I feel this less about the actual parts of the animal. I plan to salt the legs in hopes of preserving them, as Charlotte, Leah, and Otis will do with the tail.

We take pictures looking haunted underneath what is left hanging from the tree—just the hind legs. After cleaning the area, washing our three tools (one
small saw, a large cleaver, and a small knife) we leave yellow weed flowers over the last small pile of her parts. Then we refill the hole and leave.

It’s the most invigorating experience I’ve ever had. When I talk to Charlotte the next day at the reading she says something of the un-definable energy in the residue of those four hours. I eat a small piece of what we are now calling venison, and the taste is as I remember it, as I remember deer meat tasted when it was taken from the freezer in our garage, felled by hunters in the field between my family’s house and my father’s brother’s house. Everyone at the reading says, “It’s not that game-y.”

There is a certain show made of the eating, of the whole event. Several friends remark that our pictures, in which I see the wonder of the exposed anatomy, of the pulling apart of this sentient form and that un-definable energy in the transformative moment, seem intentionally gory—sensationalized. There are times I feel offended trying to explain why this is not so. How the intimacy of our involvement with that body-turned-meat returned some level of sacredness to the ritual of piecing apart, of sorting out food: of transforming organic matter into something edible.

“I kind of ate it because I didn’t want them [my housemates: Charlotte, Leah, and Otis] to think that I was really upset by what they did, because I wasn’t, I was just a combination of curious and shocked,” Sylvia77 tells me a few days later. “So I just wanted to show that I was trying it and I wanted to try it. The first bite I took, I just kept thinking about how it was alive like forty-eight

77 Pseudonym.
hours ago, so that made it unappetizing for me, so I didn’t eat anymore, except I did try the pâté they made … A pâté is so transformed. It’s in the kind of tin you bake banana bread in, and they put two strips of bacon on top and rosemary, and it looked like a food you would buy, and it looked really beautiful. And it wasn’t like coming off a rib, you know, so it was totally disassociated from the other way of eating.”

These were what the pictures were of: our forcible disassociations revealed, the process by which the doe became venison. Otis remarks, “I felt more comfortable with the picture of the hanging skinned meat than I did with the [picture of the] hanging meat with the skin, although it was a gnarlier picture. With the fur still on [I] felt a pang of disturbance. Without that it was hanging meat. It felt like a much more normalized picture.” Leah adds to this, “It’s finally trying to push through a culturally created sense of repugnancy. I don’t think that the visceral nausea that I felt is a natural thing … It’s forcing yourself to overcome mental boundaries.”

Were these pictures sensational or simply uncomfortable for some because of the way they exposed the violence of that ontological shift—from living being to meat—as it was embodied in the skinned animal?

I press Charlotte, Leah, and Otis on this question. “My first reaction is to say it is [sensational], and the movement of something from thing to product (meat product) is inherently a process that can feel sensationalized,” Charlotte remarks. “It’s not something being exploited; when exploitation is revealed and

78 Sylvia.
79 Heyrman.
reveled in, I think of that as being sensationalized, but this is exploitation on a very basic, sensical, and rational way of taking something that is and turning it into something that people will use. Like harvesting.”

It was through this intimacy, our closeness with the animal body and, perhaps within that closeness, a recognition of our own bodies next to it—the similarities in the anatomical, in our mammalian forms—that we experienced the butchering as some rite of expiation. It was just as we imagine the cave paintings of our ancestors to have evoked closeness, togetherness, and empathy as they recognized the unity between humans and animals that the hunters longed for and, at the same time, longed to piece apart for the sake of partial advancement, that of sustaining self. For Charlotte, this reverence turned our inherently sensational acts away from exploitation. The sensation in that violence was no longer obscured. It’s the difference between meat production through harvesting, foraging—the simplicity of the implied involvement—and factory farming.

Otis relates the story of an event held by the Greenhorns, a trendy youth farming nonprofit, on a Glenwood farm in New York. A prominent Greenhorn leader slaughtered multitudes of rabbits she and other Greenhorn members had raised without doing the due diligence necessary to learn how to correctly conduct a rabbit slaughter. As a result the rabbits experienced a long term, excruciating death—an inhumane death—in the presence of Glenwood farmers.

80 Ibid.
who raise livestock for a living, who have, according to Otis, committed their lives to a technique and a process—to being reverential in that act.

“When I think about spectacle I think about that experience,” Otis says. “But then I also think spectacle is important; I believe in spectacle. Sensationalism, there’s sensation, that I felt deeply moved by the deer’s passing and that there was sensation in that passing—the deer sensated. That was important. You wouldn’t want it to be a mechanized thing. It’s almost scarier when you can just slaughter a chicken, slaughter a chicken, slaughter a chicken; throw it in the water, throw it in the water, throw it in the water.”\(^{81}\)

Herein is the difference, the habituation, all of the imagined gore. Charlotte comments, “For me it was the singularity of it, a momentary thing. When you talk about chicken slaughters, I don’t think I’ll feel the same sort of glorious experience every time if I go into poultry manufacturing. But, the single nature of it and the newness of it and the difference of it: that it was something so opposite from what we usually spend our days doing.”\(^{82}\) The difference between glorious expenditure and catastrophic expenditure when the product appears so similar: it’s in the intimacy versus the alienation. Or rather, in the feeling of expiation from alienation that the intimacy of being inside this other body while it is still assembled allows. Recognizing the violence in the transformative moment, the raw experience of this that commodified meat production denies, is also a demanding of forgiveness. And perhaps it too is a delusion.

\(^{81}\) Ibid.
\(^{82}\) Ibid.
Alienation only means separation. Our own harvest involved first this alienation, and then our attempts to excuse it. To be forgiven through our care, our love of that which we would eat. The difference is in making ourselves familiar with the other, in knowing the right place to kick, to saw: in the bodily strain of pulling apart.

Sylvia dissects her own repugnance to me in a campus café. “I guess it shows how detached I am from living things,” she tells me, “and from making my own food. The only reason this is shocking to me was because I’ve never done that before ... I’m just a consumer, I don’t produce anything.” Knowing the discomfort with the garbage bags of meat in her freezer, knowing the element of horror our memorabilia held for her, I hadn’t expected this level of self-scrutiny.

“It’s just a radical act of self-sufficiency, what they did,” she continues. “Meat production is always channeled through huge corporations, super large production scale, and I’ve never seen anything like... just killing the animal. I mean the animal was dead, but, I don’t know, I could never feel ready to do that ... I think it just requires a really different outlook on how you get your food: being involved with it, which most people aren’t. I think a lot of things seem really gross about food when you’re just eating it and not making it. I just think they have a really different perspective on food and eating in general than I do. I think the way they think about food is ‘You should strive to make your own food
as often and in every capacity [as] you can.’ They don’t really think in terms of efficiency or a fast meal. Everything is about the process. I just think of it in terms of commodity and going to the grocery store.”

I think back to the methodical nature of the sawing, the process: This moment in which we at once fell service to the utilitarian ethic of harvesting the deer for meat and yet also contemplated the fundamental violence of that act. How once we had begun there was nothing to do but complete the butchering. In the refrigerated shelf and on the dinner plate the commodity hides its origins. Our pictures, on the contrary, exposed the ultimate lie of meat as a commodity—that it is produced through a bloodless act.

In Capital, Marx speaks to the obscured and obscuring value of the commodity in the capitalist market place. That is, the determinant of a commodity’s exchange value—its value in terms of labor, the social relations that went into and made possible its production, rather than its use value, the role it serves when consumed—is a source of alienation: of the producer from the commodity ze produces, and of the consumer from the producer. These elements—source of value and social relations—are congealed and impossible to discern from that end monetary assignment of a price. Marx writes, “Value, therefore, does not have its description branded on its forehead; it rather transforms every product of labor into a social hieroglyphic.” This is Marx’s commodity “fetishism,” the commodity disguising in its polished thingness the

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83 Sylvia.
84 Marx, 166.
work of people, their transformations of matter, and the relationships between people that went into producing it.

As labor is atomized under capitalism, the parts disconnected from the assemblage, and the process impossible to conceptualize as whole, so is the thing that is labored over. To lay claim to the body of the deer in its entirety and its individuality, to implicate ourselves in its dismembering, is to threaten to exit the market place, to produce as we consume. Pictures taken of the moment of congealment (or would-be congealment, were we to plastic wrap the flank in a Styrofoam tray and drive it to our local Stop and Shop) are for the participants documentarian, revelatory, revealing, and for those merely eating perhaps accurately horrific. Segmented. The five, then four of us: Charlotte, Leah, Otis, myself, and her. Charlotte, Leah, Otis, myself, and all that hanging meat.

In making ourselves intimate with process, with the labor value that seems forever disjointed from use value, we made ourselves intimate with the moment of transformation to thing: What Otis called the sensating in her passing. Disjointed from that process, the ideology of Thing, of continual matter as being broken into parts with individual utility, perhaps obscures most. It is what turns the landscape around us into capitalist grounds and turns gather or hunt into sport. For Thing has no beginning, no violent creation. Its origins are so obscured that we consume it without reverence, feeling no need for slow encounter, for rituals of expiation.
But what of that taken inside ourselves, consumed so intimately, without the filmic aspect of this horror—drained of blood, of saw—when instead we turn to fruits, vegetables, boxes, cans? Food commodity, as termed in the market place, necessitates a fragmentation beyond that of the human relations brought into its creation. As with the sentient being, limbs pulled from torso and turned into edible matter, in terming organic matter as food a discontinuity is introduced. Without the recognition of that introduction, of a utility applied, that the isolated milieu of Long Lane allowed by bringing together singular bodies, the element of construction is obscured. In the market place, where each step in that construction—each act that adds up to its completion—is so alienated, discontinuity seems natural or at least as natural as any other element of daily life following the mechanic tics of capitalism.

As Arjun Appadurai argues, objects or things, which we learn to see as staid, have fuller social lives that extend before and beyond that outlining of their thingness. He writes, “Commodities are frequently represented as mechanical products of regimes governed by the laws of supply and demand ... [But] the flow of commodities in any given situation is a shifting compromise between socially regulated paths and competitively inspired diversions. Commodities, as Igor Kopytoff points out, can usefully be regarded as having life histories. In this processual view, the commodity phase of the life history of an object does not exhaust its biography; it is culturally regulated; and its
interpretation is open to individual manipulation to some degree."85 As these objects are consumed with agency—like the family heirloom once purchased, but that no longer appears to us as commodity—the lie of that stasis is revealed.

This enforced stasis becomes ever harder to manage when applied to the living commodity, to our food. With the granting of an expiration date food is taken from that “continuum” of life the freegans imagine. The food product is separated out of a natural world devoid from a concept of death such as ours, with its reference to individual beings and its reliance on the contours of identity, and acknowledged only as this end product: the living object/commodity with impending death, but also importantly the living object without a discernible birth. It is impossible to know how the stalk of broccoli or the prepared noodles lying still in their plastic container came to be, but we know that by April 12, 2013, for example, they don’t belong to us or occupy the same temporal space as us anymore: they’re garbage.

And so, on the shelf an apple is separated out from not just its “natural” context but also from itself or, more appropriately, from its varying selves. The natural life cycle of the apple is really the natural life cycle of the tree, the soil that it rots into, and the other plant it grows up to be again. And yet we see the grocery store apple how we see ourselves—separated from such state of continuity and identifiable as a separate, quantifiable entity. As Bataille writes:

85 Appadurai, 17.
principle: to subordinate is not only to alter the subordinated element but to be altered oneself. The tool changes nature and man at the same time: it subjugates nature to man, who makes and uses it, but it ties man to subjugated nature. Nature becomes man's property but it ceases to be immanent to him. It is his on condition that it is closed to him. If he places the world in his power, this is to the extent that he forgets that he is himself the world: he denies the world but it is himself that he denies. Everything in my power declares that I have compelled that which is equal to me no longer to exist for its own purpose but rather for a purpose that is alien to it.86

On both ends, through the colander of the market place and through the finger sieves of that forager operating beyond market place, the task is one of sorting, sorting out. It is one of terming, a game of rhetoric. As Appadurai writes, “Let us approach commodities as things in a certain situation ... This means to look at the commodity potential of all things rather than searching fruitlessly for the magic distinction between commodities and other sorts of things. It also means breaking significantly with the production-dominated Marxian view of the commodity and focusing on its total trajectory from production, through exchange/distribution, to consumption.”87 It is perhaps obvious that it is us who imbue in food its varying qualities in order to make it edible, appetizing, but what is less obvious is how unstable we find these categories to be, how arbitrary is the sorting.

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86 This, too, is what allows the thingification of human life, another type of living matter. Bataille continues, “The agricultural product and the livestock are things, and the farmer or the stock raiser, during the time they are working, are also things. All this is foreign to the immanent immensity, where there are neither separations nor limits. In the degree that he is the immanent immensity, that he is being, that he is of the world, man is a stranger for himself.” Bataille, Theory, 41-42.

87 Appadurai, 13.
Organics change uncontrollably. They don’t break but instead mutate—they go from not smelling to smelling, from flavorless to flavorful, from sturdy to rot. They shift categorically. We build ourselves out of organics and in turn are organic ourselves, but that impending mutation all organics share is one that we work to disassociate from self and from that which we place inside the self. Once our foods become inedible they repulse us, become untouchable, appear as contaminants to us—perhaps as the rotting body may be perceived, the body yet to be drained and filled again with formaldehyde, its face painted over so as to preserve a certain countenance, a “memory image” of the deceased. The body unpreserved, the produce that begins to seem so monstrously undefinable—that quality of unknown in the identity of the sub/object—are what makes garbage dangerous and gross. In this sense organics are the most pure and the most impure. Keeping this separate becomes hugely important.

Foragers interrogate the validity of our measures for avoiding rot—the need to preserve a certain image of the edible stalk of broccoli—and in doing so expose our desire, but ultimate failure, to wield control over natural processes. By finding produce that was supposed to have moved categorically on but that nevertheless lingers on in its edible state, foragers expose the frictions between life cycles, their variance, and the precision of human-made category. They are

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88 Jerome Salomone writes, “Employing the restorative techniques of cosmetology and dermasurgery to reestablish, as much as possible, a lifelike remembrance of the deceased … [funeral homes] provide therapeutic value to the bereaved.” In this way, a final image of that body as person is carefully crafted to enable its viewers to imagine the person continuing as person, forever in this one material state. This presentation thus becomes an illusion of a certain immortality. Salomone, 579.
the catalyst in the “deviant” moves Appadurai speaks to when he comments, “Things can move in and out of the commodity state, [and] such movement can be slow or fast, reversible or terminal, normative or deviant.”\(^89\)

That variance scares us. Think of how obsessively Americans refrigerate, how we cling to those expiration dates and shirk away from strong smells or signs of blemish. The apple must only ever be the apple, this one small part of a more complete, or perhaps perpetually incomplete, life cycle. It is an ultimate taboo to piece together the fragments, to claim as food the apple in its afterlife as waste, where it has lost its identity in its amalgamation as a collective, in its renewed continuity: the once-apple rotting into plastics inside plastic on the concrete street, impossible to differentiate from other rotting apples; and then the apple also part of this collective but not yet rotting, that is still separable.

Foragers seek out this in/organic mass in the utter chaos of the city. They see the urbanscape as a continuum from which matter in all varying stages of life is capable of becoming for the consuming, not consumer, food. In the context of food as non-commodity, as only that within which one person finds this one quality: sustenance, a broader reworking begins. This is to claim a space outside precision, outside expertise, outside capitalism, one that operates and sustains the bodies within it alongside the supermarket, not quite independent of it, but acting as both leech and subversion to it.

David Harvey notes the dangers of misreading Marx’s fetishism of the commodity as something inherent to things. Doing so is to fall prey to what Marx

\(^{89}\) Appadurai, 13.
names the obscured and obscuring qualities of commodities and thus, I would argue, to what further exploitation the brutalizing of planetary bodies (human, animal, plant, earth) that is a sine qua non of their production enables. He writes, “Plainly, the classical political economists preferred the Robinson Crusoe myth because it naturalized capitalism. But as Marx insists, capitalism is a historical construct, not a natural object. ‘The categories of bourgeois economies’ are merely ‘forms of thought which are socially valid, and therefore objective, for the relations of production belonging to this historically determined mode of production.’ ... You will err, he is suggesting, if you naturalize the value-form under capitalism, because it is then difficult, if not impossible, to conceive of alternatives.’”

We cannot naturalize the discontinuous; there is value in spectacle and subversion. Sylvia pauses, drinks from a disposable cup of coffee, and starts again. “I don’t really understand my own reaction. One of the moments when I decided to be a vegetarian was when I went to this seafood buffet in New Orleans with a guy who used to be a fisherman. It was like his place, so he brought both of us back to a table and gave me plate upon plate of shrimp with all the stuff on it. All this seafood with the body, the exoskeleton, and he was eating it so fast, and I was watching him tear things apart and suck the juices, and he was eating so fast so I was trying to keep up, and after a certain point I

90 Harvey, 44-45.
actually felt like I was going to vomit. And I was like, 'If I’m having this reaction...’”

So the question is, should it be disturbing? The removal of the exoskeleton or the picking out of other numerous exoskeletons as we reach for something more appetizing at the bottom of the trash heap, as we draw up our fisherman’s net and claim its contents, in parts or in its entirety, as consumable—to be made part of ourselves... Can we continue to eat the shelled shrimp arranged in circles on a plastic supermarket tray while holding onto that image of their shelling?

I am, myself, contaminant. I’m not embarrassed by this fact; I don’t endorse it entirely or believe in its implications. But I feel its social truths as I become aware, entering the air-conditioned subway car that will take me from Park Slope to my Bedford-Stuyvesant apartment, how molecules of myself carry on in the air and announce my presence here. I smell, like garbage.

Susan Strasser writes about how “malodorous food” in the fridge can seem to “taint” other foods. There is a bacteriology associated to the dangers of the unseen, the dangers of what is evidenced by its sensory yet immaterial, unsubstantiated, output. I feel as though I am molding, those gases escaping from open spores alerting the passengers who sit on my left and right to the

91 Sylvia.
92 Strasser, 34.
possibilities of what may accompany the smell in the leaking out. There is a link here between aesthetics and contagion through the metaphor of the fridge and the theories of miasmas that inform our understanding of that space: the history of believing that which smells is that which sickens. Strasser’s broader work, *Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash*, looks at the rise of disposability and how this was marketed through fear, through bacteriology and a pushing towards an extreme aesthetics of non-blemish via this fear.

It is through this line of thinking that we reach an aesthetics of the body. In an essay exploring separation, concealment, and shame in public restrooms, Ruth Barcan draws on theorist Susan Bordo to discuss the self-regulation involved in manipulating the outer image of our biological selves. She writes, “Today, moral liberalization is not matched by bodily liberation; rather consumer culture actively fuels our disgust at any body that is not tight, taut, hairless, and odorless—in short, sealed off.” But, as Terence McLaughlin argues, this sealing off is impossible and the body continues to ooze. He writes, “Unfortunately for our peace of mind, most of the products of the human body are slimy—saliva, mucus, excrement, pus, semen, blood, lymph—and even honest sweat gets sticky by evaporation.”

I am reminded of a different body on a different subway car: a man wearing baggy jeans, a hoodie, and a bandana over his face. As he entered, the strong smell of urine emanating from him not only visibly revolted other passengers but put them on edge. This smell, more so than his off-putting

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93 Barcan, 27.
94 McLaughlin, 3.
appearance and stance, was enough to make some take oddly self-protective shapes. In a city where people are so often lumps of background material to other people, where a friend related fainting on subway stairs and having other commuters merely step over her body with little acknowledgment of its alteration of the ground beneath them, the reactions of these passengers seemed noteworthy to me. They seemed to go beyond discomfort—they were fearful of this man.

There is a “delicacy” about the body, a “polite distancing from it,” which Norbert Elias associates with “the civilizing process”—a link between a polishing of these facades of self-transcending-body and a more secure outer world in which social stratification becomes bound to ever-more-subtle visual cues based on hygiene and cleanliness.95 Importantly, this sealant process must make itself appear merely another functioning inherent to the body. Not a social practice, but a healthful one, and thus made second nature in modernity.

And so we cycle back in on these claims to natural, how they are legitimated even when rupturing the normalized process of distancing from body, from what we place inside it, through a socially constructed notion of health associated with a quiet body, a body that does not announce itself, a body bound up in shame. The subjects of a *New York Times* article written by Catherine Saint Louis on those who actively decide to shower less and shirk “other gold standards of personal hygiene,” not only recognize that their “natural” is not “normal” but also seem to want to validate their practices based

95 Barcan, 27.
on an ability to, in fact, operate normally within society: To pass. All of the
interviewees are quick to note that they don’t smell, that they “get invited to
dinner parties”: that they’re unnoticeable. Like the freegans, their politics are
not separatist, but, unlike the freegans, the impact of those politics relies on its
vessel, their bodies, remaining just as unseen/unsmelled as any other. They
grasp onto the human body, while turning away from the humanimal.

In part it is fear and embarrassment, or a fear of embarrassment. Just as I
find myself beginning with a lie: that I’m not embarrassed to smell of garbage as
I ride a crowded train but only conscious of my invasive offense towards the
“sacred” personal space of other selves. With some paranoia, I expect the
shaming glances from other people. Saint Louis relates, “The few times Mr. Felix
has mentioned on a date that he goes without deodorant, he said, things have
quickly turned, well, sour. ‘It’s weird, but I don’t smell,’ Mr. Felix will announce.
Then, he said, ‘the comment is always, ‘You think you don’t smell.’” (Mr. Felix
admitted that he lives in horror of having the rare fetid day.)” Another
interviewee, Alice Fiering, tells Saint Louis that her mother will frequently ask
her, “Didn’t I bring you up differently? ... What will people think?”

It is an alarm call made only clearer as we think of self in relation to the
animal, its own aesthetics. Bleakley writes:

> Our model could be the seahorse, who in the wild demonstrates a
> life of the aesthetic, of elegant self-display; who shows tenderness,
> wrapping a tail gently around the finger of prying zoologists just as the

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96 Saint Louis.
97 Ibid.
male and female seahorses go for walks with their tails entwined; who shows fidelity—a mate for life; and who throws the assumptions we make about gender in animal life into disarray, for it is the male seahorse who incubates the ova that the female injects into his birth pouch, and who eventually gives birth. Perhaps what frightens us about animals—just as it simultaneously intrigues us—is not their irrationality, their bestiality, their primitiveness, but the depth, the sublimity, the sheer range and unpredictability of their aesthetic self-display.

Unpredictability. The fear of those whose movements appear erratic, unreliable, against the norm to a degree that is asocial, and what is denied to those bodies as we fear them—as we keep these eccentrics outside our social spaces.

A girl off camera says, “It’s just unacceptable. They look like trash; they’re wearing garbage; they wear this hideous makeup all over their face. They extend to the greatest limits of insanity and hideosity, and I just don’t understand why that’s something that they strive for. What does that say; what does that say about you? I mean, you’re filthy; you’re filthy! I mean, God!” She’s talking about the “dirty girls,” the subject of a documentary short of the same name that went viral seventeen years after its filming when maker Michael Lucid uploaded the video to YouTube in March of 2013. The film begins with Liz Phair’s Batmobile twanging in the background as the following text hovers onscreen: “In Spring of

98 Bleakley, 35.
99 Dirty.
1996, my senior year of high school, I documented a group of 8th grade girls who were notorious for their crass behavior and allegedly bad hygiene...”

There’s intrigue in an aesthetic formed around wearing what’s repressed in our bodies and in the unpredictability of that perceived animality brought to the surface. To some it’s “hideous,” or as other high schoolers interviewed comment, immature—indicative of, again, a failure to care for oneself on a most basic level— but it’s also fascinating. It seems like everyone in the school has an opinion on this group of thirteen-year-olds, which is even more remarkable considering the girls appear to be younger than the vast majority of their pictured critics.

The girls themselves identify as Riot Grrrls, as punk-rock feminists turning a third-wave lens on the hallways of their middle and high schools. Others scoff at this, at their self-published zine, and name it “dime store feminism”—“nothing new.” Harper, one of two sisters seen as pack leaders of the dirty girls, says to the camera, “I feel like we’re just dressing how we want to dress and it has nothing to do with fitting a movement, fitting a new style, making a new style; it’s just not competition between girls. We’re not going to walk around with our legs open to all the guys like I know a lot of girls do and that just, I don’t know, a lot of people are against us for that ... I think that a Riot Grrrl is someone who doesn’t believe in the way that women are treated in this society right now, and not only women, any prejudice ...

\[100\] Ibid.
We’re willing to stand up against it and state our opinions and not hide behind barriers like a lot of women do.”\(^{101}\)

For the dirty girls, the importance of a visible body is unparalleled. Despite their assertions that the aesthetic of that body itself is almost arbitrary, that it’s not a “style,” the fact that everyone seems to know who is a dirty girl and who isn’t based merely on visible details (“It’s not like you can’t notice them,” says one girl) speaks otherwise. And perhaps even more interesting is that this aesthetic is de-linked from the presumptions of body made based on its self-display. Says one boy, “That’s the easiest thing to do, to rebel. And especially if you come from a wealthy family, the first thing that people expect from you is to be clean and to look nice. So that’s the first thing that they’re going against.”

While this may perhaps be the politics of the dirty girls, as Harper states, “They fucking can’t smell me; I took a shower last night.”\(^{102}\)

Like the seahorse, these girls make visible the range of aesthetic self-display possible in the functioning body, a body here existing on the skirts of sociality in the microcosm of one Los Angeles high school. While this particular setting may exaggerate the stakes of in/exclusion, the magnetism of this group is still notable. As Bataille writes on the force of repulsion, “Nothing is more important for us than that we recognize that we are bound and sworn to that which horrifies us most, that which provokes our most intense disgust.”\(^{103}\)

\(^{101}\) Ibid.
\(^{102}\) Ibid.
\(^{103}\) Bataille, “Attraction,” 114.
For Bataille, the duality of attraction and repulsion is tied into a transmutation of depressant into stimulant, a phenomena he terms denaturation. The social energy concentrated within our reactions of repugnance gravitates us towards the sources of that repugnance. We are not completely detached from that which we reject, that which we expel from our bodies and from the limits of our social spaces. Instead, it is this very act of separation that joins us to the very thing that is separated. And so we find ourselves in ever-disguised forms of contact with that outside the limits, the totems of taboo. We find ourselves unable to stop gossiping at cafeteria tables about “dirty” girls.

Roger Caillois writes of these behaviors as ritualized contact with both the pure and impure sacred. Drawing on Caillois and his sense of the emotional charge the fear of contagion adds to these moments of negotiated border crossing, that Durkhemian electricity, Michael Taussig writes, “Negation should be understood as an endlessly discharging circuit of taboo and transgression, as if fearsome barriers were erected precisely in order to be crossed. Moreover it is in the charged space thus opened up by transgression that we encounter empowering and sacred ritual, caused by and causative of this ‘space.’”

What draws some to these borders, bouncing electrically back and forth, continually natured and denatured?

It’s what’s missing from Mary Douglas’ theory of dirt as disorder. She writes, “There is no such thing as absolute dirt ... If we shun dirt, it is not because

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104 Taussig, 350.
of craven fear, still less dread of holy terror. Nor do our ideas about disease account for the range of our behavior in cleaning or avoiding dirt. Dirt offends against order. Eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organize the environment.”  

She neglects the space we leave for disorder, the times in which we allow ourselves to touch dirt or witness others doing so. The humanimal body that wears that dirt on hir clothing, underneath hir fingernails, and at last chooses not to notice whether others glance shamingly as ze settles into hir seat in a subway car.

Ally lets me record her speaking a year before I find myself in her studio. It is the fall of 2011 and our shared social circuit has been buzzing around the ongoing Occupy Wall Street movement. While at times we scoff, we also find ourselves taking the train into New York more than once, getting caught up in the energy of the moment. In shouting.

She says:

At Occupy [Wall Street] there was a lot of hubbub about the park not being clean, which I just thought was really ridiculous ... I think it put off a lot of people because there were a lot of [protestors] sleeping outside, and that’s like a whole subculture, too, you know, crust punks, and people who aren’t necessarily showering all the time. Crust punk is a type of punk that doesn’t shower ever ... But what really bothered me about that is I feel like we’re so desensitized to homeless people who may take a shower like once a month when they’re in the shelter, you know? Who are really not showering and maybe when we see them we think, ‘Oh, they’re dirty,’ but I

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105 Douglas, 2.
don’t think people even see that a lot and, I mean, I don’t know if it’s a right or if it’s a privilege or what it is. I mean I don’t shower that often when I can help it; especially this summer when I was farming I would frequently let myself stay dirty and I think for me that was partially pride that I’m not afraid to get dirty ...

Being dirty is about saying I’m not afraid to do the hard work that needs to get done, you know, it’s like I— I don’t know, I remember this summer I picked Charlotte up at the hospital because she had just gotten shots and she was filthy and she said to me, ‘It’s so funny how people look at you when you’re dirty.’ I mean there’s a difference between not showering and being able to see the physical dirt on your body, which I think is also something that people don’t frequently get to experience, and, I mean, I like it, besides the symbolic reasons, because it feels really right. It’s really hard to explain; you should go and rub dirt all over your legs and face. Or like dig, you know. It’s like showing people that you dug, and that’s important I think ...

Are you investigating the ways in which dirtiness is thought of as being diseased? Because, I mean, I think a lot of people when they were saying Zuccotti Park [site of the New York Occupy Wall Street encampment] is dirty weren’t saying it’s physically dirty, because, I mean, we went when they were talking about washing it—it wasn’t physically dirty, it was polluted by humans, which is so much more offensive, you know. If a rich businessman says Zuccotti Park is dirty because ‘there are people in it who aren’t like me,’ that’s offensive because it’s saying that you’re unwanted, you know. Maybe we should reclaim that. We are the dirt of society [laughs]. That doesn’t sound that great. But I also like dirty; I really love it. It feels so good. Dirt on the farm is so soft and lovely. I think that’s why I got dirty a lot, because it feels good and it feels good between your toes and it feels kind of nice to be dirty until it starts to itch. I could do with a shower a week, though ...

My parents would be like, ‘I can’t believe you go out in public like that,’ because I was farming this summer in Hanover, New Hampshire, and I was also living alone, so they didn’t have to see me every day so if I wanted to stay dirty I could. You know, especially on the weekends when I wasn’t going to my job, but even at my job they didn’t care. You know, it’s like through becoming an adult you’re allowed to recapture what when you were young was a natural thing and now it’s not natural anymore, you know? Does that make any sense? Like now, the option’s available to you. Because when you’re little, also, I think you don’t think about it. About being dirty. Until your mom yells at you so much that you do. My mom got mad at me and would make me take a shower.106

In Elias’s sense of civilizing, in our disciplining of body, there is a denial not only of that which we came from, but of that which continues to make us material. As we shirk dirt and muscle, our own origins are obscured. Bataille writes, “It is clear that we are sorry we came from life, from meat, from a whole

106 Bernstein, “Hygiene.”
bloody mess. We might think, if need be, that living matter on the very level at which we separate ourselves from it is the privileged object of our disgust. We take our children out of the muck, then do our best to wipe out the traces of that origin. We busy ourselves in terrifying them as soon as they are old enough to take part (little by little) in our disgust for excrement, for everything that emanates from warm and living flesh.” In some ways, this disgust becomes a moment of spectacle, as well, in which we make ritual contact with our points of origin, our repulsion.

Ally continues:

This guy was really into me being dirty. Because I was really dirty, the soil was really soft because they have a farm manager, and I was really dirty. And I went to go get an iced coffee and I ran into this guy who I had hooked up with. And he invited me back to his place and was so into me taking a shower there and I just kept saying, ‘No, no, no, that’s weird,’ and also it was this gross frat. But yeah, again, he was just into me being dirty, he was into me being filthy, because it was so different from what he had seen. He really made me feel—not in a bad way—he totally thought I was exotic. I mean, I had long hair then and I don’t think there are that many Jewish girls at Dartmouth and he was like, ‘We don’t see too much curly brown hair around here,’ and so I was like, ‘Okay, so I’m this dirty, Jewish girl?’

I don’t understand [laughs]. I didn’t really understand it, but it’s like—men like different. My friend used to say, ‘Boys like weird pussy.’ I guess me being dirty was like weird pussy, you know. It was really strange. It doesn’t normally work like that, I think. Maybe it does, maybe it’s like taboo or something. I also hadn’t shaved, because I wasn’t expecting to see him, and the first time I went to see him I wasn’t expecting to hook up, so I hadn’t shaved anything, specifically, ok, specifically my pubic hair, and he really wanted to have sex and I was like, ‘No way,’ and he was like, ‘Let me just see,’ and I was like, ‘No,’ and I was like, ‘I have a forest.’ I wasn’t expecting to hang out with boys at all during the summer so I let everything grow and he was into—I didn’t let him. I didn’t let him see that until I had cleared it up. He was like really, I don’t know ... It was so weird. If it’s one girl, and we didn’t hang out very many times, if it’s one girl, and you’re surrounded by everything different, then that becomes special ...

And Occupy Wall Street ... that was kind of terror, because I was like, ‘Everything is changing. I’ve spent so long thinking about how upset I am

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107 Bataille, Accursed, 63.
about capitalism, and all of a sudden there’s this real force that wants it to change.’ Maybe not everyone wants that, but there’s something underlying that wants change and change is so scary. And we try to accommodate it in the small ways, but when it’s big—I don’t think we realize how much we are creatures of routine, even if that routine is just taking a shower. I mean, I would really challenge anyone in this school to go more than a week without a shower. I don’t think most people could do it ... I think the dirt is about that need to understand ourselves through the making of ourselves.108

This fearsome change brought forth in intimacy, in the rupturing that intimacy brings. Bataille continues as well, "We have arranged the world around us in such a way that if ‘filth’ were not constantly thrown out of it, the edifice would rot. But the horror that demands from us this constant movement of rejection is not natural. It bespeaks rather a negation of nature. We have to set ourselves against the natural impulses of our children if we want them to be like us. We must artificially deform them in our image and, as our most precious possessions, instill in them the horror of that which is only natural ... We will not rest until they share the impulse that made us clean them and clothe them, until they share our horror of the life of the flesh, of life naked, undisguised, a horror without which we would resemble the animals."109

And yet, it is again this animality, its very clothing, which lends charge to the moment of encounter—that makes it erotic. Bataille writes in another text, “The image of the desirable woman as first imagined would be insipid and unprovocative if it did not at the same time also promise or reveal a mysterious animal aspect, more momentously suggestive. The beauty of the desirable woman suggests her private parts, the hairy ones, to be precise, the animal

108 Bernstein, "Hygiene."
109 Bataille, Accursed, 63.
ones.” It is almost comedic, and perhaps Bataille would say rightfully so: the relegation of this space for our animal selves to moments of sexual attraction—the denaturation as our initial reactions of repugnance to those images of the explicitly sexed body become rather stimulants, for lack of a better word, turn-ons.

Perhaps arguments over what is natural are inconsequential. After all, so little of our surroundings, our interactions, are made of the natural in an original sense, in ideas of natural as un-tampered, vacant of human life. Perhaps what reclamation of “natural” body really becomes is a demand for re-sensitization to our artifice. Not to do away with the artificial, but to always be considering its presence, the moments of its crafting. The urban forager wishes to rethink waste systems largely, and how individuals dispose so easily and carelessly, but that does not mean ze wishes to do away, for example, with farming (a human artifice) entirely. The humanimal considers and abhors that unconscious present incarnation in factory farming, which acts in such incoherence so as to mask the exploitation in each part of its functioning, but ze also recognizes the technologies of that Paleolithic hunter-gatherer as artificial, exploitative in some ways but not necessarily exploitative because of their artifice.

Recognizing the dirt in the making of ourselves becomes again about care, about what the silence of animality allows us to notice in encounter. We wish to at times resemble the animals, and at times notice our variance, but to always hold us and them on the same plane of action, with the same regard and respect.

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Imagine a cow with human blood circulating through its veins. A mouse with a tiny human kidney or human liver. And a human with some combination of the animal and the person injected in their veins. A chimera. In 1997 a pig liver sustained a patient suffering from acute liver failure at the Baylor All Saints Medical Center in Texas for seven full hours until a human liver was secured. Today, leaders of the biotech world are playing with inversions of this formula—growing human livers inside pigs and goats, developing permanent human organs for transplant from the animal donor. The word is xenotransplantation: a process by which the animal’s genes are deleted and replaced by human DNA in a lab, creating a living hybrid, a would-be science fiction. These animals can act as organ or blood donors, or, as in the case of mice, can become miniature disease-response zones, producing antibodies that can then be developed into drugs for human patients.111

In these instances of species crossing, the human involved remains fully “human.” Historically, this has not been the case. In the late 17th century doctors experimented with blood transfusions in humans from animal donors—of animal blood. Something of the docility of the animals chosen (cows, sheep, lambs) was thought to carry over, bring tranquility to the chosen receptor of their blood. And because the animals were considered naïve to human toxins, from alcohol to swearing, the blood was thought to be a purer cure, a more

111 “Transgenic.”
original starting point. On the other side of this conceptualization of a fluidity between the boundaries of human and animal behavior carried through their physiology were negative visions of that chimera, a monster: A sense of the soul of the beast residing in its blood and now in the blood of the human. Indeed, asked some, were these patients even fully human anymore?¹¹²

So what of today’s formulation, the equation reversed? Lee Silver, a scientist at Princeton University, comments, “As long as you don’t play with the external features, I think society will accept it. People eat pigs, and if you can eat a pig why not grow a pig to have a human liver or kidney or heart? As long as it still looks like a pig and behaves like a pig … Sometimes emotional distinctions matter.”¹¹³ One of the places these distinctions become less clear are in experiments of the brain. A laboratory mouse or monkey with human brain cells, or even a complete human brain. Which parts of ourselves, our bodies, do we think of as seats of the human self—the host of that self? And would this specific brand of internal tinkering finally awake the beast, would it constitute a fully human being trapped in some other animal body? How would the two parts coincide in the building of some alternative kind of self?

As we move out of myth and arrive at the dawn of a transgenic era, these are the questions driving moral objectors. They see no beauty in the dissolution of the molecules of person, in the blending of species, or in the return to that primordial place of non-species, non-individuation, where the cell walls were fluid and continually shared their genetics in accidental contact. If we are to hold

¹¹² Anthes.
¹¹³ Abumrad.
ourselves on a planetary stage with ecocatastrophe and mass-species die-off waiting entrance in its wings, we must consider the opening that such a cycling back towards genetic exchange could create. What seems questionable is the ethics of utility in our current use of these technologies and the brutalizing of the animal to service those ethics. In this realm of regenerative medicine, no one is asking who we are regenerating and who we are sacrificing to continue a growth of the unchecked.

There is no question in my mind that if faced with the choice of saving my own life by accepting a kidney from a pig, goat, or cow and thus allowing its death in the service of my own bizarre extension, I would selfishly choose the self. But should I be allowed to do so? Should the human continue to allow himself to overpopulate, to produce these hybrid bodies, dependent as they are on the hierarchy of planetary beings? In doing so we grant ourselves planetary supremacy and the false sense of security that accompanies it. We turn the animal material into a thing whose complete purpose is to fortify the human. This to me is not a biological question, but an ecological one. I’m not sure one can make an argument against medical advancement, against life, but it is worthwhile considering how we will continue in a finite space if we make ourselves infinite. It’s a species-centric, ethnocentric, outlook. Like the utility of scavenged meat.

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114 The projected exploitation of the transgenic being, after all, can perhaps be compared to the current use of bodies in the global south. The commodification of these bodies can be seen in the separate works of Arlie Russell Hochschild and Jyotsna Agnihotri Gupta, both writing on Indian women surrogacy arrangements.
Charlotte remarks to me after speaking for so long about the “what else?”—the what else we could have done with the body of the doe after her accidental sacrifice—“I was also curious, should we have moved it into the woods and let it go to waste—let it return? Marking it ‘waste.’ Wasn’t that incredibly ethnocentric of us? To think something going back to the earth and feeding flies and coyotes and maggots is any less of a respectable process just because we aren’t benefitting from it inherently in our stomachs? But then I think that’s awfully sensational, too, to have a rotting corpse.”

To recognize a utility separated from species, to imagine a hybrid more continuous. But then, I suppose that’s not quite the point of modern science.

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When we look for collectivity, at least those in a lineage of Western traditions, so often do so in a way that builds person by person to something greater. Instead of seeing ourselves as the same matter as that which we exploit, that which we eat, we delineate a body, an identity, and then mummify it. The collective body we find comfort in is an additive self made not by the loss of person in its collective effervescence but by the multitude of cherished selves found all in one space. There is so much stasis here, each body a brick concretizing its singular self, its singular importance. An effervescent mass of

to carry babies of European or American women, or through discussions of currently illegal organ trade.

115 Heyrman.
gravestones, each announcing whom they keep human in commemoration of spirit after body's lost. It's such an exact mathematics.

What scares us is this monument’s crumbling. The whole mass taken to the landfill: where the possessions of one become entangled in each other. In a heap, these objects take a collective personhood, or rather lack of personhood. That scary loss of ego, like mice climbing over each other as though each were simply part of the floorboard. That individual body made dilute, made not-person, not-mouse, but simply living matter. It’s as Rafinesque and Sullivan orient their own worlding around the lack of division between “our essence” and “the material world that produces us”—the stillness in this, or conversely the chaos. 116

This is why the stench of my body or that of the man soaked in his own urine is alarming. It infiltrates. Via smell, via touch: McLaughlin draws on Sartre to argue that touch is the sense that breeds the most anxiety of the five. For in the potential for stickiness there is also the threat of a forcible wearing, a mixology of personhood with the elements of this other that forces us to perceive our literal boundaries as more immanent. Sartre writes, “If an object which I hold in my hands is solid, I can let it go when I please … Yet here is the slimy reversing the terms … I open my hands, I want to let go of the slimy material and it sticks to me, it draws me, it sucks at me. Its mode of being is neither the reassuring inertia of the solid nor a dynamism like that in water

116 Sullivan, 212-213.
which is exhausted in fleeing from me ... To touch slime is to risk being dissolved in slininess.”¹¹⁷

As McLaughlin puts it, “This is the feeling of pollution ... [of] ritual defilement.”¹¹⁸ For it is when the contents of a garbage bag are moved from a delineated, contained space—a private space—to the public curb that everything within becomes irretrievable. In a school cafeteria, a child accidentally throws away the expensive orthodontics ze had placed on hir lunch tray. Upon realization, the trashcan is overturned, the retainer sought out, found, washed carefully, and worn intimately inside the mouth once again. But if that same trash has already been “taken out” to a public outdoors where the primary change is this very public-ness and its potential for contact with other people (their germs, their garbage!), it is likely that no search will commence. The stakes have been raised. Nothing of the actual nesting place in the trash bag has changed, but this spatial shift has solidified its status, in its stickiness, as trash, a mass—unsortable. There is the metamorphosis, the stage at which transformation is complete. And what becomes clear from it: we’re worried about what could get in.

It’s that margin of the unknown, that invisible invasion, which haunts us. Spokesman for the New York State Health Department Peter Constantakes tells ABC News, “There are too many uncertainties involved about what the food in the dumpsters have been exposed to ... We have concerns about the practice [of dumpster diving] mainly because anything that goes into trash has exposure to

¹¹⁷ McLaughlin, 2-3.
¹¹⁸ Ibid, 3.
any sort of food pathogens, including rat droppings, pesticides, or household cleaners that can be a potential health risk.”

I am reminded of a gourmet bakery in Park Slope that had become a regular part of my route, from which I would normally bring home muffins to freeze and re-heat or various other sweet snacks. The last time I foraged there, a friend and I found two untouched tiramisus and immediately began to sample the cakes, unable to resist their temptation despite our usual adherence to a common sense food safety protocol (bringing food into better lit homes first, washing it if necessary). After a few bites the contents of the bag shifted and black, triangular boxes of rat poison underneath the pillows of baked goods were revealed.

The food-safety concerns are not entirely un-grounded. To conceive of the curb’s bounty as gift is perhaps to endow it with too much trust, for the gift can always be a poisonous one. But still, as we keep this caution in mind and avoid the byproducts of modern cleanliness and its pests (“household cleaners,” “rat droppings,” and rat poison) it seems to be more than just their toxicity we are avoiding.

I am reminded of another conversation with Ally where she related her peers’ expressions of horror at her trash picking habits. “They were just like, ‘That’s disgusting, I would never do that,’ and I didn’t know how to respond, so I was like, ‘You have pesticide over all your food that you eat from the supermarket, that’s gross,’ and they were like, ‘I’d rather eat pesticide than have

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Kirpalani.
food from a dumpster; that's vile,' and I was like, 'Whatever, I wouldn't, I'd rather have dirt I know than the dirt I don't.’” And a boy who admitted sheepishly to me that the prepared soups I had been bringing him from the Park Slope Union Market trash bags for weeks, which I would find in air-tight containers still cold from their refrigerated aisle, were accumulating in his freezer, untouched.

Neither him nor his roommate would eat them.

McLaughlin continues, "It is the human traces that we object to, because we fear contamination, a kind of magical power that these traces might exert on us if we happened to touch them or even smell them. We dislike the feeling that these unknown people who have been in the place before us may somehow infect us with their own diseases and shortcomings, and their lives may be permanently entwined with ours, just as the Thieves in Circle VIII of the Inferno lose their individual likenesses and are constantly melting one into another. This is not just a fear of germs, for the feelings date from pre-Pasteur days, and are shared, or even intensified, in primitive societies [sic] where no notions of the germ theory exist ... The purely hygienic laws, about leprosy, skin diseases, menstruation, and discharges from the body, are not based on bacteriology, they are based on avoidance of defilement from other people.”

In the instance of picking through trash, there is the unshakable marker of stench that one wears after. Carrying the garbage fluids with me changes my body in a perceivable way. I feel embarrassment at this obvious transgression of hygiene. I fear the rejection that might ensue in being considered inferior,

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120 McLaughlin, 5-6.
categorized as such because of my association with garbage. When I return home
I cleanse myself with hot water and soap; I remove my clothing and later take it
to the Laundromat across the street. All of these are ways in which the ritual of
decontamination, its necessity, has been marketed to me.

But what of the example of the transgenic organism, where a more
discreet mingling is possible? Human blood through cow veins, human blood in
contact with the animal then brought back inside the human. This is an
intentional chemistry whose utility is obvious in contrast to that of clinging,
monstrous slime. Each seems intimate in its own way: in each version of
closeness we imagine a fascinatingly grotesque chimera. Be it the imagined
molecules of that man’s excretions I carry in my nostrils as he leaves the subway
car and I still smell him, on me, or a body more clearly, surgically, amalgamated.

“We are all jealous of our ‘one-ness,’ our individuality,” writes
McLaughlin, “and we resent and fear any situation that forces us to become
intimate, in the real sense of the word, with another person against our will.
Contamination by other people is what we really fear about dirt: Sartre says, in
Huis Clos, that Hell is other people. Dirt is also other people.”121

And this specific brand of defilement, the inorganic organic one, the one
created by the human: our garbage and our wasteful, wasting bodies. It is
interesting that what lasts beyond our individual selves, and likely beyond our
collective self as a species, is just this: the landfill and the burial ground, or
perhaps each as the other. Waste is what persists. It is the mass that sticks and

121 Ibid, 6.
smells together. And today, with new technologies of aeration, it is the mass that properly rots together.

During the immediate clean up following the 9/11 attacks, trucks of debris were taken to Fresh Kills Landfill, which acted as a sorting site for the mass amounts of material resulting from the event’s devastations. What was not claimed was then buried in the landfill, together. Without doubt, this included some human remains of those killed. Since then, there has been outcry about the un-sanctimonious nature of this burial, with demands being made for the recovery of these remains, the people within, from what is otherwise covered garbage. There are risks in this recovery, most notably the endangering of sanitation workers in their exposure to the toxins that would be re-released in the unburying.

More than a decade has passed, and it seems that the buried at Fresh Kills will remain so. The terrain of New York City is in part artificial—and within that artifice lie innumerable human remains. Our cities are built over the dead. Robin Nagle, the anthropologist-in-residence with the New York Department of Sanitation with whom I had an internship this past summer, remarks in an interview with *The Believer*, “The actual topography of New York is garbage-based ... You [interviewer Alex Carp] talked about how we're now at fifteen feet, and we used to be at six feet. Well, ancient Troy, ancient Rome, Babylon, Jerusalem, Paris, all these old cities, it’s the same: you’re standing on centuries of the physical detritus of those who preceded you.” Part of this detritus is, more often than not, their bodies.
In the particular case of the 9/11 victims taken to Fresh Kills, the looming realities of this past history was made all too succinct. We are temporal, our bodies are future waste, and so what could be more fitting than to find ourselves, and particularly those of us who are treated with so much reverence, the subjects of tragedy, in this space for the ephemeral? The landfill is designed to be out of sight, the discarded out of conversation with our own mortality. It is designed to make a non-monument of its monumental stature.

Nagle says to me in conversation, “There are some things we let go of very easily and some things that are very, very hard for us to let go of. When you mix those two categories you have problems.” We watch a documentary together, titled As Above, So Below—we watch the camera pan shoes, newspapers, endless glass bottles eroding out of the shores of Dead Horse Bay; incredible piles of electronic waste (“e-waste”) usable and unusable being interrogated, broken down by just-as-large machines; and a woman who opens a Fed-Ex delivery package containing a diamond made from the compressed carbon of the ashes of her recently deceased husband.

A chimera is in parts; like the humanimal it wears its distinctions. So then who is this man?
This woman, her children?

122 Piccinini, *Carrier*. 
What genes were spliced to create this “helper species,” which incubates the Australian wombat? Whom does this creature belong to?

Donna Haraway writes, “[Patricia] Piccinini’s objects are replete with narrative speculative fabulation. Her visual and sculptural art is about worlding; i.e., ‘naturaltechnical’ worlds at stake, worlds needy for care and response, worlds full of unsettling but oddly familiar critters who turn out to be simultaneously near kin and alien colonists. Piccinini’s worlds ... do not yield to

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123 Piccinini, *Family.*
124 Piccinini, *Surrogate.*
clean judgments or bottom lines—especially not about what is living or non-living, organic or technological, promising or threatening.”

These bodies, stretched over in silicone skins evoking that of their creator, are imaginings of diffusion. Lines of speciation blur as Piccinini, the artist historian, extends increasingly malleable lines of genealogy into a future life in which not only the pure human continues, but the human hybrid and the nonhuman hybrid and the two reproducing, bending into each other. She asks, who will parent these creations, their own creations: the children of chimera? In building social structures of care and responsibility across speciation and its breakdown, Piccinini is asking us to consider, just as Kravinsky and Collins had through self-divestment, a “larger sense of family.”

In an artist’s statement for her show “In Another Life,” Piccinini remarks, “Anyone who dabbles in creation would do well to remember that as soon as something exists we begin to lose our grip on it. For me this freedom is a beautiful thing ... There is no question as to whether there will be undesired outcomes; my interest is in whether we will be able to love them ... The idea, experience and possibilities of empathy are important to me.” So many of her creations are young, infantile, and posed so as to capitalize upon this vulnerability. Human children curled up in sleep with nonhuman imaginings. They ask not only for our protection or our understanding of their protectors, but also to envision a fuller narrative—the growth of these relationships as each counterpart ages. Their youth indicates the beginning of a timeline. In this way,

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125 Haraway, 1.
Piccinini involves the viewer in the imagining of the timeline continuing, in the worlding, and in the considerations of entanglement of what we consider ourselves and what we consider other.

Piccinini comments in an interview with Lauren Fernandez Orgaz, “My real interest is how the conceptual or ethical issues are transformed by emotional realities ... The pyjama-clad child seems completely at ease with the Surrogate, as if she were his pet dog. However, most viewers find their closeness difficult. Most of us are happy to engage the idea of a creature engineered to help an endangered species, but are much less comfortable with the idea of it getting too close ... I think if people are disturbed by my work it is because it asks questions about fundamental aspects of our existence—about our artificiality, about our animalness, about our responsibilities towards our creations, our children, and our environment.”

Like the imagined body of the urban humanimal enacting prehistoric intuition within a capitalist space that devalues that bodily trust, Piccinini considers the artificial body and the natural or animal one within a teleological framework that orients itself towards the past. Haraway argues that Piccinini's work disassociates from a Christian temporality that places the future before its subject and the past behind, in an irretrievable position that can only be understood as happenings to be overcome in the present moment, which is forever a fleeting stepping point dropping to that backwards point of past. Instead the pieces can be viewed as drawing on an Aboriginal sense of time in

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which the subject is reoriented to face the past, care for it and carry that care into a future conscious of its ongoing ties to the past and present that formed it. Here we see the present encounter, the past emerging through it as an imagined memory taking form so that we may become ourselves bodies of the past, present, and future.

And so, distinctions of materiality dissolve as viewers are asked instead to consider the interactions that prevail despite baseline questions of animal, of human, of machine. As Haraway writes, “The important question is not found in the false opposition of nature and technology. Rather what matters is who and what lives and dies, where, when, and how? What is wild, and what quiet? What is the heritage for which technocultural beings are both accountable and indebted? What must practices of love look like in this tangled wild/quiet country?” 128 Part of this, for Piccinini and Haraway, is letting go of natural as we tend to conceive it and opening the term to the messiness of a biological world long tampered with.

Piccinini continues to say to Orgaz, “Another of the key, shifting boundaries that my work follows is the increasingly permeable border between the artificial and the natural. I have never really felt comfortable in the wilderness … While what is artificial and what is natural seems immediately obvious, when you look more closely it becomes much more difficult to tell them apart. A car would seem obviously artificial, but I would argue that it is very much more natural to me than a horse, given how much time I spend in a car. In

128 Haraway, 3.
fact, a horse is a product of millennia of human intervention in the form of
selective breeding. Surely that would make it no less ‘artificial’ than the car.”

Through interrogating these lines of artificiality, Piccinini’s work removes
itself from the colonizing ethic of previous considerations of human
responsibility for its creations. She instead tangles human and nonhuman
responsibility, framing the products of her naturaltechnical world not as a “new
frontier” to be dealt with, but as beings with agency whom we must interact and
form bonds with to move forward, whom we must recognize as having been
entangled in our lives for generations previous and generations to come.

Feminist theorist Karen Barad comments, “Embodiment is a matter not of being
specifically situated in the world, but rather of being in the world in its dynamic
specificity … Ethics is therefore not about right response to a radically
exterior/ized other, but about responsibility and accountability for the lively
relationalities of becoming of which we are a part.”

Of which we are a part: “eroded and disowned no-places,” writes
Haraway. The curbside depositary, which the urban forager tills, cares for.
Those bags ze unties and reties. Stewardship of a space disconnected,
fragmented from the capitalist body, and yet a direct product of its functioning, a
stewardship that recognizes how the space cares for us as we do it. These
garbage bags feed me, keep me alive for the better part of three months spent in
a city replete with such disclaimed members.

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130 Barad, 377, 393.
131 Haraway, 2.
In silicone, in flesh—in the materiality that gives body presence and situates it in the forever fleeting present—the humanimal lies silent. In the dark city streets that mimic Herzog’s caves, as he names them, of forgotten dreams:

We till this naturaltechnical world and bring forth fruits.
EPILOGUE

My housemate, Ethan Cohen, gives me a 1968 Playboy interview with director Stanley Kubrick to read. The film 2001: A Space Odyssey had just been released and the Apollo 11 moon landing was less than a year from occurring. It was a time when the bizarre unknowns of our multiverse seemed so reachable, when what we now see as likely realities—but as existing in multitudes of space un-crossable in our own lifetimes—seemed to be occupying the very orbits of our solar system. Kubrick talks about the chances of discovering artifacts of extraterrestrial life left for us to find in the arid vacuum of the moon and how to prepare psychologically for such an encounter. The interview is full of similarly optimistic scientific and pseudo-scientific theories and research on the occupants of outer space and on possible modes of encounter—through pockets of space/time warp, which could enable time travel, or the cryogenic extension of ourselves until the timing is right for both our technologies of communication and theirs to align, among others. And then there’s the alien much closer, nearer. Kubrick remarks:

But an equally fascinating question is whether there could be another race of intelligent life on Earth. Dr. John Lilly, whose research into dolphins has been funded by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, has amassed considerable evidence pointing to the possibility that the bottle-nosed dolphin may be as intelligent or more intelligent than man. He bases this not only on its brain size—which is larger than man’s and with a more complex cortex—but on the fact that dolphins have evolved an extensive language. Lilly is currently attempting, with some initial success, to decipher this language and establish communication with the dolphins. NASA’s interest in this is obvious, because learning to communicate with dolphins would be a highly instructive precedent for learning to communicate with alien races.
on other planets. Of course, if the dolphins are really intelligent, theirs is obviously a nontechnological culture, since without an opposable thumb, they could never create artifacts. Their intelligence might also be on a totally different order than man's, which could make communication additionally difficult. Dr. Lilly has written that, "It is probable that their intelligence is comparable to ours, though in a very strange fashion ... they may have a new class of large brain so dissimilar to ours that we cannot within our lifetime possibly understand its mental process." Their culture may be totally devoted to creating works of poetry or devising abstract mathematical concepts, and they could conceivably share a telepathic communication to supplement their high-frequency underwater language.

What is particularly interesting is that dolphins appear to have developed a concept of altruism; the stories of shipwrecked sailors rescued by dolphins and carried to shore, or protected by them against sharks, are by no means all old wives' tales. But I'm rather disturbed by some recent developments that indicate not only how we may treat dolphins but also how we may treat intelligent races on other planets. The Navy, impressed by the dolphin's apparent intelligence, is reported to have been engaging in underwater-demolition experiments in which a live torpedo is strapped to a dolphin and detonated by radio when it nears a prototype enemy submarine. These experiments have been officially denied; but if they're true, I'm afraid we may learn more about man through dolphins than the other way around. The Russians, paradoxically, seem to be one step ahead of us in this area; they recently banned all catching of dolphins in Russian waters on the grounds that "Comrade Dolphin" is a fellow sentient being and killing him would be morally equivalent to murder.132

Kubrick's statements speak to the extent to which, in our examinations of animal and other human worlds, we intently look for evidence of what we feel we don't have, what we have purportedly lost: an altruistic ethic that binds to something larger. It's hardly surprising that this mode of doing science, bolstered by the authority of evolutionary theory, would capture our imagination. For as silly as it might be to picture "Comrade Dolphin," isn't ze a beautiful concept? Some underwater species existing here, in this world that has built its sociality around a poetics of cross-species empathy, carrying the sailor to shore. Envision the abstraction, the mathematical intricacy in the aquatic

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132 Nordern, 56-57.
movements of this performance—the two mingling, a smoothness. What a gentler species this appears to us, their intelligence far more noble. Does this really exist in the confines of our own oceans? I’m not sure the answer even matters. But to imagine it: to image one could craft that society as ze moves forward with the knowledge of its possibility, its “evolutionary” sense. Perhaps it has already existed, perhaps it is emerging again as we dream it. Herzog’s question reverberates beyond Chauvet: Whose heartbeat is it that we hear while submerged in the ocean, while immersed in the cave?

My interest in urban foragers was initially tied to the politics of their desire to recuperate the waste we shun from our lives. As I finish writing this thesis I realize that what is at stake for these politics resides in this very question of time condensing and the bodies we occupy in its presence, a collapsing. Who do those belong to? Just as abundance is all around us, the rethinking—the imagining—of social structures is all around us with wild variance: in nature and in human as human is part of nature. Humans are themselves “the world,” Bataille says.133 “What’s true of us is true of nature,” adds Sullivan.134 The apple eaten becomes person, the person buried becomes soil, the Earth swallowed becomes Sun. To be in this world is to be cannibal, and to be conscious of this is always to hope we can turn the horror, the transgression of that consumption, into reverence. Rather than delineating through (dis)ownership, by operating in imagined immanence, we make material our own forgiveness, we delude a self-sacrifice.

133 Bataille, Theory, 41.
134 Sullivan, 212.
This work resides within that circuit, somewhere between the illegibility of body and how we have come to read it. It is an imagining, a playing with delusion, or perhaps a legitimizing of it. Delusion is simply an imagining that substantiates itself in the present, in “realness.” It is by participating in its making—even simply by placing myself on a spatial plane of gather, kneeling in the city’s refuse, and bringing my friends containers of soup they will not eat as a gesture towards forms of sociality that explore capitalism’s ultimate consequences and forms of worlding around the quiet care in practices of mutual aid—that we become the bearers of future life.
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