An Itinerary for Going Nowhere

by

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For all my teachers, professors, and mentors
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PLAN
Hiking last summer in the mountains just north of Taos, New Mexico, my friends and I arrived at a highland pasture, a modest clearing punctuated with a row of old pines. Their trunks held mostly bare branches dispersed at consistent intervals, the kind of trees that solicits climbing. We rushed to them and began scaling, absorbed in the haptic reading of footholds and handpulls. After a few moments, out of what had just seemed remote and unpeopled terrain lurched a small piece of motorized construction equipment driven by a weathered man in a cowboy hat. This technologized frontiersman yelled at us from afar: “jump down outta those trees right now or else I’m gonna go get my gun!” In running to the trees we had crossed from national park land into private territory. Stunned by the transposition of our tree dealings into a domain of restricted access and anxieties about the legal responsibilities of injuries that might befall us from our activity, I remained in the tree for a moment, stilled as my friends hopped down. Motioned by several more vocal proddings, I finally remade contact with the land. We walked to rejoin the trail, but the man’s confrontation with us was not over—he continued to yell at us from his construction vehicle. He wanted to know what kind of threats we posed to the integrity of this tenuously delimited swath of private land. He rolled toward us in his mechanical horse and asked as we departed back down the trail with an insistent and interrogatory sharpness,

“Where are you all headed?”

As we began our descent to the base, I kept flipping this question over in my mind. This was a question of itinerary and security, mobility and identity. On some level, I think the man wanted us to secure our identities by projecting a particular inhabitation of landscape and modes of passage through it. My sense, as we walked
away from the man and his machine, was that our answer could have either confirm our trustworthiness—that is, corroborate a claim of responsibility—or expose us as some kind of threat to the matrix of private property and maintenance of capital. Either we were all in all good kids that had just made an innocent mistake (confusing two different legal entities physically indistinguishable) or we were potentially disruptive, coming from a living formation comprised of different, non-capitalist practices of land, labor, and resources. The high-altitude desertscape around Taos is home to several such off-the-grid, improvised communities and the presence of these is probably what this mountain man was referencing in his accusatory question. Where are you from? What place will you return to? What is that place in which you dwell? His judgment rested on the sites, territories, and places that we habituate within and thus in some sense belong to. Suddenly our planned movement through terrain and the locales that gave it shape became a record of the kind of people we were.

Even if the man hadn’t meant any of this, it’s hard to deny the prevalence of such questions in our everyday dealings, questions of itinerary. We experience the intensive checking and securing of itineraries in many sites of our world. In these sites, divergent modes of mobility measure the agentive capacities of persons. Hyper-mobile travelers, like frequent flyers, enact an ease of access that systems of movement, like transport systems, anticipate and promote. These enabling techno-interactions participate in the expansion and maintenance of global capital exchange and mobility-based conceptions of personhood. While speed continues to be a trope of global transport, what becomes most central are the capacities to engage with infrastructural systems with command and certainty so as to initiate speedy travel when required or desired—i.e. in ways that are productive, furthering the efforts of economic growth. Frequent flyers, for example, have the practical understanding of
how to pass through security checkpoints without the need to evaluate each gesture, as human capacities are off-loaded onto other components of the system. Their minute sensorimotor operations fold into the protocols of infrastructural travel. These itineraries do not just map out smooth trajectories from departure to arrival but rehearse a mode of embodied coping of which the traveler’s body and the infrastructural system are both interactive parts. Out of these enactive modes emerge entities we can recognize as persons of divergent kinds—the frequent flyer, the refugee, the disabled traveler.

In classical humanist narratives of what humans are, this emergent and interactive process of agency falls out of the picture. We are left instead with conceptions of persons endowed with innate capacities and of matter as inert and un-agentive. The subject commands the object. The object is for the subject. The subject animates the object. The object awaits activation by the subject. Through these frames of classification, the frequent flyer appears to fulfill the position of the subject, in command of the inanimate workings of the infrastructural system. For those who struggle to navigate the processing and mobilizing operations of transport spaces, their personhood—the ability to orchestrate passage through the world—is suspect.

And yet for all travelers, these positions obtain only provisionally and precariously. Dealings with infrastructure require the relinquishing of full autonomy, the giving up of capacities that traditionally actualize personhood. Because of the scale and complexity of transport operations, travelers are made to submit to larger, extra-individual time structures, like flight schedules and processing checkpoint protocols. It follows, then, that traveling, even for frequent flyers and those with substantial network capital, relies on and produces patterns of waiting. In these moments of stillness that populate travel, recognizable forms of the person, of the
subject (and object), grow somewhat hazy. The subject enters into a position of
docility generally characteristic of the object.

In philosophical traditions that attempt to settle the nature of humans, this
objectification of the person signals dehumanization, which demonstrates the
geometrical logic of the subject-object split. The two positions are held as
diametrically opposed such that the movement toward one is continuous with the
movement away from the other. One becomes an object in the same movement that
one un-becomes a subject. In Marxist lines of thought, this situation prompts the call
to re-humanize the objectified. This is the moment in which this present work
intervenes. I want to resist that call back to the human coming from philosophical
discourses, infrastructural formations, capitalist systems of exchange, and political
regimes of the responsible citizen. I do so by considering how alternative non-
classical accounts of persons and things coming out of disability activism and
philosophies of science open a space of hesitation in which we might be able to
register the pleasurable and political possibilities—the moments of otherwise—of
extra-human domains of being, of giving up our agentive capacities as styled by the
constellation of these coercive humanist discourses.

at-hand itinerary

The present work falls into two sections. In the first, Delay, I expand upon the
philosophical anxieties that interject in exchanges between subject and object. I do so
in conversation with a protest by disability activists in 1977 at San Francisco’s
Federal Building. The protest was part of a larger national one against the Office for
Civil Rights of the Department of Health, Education, the federal agency responsible
for the delay of the implementation of Section 504 guidelines included in the federal
Rehabilitation Act of 1973 that made it illegal for any groups or programs receiving
federal funding to discriminate based on qualified handicap. While all the other coordinated demonstrations ended after several days, the protest in San Francisco continued for a total of twenty-eight days as participants moved into the building, occupying its office spaces and reconfiguring its architecture to make it more accommodating. Drawing on critical frameworks from philosophy of science that foreground the constitutive interactive entanglements between the human agent and matter within the context of scientific experimental practice, I show the ways in which the actions of the protestors within the situated material setting of the Federal Building, and the Civic Center of which it is part, enacted a kind of dispersed, irresponsible agency that kicked back against humanizing projects like Marxist thought and progressive reformist politics. This section acts as a staging ground for theoretical concerns about the anxieties prompting such projects. Although I take classical subject-object cuts to be distorting and possibly violent representations of how things are, as we see in the experimental practice and disability activism, I also resist any move to designate all such distinctions as worthless and wrong. Ontological boundary marking is crucial to living, to our engagement with the world. The problem rests rather in the coercive tug that some cuts exert, like those at play in Marxist thought and in reformist political movements of the kind responsible for the planning of the Civic Center.

If this first section serves to open up a site of hesitation, a delay, and explore the questions that arise from it, the second section, Landing, pulls these questions into relation with a situated case study of airports. Turning to airport queues in particular, the section traces the presence of dehumanizing experiences of waiting so as to trouble the humanist narratives of subjects and objects. Do we need to read erosions into thing-like positions as intrinsically harmful? Must such passages be met with efforts to pull ourselves back into the seat of humanness? The section enters
into this domain of investigation by way of Edward Snowden’s itinerary as a stateless subject. In Snowden’s extended inhabitation of Moscow’s Sheremetyevo International Airport awaiting admission into Russian territory we find many similarities with the itineraries of ordinary citizen-travelers, namely the abundance of waiting and stillness. These time-space configurations, which I locate in the airport queue, provide a site for thinking through the ambiguities, dangers, and pleasures of dehumanization.

Each section opens with excerpts from an imagined itinerary. Itineraries are both plans and retrospective accounts of travel. They guide and record passage. In the context of airports, they help coordinate the operation of different infrastructural components. If we consider itineraries more broadly in connection with mobility-based conceptions of personhood, they can function as organizing matrices for the enactment of identity. The cowboy’s question, “Where are you all headed?” sought to confirm who we were by explaining both our plan and history of movement. Engaging with these dual registers of itinerary—an anticipatory and future-direction plan of travel as well as its record—the entries pass back and project forward through time. Grounded in the various material settings that appear in each section—San Francisco’s Federal Building and Sheremetyevo International Airport—the entries dilate the conventional format that folds each day into an atomized segment. Rather than giving hyper-reductionist summations of substantial movements between geographically dispersed sites (e.g. Day 2: Fly from A to B), each entry lingers on an extended zone of the present. In these passages, the traveler is not the guiding agent, determining the itinerary’s shape. Instead, the entries dial up the friction to bring to the fore the entangled paths, mechanics, protocols, and lags that are the preconditions for mobility and the subject-object cuts it crafts.
Day 10: “I had never done anything like this where I didn’t know if I had an attendant and things like getting on and off the mattress. I think another reason was I didn’t have an electric wheelchair and cannot push myself and that was frightening— that I could get stuck someplace.” Some place. Where I could get stuck. Between two planes of a multiplanar landscape, dropped in a crack, suspended between two layers. Somewhere between floor one and two, I find a rolling funpark of curves and loops, brushing into one another and me. Rounded edges circling, cycling, tracing lines across terrain, lines mapping movement and the pressure of this body into the ground, this ass onto this seat. A moving seat, moving with its ass. My ass and that seat like each other. They get along, moving along, turn by turn.

Day 2: The wheel knows the world in turns, meeting its surface for a moment, then passing on, then meeting it again. Perpetual déjà vu, steady amnesia. The wheels roll forward as they roll backward, retreading ground, caught in a continuum of motion, pulling that repository of turns into new ground and extending its reach. Wheels repeat, but when does the repetition begin? One cycle rolls continuously into the next, the next collapses into the one after and all the ones after falling into a stream of circling. But kicked up on a lip, the circling skips, the wheels skid. Fuck—readjustments required. That ass has to push into the seat so the arms gain leverage and jerk the wheels back into motion. Push, hop, pull. My body, the body that I’m part of, wants to fall into the world, but it’s also tired and worn out. I/it wants to curl up with the world and the world to curl around me/it. A person is supposed to be in the world, to tease its pieces and make it do things. A person should know how to plunge in and manipulate to craft a place for living in the world. For some of us its,

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that’s difficult. The world has already been made for others, others that fail to materialize.

Day 19: We (formerly others) triangulate a position for maximum sitting, some surface that when brought into close contiguous relation with our asses would afford the conditions for extreme sitting in our project for sitting endurance and competitions of such a sedentary state. We hope to find a position that anticipates our bone and muscle structure and could talk back to our passive ejaculations and emissions, neutralizing odors and releasing self-cleaning microbes. We hope those of us sitting enjoy this stimulating lifestyle. We intend that some of us, the sitters, realize our best potential in sitting and that in sitting some of us realize we’re selling it (us) to ourselves.
Anxieties flare up at the fringes of the human, in the strange clownhouse region where objects and people begin to echo each other, inverting. But lest this be read as a phenomenon beyond our everyday, it is situated squarely there in the territory most familiar to our habitual practice of living. A territory so close to our being that it resists easy articulation. A territory at once alien and banal, both here and there. In the face of these troubling ambiguities, massive re-inscription projects are undertaken to prop up the humanness of our being, by disparate yet interlinked philosophical traditions, political reformist movements, and capitalist labor formations. This section departs from these ongoing lineages that explore the mediation of subject and object, person and world. In particular I will focus on a set of concerns that often constrict these conceptions about the boundaries of the human in unnecessary, sometimes violent ways.

In philosophy, these anxieties have led our thinking into a difficult impasse that few have attempted to grapple with. Hegel and Marx, and a slew of subsequent thinkers like Georges Bataille, write in an uneasy relationship with the alienation of the self, the thingification of the body through work, subordination, or other forms of living that blunt the terms of real personhood, the phenomenon Georg Lukács described in his readings of Marx as reification, by constricting or diluting the mechanisms through which these modes of being are achieved. In Hegel’s formulation of the relationship between the master and servant as a dialectical formation of self-consciousness that constitutes the subject, the servant is divorced from hir labor since its effects and products are for the master through and through. The servant becomes an instrument for the master’s sustenance. Yet this arrangement itself is instrumental in Hegel’s text as it leads through the working out of its contradictions to a new formation of consciousness that is more eminently of
the self in consciousness. In this Hegelian trajectory, the brief entry into the ontological realm of thing leads quickly and decisively back into the land of personhood—the thing maintains an abject position against and from which Spirit develops into itself. In Marxist terms, the worker is likewise estranged from the products of his labor, becoming something less than human. Further, the abstraction of human activity as a commodity extends to all social relations, according to Lukács, such that our encounters with others become animated through a tension between engagement (or recognition) and detachment (or reification), according to Honneth’s rereading of Lukács. For Bataille, as the individual becomes a means for an end, ze meets the conditions of thing: “a thing is what we know from without, what is given to us as a physical reality (verging on a utility available without reserve). ... It has no meaning other than its material qualities, adapted or not to some useful purpose, in the productive sense of the word” (132). Bataille is clear about his feelings toward the way “a capitalist society reduces what is human to the condition of a thing (of a commodity)” (129). This status as thing that we assume through our engagement in capitalist practices is for Bataille “half-ludicrous, half-revolting” (134). Indeed, he defines sovereignty, in which we realize ourselves fully in the fullness of our being, against “the servile and the subordinate” (197).

The driving intention of this section is to engage with these anxieties and fears that run through a line of philosophical thought so as to question their...

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2 On the legacy of Kant’s transcendental idealism: “Being...exists only for subjects. ... In G. W. F. Hegel’s absolute idealism, the world is best characterized by the way it appears to the self-conscious mind” (Bogost 3-4). The trajectory toward Spirit is enacted through the sequence of appearances of knowledge that each grow out of and rework the preceding one, demonstrating their conception of being itself and in relation to the world to have been internally flawed and bearing the conditions for the emergence of the subsequent formation of consciousness. Thus the story of being in Phenomenology is the story of consciousness as a phenomenon of the entire world since it depends upon it for its emergence even though it must also see itself as separate from the world. The subject animates the world. Without the presence of the subject that is the locus of the development of consciousness, the world would lack consciousness and thus would be meaningless and inanimate. What is the world for Hegel without the presence of consciousness, without the vehicle of Spirit’s emergence?
placement and their overdetermination of the thing (and by extension the person). Are there other meanings for the thing not tied to utility? What is the thing for the subject? How do we come to know things other than us? How do we encounter things? What do we encounter them as? What happens when we encounter people as things? And, once within this position, what unfolds from a resistance to the pressures to speedily retreat back to the certainties of personhood? What I propose, then, is not so much a solution to an impasse, an itinerary for finding our way out of a problem, but a dialing up of the friction so as to delay the return back to the human and explore what emerges when things slow to a glacial pace. I pursue these questions by considering alternative stories and modes of mattering about what kinds of beings we are, specifically ones that come from recent work on disability studies and scientific experimental practice that together challenge the natural status of the conceptions that arise from the anxieties I mention above.

ways through: itineraries of disability studies and philosophies of science

Disability studies and certain philosophies of science both investigate the ontology of being in the world, specifically the relation between the subject and its material-cultural world. These divergent yet linked perspectives offer critiques and ways of reformulating conventional conceptions of the agentive subject, the subject defined by the built-in capacity to control hir actions and interactions within the world. Disability theorists have argued that such a subject is an impossible ableist fantasy that misrecognizes our actual lived relations with the material and social world and perpetuates the oppression of those who fail to perform the charade of the abled subject. Many of these critiques work to denaturalize this myth by bringing greater
immediacy to the interdependency of the embodied subject with its larger material-cultural environment regardless of being marked disabled or not, and thus denaturalizing disability as an innate feature of the body.

In a parallel vein, the physicist and feminist theorist Karen Barad questions classical conceptions of agents and objects in scientific practice that present such entities as residing innately on one side or the other of a fundamental and natural ontological divide. For Barad, a divide happens rather than is and happens within a situated material configuration. The person exists as a bounded entity only through repeated gestures of cutting that mark its limits. Lurking in the underbrush of this assertion is the enduring presence of the stuff that is cut off and out from the entity of the person. Entire realms of matter and inertia are called upon to erect the person through the contours of its negative space: nature, animals, technology, things, the inanimate, the non-agentive, the disabled, immobility, suspension. For cutting cuts both ways, out multi-dimensionally from the dimension of the cut. Classical conceptions of the world’s ontology lay out these cuts as natural and innate facts of our world. In this schema, the object and subject exist prior to and independent of their interaction within a particular context—each entity’s ontological status is fixed a priori. This divide, what Karen Barad calls “the cut,” (when understood as inherent in the world) makes intelligible the distinct roles that the subject and the objects of our use and inquiry are understood to have—the subject does the work, the object is worked on; the subject is endowed with agency, the object remains passive. Thus, the cut is instrumental in reaffirming implicitly the subject’s personhood over and against the thinghood of the object.

In this way, the subject performs itself against those forms of being that appear to lack the capacities that define the subject, namely agency and intentionality, which together mobilize the ability to engage with the world to produce intended
effects. In this tautological consolidation of the subject, in which the subject is defined against that which is defined against the subject (and the object is defined against that which is defined against the object), we cannot pick out a steady and fixed origin point from which the two entities enter into engagement nor an agent that initiates the whirling being-becoming process. The classical schema of the subject and object pre-existing their interaction retroactively establishes its truth, its status as natural and obvious, through constructing a temporally particular subject-object cut. The subject exists in the world surrounded by the inanimate stuff of the world (to make no mention of the animate parts). The subject engages with the world, with the various textures of inanimate life, feeling their features, configuring them into arrangements that do something, that produce an effect in some way foreseen. In this facilitated doing, the subject initiates production, prompts the world to show itself to have productive value when overseen by the embodied knowledge of the subject.

These cuts are made in various sites where encounters between persons and things occur, which is to say sites where persons enter into intimate entanglements with formations of inanimate matter in such ways that allow these entities, persons and things, to show up intelligibly to us. In these localized meetings, persons take on markings—like disability—that appear to have been present all along. This is the point of contact between emerging philosophies of science and disability studies. Both push back against the naturalized, humanist conceptions of the person that arise from the philosophical anxieties I’ve referred to above. Just as Barad’s account turns toward the effortful coping necessary to manifest and maintain the presence of an intelligible subject-object split, disability theorists work to foreground the relational character of disability and ability.
As in disabled embodiment, scientific practice engages persons in tight couplings with things in ways that reshape the boundaries of each while providing the material from which such distinctions can be made in the first place. These enmeshed encounters are animated by concerns with expanding our knowledge of the entities within the world, particularly ones that remain unknown to us. In this domain, ontological distinctions are worked out that allow us to recognize what kind of beings we are in our relations with other entities. That is, like political spaces of protest, experimental practice is one site where persons and things are produced through intimate comingling. A classical schema of this practice operates through “the assumed one-to-one correspondence between scientific theories and reality [that] is used to bolster the further assumption that scientific entities are unmarked by the discoverers: that is, nature is taken to be transparently given” (Barad 162). This classical schema of science relies on and secures the natural status of a subject-object divide, interconnected with the schema that separates the abled body from its material-cultural setting. As in this ableist conception of the bounded body, the object and subject exist prior to and independent of their interaction within experimental practice. This manner of cut designates the capacities that the observer or practitioner of science and the objects of inquiry are understood to have in scientific practice—the scientist does the work, the object is made to submit to the scientist’s observations and measurements. Thus, the cut, when taken as naturally given, is instrumental in reaffirming implicitly the scientist’s personhood over and against the thingness of the object through constant reiterations.

In attending to the work of science, a different reality emerges. ‘Experiment has a life of its own,’ apart from that of theory, beyond its production of data for the use of theoretical explanation. For Ian Hacking, experiment consists of a rich range of practices and knowledges that are native to it, including the practical
understanding of equipment and materials, the capacity to foresee possible sources of error within the experimental system and ways of overcoming them, the skill to design, manipulate and use the system’s apparatus, the discernment in assessing the performance and outcomes of experimental work, a sense of what kinds of projects are interesting, do-able, and significant, and a sense for how to get an effect. All this is fundamentally a question of how the subject relates to the object within a particular material and conceptual arena of interaction. The scientist does not observe and write down the results of experiments in the form of data from a position outside the spatial-temporal and material-conceptual site of the experiment. Rather, ze is engaged with and is part of the experimental system all the way through, working on and brought into relation with the inter-present and inter-constitutive agents of the system. Experiment has a life of its own, then, in the sense that it designates a field of interaction in which the human agent (the scientist) is not defined as a disengaged and detached spectator but as a practitioner, a doer, entangled in relations with the instruments and procedures, with epistemic things and technical objects—interfacing between things whose causal effects have been reliably worked out within the experimental setting and things under study, whose characteristics remain vague and unpredictable. This shift of perspective has implications for the role of the scientist in experimental practice and, thus, for our ontological status as humans in our interaction with other forms of being, including experimental materials—namely for what counts as human and the aims such statuses serve.

In Hacking’s articulation, this ontological reconfiguration follows from the scientist’s epistemological engagements within the experimental system. Bringing the scientist into intimate involvement with non-human animate objects, things, and phenomena, the experimental system often challenges not just the expertise of the
scientist but also the agentive orientations to the world by which we affirm the authority of the human. This occurs partly through challenges to hir capacities to apply preexisting knowledge to the real-time unfolding practice of the experiment. The application of a scientific concept through their manifestation in language never enacts a neutral repetition of the meaning but situates its meaning in the new material context of the present experimental system thereby contracting, expanding, or otherwise readjusting it. In this sense, scientists do not apply concepts with finality and ease but must *work* to mobilize, fit, test, and verify concepts within the domain of experiment. To do so, scientists must feel out the texture of the particular experimental system they are entangled within at any one time in order to navigate these entanglements effectively. But this does not require the final or definite reimposition of a naturalized human authority—the scientist has to navigate in a way that is provisionally good enough. In a similar way, as we will see later, the disability activists participating in the sit-in of 1977 had to struggle to inhabit the site of protest, positioning themselves in relation to the unaccommodating material setting to lessen the hurt and endure to realize their political aim. And yet, the directedness of their involvement with the site of protest did not spring forth from protestors as individual agents actualizing innate intentionality. Rather, like scientists negotiating and sharing capacities across subsystems, the protestors had to give in to the constraints of the architecture, generating a dispersal of intentionality throughout the interactions composing the sit-in.

The difficult work that follows from comminglings of persons and things draws on forms of embodied knowledge that make up much of the experimental world: practical understanding of equipment materials, discernment of possible sources of error, sense of how to make the apparatus work, etc.—all modes of engaging with things in order to bring about the intended effects or, rather, how to
set up specific parameters so as to allow for some unknown yet anticipated event to occur. Such knowledges often bypass the verbal articulation employed in theoretical explanation and application. They instead rely on intimate and ongoing interactions with technical objects and epistemic things. Scientists must ‘feel’ or ‘sense’ when something is amiss since sources of error—misplaced objects or incorrectly calibrated instruments—often do not show themselves in an explicit or obvious way. Furthermore, these forms of engagement with the material mechanisms of the experiment do not proceed through a basic repetition of routine procedures but involve ‘synchronic reconstitution,’ a repeated and never-finalized reworking of embodied technical knowledge in particularly situated relations with the experimental apparatus (Bono). Like a disabled person attending to the uncertainties of a terrain designed by and for abled persons, the scientist must maintain openness to adapting to the unresolved nature of the experimental system, adjusting and refitting the concepts to the emergent frames of the experimental setting and attending intimately to hir instruments and other technical objects.

This intimacy opens the scientist and the disabled subject to new ontological hybrids in which the technical objects depend upon the human agent to orchestrate and coordinate their functioning and the human agents depend upon the objects to intervene, record, and show phenomena (in the case of the scientist) and perform functions in encounters with the world (in the case of the disabled person) that the subject alone cannot. Hacking’s shift in emphasis from what we observe to what the phenomena of an experimental system show brings out these interdependencies and limits of the subject’s capacities. The individual, then, is not the agent that alone determines the course of events and the productive power of a situated configuration like experimental practice. Instead a configured system composed of tight couplings of things and subjects enacts a field of toppled ontology in which agency is dispersed,
albeit in uneven and changing patterns. Not only is the scientist’s agency limited in the experimental domain, but also, at the same time, the non-human experimental components possess agentive roles of their own, participating in directing the system’s life and shaping its outcomes. In this sense, non-human agents take on some of the responsibilities and functions that we might have previously assumed to be located solely within the human. This meshing of animation challenges the primacy of the human’s role in experiment and other mattering systems, as has been shown, as well as the ontological distinctions between human and non-human within such systems. Nonetheless experiment requires intervention in the world to make certain patterns intelligible, but this is not brought about by human agents nor through the patterns themselves but only through the fragile, complex, and sustained interaction of scientists, materials, phenomena, knowledges, and so on in an outwardly expanding network of nested relations.

These ontological reconfigurations occur in another register as well, exceeding the intimate interdependency with familiar technical objects. Experimental and political practices, like the ones involved in disability activism, aim for expanding our realm of intelligibility and so necessarily engage with the realms beyond. If experimental systems are engines for translating non-human “epistemic things”3 into objects whose patterns of interaction with the world can be reliably determined, not only do they compel the scientist to engage intimately with objects already made intelligible—they also bring the scientist into contact with the not-yet known, with phenomena unarticulated within the framework of (scientific) understanding. These ‘irreducibly vague’ epistemic things mark, at least temporarily,

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3 Rheinberger uses “epistemic thing” to define the “subject matter” of scientific inquiry not yet articulated. These epistemic things are “material entities of processes” that “present themselves in a characteristic, irreducible vagueness,” running beyond the scope of current understanding that aims to incorporate it within its domain (28).
the liminal zone of sketchy possibilities and opportunities within a world known to humans, a human-centered worldhood (Rheinberger 28). The thing’s vagueness exceeds a merely epistemic character. Through the lines of inquiry pursued in the experimental system, the stabilization and articulation of the epistemic thing transforms it *not* into an epistemic thing whose vagueness has been resolved but into another entity altogether—a technical object, equipment directed toward something else. That is, experimental practice ontologically changes the thing it engages by transforming not some innate feature of it, something like its essence, but its relational position within the larger apparatus of the experiment. As the technical object emerges from the epistemic thing, its non-scientific, non-technical modalities recede from the experimental domain. The system requires only certain functions from the thing, mainly stable and reliable relational patterns of interaction that it can employ to examine further epistemic things. In grasping for insight into unknown features of the world, the experimental system necessarily changes them. In this way, experiment never fully achieves an engagement with epistemic things on their own terms but only through “the technical conditions [that] determine the realm of possible representations of an epistemic thing” (Rheinberger 29). For this reason, experimental practice is never entirely satisfied or complete with the close of any particular experiment, always reorienting itself towards new frontiers of the unknown. It is at this edge position where experimental practice brings the scientist into contact with the limits of the known and forms of being not yet worked into the routinized domain of human practice. While the experimental system promises and reaches into this extra-human domain, it also in that very gesture re-inscribes and reaffirms the domain as one for human understanding, even as it reconfigures the human by changing our capacities, interests, and possibilities of future practice.
At the same time, however, as shown above, the domain of experimental practice is not one wholly governed by human agents and, moreover, marks the site where such ontological distinctions between human and non-human agents shift and temporarily break down through intimate couplings of shared agencies. To say, then, that experimental practice brings a human-oriented domain of knowing into contact with its limits is to say in a truer sense that it brings a technical system of interlocking and reliable relational patterns and its capacities for orchestrating events—that is, the authority of scientific practice—into contact with its limits. Experimental practice brings us into engagement with that which has not yet been made intelligible within the techno-scientific frames available to us only through our engagement with the experimental system. That is, it makes intelligible the unknown for a domain in which we are constitutive agents and thus it makes intelligible for us, but not only nor necessarily for us—the for us, then, is only a sub- or after-effect of the experimental system’s workings.

But in what ways does or could experimental practice push beyond these limits? What kind of reimagined experimental practice could bring us into involvement with things while maintaining their difference from and simultaneity with technical objects? What other ways of mattering afford divergence and intermingling without the coercive mechanisms that pull being back into the classical composition of subject and object? The pervasive interdependencies that I’ve shown to structure experimental practice and disability push back against the classical schema of subject and object as naturally innate and preexisting entities. Any clear distinction between the terms of things and the terms of persons, between their terms and our terms, misrecognizes the ontology of entities in experimental practice, disability, and other sites of intimate encounters between subject and object. This re-embrace of entanglements allows us to challenge these conceptions and instead see
co-presence with things as inherently relational and unconfined within spheres of ownness. Experimental practice is shaped by these very impulses so thoroughly that we might shift from a view of experiment (and, generally, encounters between persons and things) dominated by its activity of expanding intelligibility of persons and things to one that includes the centrality of boundary play in its makeup. I mean this not in the soft sense that experiment is a mainly amusing and recreational endeavor, although that spirit may and often does run through its practice, but in the deeper sense that it refers to an entanglement with the world animated by a certain disrespect for the integrity of conventional ontological boundary-taking. This does not refer only to the scientist’s attitude but also to the disregard of the whole experimental system in which the scientist’s attitude is subsumed, including a disregard for the disregard of the scientist. This subsumption affects the more powerful potentialities of experiment to involve its (human) agents in relations usually characteristic of the non-human, relations of dependency and indeterminacy hovering uneasily and playfully in the life between the known and the unknown, the subject and the object.

**disabling activism**

As we have seen, navigating disability requires embracing similar conditions of interdependency and thinghood. How disabled persons do so politically can work to reify the kind of classical subject-object cut we see in scientific practice or to challenge it—often these two effects occur together. Many disability activists and theorists seek redress for their subhuman status in our hierarchy of being through humanistic discourses based on the recognition of human rights. In this form of rights-based politics, disability carries a mark of abjection that these projects aim to cast off from the label in order to gain entry into the realm of fully human being, as
classical subject-object cuts in scientific practice seek to establish the human agent as innately in command of hir instruments. Normalizing disability projects seek security from forms of violence directed at the disabled both through legal protections and the sea changes in our categories of being that they hope to ultimately inspire or compel. Legally protected rights become the guarantee of the preservation of human status. Reviewing “a recently published collection of papers...from a high-profile conference...‘Disability Studies and the University,’” Cary Wolfe finds reaffirmations of the “fetishization of agency” “endemic to the liberal concept of subjectivity”: “we have the right to leave the hospital and travel the earth,” “people with disabilities are on the move,” “after years of being probed and studied, disabled people have begun themselves to probe and study” (138). He concludes, “Here...the valences of the “normal” liberal subject (active not passive, subject not object of knowledge, producer not product, and so on) are called on to validate and legitimate the subjectivity of the disabled” (138). These projects seek to instantiate and preserve a naturalized subject-object ontology through which people are roped back into a classical personhood.

Of course, this is not the only form of disability activism. Many groups turn away from the push for equal status of human, instead questioning the terms of such a status and exploring different configurations of being that the disabled have a privileged access to, ones in which the centrality of interdependency becomes salient and generative of divergent ways of living. These positions are shaped through challenging the interpretations of disability that the normalizing politics mentioned above exploit, namely that disability is another identity definitive of personhood similar to racial, gendered ones that should be recognized as equal before the law.4

4 Cf. “Beyond (Human) Rights?” in Disability Studies Quarterly. Philip Armstrong advocates a reconceptualization of rights inspired by Deleuze and Gattari’s theorization of immanent modes of being: “How to affirm and acknowledge our singularities (in their constitutive
The “pragmatic pursuits” of this style of rights-based politics “are forced to work within the purview of a liberal humanism in philosophy, politics, and law that is bound by a historically and ideologically specific set of coordinates that, because of that very boundedness, allow one to achieve certain pragmatic gains in the short run, but at the price of a radical foreshortening of a more ambitious and more profound ethical project: a new and more inclusive form of ethical pluralism that is our charge...to frame” (Wolfe 137).

Critics of this naturalized conception challenge specifically the integrity of disability as an identity, contending that its boundaries are highly malleable. As Barad’s reformulation of agents accentuates, disability is not a static feature of the body but arises through our interactions with the world. Any of us may become disabled by entering into disabling encounters with new material-conceptual settings. With this in mind, we may then say that pursuing the legal codification of disability is not necessarily irreconcilable with this rearticulation of disability and does not necessarily entrench disability as ontologically stable but only as legally definitive. But this would be to deny the law’s role in constituting forms of living through the systematic and targeted distribution of resources to make live and let die and, thus, to reconfigure our ways of being. The law has historically played an active and pervasive role in delimiting the domain of humanness, restricting resources for those that fall outside this domain (by its own definition and more dispersed cultural ones). For many, then, this form of politics, by engaging with the law on its own terms, plurality and multiplicity)? How do we affirm and acknowledge those exclusivities that escape and resist all appropriation and identification, all dialectic of identity and difference, all stigmatization and discrimination, those singularities that inform a humanity that is partagê, translated here as what we “share” in our irreducible difference from—and with—one another?”
constrains the potential for realizing divergent practices of living by policing the boundaries of the human.5

Scrambling the terms of politics, opponents of re-inscribing the hierarchies of being engage disability, in its wide, divergent multiplicity, to find ways of living that transgress boundaries (e.g. between thing and human) and find pleasure in the resulting emergent hybrids. Some theorists writing from within such projects locate the power of disability along these lines in the vantage it gives us of pervasive cultural imperatives to live responsibly and healthily, to live according to the myths of liberal humanism. In failing (with intent?) to live up to these imperatives, as the argument goes, crips, queers, and other deviants occupy a field of not-quite living but, nonetheless, are often compelled or pushed to reenter the fold of the good life. A radical crip politics here resists these demands made on the body to continue living through negating that very body, pulling it in unhealthy, untenable directions. These forms of not-doing are influenced by the work of queer theorists Lee Edelman and Leo Bersani on the death drive. For Lee Edelman, “all sexuality is destructive, not in the sense of effecting literal death, but in the threat it poses to the integrity of the subject and thus to the social order” (Mollow 297). The death drive is this self-destructive momentum that manifests in activities like sex. Sex pushes us beyond ethics of responsibility that give shape to our subjecthood, pulling us into intimate couplings with other entities in ways that open our boundaries to playful and risky reinscriptions. Edelman challenges queers to embrace this death drive that “familiar right-wing diatribes” ascribe to queer sexualities in the form of “intrinsic muderousness and suicidiality” (Mollow 297).

5 How are these ontological hierarchies reaffirmed spatially? Do practices of monitoring self-behavior in ‘public’ domains (domains where people unrelated and anonymous to each other, mediated by the security policies governing the space—e.g. airports) act as displays of individuality that police and reinforce the boundaries that define the individual body? Cf. literature on airport security.
Disability theorist Anna Mollow translates and extends this idea into the realm of disability and the cultural imagination surrounding it, in which “disability is *fantasized* in terms of a loss of self, of mastery, integrity, and control, a loss that, both desired and feared, is indissociable from sexuality” (297). This self-destructive potential of sex and disability, valued in the essay’s conceptual matrix as subversive against the hegemony of health and humanness (i.e. the demands of reproductive futurism), is supposed to unfold with contagious force through the senseless abdication of the capacities that constitute and maintain the human. In this account, the power of abdication rests in its temporally and spatially delimited nature as an event that stands out against a background of self-preservation. Its disruptive force erupts from this dizzying differential between foreground and background, between an individual’s initial healthful position and its negation—the greater the privilege or finer the capacities given up, the greater the magnitude of the giving-up’s perversity.

In this logic, an abdication enacts disruptive potential to the extent that it is pursued or follows from a position of power—a healthy, white male, say, who gives away all his belongings, engages in unprotected sex with others, contracts AIDS, and dies on the street achieves a disruption to regimes of health that are impossible for most others that start out from less privileged places. This relation, then, reaffirms the value of independence and isolation because pursuing the death drive is easier when one is not entangled from the start in relations of interdependence. This, in turn, points to another way in which introducing the dimension of privilege adds complications that the original framework doesn’t seem to account for, namely, the differential in the conditions for initiating or navigating the giving up of power, privilege, or responsibilities. Giving up/in might be for some intentional and easy and for others may be forced, compulsory or, alternatively, extensively inhibited through various social, physical, economic constraints. Those who are able to live
apparently individualist lives can more readily part with their social positions and engage in senseless abdications of their power that realize the promises of the disability or death drive. Others may have a limited range of movement to pursue such thrills and tremors, and thus may find extra-human ontologies in forms apart from the field of intentionality constituted of discrete acts. Part of the difficulty with theorizing the (de)generative power of disability, particularly in reference to the disability drive, arises from these strained and limiting confusions of forms of self-loss and particular positions of power. While a rights-based form of disability activism tames the troubling features of disabled embodiment, a radical crip politics that plays up the disability drive ends up diluting its potential in its overemphasis on speedy abdications of responsibility and health, leaving intact humanist associations between action and personhood.

While normative political projects leave unchallenged the coercive pull of humanistic rights, these anti-humanist crip political desires preclude the participation of slowed, stilled forms of protest. In situated practices of resistance, the potentialities and restrictions of these varying political strategies intermingle and change the terms by which each operates. A major development in disability activism occurred in 1977 in the form of a series of coordinated protests. The sit-in of 1977 in San Francisco targeted the local branch of the Office for Civil Rights of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare as the local, most accessible node of a national network of bureaucratic power responsible for delaying the implementation of Section 504 guidelines included in the federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Section 504, slipped into the Act by some anonymous activist congressional staffers, mandated, “no otherwise qualified handicapped individual…shall...be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving federal financial assistance” (Longmore 105). The
language of this clause borrowed directly from Section 601 of Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, thus forging textual, conceptual, and legal-practical connections between the struggles behind the Civil Rights Act and those of disability activists in the 1970s and earlier.

Likewise, as the federal agency designated to oversee the implementation and enforcement of these regulations failed to do so, disability activists adopted the protest strategies of rights movements that had preceded them, like the sit-in, which began to be used as a political tool prevalently in the 1960s as part of the civil rights movement. Clayborne Carson has traced the sit-in to “a simple, impulsive act of defiance” on February 1, 1960 at a lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina (9). According to Carson, the four black college students planned the sit-in the night before with not much deliberation or precise planning, nor with much formal political-theoretical rationale. The power of the sit-in, then, is its accessibility, requiring “no special skills or resources” (9). Through the 1960s, the sit-in took shape as a central feature of the peaceful side of the civil rights movement that stressed non-violent protest tactics.

Since these early manifestations, the sit-in has grappled with the place of action and stillness in person-making formations, pushing against traditional conceptions of citizens and non-citizens of the kind anticipated in both radical crip politics and rights-based disability activism. These strategies of political engagement locate resistance in delimited and instrumental actions that turn on the presence of intentionality, even as some actions run beyond the limits of self-preservation. As the sit-in makes clear, ‘self-rupture’ (note the suddenness this suggests) is not always a momentary or decisive event; it is not always sparked by the gulf between power and its negation. An experience of losing the self, of becoming thing, might ebb and flow, its parameters (even its very occurrence) might not be discernable, it might not break
the surface of the familiar, it may remain in the unexamined domain of banality, of the mundane bodily demands managed by the participants of the 1977 sit-in. In this sense, we sometimes live through orientations to the world in which we lose ourselves through nothing in particular or by the absence of anything, through times of intense stillness rather than incendiary displays of abdication. How can we at once be and not be ourselves? The point here is that there are other less forceful, less movement-based forms of treading the border region between healthy, responsible, autonomous individual and something less than this, something slipping into other realms of non-individual, non-human being, realms of the object. How are agentive and movement-based models of personhood changed in political strategies like the sit-in that work through effortful, obstinate stillnesses?

The sit-in of 1977 reordered the contours of the citizen and the conception of the human subject it made use of, reconfiguring the frame that works to contain disabled bodies as apolitical and inert. Like a scientist working in an experimental system, the disabled bodies drew on and mobilized their intimate relations of interdependency with each other and the building itself to enact alternative forms of insurgent citizenship and crip subjection. Through these involvements with the material setting of San Francisco’s Civic Center, the protestors unsettled tight, naturalized couplings between action, intentionality, and personhood.

normal cities, normal bodies

On April 5, 1977, a motley and spirited crew of protestors entered the Federal Building in San Francisco, the local branch of the Office for Civil Rights of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. The group entered to protest the stalled implementation of Section 504, the guidelines included in the federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973 prohibiting “recipients of federal aid from discriminating
against any ‘otherwise qualified handicapped individual’” (Schweik, par. 3). This building, constructed between 1934 and 1936, was a central feature of a larger urban plan for the San Francisco Civic Center, which attempted to work out how cities and civic spaces should be structured and how such a plan should be overseen, regulated, and implemented as a project of the state. The English architect B.J.S. Cahill first drafted the Civic Center plan in 1899, drawing on ideas popular among participants of the City Beautiful Movement at the time. This movement arose in the early 1890s in response to a general recognition among architects, city planners, politicians, and social activists that the model of the industrial city was failing to live up to its promises of providing improved living conditions for its inhabitants. The movement shared the larger reformist concerns and aspirations of the Progressive Era. Like other reformers and progressives of the time, the proponents of the City Beautiful Movement hoped to ameliorate the poor living conditions of inner cities that had deteriorated as wealthy citizens who could afford to leave vacated the city, acting on the coupling of economic and motional power. At the same time, cities across the country were experiencing population increases from new influxes of immigrants, which led to greater overcrowding and the expansion of slums. Instigating these trends were widespread corruption and factional politics, which left cities unable to assemble and enact substantive reforms for their urban communities. Many reform movements pushed for greater political centralization as a solution to the disunity and bipartisanship of city politics.

While other movements and organizations focused on political or economic reform, the City Beautiful Movement took shape in the convergence of these concerns and aesthetic ones, focusing on the ways in which the form of an urban domain afforded or hindered certain pursuits and certain bodies. Planners and architects as well as other spatially attentive citizens interpreted the physical urban
framework as a central cause of the problems cities faced as well as the material for crafting a solution. In setting out their claim to authority as figures who could improve these conditions, City Beautiful participants argued that poor urban planning policies and un-enforced land-use regulations and zoning guidelines had opened the city up to opportunistic and exploitative development patterns. As Draper explains, “The prevailing laissez-faire attitude toward development of American cities had resulted not only in squalor in tenement and industrial districts, but in formal anarchy downtown and in enclaves of the rich” (14). Weaving this narrative through the material urban landscape, these public proponents of urban planning framed the problems facing American cities at the end of the nineteenth century as originating with the misuse or absence of urban planning, positioning themselves as the most appropriate people to work out these problems.

The individuals working within the City Beautiful Movement detailed their solutions in microcosmic form through the Civic Center plan, an urban plan type for reformed centers of political power that was taken up by planners in various cities across the country. These plans engaged with the urban problems not by proposing extensive, thorough, and finalized solutions for the entire metropolitan area but by working out partial solutions in smaller areas that might provide models for further reform efforts. The Civic Center plans elaborated upon other reform movements for greater political centralization, reimagining the city government as a cohesive, functioning whole housed in a central and unified set of buildings sited in strategic positions within the urban core. In San Francisco, urban planners and others asserted that consolidating the various rented office spaces around the city from which the government operated into a more centralized location would facilitate the changes in political practice needed to improve the deteriorating urban conditions. The plan proposed not just a physical reconfiguration but also, as part of this, a
reconceptualization of land use based on technical, not political rationales. The plan, in Draper’s words, “suggested that a professional, non-partisan body should control land use and the expenditure of tax revenues for the benefit of the community as a whole,” and, as such, the plan was at the forefront of zoning regulations, planning commissions, and professional planning staffs (31). Thus, the civic buildings constructed as a result of the Civic Center planning efforts embodied not just the everyday bureaucratic operations of the city government but also a reflexive attitude toward such operations as centralized, reformed, and modern. Working in this revised spatial setting enacted the values of a functioning government and an engaged civic subjectivity, the order of each reflecting and upholding the other.

These efforts to reorganize land use and regulation were aided by the rise of “accurate topographical and statistical surveys” of urban transportation, population density, and land values (Draper 10). These emerging tools allowed planners and politicians to strategize about the most appropriate way to graft their plans onto the existing terrain with greater attention to the social, political, and economic makeup of the urban topography. In the debate about the Civic Center’s location, an architect from the area argued, “For economy of administration [the Civic Center] is placed naturally in the center of population, which in a normal city corresponds very closely to the geographic center; like the heart in a human body” (Cuthbertson 57). These new ways of mapping urban terrain allowed tighter links to be made between the spatial plan and the social plan, between the authority of science and the aims of social urban planning. In this rhetorical and practical framework, the plan was legitimized as a natural manifestation of the latent facts of the city as it made intelligible an underlying order through statistical and demographical studies previously absent. The patterns rendered legible through these new techniques established a static vision of the city as a figure with parts to be studied, sculpted, and
reassembled by those with the technical capacities to survey, analyze, and interpret the new kinds of demographic information. Yet, as the quote above makes clear, the process of construction and intervention central to the success of these tools—the capacity to reorder the urban center—was covered over by the claims of positivist objectivity made by those who wielded them. Statistical studies revealed truths about the city that were independent of the tools and people used to reveal them.

Urban planners and architects in San Francisco did not, however, depend solely on these mapping procedures in generating the plans’ formwork. Rather, they synthesized them with aesthetic and architectural dogmas, particularly those of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris. In searching for an American classicism modeled after Renaissance classicism, these architects adopted the Beaux-Arts universalist principles of composition that included axial symmetry, order, harmony, and stability because they believed these to be the appropriate design principles to facilitate the social change they and their political allies desired: “The idiom used within modern civic centers was usually the Beaux-Arts classical style, which brought about design order and perhaps also harmony and dignity—a style that was perceived to induce social order and respectability” (Goldfield 151). The San Francisco Civic Center plan carries these virtues in its “group plan” model, which presented “the composition of buildings and open spaces in a unified and harmonious manner, according to a preconceived plan” (Draper 34). In the 1890s, architects in the United States that had trained at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts and others that looked to European urban traditions brought the concept of the group plan back and applied them to projects around the nation, especially after its use at the Chicago World’s Fair of 1893 (Draper 34-35). The various stages in the plan’s genesis shared this basic group approach to siting the buildings of the plan: the City Hall, the courthouse, the auditorium, and the Federal Building. Implied in the emphasis on unity, the Beaux-
Arts tradition espoused the primacy of a plan’s total visual effect, achieved through vistas and unobstructed sightlines connecting the plan’s major components. The San Francisco’s Civic Center plan embodied these design tenets, organizing the component elements along major and minor axes in order to foreground the unity of the whole and communicate the varying importance of each individual part (Draper 38).

Through this synthesis of aesthetic, ethical, and statistical tools, the urban terrain was reimagined as an organism or figural body whose functional and social codes of meaning were ensured through clarity of form. In charge of heading the board of architects assembled to “undertake further planning and then supervise construction” of the Civic Center, architect John Galen Howard gave his vision for the city in such terms (Issel 171): “What is wanted is not a type of village concentrated around a single bustling market place, but a superb city organism flowing with larger life and planned for fullest growth” (Howard 85). He equates the Beaux Arts design principles of unity and order, specifically the compositional use of central axes, with the preconditions for the city’s success. Several months later in the same architectural journal, the former city architect of San Francisco W.J. Cuthberston expanded on the organismic metaphor in a piece titled “An Interesting Analogy of the Human and the Modern Civic Center.” As the city came to be recognized as “the analogue of natural organisms,” the responsibility of city planners became adapting its functional operation by following the “lessons from Nature’s methods and arrangements, shown in the case of animal organisms, and more especially in the highest known work of God on earth, the ‘human’” (Cuthbertson 57). In this humanistic composition, the Civic Center fulfills the role of the heart as “the place in which are the activities directing the means by which the general public
welfare or commonwealth is attained and in the absence of which the municipality becomes an unorganized anarchism and is practically dead” (Cuthbertson 57).

As planners interpreted the demographic facts provided by statistical tools under development through this classical conception of spatial form, the metaphorical links made between the city and the human body dually re-naturalized the planning decisions and the assertions made about the body. By remapping the city as an organism, specifically a human body, planners legitimized their decisions as natural outcomes of the design process. Because the relations constituting the human body (axial symmetry, center-periphery) carried the powerful status of the innate and natural, features of the plan such as siting and internal spatial composition that were metaphorically linked to features of the body drew on the power of this status, legitimizing them as common sense, as inevitable outgrowths of the city’s features. In forging these rhetorical ties, planners also re-inscribed the body as a natural being with intrinsic qualities such as symmetry and order, arranged along axial symmetry from a fixed center. These conceptual transferences and consolidations were interconnected with material ones in constructing an urban plan underwritten by a particular normative civic subjectivity that assumed a citizen with intelligible interests and patterns of behavior who would engage with other congruent citizens in orderly, productive, and responsible political formations. In his preface to the 1906 plan for the Civic Center, Daniel H. Burnham, the nation’s preeminent urban planner at the time, outlined the main objectives of the Civic Center model “to stimulate the sentiment of civic pride in the improvement and care of private property” through “a lesson of order and system” (7, 145). Although the plan was passed over in the reconstruction efforts that overloaded the city after the earthquake of 1906, its objectives and spirit of “influenc[ing] the masses” guided subsequent proposals, including the one that was ultimately built (Burnham 145).
By working in and out this naturalized-humanist aesthetic tradition, proponents of such planning interventions believed in the transcendental power of their plans to inspire a reunification of the public as an antidote to deep political bipartisanship, as evident in these early stages of the project. According to this understanding of planning and its interpolation of the citizen, “civic beauty” of the kind displayed in the monumental civic center plans “would inspire in the masses the feeling of civic pride, that quasi-religious sentiment experienced by large segments of the middle-class during the Progressive Era” (Draper 7). Such an achievement would require an intimate identification to occur between the citizen and the civic plan. The monumental effect of the buildings in totality would have to spark a deep sense of belonging and civic engagement that would unfold in ways “harmonious” with those of the state. That is, monumental spatial gestures were meant to inspire greater civic action but action of a particular type. The plan would overwhelm the people of the city and so compel them to submit themselves to the reformed patterns of unified and orderly political practice, leaving behind the harsh factional party politics that had deadlocked political activity in the decades preceding. Citizens were to be remade as docile beings, active and engaged but within the acceptable frame installed by the plan and reform efforts. In this way, the Civic Center in plan and in constructed form was intended as an instrument of political and social coercion for a particular reform project. This attitude informed not only San Francisco’s plan but also those in many cities across the nation. A prominent architect of the time, Arnold Brummer, presented his plan for Cleveland’s civic center by emphasizing its disciplinary functions: “The Civic Center is where the city [the state]...asserts itself. Here the streets meet and agree to submit to regulation...the buildings stop swearing at each other, competition is forgotten, individuals are no longer rivals...Here the
citizens assume their rights and duties and here civic pride is born” (Arnold Brunner as quoted in Draper 125).

These ambitious beliefs in the power of design to change social realities, as James Holston explains, followed the “modernist doctrine [that] posed the urban questions of our time precisely by advancing planning and architecture as solutions to the social crises of industrial capitalism” (156). For planners such as Cahill and the politicians of San Francisco, such total urban plans provided the state with “instruments of social change...by conceiving of change in terms of the imagined future embodied in the narratives of its master plans” (Holston 156). In the San Francisco Civic Center, the change desired, the creation of a unified, patriotic, engaged, and responsible citizenry, was framed by the plan’s aesthetic and rhetorical appeals to order, symmetry, and harmony. What Holston describes for modernist planning in other contexts is also clearly displayed in the San Francisco plan: “Whether in the form of urban design or applied social science, this idea of planning [an alternative future to replace the undesired present] is central to the identity of the modern state: it motivates political authorities to attempt to create and legitimate new kinds of public spheres, with new subjects and subjectivities” (Holston 158).

This is what Cahill’s and many other modernist urban plans attempted: to erase the social ills of the present so as to arrive at the desired present. The modernist plan, couched in naturalized conceptions of the city, is proposed both as the sole solution to present problems and as the natural and appropriate extension of the present, however much it seems to depart from it. The narrative embedded within this approach—of totalizing rupture with the past giving way to a new civic subject—attempts to build a continuity between the existing conditions and the alternative future of the plan in order to limit or foreclose the possibility of multiple, simultaneous futures. The retroactive temporality of this imposition places the
authority to shape the future of civic life in the hands of the state, securing “the development of the apparatus of the modern state itself as the supreme planning power” (Holston 159-160).

From this seed of intention, the modernist plan, either implemented in totality or in fragment, “is supposed to create new forms of social experience, collective association, perception, and personal habit” while “preclud[ing] those forms deemed undesirable by negating previous social and architectural expectations about urban life” (Holston 160). This process of recreating individual citizens was believed to work through “subjective synthesis,” in which “the shock of defamiliarization during which the subject identifies with the ideal in the dialectic as the means necessary to bridge the now evident gap between his or her local and splintered situation and the proposed future plenitude” (Holston 160). The citizen comes to desire the future depicted in the plan and so sees the plan as the most suitable tool with which to move from the newly unsatisfying present to the promised future. This is precisely the kind of transcendental power that the Civic Center, according to its proponents, would catalyze in a groundswell of civic re-engagement.

In these arrangements of civic space, admission into the community of civic life—citizenship—gathers together an assemblage of actions, including duties and rights, as enacted spatially in official political rituals, into a formal title of membership. In the Civic Center plan, some practices involved in being a citizen, like direct political action, dissent, and the organization of alternative places of living, are covered over by more narrowly defined duties such as voting. The Center’s dramatic staging of grand vistas and open plaza situate the space as one for political ceremonies. In these attenuated visions of citizenship and their attendant spatial models, the real, good citizen, the one imagined to populate the city, is one that participates in the official rituals of our political process, like voting and public
ceremonies, made possible the plan’s monumental vistas and promenades. What I want to argue is that these appeals (articulated through the coercive spatial strategies of the Civic Center) conflate the citizen with able-ist notions of the human subject as responsible, agentive and, implicitly, self-sustaining and autonomous. The Civic Center re-inscribes the assumption that the participant of the democratic political process is able to make decisions and that such decisions are made on the basis of what is good for that individual within the matrix of living conditions imagined by the plan and provided or allowed by the state. If an individual is unable to perform these central action-based rituals, hir citizenship status cast into doubt, along with hir status as a human subject.

In this political-spatial structure of supposedly autonomous subjects, forms of interdependency and disabling relations among parties are not just out of place but also disruptive of the circuits of mobility, capital exchange, and citizenship that organize the civic space. We see this in the original 1906 plan’s emphasis on caring for private property as part of the attempt to inspire civic reengagement. Such relational forms of being that resist the demands for responsibility driving the functioning of political life are cast as the antithesis of such aims, whether the resistance is deliberate or not. But this is not the result of discursive or rhetorical tactics of citizen definition operating alone. The Civic Center is materially set up to make possible particular actions undertaken by enabled bodies. Such a set up severely restricts the domain of movement open to other (disabled) bodies through these enabling features, and thus participates in differentiating persons and objects according to capacities of directed movement. It is this series of interlocking tactics of subject formation that the protestors of April 5th, 1977 engaged with, expanding and reordering what citizenship means, and what it means to be entangled within a particular ontological-material formation.
As they entered the Federal Building on April 5, 1977, the protestors also entered into a web of entanglements with this matrix of action-based personhood that reconfigured its meaning and presence. By occupying the Federal Building—that is, asserting their presence visually, physically, vocally, and gesturally—the protestors were in some sense unraveling the narratives of civic responsibility that shaped the design and construction of the place. As sites like the Federal Building embody the achievements of progressivist reform efforts to break the impasse of bi-partisanship by reestablishing the authority of centralized state and federal bodies, the sit-in intervened in this historical narrative and its residual influences on the shape of state political practice, not just temporarily slowing or halting the activities of the Office for Civil Rights of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare but shifting its spatial makeup and, in the process, enacting an alternative form of citizenship and subjecthood.

Before protestors physically intervened in these circuits, halting the transmission of commands and the very literal movement of officials through the building, the sit-in disrupted bureaucratic operations through the fact of its occurrence, through the initial entrance of the activists into the building, and even before the very threat of entrance. Protestors began their intervention outside the Federal Building, gathering on the sidewalk, circling in front of its main entrance with signs and shouts that referenced HEW and Section 504: “CALIFANO, SIGN OR RESIGN,” “SIGN 504.” With these directed visual and oral signals, the protestors called attention to the building and thus to the agency it housed, causing it to stand out from its usual nondescript location within the orderly and unified plan of the Civic Center. Even before entry into the building, this preliminary and relatively brief
procession reordered the intended hierarchy of plan, targeting a particular component of the whole as problematic and thus disassembling the civic calm and order the plan was intended to inspire and ensure through the clarity of its order. By exploiting the open public plaza and monumental vistas to amplify their presence with amassed bodies, wheelchairs, signs, and chants, the protestors deflected the coercive effect its monumental scale was meant to have on citizens back onto the building itself. That is, while the centralization of federal and state agencies into the Civic Center had strengthened their authority and ability to shape city politics, it also created sites of political engagement that were visually and spatially imposing and obtrusive and thus easy targets of protest. The protestors made a display out of the monumental building that was meant to have a productive yet unnoticed effect, pointing out its stateliness as a result and symptom of the misuse of power perpetuated by the agency inside. The protestors thus appropriated the spatial features of monumentality that were intended to be instruments for state power as tools for fueling the disruptive effects of the protest. These actions worked against the forms of civic engagement that the Civic Center was designed to instill, namely adherence to the official avenues of political negotiation framed in terms of civic responsibility. Thus, in misusing the spatial order of the center, the protestors reconfigured the meaning of its elements (order, hierarchy, monumentality) and the domain of political potentiality they afforded.

In doing so, the protestors provoked further unsettling in their embodied encounters with the Civic Center, the Federal Building, and its constitutive practices of citizen-making. In drawing on spatial relations such as axial symmetry and order, the Civic Center and aesthetic dogmas of the day reaffirmed the natural status of these features in organismic entities, especially humans. Architects and planners justified such aesthetic gestures by reference to their innately pleasing quality. Many
of the bodies protesting that day did not manifest axial symmetry—some were missing limbs, some slouched or bent in asymmetrical directions. Nor did many display the comportment of an engaged and autonomous citizen, as they were aided by attendants and friends and each other. In a spatial context carved up according to symmetrical plans prompted by naturalized conceptions of symmetry in organisms, the bodies sitting-in did not need to upset the functions of its targeted political centers through direct movement-based action, by aggressively blocking movement of non-protesting bodies and technological networks, like destroying office equipment or tying up office workers. That is, the protestors disrupted, at least temporarily (and this is the animating and mobilizing productive short-term timeline of direct political action such as the sit-in), the everyday functions that enable the perpetuation of social violence through the presence of their bodies in juxtaposition with the building’s architecture. This clash between the physical here-and-now-ness of the disabled and disorderly bodies breathing, yelling, and coughing and the naturalistic aesthetics of the Civic Center made strikingly apparent the contradictions and limits of this conception of citizenship organizing such bureaucratic functions. This was a clash between the practical and conceptual arrangement re-inscribing the normative power of the responsible citizen and the presence of these mobilized, angry, technically and socially assisted beings. The appearance of the beings that such discourses of the subject rely on to define the subject against and thus consolidate such a being as natural, beings like the disabled, is usually confined to fund drive telethons or public ceremonies, sites that control the terms of their presence in ways that uphold their [our] difference, their [our] otherness—they are objects of our pity or sorrow. In this protest, disabled bodies appeared slipping out of these usual frames of reference.
News coverage of the event drew on images of the disabled body inert and still to provoke pity for the protesters: those poor things; we must not harm them. Officials dealing with the event assured the media that they would not forcibly remove the activists from the building. “Even in the midst of protesting structural barriers,” one account states, “disabled activists are narrated as ‘fragile’ and as taking unnecessary chances with their already too fragile health” (Mitchell 181). On the first day of the sit-in, officials from the HEW office offered the protestors cookies and juice “as if they were schoolchildren on a field trip” (Shapiro 66). These rhetorical tactics worked to belittle the political intent of the sit-in and contain the subversive imagery of disabled bodies pursuing organized political action by refolding them into narratives of the docility and passivity of the disabled and thus uphold the difference between the agentive political subject and the disabled body.

But in the site of protest, the participants were anything but inert. Rather, the effortful and obdurate presence of the protestors pushed against the representational frames through which disabled bodies usually appear to the public. Hearts beating, chants reverberating through the staid offices, wheelchairs clashing against office doorways, the protestors shifted and rocked their equipment to fit through and break entry into the office and make passage through doorways designed for non-disabled movement. Once inside, beyond the front doorway they pooled, and then streamed out again, wheeling and walking and shuffling down the hallways. The clanging of mobile supporting apparatuses meeting, touching, the soft slap of skin embracing metal, reverberated through the halls and offices. The crew assembled again in the central offices, stilled for a moment having reached a locus of the authority they were challenging. A latent bustle continued through this gathering; a chair’s woman shifts her weight as her chair gives a slight creak in response. “Those participants—‘an occupation army of cripples,’ one news broadcast called them—were a ‘very disparate
group, a very wild and divergent community,’ as activist Corbett O’Toole recalls: ‘the Mill Valley Moms with a disabled child’ next to ‘the street junkies” (Schweik). After pay phones installed in the office by demand of Phillip Burton became clogged with coins, “the demonstrators unfurled banners with their messages from windows; deaf protestors used sign language to convey information to those watching outside; and at one point members of the Butterfly Brigade, a group of gay men who patrolled city streets on the lookout for antigay violence, smuggled in a set of walkie-talkies” (Shapiro 67).

Through these various tactics, the sit-in wrested the control over the capacity to animate the building in practice from the habitual bureaucratic activities of centralized state agencies initiated by the reform efforts manifested in the Civic Center plan. The protestors in interrupting the usual patterns of practice effectively enacted a transfer of spatial authority from federal officials to the participants of the sit-in: the state officials were blocked from continuing their work activities. Yet, entrance into the building did not ensure nor finalize this relational rearrangement—the bodies occupying the building had to endure, to actively hold out against the pressures of the federal formation of power attempting to reassert its authority as well as the demands of their bodies usually sustained by particular assistive arrangements. Despite threats of disciplinary action, the protestors defied the demands by authorities to vacate the premise by remaining obstinately there. In this sense, the political action assumed the form of resisting specific actions, namely the process of exiting the old federal building, while sustaining a bustle of activity within the building. The protestors disobeyed requests made of them to do something by not doing that something, thus working towards the political future they desired by resisting the work of moving. But this restriction of movement did not just enact a negation of demands and a limiting of practice but an affirmative disruption of the
political circuits delaying the implementation of accommodations for those with disabilities.

In this case the restriction of movement was on one register self-imposed—the protestors endured within the building, occupied and filled the space with their buzzing, effortful and collectively sustained presence. The sit-in continued because of the shared intent on the part of the protestors. The protestors kept each other going, feeding off each other’s stamina and energy while giving it simultaneously. They overextended themselves not just for the possibility of a personal victory and the material changes such an act could catalyze. For those whose continued living depended on the assistive presence of an attendant or technical-medical apparatus, confining oneself to the Federal Building meant being without or not in the usual relation with those assistances and thus risked bringing serious pain upon themselves. These uncertainties come forth in interviews with demonstrators, as Maryellen O’Grady recalls, “I had never done anything like this where I didn’t know if I had an attendant and things like getting on and off the mattress. I think another reason was I didn’t have an electric wheelchair and cannot push myself and that was frightening- that I could get stuck someplace” (“Voices of 504”). In these repeated micro-gestures of entering into disabling interactions with the unaccommodating structure of the building, the protestors gave no heed to the strictures of a code of ethics asserting responsibility and self-maintenance. These interactions were irresponsible; they exhausted the subject’s capacities to sustain herself in order to sustain those surrounding bodies without any guarantee of return benefit. Another protestor testifies, “This demonstration is a very draining experience. It taxes the soul. My whole aura, my gestalt, has been challenged and it’s one of the most positive things that has ever happened to me” (“Voices of 504”). The protestors gave in to the intolerances of a facility designed by and for other bodies with other social
orientations. They gave themselves for each other in excess, risking their continued being as subjects, as persons, and so opening themselves to the pleasure of collective giving-in. The matrix of interdependencies protestors entered into and maintained worked around the model of the responsible citizen, not just suggesting the possibility of alternatives but actually enacting them in practice.

On another register, the restriction of movement the protestors faced was continuous with the restrictions the handicapped face navigating the everyday terrain outside of moments of focused, organized social protest. The difficulty the protestors had in moving around the offices of the H.E.W. branch, in navigating stairwells and fitting through doorways, gave “material evidence for their exclusion from the public sphere,” bringing forth this exclusion saliently through the meeting of ordinary activities with the setting of bureaucratic authority (Serlin 168). As disability activist Mary Lou Breslin notes, “The whole thing was like a living role model...living out the purpose that you’re trying to embody in those regulations — that purpose was being experienced and exercised in the building itself” (Schweik). The sit-in pushed the comforts of stillness, an extension spurred by the futurity of hope. In falling into these difficulties and risks, unrecognized features of disabled embodiment emerged intelligibly but not intentionally. As activist Ursula McGuire comments, “I think most disabled people don’t realize how strong they are spiritually and I think that’s a lot of the part of what the consciousness raising was: We are strong. We can hold this building and fight at all costs because we are strong, and society doesn’t want to face this particularly because of ignorance and fear” (“Voices of 504”).

Through the interruption spurred by the sit-in, participants forged new forms of sociality that worked against the a-socialization and atomization of persons with disabilities as well as the inscription of the civic subject as responsible and
autonomous. These two processes of social demarcation, in which the disabled person is confined as an anomalous being and the non-disabled person is naturalized as the norm, draw on and sustain each other. The inscription of disability as an innate feature of the individual or as an otherwise asocial medical condition marks the disabled person as the sum of hir disability and thus as a non-normal being, something less than the rich complexity that we grant the human subject. This implicitly upholds the non-disabled as an unmarked and default position of the person. Says Joan Tollifson, a protest participant, “I was programmed not to associate with other disabled people. I felt that if I associated with other disabled people that that would devalue me in the eyes of normals and the object was to pass as normal, and so I stayed away and if I saw another disabled person I made no attempt to become friendly with them. In fact, I made an effort to avoid them, make no contact” (“Voices of 504”). Because of the interdependency of disability and ability, anomaly and norm, such a social gathering, independent of the expressed political ends of the sit-in, challenged the individualization and atomization of the disabled that occurs through medicalization, infrastructural accommodations, etc.. In doing so, it also troubled the normative status of the non-disabled subject. The sit-in established a place of disabled sociality where individuals usually isolated, shut up in asocial havens, made connections among their social positions, exchanging vital embodied, situated knowledges of oppression and violence enabling them to recognize what had previously seemed to be unrelated and anomalous events as rather manifestations of an extensive and structural system of ableist violence. Yet, the protestors were not unified through a shared identity. Instead the basis for political action turned on “what singularities share in common,” specifically the stubborn differences of bodies, opening participation to a multitude of subjects and their ways of interrelating (Hardt et al.). The sit-in did not work through negating all
exclusionary distinctions among entities within the site of protest but by accentuating and playing with them to expose the particularly coercive and disciplinary pull of the ones structuring the Civic Center and its formation of the person.

In intervening, the protestors enacted an irresponsible and stubborn form of insurgent citizenship that debilitated the classical models of civic participation animating the Civic Center. Many of these protestors, in their encounters with the targeted material apparatus (the Federal Building), failed to fulfill the style of citizenship such a plan intended, aesthetically and agentively. But they failed affirmatively, opening up new ways of being civic, of participating in the political negotiations of the state. Protestors acted in resistance to both the failings of the civic model of political action and to their own shortcomings in the frame of such models, attempting to assert a different civic practice by working it out in and with the Federal Building.

familiar itinerants: subject and object

The sit-in of 1977 opened the Federal Building to forms of ontological play through interactions with disabled bodies, bodies that had been forcibly excluded from consideration in the planning of San Francisco’s Civic Center. For one, the building and the plan at large assume bodies capable of unassisted ambulation through its carpentered orthogonality and its stairs to navigate across levels. These architectural features enable non-wheelchaired persons while physically immobilizing those with wheelchairs, literally excluding them from the centers of political power. In its emphasis on vistas and the power of sight to inspire renewed feelings of civic engagement, the Civic Center presumes both a seeing subject and a responsible subject, encouraging and even compelling those subjects to enter into political
associations with the state while in that same gesture blocking the participation of those that fail to manifest these forms of being. In these ways, the various interconnected components of the building map a particular subject with particular embodied relations with its world. In the habitual encounters with these selectively enabling material affordances, (en)abled subjects display through abundant repetition their ability to navigate loci of political power with apparent total ease—the entire infrastructure situated so as to assist these movements recedes into the background as neutral and unassitative. Through these repeated, everyday performative (inter)actions, the subject is consolidated as innately abled rather than deeply dependent on and constituted by this material landscape.

Through similar circuits that enmesh the scientist in experimental practice, the political interventions of the activists interrupted this ontological consolidation of the abled subject through disassembling and reordering engagements with the material-conceptual apparatus of the Civic Center. This move draws on the imaginative potentials of Donna Haraway’s cyborg, an ontologically hybrid entity that embodies her provocative rhetorical question, “Why should our bodies end at the skin, or include at best other beings encapsulated by skin?” (178). This polemical gesture aims at upsetting the normative hold of boundaries that define the body as bounded, especially those that delimit the body at the skin. The cyborg indulges in denaturalizing the Western myths that Haraway identifies, particularly the myth of the self-contained, -completing and -reliant body. In this willfully perverse reconceptualization, the abled body no longer holds the unmarked and hegemonic position as the body, as the cyborg reveals the ways in which all bodies in some way depend upon entities-in-relation that move beyond their limits and without which they would cease to exist as a body. In navigating varying levels within a landscape, a wheelchair user enters into mobilizing relations of interdependence with hir chair
and the ground. A non-blind person, unlike the non-seeing person, navigates the world dependent on the presence of an extensive infrastructure of controlled illumination that extends beyond the body. Drawing on this expanded/extended understanding of the embodied subject, Lennard Davis in “The End of Identity Politics” argues that disability is not an internal nor fixed feature of the individual body, as scientific-medical models assert, but arises through the negotiation of its limits. In this way, disability resists generalization to the status of universal identity and remains instead stubbornly contextual and relational, specific to encounters between the body and material-conceptual settings in which the body itself is continually redefined. Thus, “the power behind the concept [of disability] is that disability presents us with a malleable view of the human body” (Davis 273).

Both subjects and objects, persons and worlds, arise as such only through their interaction. In such interactions, “boundaries are drawn by mapping practices; ‘objects’ do not preexist as such. Objects are boundary projects” (Haraway, as quoted in Barad 182). Barad expands on this insight, arguing that the same can be said of the subject. She does so by working out the implications of such a perspective within scientific experimental practice. The boundaries between the experimental measurement apparatus (including the subject) and the object of scientific inquiry are constituted by what takes place in this particular apparatus. For example, in quantum mechanics physically different and incompatible subject-object cuts are required to measure position and momentum—the former requires an internally rigid detector while the latter requires an internally movable detector. Further, both require the establishment of a local reference frame within which the resulting marks can be ‘located’ within the phenomenon (i.e. relationally rather than spatially). In each case, the boundary that marks the apparatus and the object of inquiry as distinct differ and provide the conditions for different manifestations of the object. In
other cases, the object measured in one configuration of apparatus may be instead part of the measurement apparatus in other configurations. Thus, neither the subject nor the object arrives at the scene of the experiment already possessing intrinsic boundaries, internal integrity, and definitive roles or abilities. The boundaries that give shape and intelligibility to subject and object only occur within definite phenomena. Subject and object do not preexist their interaction but only exist in their ongoing patterns of intra-action.

We see this in the events of the San Francisco sit-in site. Here protestors and other citizens encounter the physical affordances of the Civic Center easily or with intense effort and discomfort, some enacting a public identity and modality of embodiment that appears to fulfill the ideal responsible and abled citizen who can stroll along the promenades, partake in the composition of counterpoised vistas, with the certainty that accommodation and easy access bring. For others, entry is barred physically by constructed obstacles or by the bureaucratic protocols of federal and state agencies, but—as made crushingly clear in the protest—these terms are not definite and final but become reworked through particular modes of engagement, such as the ones undertaken by the protestors. Who counts, what ways of being bodies are intelligible or enabled, is not determined a priori by varying yet intrinsic qualities of the person that are then mapped onto legislative frameworks. Rather, such distinctions occur in localized matterings impressed in presence.

This is true within other realms of practice that give rise to a similar subject-object relation, namely productive labor. In a Marxist framework, the subject uses the object for productive ends. For this reason, the object occupies a degraded position in the world, condemned to be only on the terms set by another. Yet, as in scientific practice, the subject and object are not entities with these intrinsic qualities of agency and passivity, respectively, that precede their interaction. Rather, servile
use is a relational condition, implying that some agent—the human subject—uses the thing or object for a particular end. The thing becomes thing as it comes into this servile relation with the subject that determines not just the end-toward but also how the thing is put toward that end. The thing is a thing and the subject a subject only so long as these relations are performed again and again, in the dominating agent’s ability to use and direct the use of the thing—the carpenter’s repeated hammering with the hammer—and in the end’s reassertion of itself as the drive-toward and destination of that drive (the completion of the task for which the thing is used). The thing must also continue to work, to afford the pattern of use-toward. In the domain of servile use, we can only know and handle the thing on our terms of instrumental action, a mode of engagement that often obscures the patterns of intra-relation that allow such distinct entities to show up to us at all.

In this servile relation, as elaborated by Marx, the object exists across a deep ontological divide from the human subject that capitalist modes of production strive to bridge by treating laborers as things, as tools for the ends of maximizing profit. Since in laboring we make links between our directedness toward the world and changes within it, labor allows us to recognize ourselves as agents capable of acting on the world. In Marxist accounts, this reflexive power of labor leads to the integration of a sense of self. Through capitalist formations of labor, in which the laborer seeks wages for hir labor, the products of working on the world no longer belong to the laborer but instead to extra-individual entities seeking profit for these products. The decisive distinction, then, between the place of the subject and the object in Marxist thought acts as a moral counterweight to the ways in which the human subject becomes entangled in relations that make it more and more thing-like.

The term thing thus resists generalization to a natural ontological category but instead delimits a range of myriad beings (human, non-human, and other) pulled
into intra-action with others in a particular ordered arrangement so as to bring about a particular intended effect or phenomenon. A distinction or set of distinctions between human-thing and non-human-thing only arises in a set of situated intra-actions, and sits uneasily and tenuously even in this delimited and at-hand material setting. Through labor, humans fulfill a role in such a productive formation—they become something like technical objects, components of an experimental system whose effects and capacities have been reliably worked out and used to give rise to a certain intended end. Our designation of human as human is a matter not just of practical application but also of how the use of a human agent within a productive formation conforms to or departs from our normative conception of human, morally or ethnically. People become things to the degree that the way they become entangled in a formation and animate intra-actions with other agents departs from the ethical standards that define how humans should be engaged with others and the world. In the context of the sit-in, to the extent that the disabled activists departed from civic models of responsibility, they entered into thinghood.

In the face of these boundary transgressions by which workers and other subjects, like the disabled, take on the relational patterns of things, Marx attempts to resurrect an intelligible and definitive subject-object cut that grants ontological primacy to the subject side over and against the object side. In this ethical framework, if a human laborer is used as an object (i.e. for productive ends), then this is a mistreatment of the human. For this form of humanistic ethics, the fall of personhood that narratives of reification lament finds its truest manifestation in the capacity to exercise autonomous agency in one’s engagement with the world. The reified and reifying subject attends to and is attended by others for the ultimate end of self-gain, namely wealth accumulation. This mistakes what Georg Lukács, writing on reification, takes as the natural being of humans, a nexus of independence within
a field of autonomous agents in which the ends of self-gain do not involve dependency on other beings. Persons are meant to be self-completing and aware of their abilities as more than “supplemental ‘resources’ in the calculation of profit opportunities” (Honneth 27). The real (i.e. un-reified) human subject employs these agential capacities not only as means for productive ends but as ends themselves, as reserves of humanness.

Reification is repeatedly characterized as a loss of this normative definition of personhood, a distortion of a previous social formation in which our relations with other entities including human ones were true to their respective ontologies, in which we possessed some capacity to read the truth of being. Reification gathers together “an ensemble of habits and attitudes that deviates from a more genuine or better form of human praxis” (Honneth 26), a praxis in which humans were human and things were things—the distinctions among them clear and fixed. The fervor of this lament then comes from the height of the fall from this prior, purer, pre-lapsarian state of existence. The entire complex of anxieties surrounding the alienation of the laborer from hir labor and the reification of other people by people thus secures its potent urgency from the magnitude of the asymmetry between the previous state of being and its warped form in a reified world. In casting the play across boundaries between thing and person that occurs in reification as a loss of something innate to the human, these narratives re-assert the fundamental ontological distinction between subjects and objects. The subject can only become less of a subject as it comes to fulfill the role of a thing. No other, more hybrid possibilities are granted—the two are diametrically opposed and mutually exclusive.

But, as Barad’s reformulation of these subject-object boundaries shows, such an imperative distinction is never innocent. It is informed and shaped by particular interests and interdependencies. The subject relies on the object and its capacities to
get things done and the object awaits its activation by the subject. Thus, the capacities of the subject whose loss is lamented in the narratives of reification, namely hir agency, the capacities that in the classical schema are innate features of the subject, instead are highly relational and context-dependent. As Barad asserts, “agency is a matter of intra-acting, that is, agency is an enactment, it is not something someone has” (183). Agency is a capacity for acting dispersed among the various intra-active components of an apparatus or productive configuration, such that the conception of the subject’s agency obscures the necessary and vital role of multiple “agencies of observation” that extend the subject’s capacities. This reformulation of agency does not mean that each component brings a specific capacity to the configuration that all add up to something equivalent to the subject’s agency that is simply transferred to the larger apparatus of a material configuration. Rather, the component parts of an apparatus draw on each other's capacities, transforming one another and themselves as prosthetic embodiments of subject-esque capacities. Again, the boundaries that define each component only stand in a particular configuration of intra-relations—they cannot be generalized beyond this context. Following from this, the agency of entities—what it means to do something as an agent—is enacted only within ongoing entanglements of intra-action.

Barad’s cyborgian remattering of boundaries, of a kind animated in the sit-in, provides us with a stronger way of challenging ableist conceptions of the body and its personhood, of the subject and its relation to inanimate matter of the kind reasserted in Marxist theories of reification and humanist conceptions of responsible citizenship. In many social settings, such boundaries constitute and perpetuate forms of social violence against beings who do not make the cut. As made manifest in the Marxist schema of the object and subject, beings cannot easily and unproblematically exist between these categories as the two are positioned against one another like two poles.
of a magnetic field. The subject gains its definition from the object and vice versa. We are able to recognize a human as such when such a subject is thrown into a thing-like relation and some of that humanness, some of the abilities of the subject, is lost. Thus, the presence of the subject as a being in the world occurs through the exclusion of other forms of being or matter that the subject is defined against, namely the object and its inanimately mattered others. But, as Barad’s expansive terms of intra-action make apparent, this process of shoring up the integrity of the subject is never finalized but depends on constant cuts made in particularly situated intra-actions that only through this constant reiteration begin, like the quick succession of stills in a film, to cohere into something apparently continuous and inevitable illuminating the natural properties of the object and subject respectively. Through this performative settling of the subject (like the sedimentation of the gendered reiterations over an extended period of time) a retrospective projection of the subject’s seemingly natural capacities reframes the subject’s past as one of hir making and reinscribes this history as the outcome and evidence of the ‘natural’ subject-object split. Participating in this naturalizing reiterative process, Marxist thought intervenes in one particular pattern of intra-action, the degraded role of the laborer in capitalist formations of production, in order to reinstate the cut between object and subject, reclaiming the laborer as a misrecognized human despite its uneasy thing-like status. Discourses of responsible citizenship and their materialization in the Civic Center designate another site in which subjective boundaries are enforced through encounters between subjects and the physical worlds in which they find themselves. Relatedly, the boundaries of the subject are reinforced through marking other bodies that do not fulfill the capacities of the subject as something other than human. Medical models of disability perform this function by marking such non-normative differences in ability as innate features of
the body. This dual move of inclusion and exclusion obscures the sticky and slippery intermixing, switching, and fusing of the subject and the object.

According to the classical cut, if the subject embodies agentive capacities to initiate, shape, slow, and stop action in the world in responsible, self-sustaining ways (i.e. to be productive), “non-productive bodies” sit uneasily in the edge space of the subject and also resist the becoming-thing of the used laborer. While both the reified laborer and the disabled person are made docile to the demands of health, productivity, and ability, albeit in different ways, “non-productive bodies are those inhabitants of the planet who, largely by virtue of biological (in)capacity, aesthetic non-conformity, and/or non-normative labor patterns, have gone invisible due to the inflexibility of traditional classifications of labor (both economic and political). They represent the non-laboring populations—not merely excluded from—but also resistant to standardized labor demands of human value” (Mitchell 184). That last clause is key as it points to the resemblances between the overworked laborer and the disabled body—both work against the “standardized...demands of human value” made on bodies in capitalist formations of social life, through labor, civic engagement, and health-making. Like disabled bodies, “those who identify as non-disabled often strain to occupy the increasingly common forms of prosthetization that supplement failing bodies trying to navigate late capitalist environments” (Mitchell 189). These bodies, non-disabled and disabled and in-between, upset the subject-object dyad through the over-use of work and their resistance to being made productive, respectively. While the living conditions of the disabled and the non-disabled are as varied within these categories as between them, their striking interconnections, their shared difficulties in navigating the subject-object cut, illuminate the efficiency with which our formations of labor and civic life wear out, strain, and (temporarily or permanently) disable bodies and thus the impossibility of achieving real subjecthood
as a fixed status or position. As Barad’s take on entities allows us to see, these features of the laborer and the disabled do not reside on separate, disconnected sides of an ontological split but arise only within discrete patterns of intra-action that make clear the fundamental tenuousness of such a distinction.

What attitude, then, to take towards such cuts? Indeed, the point, as Barad emphasizes, is not that boundaries are intrinsically instruments of social control and violence—being a thing does not necessarily come with violence that targets it. But, Barad argues that such a cut between the subject and object, the human agent and its extra-human material context, while useful in scientific practice and other encounters, also must be continually questioned and challenged because of the kinds of violence and disciplinary action toward which they can be used: “What I am proposing is not some holistic approach in which subject and object reunite into some apolitical relativized whole, but a theory which insists on the importance of constructed boundaries and also the necessity of interrogating and refiguring them” (Barad 187). Such ways of distinguishing are preconditions for making the world and the entities within it intelligible and communicable. Without means of parceling out distinct elements-in-phenomena we are left with something like what Barad describes as “an amorphous blob” (163). Beyond providing the preconditions for intelligibility, distinctions can mobilize action and desire among bodies and other components in liberating ways by designating and upholding differences in function, form, affect, and so on. They allow us to recognize entities that we might engage with socially or ones might pose dangers for us and those around us as well as differentiate the ways such phenomena as curbs or stairs differentiate bodies as mobile. At the same time, these ontological cuts are never innocent and have differential consequences for various agents, excluding non-productive, irresponsible, or dependent bodies from the position of subject even as those productive,
responsible, independent bodies that occupy its role are worn out by its demands. As made crushingly clear in the activist’s actions in 1977, such consequences are not just a matter of who gets to be in which category, of which label one gets to assume. These cuts do not matter just conceptually but materially-conceptually—that is, they literally matter—directing how and to whom resources are distributed (in medical institutions and social services, for example), and can thus determine the difference between life and death (including forms of living that enact something resembling death) for those displaced from agentive positions of being. As these cuts may be and often are used in oppressive, coercive ways, we need to seek ways of reconfiguring them to lessen, stop, or prevent their destructive potential.

At the same time, reconceptualizing the power of boundaries in this way risks leaving in place the primacy of the subject over and against the object even as the boundaries between them are denaturalized and opened up to refiguration. We risk pursuing a form of washed-out relativism in which, upon the revelation that boundaries are not natural, we begin to treat them as limitlessly malleable and something totally submissive to our demands. In doing so, we may in turn risk believing we can mitigate the social violence of such boundaries by simply shifting them to include everyone in the position of subject. But taking on this new attitude over the classical one would do nothing to wrestle with the problems that follow from the humanist ethics of being that assert the natural and fixed priority of the subject over the thing and ignore the possibility of our unresolvable subject-object hybridity.

By what means of mattering can we counter these moralizing narratives of the thing? How can we push beyond the confines of such ethical frameworks that we find in narratives of reification and civic responsibility to live with others in ethical ways that do not presume a particular subject-ist manifestation of being as its model? That is, how can we affirm the potentialities (of pleasure, of political resistance) at play in
becoming-thing without also reaffirming the forms of social control that so often come along with this mode of interdependence? How can we, along the lines of animal rights activists, assert something like the following, replacing “animal” with “thing”: “I do not deny that I’m like [a thing]. Instead, I want to be aware of the mistreatment that those labeled “[thing]” (human and nonhuman) experience. I am [a thing]” (Taylor 194)? We need to think expansively about what it means to act in the world despite or perhaps because of our deep and ongoing entanglements that provide the preconditions for emergent forms of being and also, for this very reason, delimit the range of our potential. Answers will follow from opening ourselves up to the ways in which, even while we are not solely in control of the configuration of the phenomena we participate in, even though we are never fully, finally subjects, we are fully responsible for living through the entanglements that matter us in ways that matter. But we can do so without falling back into the coercive ethical practices of the person.
turbulence interval: sacrifice

If ways of taking and distinguishing pervade our dealings with the world, are there configurations in which distinctions recede, no longer useful or germane? I have resisted giving up on subject-object cuts in order to show the ways in which subjects really do enter into objecthood and find there *sui generis* possibilities of engagement—and, inversely, things participate in the making of our shared world. My caring for distinctions is a way of ensuring that the divergences that populate being are not suffocated under a coercive humanist narrative. Nonetheless, we might still consider the possibility of encounters in which such mattered breaks between persons and things do, for a time, cease to matter. One place in particular where this reunification of subject and object into a unity unfolds is in practices of sacrifice. In writing of sacrifice as that which “restores to the sacred world that which servile use has degraded, rendered profane,” Georges Bataille marks the profane world as lacking (55). Servile use is the imposition of an end in the use of a thing by a subject—the subject determines the terms by which the thing is used, by which it exists in the world. In a traditional view of this relation, the subject and object are fundamentally opposed, endowed with roles that define this opposition—the subject uses the object, the object is used by the subject. According to Bataille, this relation of logical opposition obscures the fundamental intimacy between the subject and object before these entities became settled as such. In the logic of the sacrifice, the world of the profane has fallen from the heights of the sacred and is replaced to those heights through the transformation that occurs in sacrifice. Bataille is drawn to the terms of ‘reduction,’ ‘degradation,’ and ‘poverty’ to capture this fall. In some sense, the sacrifice affects a re-membering of the profane thing’s prior status as sacred, as an end in itself, it aims to resurrect the thing’s lost or forgotten past as something more
than just a thing, as part of a field of continuity where forces run like waves, crashing into each other indifferently, recurring ad infinitum.

In sacrifice, the thing, the sacrificed “victim,” does not map onto easy distinctions between thing and human, as the thing sacrificed often is in some sense a human—“the slave bound to labor and having become the property of another is a thing just as a work animal is a thing” (Bataille 56). The sacrifice negates and departs from a map drawn through the contrasting shades of human and thing. It cuts across these shades, blurring them and pulling into definition a pattern previously dormant and hidden. This pattern is constituted by a basic unit of pairing between the sacrificed and the sacrificer (and the place of sacrifice), and, as pattern denotes, this pairing repeats through the process of the sacrifice and its reenactment as a ritual, a matter of tradition, but in such a way that the beings occupying each constitutive base position mirror each other in a relationship of intimacy and identification. The sacrificer sees the sacrificed as a reflection of hirself, a reflection that comes across with such stunning clarity that it shakes the subject’s rootedness in the here of the self, dislocating the subject to the sacrificed.

The back-and-forth reflection (leading into refraction) of self and other, of subject and object, person and thing, resembles the role of the mirror in assimilating a certain sequence of movement into one’s repertoire of comportment. In dance practice, the mirror becomes a site where relations between “inner experience” and “outward form” are negotiated and transformed. This web of layered realities recalls Foucault’s use of the heterotopia to gesture toward an illusionary and real space that is enacted through the contradictions and juxtapositions—temporal and spatial—among its constitutive parties. Like a heterotopia, the time-space representational structure of the mirror, which becomes an epistemological and ontological one—locating the position from which we know and the movement from which we feel
ourselves to be—relies on the tension between the visual image of the mirrored body in the mirror and the sensation of movement within the body. That invisibility of the embodied body relies on that other over there to display implicitly its here-and-now-ness, just as the heterotopia exists only through the animating tension between various spatially and temporally distant actors.

In sacrifice, the thing sacrificed at once stands out as a thing to be sacrificed apart from the sacrifice—this distinction must be maintained since one must sacrifice in order for their to be such a relation. The relation between the agents of the sacrifice is defined (at least provisionally) by their particular and unique role in the encounter. In order to recognize the occurrence of the sacrifice, these positions must be realized, fulfilled, displayed up to the moment of sacrifice. Drawing on this framework for the disruptive possibilities of the heterotopia, I wonder whether these tensions seem to be ultimately resolved. Do the dancers learn to assimilate the otherness of the visual body in the mirror into their embodied body moving multidimensionally through space? Is the distinction between the sacrificer and the sacrificed really collapsed, or to what extent is it, in the consummation of the sacrifice? In this sense, the mirror is realized as a real object productive of certain relationships between external form and internal rhythms, relations that mark and constitute the self, the moving self, the self as dancer. Nonetheless, the image in the mirror is a mere surface reflection and displays something that does not exist apart from that which it reflects, so that the mirror offers a space that is both real and unreal. The link between the agents of the sacrifice collapses into a relation of complete congruency.

Sacrifice has the power to fold human into thing and then release both (collapsed into something indistinguishable—into the role of the sacrificed) into the realm of sacred. Yet the sacred only comes into view through its strictly delineated
and enforced differences from the profane. The question remains to what extent, within the temporally and spatially delimited zone of sacrifice, do pervasive boundary-marking practices that give us subject and object lose their hold?
Day 289: I, thing, find my place, my markings, look to the display board above me to display my parameters—departing from the place designated A (differentiated from B, C, D...etc.), I sort myself into an alphabetically enumerated system. My detailed status arrives through a sequence of cues and signals, gestures and clearances. Translucencies and assorted plastic synthetics flattened, shined, illuminated throw back a glimpse of my bag, the evidence of my travel, my personal effects, a sweep through the hair, hand moves to adjust tie. Ties refract through the layered transparencies, an ordered jungle of well-cultivated strips, a few folds away from the knot required to support a hanging body. Is that my tie? Are we here? Is that hand moving my tie? Are I’s consuming this provided visual imagery with greatest productivity? Is that tie constraining that neck?

Day 67: My extra drink sits beside me—is it mine? In what sense can I make sense of this relation of ownership, of mattering matter into my sense? Here is answer: person receives this drink from the bright snack-spot down the terminal stocked with packages, from an attendant working (overseeing) the dispensing of goods, intake of monetary value. Water to hand to hand to money.

But in what sense can I say this attendant is person? How do I know she recognized me and could say to me that she was a person, that she could see me and feel my mild stomach pain, the tug of my bag on my shoulder? Indeed, by what extreme leap could she open her mouth and cash drawer, unfold the gateway for exchange and take in my offerings, subtotal $6.90 (for water and m&ms)? Obvious enough—things work, things are things. Shop attendant spoke a form of the global standard language, customer too tired to make sense fully, and attendant too tired to care about customer’s shortcoming. Lulled into minimal interaction, attendant and
customer accept the shortcomings, fall into them. Good-enough-functioning agents of capital accumulation and consumption.

Is she human? Am I? Are the similarities between her and I (you and you, following endlessly down the possible configurations of pronoun positions) really any greater, any stronger and more binding than those between me/her and this drink I just bought? Maybe, but: She, I, drink—that’s all. Refocusing perspective, recalibrating scale. This interaction ends simultaneously with its re-initiation. Another customer behind this customer steps to the counter as customer recedes back to customer’s temporary personal rental plot on the carpet, and the specificity of customer’s immediate past (still within the domain of the present in which the I understands itself to be) readjusts its contours and shows itself to be a form composed of thousands of similar interactions.

To what degree is this repetition? Is this order of magnitude any greater than that between the interactions among the competing registers of my self? Is the continuity of this exchange different in kind than the continuity of my self? If I repeat myself, if I pass through similar times and spaces, can I recognize myself more in my history than I can in these exchanges among others not myself that partake in the same movements and procedures that I do? Stop. Drink. Sit. No need to think. Breathe in the climate-controlled vapors. Slip into drinkhood.

This drink sweats and drips onto the mauve carpeted floor. The sweat drops retract into the floor, pulled by the coarse fibers of the carpet. There they remain dispersed, entangled with the traces of previous consumer substances and their encounters with the floor. Spilled coffee. Baby spit-up. Carpet shampoo applied once a month, swept over the surface layer, enfolding over (not erasing) the under layers. The entangled odors, the bits of matter flung there, dropped, allowed to live their lives, their durations of decomposition and recomposition, recombination into waste
pulled up by vacuum. An erasure of history? Is this history, historical traces, a sort of archive? Why not? At what point does that flung crumb lose its edible consumption status and fall into the nether region of detritus? What of it (it?) can be said to remain between the moment it parts from the food unit and the moment it is picked up again as waste, as matter out of place? Once it enters the domain of the floor, the surface on which we walk, how is it in the world, what is its status...the fallen tree in the forest...? And do we live out our durations of being as we know it without recognition of the devastating and unrelenting resemblances between us and this crumb? Sitting on the carpet, moment for movement delayed without notice to an unknown point ahead, but now is filled with vacuum made by this delay. Muscles ache from the rigid meeting with orthogonally corrective seating. Now sprawled on floor, head resting (mind weary) on floor, floor under head. Field of vision inverted (or at least deviated) from the demands of vertical living. Floor finds new expansiveness as the body spreads and finds an expanse and in this expands its position. Now the matter of the floor rubs against and into the body, odors intermingling. The compiled smells of past interactions give themselves as body gives into floor.

Day 5: Smells, molecular aero-fields, circulate through the archival system of AC ducts. Fly to the space above the Gate A12 sign.

The air-conditioning ductports outswim the blow, into the overhead space of the heads bobbing below or at a distance (ductports discern direction in spatial linearity, and open space in proceeding from point among points, HVAC materials, the pipes, the tubes, the rounded, linked moment of meeting between supporting steel truss, the periodic and digit-al bracing pattern), bumping and shuffling, heads on shoulders, shoulders slouched. Massed, the crowd fluctuates only superficially,
maintaining usual and expected ratios of relevant and statistically identified person aspects: blonde to bald, fat to excessively trimmed, hurried to sleeping, blue:blushed, on:airplane-mode, approved:overweight, ETA:RTA. The ducts direct the air that has been the air for some time now, caressed by the too familiar rush of too familiar air. Out and around, lightening up the heavy footfall of a body in unrest, slowing the simultaneous exportation of sweat from this body and all surrounding ones. These two outflows of substance, of gas and moisture, meet and tackle each other. The moisture, the bodily excesses, impurities, pass into the shared airspace of the terminal, dispersing, and are received again by us, return to the interfaces by which they passed into this airspace. This reunion occurs in a reorder. Epidermal filters transmit the moisture, the singularities of sweat substance. Olfactory indicators receive these fields of moisture as smell, body odor, BO in its array of branded and personalized lines.
from spectacle to node

At 5:05pm on June 23, 2013, Edward Snowden arrived at Terminal F of Sheremetyevo International Airport (SVO) in Moscow, Russia. In these few steps, he entered into relation with a temporal and spatial configuration of mobility and fixity, open-access and containment, that characterizes contemporary airports. Today airports, including SVO, are central to the construction of globalist cultures by facilitating the mass movement of traveling publics as agents of global economic development. The airport as a spatial typology has not always been so carefully and strongly implicated in the flows of capital—of course, SVO was built by the mandate of the USSR state and anti-capitalist approaches to society-formation. Most airports have their origin in sites that lack many of the central features of today’s infrastructure. Many of these early air flight facilities functioned as airfield spaces for private planes of wealthy, adventure-seeking individuals who were captivated by the new flying technology. Airplanes were novelties and the airfield was a venue for spectacle where people would gather to watch the planes in action, defying historical precedents of movement and suspension. With the proliferation of plane production, airfields became regional transport hubs for the wealthy. During this golden age of air travel, airports and airplanes were spaces of limited access, left unfamiliar to and unused by the broader public. Likewise, SVO arose in its current formation from a limited access operation as “the chief aerodrome for the Soviet Army’s air force” (SVO website). Construction of the air base began on October 25, 1953 with the arrival of the first group of military builders at the Lobyna Railway Station. As the official website of SVO narrates, these “first servicemen at the construction site lived in tents, built their own barracks, and simultaneously cut a clearing in the woods for the future runway and access railways. The living conditions were tough, there were
no roads, and the work continued day and night” (SVO website). On October 7, 1957, the first aircraft landed on the runways of the airdrome.

A couple years later in 1959, the signing and approval of the Delivery-Acceptance Act by the Commander-in-Chief of the Air Force and the Head of the Main Directorate of the Civil Air Fleet marked the legal transfer of the site from the military to civil operation. This shift represented a larger Soviet project of infrastructural development through state-initiated and -funded projects. In a ceremonial visit to the new civic airport, Khrushchev addressed a group of government officials, including members of the Presidium of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, representatives of the Council of Ministers of the USSR, the Supreme Council of the USSR, commanders of the Ministry of Defense and the Main Directorate of Civil Aviation. In this gathering, he laid out a vision for the future of the Sheremetyevo International Airport and Soviet air travel more broadly. Having arrived from a visit to London, Khrushchev said of England, “It is not customary there, as it is with us, that every leader is allocated an individual plane. Capitalists can count money, no doubt. Leaders fly there by civil aircraft as first-class passengers, and nobody is embarrassed or hurt. We should think about it too. We should think about good airports, a good level of service” (SVO website). Recognizing that air-transit infrastructure had become a publically accessible service in England and other Western countries and that this had facilitated broad and substantial economic growth, Khrushchev proposed to pursue a similar project but one undertaken and controlled by the state.

The reopening of the airport as a civic operation in the style of Khrushchev’s vision required extensive physical reconfigurations of its facilities. The State Planning and Surveying Research Institute of the Civil Aviation Aeroproekt drafted a plan to make the site more efficient for providing civil air transit services in 1959.
This became the main template for the reconstruction that followed, including the division of the site into two spatial and programmatic zones. The northern part, Sector No. 1, contained “the Central Control Tower, POL storages, warehouses, a boiler house, technical buildings and facilities as well as a residential and service infrastructure (kitchens, laundry facility, bathhouse, cafeterias, etc.)” (SVO website). The southern part, Sector No. 2, “contained an apron with an air terminal designated for governmental air services, a service building, and several other service buildings and structures. The two sectors were connected by an aerodrome sector which included a runway, major and connecting taxiways, ramps and aprons” (SVO website). This plan oversaw the construction of two terminals complete with hotels and shops, expanding the capacities and operations of the airspace beyond those of transport to include consumption and inhabitation.

The next period of extensive construction began in the mid-1970s as Moscow prepared to host the 20th Summer Olympic Games. This project dramatically increased the capacities of the airport. When the new terminal opened on January 1, 1980, it was “designed to service 6 million passengers a year. Its handling capacity was 2,100 people per hour” (SVO website). By contrast, in 1969 1.5 million travelers passed through the airport, “and 715,000 passengers and 22,000 tons of mail and cargo was carried by international airlines” (SVO website). These expansions and redevelopments following from Khrushchev’s revisioning of air transport’s role in Russia helped initiate the transition to SVO’s current form. Even SVO, which began as the project of a socialist state, now bears the traces of post-Fordist global capital exchange. The government still supports the airport financially. The Ministry of Transport has allocated $2 billion for a 20-year master plan. But, as we will see, the plan strategically targets projects to attract business and frequent flyers. The airport represents the role of the state as a participant in neo-liberal economic development,
supporting and furthering the flow of capital. This development in the former USSR might feel somewhat strange given Marxist critiques of capitalist formations of labor were taken up as foundational texts for the construction of the socialist state of the USSR. Now experiences of dehumanization that Marx originally criticized as deeply problematic features of capitalist life play a prominent role in post-socialist life, particularly in urban hubs like SVO. This illuminates the pervasive reach of networked formations of capital exchange.

As such, SVO and airports generally have made the “move away from being mainly transport hubs and become sites for mass travel. Airports are increasingly built on the edge of cities, as places or camps of banishment” and have become themselves “small-scale global cities...places to meet and do business, to sustain family life and friendship, and to act as a site for liminal consumption” (Urry 27). Where in their previous form airports had functioned as “strictly monomodal and monofunctional traffic terminals, airports have been reinvented as multimodal hubs comparable with a ‘multi-point, multi-service, marketing-driven firm’ in a global marketplace,” a node in a much larger global network (Kesselring 46). This transition is evident in the development of SVO, beginning most markedly with its expansion in 1959 that added hotels and shops directly interlinked with its terminals. The SVO website now boasts of its size, flight-handling capacity, and its array of international connections. In reference to the opening of its newest terminal that has an annual handling capacity of 25 million passengers, the SVO website claims the terminal “provides all the conditions necessary for the development of Sheremetyevo Airport as a leading air hub in Russia and Eastern Europe” (SVO website). As “interfaces with global space,” major contemporary international airports like SVO “stabilize the cosmopolitan mobility potential of the mobile risk society by providing the logistic infrastructure for the acceleration and global coordination of organizational
processes in business and society” (Kesselring 48). That is, airports facilitate the efficient movement of capital, upholding a global culture of unbroken connectivity. “But, on the other hand, airports are territorial and thus bound by the social, cultural, economic and political norms of their location” (Kesselring 48). Thus positioned liminally between global networks that stress movement and local sites that require durable situated-ness, “airports assume the role of stabilizing units, spatial fixities, in this restructuring process” between global and local, here and elsewhere (Kesselring 41). In this way, the definitive elements of global capitalism—flow, flux, fluidity—that alone deny the fixity of representation are manifested physically and spatially in the airport. The array of movements that animate global capitalism is recapitulated in the airport. Because of the ways in which the airport thus displays “this almost ontological dialectic of ‘fixity and motion’ that defines the specific spatiality of the global society,” understanding and experiencing airports is vital to grasping, or at least embodying, global capitalism and its formations of personhood (Kesselring 48). However, airports are not just representations of an ephemeral, intangible economic system of rapid exchange but work with the flow, directing, redirecting and changing it and us.

**turbulence interval: agential time-space**

Through these reconfigurations, the contemporary airport has emerged as a central hub of global capitalism, a particular arrangement of production and reproduction that relies on a global network of capital flows. Flows include the movement of bodies, goods, and information among sites that store, produce, modify, sell, or consume. These networks are in turn sustained by our use of airports, which
simultaneously configure a network of time-space relations, like that of the airport queue, that lead us to give up person-constitutive capacities.

This networked economic structure grows out of and departs from Fordism, an earlier mode of capitalism that depended on fixed production schedules and consumption venues—a specific constellation of ontological cuts. As David Harvey notes, because time and space unfold through material processes, methods of production and reproduction, which work through matter, must necessarily shape and reshape the processes of time and space through which entities show up to us. As Karen Barad’s framing of agential realism makes clear, we cannot presume the existence of subject and object, of entities in time and space, apart from how such distinctions are constructed through real, material intra-actions. In this way, we cannot usefully think of time and space apart from their configuration in such particular phenomena. At the most, we might think of time-space as the field of potentiality for such configurations, but this must be delimited by the constraints of a certain domain of intra-action. I am inclined to draw on Barad’s description of agency to re-approach time and space conceptually in ways that do not attempt to falsely resolve these difficulties: “[time-space] is a matter of intra-acting, that is, [time-space] is an enactment, it is not something someone has” nor something one is in. This moves us away from treating space and time as infinite and neutral media in which the world is cast. Instead, we may best get at the potentialities and multiple dimensions of time and space indirectly by attending to the dynamics of particular intra-actions, like those of infrastructural space or of the 1977 sit-in, rather than starting out at this level of generality seeking definitions of ‘time’ and ‘space.’
By engaging material configurations, capitalism (as a mode of production) reorients our participation in the structuring of time and space, of subject and object, both diffusely—that is internally as it re-performs itself—and more noticeably as it transforms into emergent iterations of production and exchange. Thus, “the transition from Fordism to more flexible modes of capital accumulation” is propagated “via mediations of spatial and temporal experiences” (Harvey 201). Where Fordism relied on stable spatial configurations for production, like the compartmentalized and serialized space of the assembly line and their distribution links with geographically locked sites of consumption, the emergent form of global capitalism seeks to conquer space by closing distances between various markets, producers, and consumers, attempting to condense national and cultural boundaries. In turn, the previously secure distinctions between subject and object, producer and consumer, loosen with these spatial changes. The sustained myth of progress-through-expansion of the kind displayed on SVO’s website drives “the tearing down of all spatial barriers, and the ultimate ‘annihilation of space through time’” in order to open up new sources of capital and targets of investment (Harvey 205). This process is never completed since progress installs in the present a promise for even greater wealth just beyond the present horizon, in that immediate but not yet graspable future. Progress pushes us to always seek more regardless of the wealth of the present and thus renders space material of potential for the further extraction of wealth, a means to an ever-receding end. In airports, this myth of progress is put on display in the emphasis on forward movement toward one’s destination and unconstrained accessibility to the world via international connections.

Yet such progress-driven projects of global capital exchange do not negate space altogether—it is difficult to imagine what that would even mean—but instead reconfigure it to both further accelerate the flows of capital and sustain such
increased velocity. Because “accelerating turnover time in production entails parallel acceleration in exchange and consumption,” global capitalism requires spatial configurations that catalyze such accelerated modes of travel, configurations like the airport (Harvey 285). The compartmentalized spaces of the Fordist system must be penetrated and linked together to create dispersed networked spaces, like the airport, rather than sequential ones, like the assembly line and department store—creating new spatial typologies through the aggressive intervention into and rupture of older ones. So while capitalism, as Harvey puts it, seeks the ‘annihilation of space,’ it nonetheless continues to rely on spatial configurations since “spatial barriers can be reduced only through the production of particular spaces” of transport, like airports and airspaces. As demonstrated in the careful orchestration of various protocols that sustain such spaces, which I will detail below, “the production, restructuring, and growth of spatial organization is [sic] a highly problematic and very expensive affair” (Harvey 232). It is within these time-space configurations that the subject-object cuts of global capital exchange are performed, renegotiated, and unraveled.

attracting ability

The involvement of transport infrastructures in contemporary formations of labor and capital exchange places demands on the conditions of their operation. Airports facilitate faster rates of exchange and consumption that follow from increased rates of flexible production. For this reason, much is at stake in their continued functioning, specifically the stability of their capacity to efficiently move people, products, information and other forms of capital. Because of the pressures that come with the transportation and investment of significant pools of resources and (fixed and potential) capital, airports require that the various components of the system work together in reliable patterns. Baggage must be linked with passengers and
arrive at the destination with their owners. Likewise, people must behave in largely predictable ways that mesh with the system’s other components, like plane schedules, security procedures, and so on. The airport tries to ensure this reliability through spatial-positioning tactics, like directing signage, queues at checkpoints, and tiered services that offer varying degrees of access. In addition, airports maintain operational stability through managing risk. After proceeding through central security checkpoints, travelers are inundated with a barrage of public services announcements and reminders to be attentive to the placement of their personal belongings as well as suspicious people or objects. These notices function to shift the activity of surveillance from a centralized figure of authority to the travelers themselves such that the travelers participate in their own monitoring. In these interactions with infrastructural protocols, travelers’ bodies and capacities are modified in varying levels of accordance with the pressures of global exchange.

By regulating the facility’s operations (all the way down to the individual traveler) in order to maintain a certain threshold of reliability, airport systems strive to minimize travel times because of both the demands of travelers (particularly business interests that depend on efficiency in travel) and the pressures coming from the airport’s management (to maximize profits by maximizing turn-over rates). Positional and locational devices prompt travelers to pass through checkpoints and waiting areas in accordance with the larger time structures of infrastructural movement, including flight schedules. The macro scale of time management must align with micro itineraries but in non-intuitive and un-mirrored relations, which is to say that time efficiency on a large level depends upon time inefficiencies on the individual level. An efficient flight schedule requires that individual travelers wait their turn and do not rush points of entry and processing. Within this carefully orchestrated order, efficient travel does not necessarily and inevitably translate into
continuous movement at the level of the traveler. The capacity to navigate robust movement through the world is off-loaded from the individual to the infrastructural macro-operations.

Moreover, as the entry points to cities and regions, airports are often made into synecdoches of their surrounds, showing it off as distinctly attractive to particular segments of the traveling public. Because airports facilitate capital exchange and economic development, they are key instruments for and emblems of a city’s capacities for sustained growth via international connectivity. The SVO communicates such intent on their website: “The implementation of the Sheremetyevo Airport long-term development plans has a positive impact on strengthening the economic stability in the region and contributes to the social welfare of the north-west area of Moscow region.” This ‘positive impact’ follows from the individual travelers, particularly ones engaged in business ventures and capital networks, and therefore from the airport’s ability to attract such travelers. A central initiative of this long-term development plan is the expansion of tiered services offered on a sliding scale of network capital, including the construction of more business lounges for frequent flyers and the traveling elite. Through these moves, the airport becomes more than a passageway for capital and business travelers. It is a destination and place of business. “For business-class passengers, special check-in counters are available in all of the Sheremetyevo Airport’s terminals. Several

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6 Lloyd characterizes such travelers with particular clarity as “global knowledge workers”: “Global knowledge workers are enabled and honoured in terminal architecture, wireless internet ports, visa-free entry and fast track departure queues. Those without transnational knowledge and border-crossing abilities for reasons of education, economics, or race are relegated to endless interrogation and waiting. As indicated at the beginning of this essay, the scale inhabited by these figures has split on the one hand into globally hypermobile: the global knowledge worker, transnational intellectual, or the globalisation researcher, who works away on a laptop in the airport lounge, airline seat and taxi, delivering their highflying report on before flying out to the next stop-over. On the other, the ‘incompletely global’ person is fixed and held by the terminal architecture, lacking access to the scale available to the hypermobile class - a situation exacerbated by the events in New York on 11 September 2001.” (Lloyd, par. 35)
business-lounges and VIP-halls are opened 24 hours a day, where maximum comfortable conditions are provided, both for rest and for business negotiations” (SVO website). In addition to providing spaces designated for business transactions and commercially productive activity, the airport attracts business travelers by offering a stratified system of lines at processing checkpoints. The security queue inscribes a hierarchy of network capital spatially in the lines differentiated for differing levels of travel competency, varying from the travel expert to the beginner. In these services, the avoidance of waiting is commoditized and advertised as self-evidently desirable. Through this setup, the airport infrastructure promotes a freer and more continuous mode of movement, even if not one composed of movement literally toward a destination, over the stop-and-go sequence that characterizes basic air travel. An orchestrated collection of signage advertises these special programs for

7 Writing on contemporary airport architecture often echoes this valuation of speed and flow over stillness. Recent reviews of new airports—specifically on Kansai International Airport, Beijing Capital International Airport, and Madrid Bajaras Airport—stress the way the design of these various structures captures, echoes, and makes manifest the airport’s conditions of flow. For these writers, like the airport operators, airports are spaces structured overwhelmingly by the movement they facilitate. In this framework, successful airports orchestrate the intersecting movement of travelers, baggage, food, services, and workers for maximum efficiency. That is, they get each unit to their respective destination in a reasonably short time opening up the system to new arrivants so that they in turn can pass through to allow a new influx of travelers, and so on in an ever-ongoing recursive loop. The literature stresses how the architectural design gives physical form to this functional-operational arrangement. In Kansai we find “a breathtaking sequence of spaces that flow, one into another, below a ceiling that billows like a forward-moving wave” (Buchanan 130). BCIA is praised for its “vast-but welcoming scale and its smooth and efficient passenger experience” (Black Dog Publishing 113) and the roof of Bajaras “undulates above the departure level in rhythm with the progression of the passenger from curb to gate” (Cohn 152). These representations build a narrative of the airport as a place where the fantasized promises of globalism—universal accessibility, interconnectivity, and capital exchange, complete ease of movement—are enacted with constant repetition. People are dreamt as global citizens and this dream is celebrated in the architecture, these essays seem to proclaim. The dreamland of globalism is here—just look at the architecture!

For nearly all involved in the life of the airport, this stylized hyper-movement is but one spatial disposition out of many that are required to navigate the airport’s everyday. As I will show, much more often engagement with infrastructural space and systems of identity-processing occurs through periods of waiting, stopping, lagging. These experiences are obscured in the literature’s celebration of flow as rendered stylistically in the airport’s architecture.

Further, at the same time that travelers are made to wait for their departure or confirmed passage through the next checkpoint, the workers of the airport inhabit it without
The services themselves, like special lines with shorter waiting times, fulfill a promotional function, placed side by side with the default ones. As if to say, look at this much shorter line right next to you—why aren’t you in this one? In case this gesture is not clear, extra signs often communicate this more explicitly by directing travelers to a website where they can opt into the special programs. Sign up here! At every checkpoint, at every encounter with an airport service here or there, the elite alternative is presented adjacently.

By tailoring itself to frequent flyers and business travelers, by branding itself as business-friendly, SVO, like most other international airports, pursues practices that promote a particular style of travel embodied in the frequent flyer. Those with sufficient network capital who command resources associated with mobility are able to buy into these programs to bypass lines, move through processing checkpoints with greater ease, and gain access to private resting areas. As the rhetoric of SVO’s website makes clear, these particular sequences of movement that transport spaces coerce travelers into enacting are targeted—they anticipate not only particular

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this promise of exit. They must remain within the place of transport to uphold the services and functions of the system and to secure their lives and those whom they support with wages. The efforts to crystallize the fantasy of total mobility in the airport’s architecture implicitly denigrate the more stilled and delimited inhabitation of place that these workers are compelled to perform everyday. These tactics of rhetorically erasing the labor of the various airport workers occur quite literally in the airport’s built structure. In these three articles, the authors repeatedly comment in adulatory tones on the seamlessness of the design (“construction which is seemingly uncontrived in form and coexists harmoniously with and even emulates nature” (Buchanan 133)), the way in which distinct elements such as floor and load-bearing column meet with a sense of inevitability. The subtext here is that the process of construction including the social formation of labor in construction and operation are erased entirely such that the structure seems to unfold through its own will, unaided by human activity. This feeds on and bolsters the ways in which the celebration of mobility implicitly privileges those able to pass through the transport system with relative ease and apparent independence over and against those who desire and/or are compelled to financially, socially, or otherwise to pursue a stilled spatial practice.

8 “As a result of the modernization program, Sheremetyevo International Airport is to strengthen its positions as one of the leading air hubs in Europe embodying the ideas of innovative leadership, quality and high efficiency in its activity. This will enhance the attractiveness of Moscow as a prospective international transit air hub and generally raise Russia’s competitiveness” (SVO website).
resources but also certain bodies and capacities. Travelers with abled bodies and reserves of substantial network capital fulfill the promoted values and gestures more seamlessly than other travelers. This hyper-enabled traveler, whom we might designate as the ‘travel expert,’ encodes a series of assumptions about the good traveler into the kind of self-evident identity that can be communicated with basic visual signage. Single, able-bodied, and intimately knowledgeable of the procedures of air travel, such travelers engage with this infrastructure in a mutually enabling sequence of relations.

This plays out in situated encounters within the airport, such as the queues designated for frequent flyers at the various checkpoints that require users to regulate and oversee the position of their bodies and belongings. These practices of monitoring self-behavior in ‘public’ domains (domains where people unrelated and anonymous to each other are mediated by the security policies governing the space—e.g. airports) act as displays of individuality that police and reinforce the boundaries that form the individual body and subject, collapsed into one secured unit. This is a spatial phenomenon as much as it is a social one. Travelers adopt both a mode of mattering and a mode of sociality that isolate themselves as a distinct unit of travel. They restrict their interaction with others to passing and short remarks while keeping their carry-on bags and other personal belonging on or near their body at all times. By compelling these tactics of self-inscription through forms of soft-coercion (e.g. PSAs, queues), transport hubs, particularly the airport, teach us about personal space and responsibility. When traveling we practice the appropriate way to inhabit space amidst a securitized and surveyed public. The traveler, particularly the frequent flyer, is meant to spurn entanglements within the airport, except ones that have some economic value for the parties involved in managing the airport (as we see in the promotion of frequent flyer services). Otherwise travelers (are reminded to)
act responsibly according to the demands of the system’s operation by being punctual, keeping their things together, etc.. In this arrangement of supposedly autonomous subjects, forms of interdependency and disabling relations among parties are not just out of place but also disruptive of the circuits of mobility, capital exchange, and citizenship that organize and animate infrastructural space. Such relational forms of being that resist intentionally or not the demands for speed and productivity driving the functioning of the airport are cast as the antithesis of such aims. If the airport is a central location where contemporary understandings of citizenship and personhood are worked out in practice, these central modes of being an “engaged” citizen in the new public realms of our global world reaffirm the primacy of the abled, mobile subject above the (inter)dependent crip that moves to the rhythm of a different form of insurgent citizenship.

frictional traveling

Embedded within the foregoing discussion of the frequent flyer is the recognition that such a mode of travel, which is also a mode of embodied personhood, emerges only in relation to other tangent modes. The frequent flyer then bares the traces of its others. In the shared time-space of the airport, another class of travelers is produced that encounters this infrastructure in very different ways. That is, “for countless others, their journeys are longer, more uncertain, more risky and indicative of their global inferiority in a world where access to network capital is of major significance within the emerging global stratification system” (Aeromobilities 32). Not all travelers partake in airport operations in reliable and expected patterns that facilitate their continued functioning and capacity for promoting economic growth. Many members of traveling publics are unable or unwilling to orient themselves according to the intended, minutely and systematically regulated choreographies of movement
and stillness. In the expansions of SVO beginning in the 1960s that aimed to ensure such operational stability, the airport was opened not only to a greater flux of travelers with substantial network capital and infrastructural agency but also to its inhabitation by less freely mobile persons. The *Moscow Times* reported on November 19, 1992, “Sixty-seven Somali refugees who had been living on the floor of the transit lounge at Sheremetyevo II airport—some for the past year—were moved to the airport’s transit hotel earlier this month by the government” (Gould). In 1994, a group of about twenty Afghan refugees arrived at SVO, attempting to escape the hostile conditions of their home country. The country had been in the midst of civil war since 1979 when Soviet military forces entered the country to protect the recently formed communist government. Conditions deteriorated dramatically after the government headed by President Najibullah, whom the Soviet interests had tried to keep in power, was overthrown. A new party failed to concentrate authority and reestablish routine governing operations. These extralegal conditions eroded the safety of civilians, exposing them to human rights abuses as documented by Amnesty International. A report dated November 2, 1995 bears witness: “Afghanistan continues to be in the grip of a devastating civil war with an estimated 25,000 people, the majority of whom are believed to have been civilians, killed since April 1992” (Amnesty International 3). The Afghans that fled to Russia had ties to the government headed by Najibullah that had been overthrown and thus had “a justifiable fear of returning to their country of origin” (Amnesty International 8). Without the proper documents, these refugees were unable to enter Russia after landing at Sheremetyevo, therefore compelled to seek shelter in the airport’s transit zone.

On touching down in the apron of SVO on June 23rd, 2013, former CIA employee and NSA contractor Edward Snowden reextended this tradition into the
present. Snowden flew from Hong Kong to Russia hoping to avoid extradition to the United States for releasing classified documents from the National Security Agency to the press, documents outlining the operations of a largely extralegal and covert global surveillance program. Snowden was originally scheduled to fly, after a brief layover in Russia, to Ecuador where he had requested asylum. Instead, Snowden remained in SVO until August 1—39 days later—after the United States revoked his passport and made clear that they would intervene upon his reentry into the United States territory to bring him to trial under the Espionage Act of 1917. At the same time that Snowden was prevented from passing onto another airport, national law also prohibited Snowden from entering Russian territory without either a valid passport or visa. As reported by Interfax, a privately-owned Russian news agency, on June 26, a source close to Snowden explained the legal situation in this way: “Snowden’s US passport has been revoked, he has no other ID papers on him. Therefore he is forced to remain in Sheremetyevo’s transit area since he is unable to either enter Russia or buy a ticket” (BBC June 26, 2013). Another source familiar with the laws governing Russian air and terminal space noted, “Snowden cannot be driven out of the airport even in a car with diplomatic number plates, because he has neither a standard nor a diplomatic visa” (BBC June 23, 2013).

Journalists covering the story helped supplant the connection between Snowden’s situation and that of previous refugees stuck in transit zones. Yet they did so in a general way that remained unmoored from the history specific to SVO. For all the media attention and the abundance of traffic through the airport every day, multiple new sources reported that Snowden had not been sighted for several weeks. In his absence, journalists dug up stories of other prolonged airport stays. One journalist writing for the business magazine Fast Company speculated five days after Snowden’s arrival at SVO, “While it seems likely that Snowden is staying under some
sort of escort in a restricted area of the transit zone, or even being held off-site with extreme discretion, some people actually do live in airport transit zones” (Ungerleider). The narratives woven in these media bits tied Snowden’s situation to other past newsworthy airport inhabitations, ones of notable duration or by personalities caught up in cultural intrigue. The figure drawn on most frequently in this tradition of airport stays is Sir Alfred, “an Iranian man who lost his papers while in transit and lived in Charles de Gaulle airport for more than eleven years” from 1988 to 1999 (Lloyd). As Justine Lloyd has shown, this inhabitation captivated various publics throughout the decade for the uncanny familiarity of Sir Alfred’s condition. A story in the Boston Globe portrayed Nasseri (Sir Alfred’s real name) in the context of a usual airport trip: “sitting patiently on a red plastic bench in Charles de Gaulle Airport’s Terminal One, luggage piled neatly by his side...occasionally cocking his head to listen to the airport announcements” (Neuffer). In these vignettes we are meant to see the habits and characteristics of the usual airport stay reproduced mimetically. We feel the pull of familiarity in the patient sitting, the plastic seating uncomfortable yet restful, the proximity of personal belongings, and the responsibility of keeping watch.

Despite this intimate association, despite the details dropped to draw us in and establish transtextual points of connection between refugee and reader, refugees like Nasseri remain displaced from the status of the everyday traveler because of the ways in which discourses of globalism focused around neoliberal economic development locate agency. In the culture of world travel and capital exchange, speed and flow are held as virtues and access to them is exclusionary, made tangible in the airport’s tiered services that cater to business travelers and frequent flyers. When calculated through this matrix of value and human worth, “a refugee could never be part of the cosmopolitan class we might designate as ‘frequent flyers’; but everyone
who belongs to the highly mobile class of transnational workers and global tourists "could recognise a bit of himself" in ‘Sir Alfred’” (Lloyd paragraph 6). In the world of global capital exchange, command and frequency of travel, rather than involvement in the stillnesses of such travel, serve as a record of one’s status. This system of valuation cements associations between action and personhood.

We see the unevenness of infrastructural agency more markedly in these stories’ omissions. In the making of Snowden’s story, these points of reference, these inscriptions of genealogy, largely passed over the Somali and Afghan individuals who also sought refuge in Russia in the early 1990s and sans the proper documents were compelled to instead take refuge within the terminal space of SVO. In news stories of Snowden, he is referred to by name along with a collection of biographical details that identify him as well as the course of his journey and decision-making: his exact arrival time at SVO, the flight number, the airline, the minutia of his course of passage through the terminal space. The stories published about past individuals in Snowden’s position, including the Somali and Afghan citizens that arrived in SVO in the early 1990s, contain no such personal details. The refugees remain nameless, accelerating the displacement of responsibility for their transnational movement from the travelers to the conditions of the native country. The denial of the level of detail granted to Snowden works to differentiate the kinds of displaced/displacing persons according to agentive capacities to command one’s worldly navigation. The system of processing that filters travelers according to network capital participates in “attributions of agency: the displaced person is merely the passive victim of external forces that move people across borders, or pull borders out from under them...while the asylum seeker is exercising a freely formed, conscious choice to cross a border and claim a right” (Lloyd).
This uneven distribution of agency according to network capital and navigation capacities is not internal to journalistic narrative conventions and the media channels through which they spread. The spatial and operational configuration of the airport in dialogue with the demands of economic development participates in differentiating travelers, as I have shown above in detailing the involvement of airports in global capital exchange and how this leads to the promotion of particular patterns of embodied movement. In cases like Snowden’s, “this formation of agency in the bodies of non-citizens works through a change of sovereignty at the port of entry—the moment at which refugees can claim their status as such” (Lloyd paragraph 34). In attracting and coercing streamlined modes of travel, transport infrastructure enables certain individuals over others. Drawing on a Baradian conception of agency, we can say moreover that infrastructural enabling is not just the selective attraction and exclusion of travelers with specific pre-formed capacities and resources. Rather, differences in infrastructural agency partially emerge from patterns of intra-action. Some such patterns have a mutually generative momentum that maintains habits of travel and others work up enough friction that travel becomes too hard, expensive, or precarious. Through divergent and patterned intra-actions, passage through the airport does not give expression to unequal positions within the network of global capital exchange but feeds on, produces, and amplifies such differences. For the business traveler, the airport and its tiered services offer a place of productivity. For the airport and its managing body, business travelers behave as consumptive agents generating revenue within the airport and as sources of capital for the region surrounding. While this configuration feeds on the fetishization of mobility, flow, and access to promote its services, stillnesses, gaps, and lags persist at the level of the individual traveler to accommodate larger logistical schedules. Because such wait times allow for the continued functioning of the airport,
they are written into the facility’s operational procedures making them largely resistant to eradication. Because of the matterfulness of travel, friction is impossible to escape.

Refugees then are not anomalies and their encounters with airports dwell closely with the domain of normal functioning rather than on its fringes. Refugees embody an experience common or even native to airport stays, one built into the spatial and social operations of air travel. From the commonality of waiting depart different modes of travel, varying with access to promotional services. With the right passes and memberships, frequent flyers and others with substantial network capital filter out such waiting times. Yet because of the complexities of infrastructural operations, the preeminence of macro time structures above individual paths, such delays cannot be fully banished from nearly any itinerary. This basic shared component of air travel then allows frequent fliers and other everyday travelers to feel continuities between the expected albeit extreme wait times of people like Nasseri and Snowden and those of their own travels. The inverse however does not hold, since experiences that special services offer are not necessarily shared by travelers without access to them. Because of this asymmetry, refugees and other compelled to remain within transit zones inhabit a difficult position. The relation between those with mobility capital and those without is marked by an asymmetry in the attribution of distance or intimacy between self and other.

In these ways, the refugee stuck within the transit zone exposes the modalities of air travel and the inhabitation of infrastructural space that are obfuscated in the predominance of mobility-centric narratives of globalist personhood. If the airport attracts capital through the promotion of business-friendly services that emphasize ease of movement and access, the presence of the stranded refugee threatens to make salient the conditions of waiting that necessarily permeate
its operations. For these reasons, the designation of the refugee’s status as anomalous works to contain its potential as a gesture displaying the shared condition of strandedness in order to salvage and reproduce the stories of flow that make special access services desirable.

In tandem with the difficulty the refugee poses to the promotion of movement and the attraction of business flyers, the refugee as a person thrown from the secure and stable position of national citizen also threatens the integrity of a system of person-processing that relies on the intelligibility of travelers to secure its operation. If citizenship status allows individuals to travel across national borders, we might say that international transport systems are venues for the performance of a certain conception of citizenship, of the global citizen with access to the world that aligns with the business traveler with access to numerous local markets. The refugee’s stay in the airport unfolds as a disruption of this carefully maintained spatial ordering that is the field of potentiality through which entities like the refugee, the frequent flyer, and the global citizen are worked on and out. The terms of entry that mandate documents proving nationality work to keep out unsecured, stateless subjects from the national order. In barring entry, these processing procedures like customs do not just exclude such amorphous and unverified subjects but also in the same gesture inscribe the limits of a space to locate, detain, and regulate them. In this sense, security practices at national borders go further than filtering out undesirable persons. They have a productive rather than subtractive power, as “efforts to contain such extremes of transnationality within border zones have produced additional sites of statelessness and un-sovereignty” (Lloyd). The airport queue, central to orienting travelers to surveillance and processing procedures at checkpoints, often feels empty of content, a necessary but meaningless precursor to the work of identity-checking, but is in fact the site of emergent forms of being, as I will detail in the next section.
Stripped of citizenship status, Snowden and other stateless subjects like the Somali and Afghan refugees of SVO find themselves in a smaller world, shrunk to the limits of the terminal space. The field of possibilities for movement—and as extended temporally comes to include or neighbor the field of *living*—folds inward along territorial fault lines, excluding Snowden from entry into any nation and in the same gesture confining him to delimited extraterritorial zones. While Russia denied Snowden entry into its geographical and legal territory, Putin in a public statement declared Snowden’s freedom to move where he pleased, to choose his place of destination, and seek asylum there quickly. This doublespeak, of freedom and exclusion from nation, catches Snowden in the terminal space indefinitely—he is nudged to move on but is unable to do so exactly because the global community assumes the same position. In these joint and divergent discursive and spatial tactics, the airport becomes both the field of action, mobility, and agency and the limiting site of control, exclusion, and suspension. The lines of passage traced back through Snowden’s itinerary and projected into the uncertain future reveal in their curtailment and fewness the recession of the infrastructural capacities for enabling mobility and the expansion of its capacities for detaining. That is, the circuits of transport through the global transport system close off to Snowden, the set of potential itineraries, of possible futures differentiated by location shrinks. Return to the country of origin is in Snowden’s case the least desirable potential itinerary, although it may be the easiest to arrange. His home country—the United States—both disowns him and asserts its authority to detain and punish him. In this limbo, the affordances of global air travel, the promises of unbounded mobility, are drawn out into parodies of themselves by which Snowden seems at once to realize the ultimate promises of these affordances and to find himself at the point of their breakdown in
which unmoored movement becomes so total that reentry into the places interconnected by transit infrastructure is barred.

I try to raise these questions of agency without supposing a humanistic moral stance of the kind at play in Marxist narratives of the reified laborer. The conception of agency I draw on from Barad cracks open what conventionally appears as a natural embodied unity of agency, personhood, and action, cohered by beliefs about the good life, about what kinds of living are good or valuable, about what kinds of life count as life. If disability and de-agentive modes of being emerge from localized matterings and matterful events, like the blocked exit faced by the refugee or the resistance to exiting sustained by the San Francisco sit-in participants, then their form and content vary. That is, the dense texture of substantial maneuverings often resists and pulls away from unity-building projects like Marxist ones on labor and alienation. Forms of disabling or thinghood do not inevitably realize the anxieties of such projects that inscribe them as undesirable, unethical, or damaging. Systemic, asymmetrical, and nonconsensual social violence does not arise always from disability and passivity, although it may appear to. We must then question whether these attributions of agency are necessarily denigrating to the displaced person. Do we need to read a position of passivity as necessarily denigrating, as a misrepresentation, or as a problem with our ways of thinking about the ties between mobility, place, and class/economic position or as structural inequities at play in these relations? Might the problem be in our presumption of the overwhelming and overdeterminative woes in occupying positions of passivity or stuckness? The animating intention here is not to present airport waiting as a fully unproblematic and desirable form of disability and thus as a kind of an answer to these questions, but rather as a site through which to explore emergent ways of being that are
systematically obscured or rendered not worth living (in the strongest and weakest senses).

**being queued**

In the tension between access and containment that catches some travelers like Snowden and mobilizes others, mainly those with substantial network capital, the enabling relations are emphasized as constitutive of global life through neoliberal narratives of speed, progress, and development. My aim in this following section, drawing on the preceding investigation of how agency is localized around particular traveler-infrastructure couplings, is to counter these narratives by foregrounding the underemphasized component of stuckness so central to infrastructural space and the kinds of being that emerge from them. Underlying this is a desire to embrace positions of docility—as deeply constitutive of contemporary modes of being, if not also deeply pleasurable—that remain abject in such normalizing narratives of travelpersonhood.

In the airport, the network of mobility and stillness is realized in a series of material configurations that often resist and produce friction against the progressive narrative of speed that organizes our understanding of global capitalism and the formation of the global citizen. As people who have travelled through airports well know, the process of air travel is not a straight shot from origin to destination but unfolds through cycles of waiting, stopping, and processing, punctuated by quick bursts of movement: packing, getting to the airport, parking, checking in, going through security, proceeding to gate, waiting to board the plane, etc.. And yet this paradoxically stilted form of transport through immobility feels uncomplicated and ordinary, a feeling that gives light to the ways in which the airport incorporates everyday embodied reality into the framework of global capitalism through situated
material intra-actions. The airport opens a dialectical configuration or feedback loop through which the spaces of the airport, structured by the demands of global capitalism, arrange the movements of travelers who then enact the spatiality and temporality of such ideologically structured conceptions of travel. The space of the airport is never finalized but always reconstituted through this dynamic exchange in which neither architectural space nor our spatializing practices—object nor subject—are wholly determining or original.

As part of this process, Harvey suggests, social practices, like those involved in travel, spatialize and engender certain time structures tied to our bodily rhythms and processes like the fatigue that we feel during those long periods of waiting in the airport queues. The airport reads and then responds to embodied states and thus functions as “a distribution architecture—it organizes the chaotic movement of bodies, planes, baggage and bits into sequenced flows through the protocols of store and forward,” based on a specific conception of travel centered around the integration of fixity and mobility. The airport directs us “through a set of procedures that facilitate mobility,” “calibrated by the logic of store and forward” and its underlying vision of travel. In doing so, we shape a specific spatial and temporal arrangement that overwhelmingly, but not entirely, fulfills the one dictated by the demands of global capitalism such that we become the working components that sustain this system. At the same time, the spaces of the airport, like that of the queue, turn our attention away from this direct participation by organizing time structures of distraction and anticipation. Such temporalities arise through the airport’s combination of stop and go procedures, on display in the airport queue, that integrate “stillness and movement...into an operational unity that has become naturalized” (Fuller 64). Here in the airport, “spatial and temporal practices can themselves appear as ‘realized myth’ and so become an essential ideological
ingredient to social reproduction,” in this case the reproduction of the system of
global capitalism as realized in the airport (Harvey 216). We enact and live out the
demands and promises of global travel in our bodies, particularly through these types
of encounters between our bodies and the other components that make up
infrastructural space and in making up arise as such.

A prominent and familiar manifestation of this feedback process of global human formation—the meshing of flow and fixity, of myth and reality—is the queue that precedes each checkpoint, including the check-in desks and kiosks and the security screening process. The queue organizes travelers into a sequence of individuals through retractable partitions. These partitions generally fold the queue into a back and forth pattern that condenses those waiting in line, one space-saving tactic out of many deployed throughout the airport. The queue is thus organized into a sort of crowd but without the chaotic motion and density of spontaneous interaction that that designation connotes. Instead, those travelers amassed in this organized crowd are preoccupied with their waiting, attention turned forward spatially and temporally to the point of processing that awaits them at the end of the line. As Jameson writes of the lobby of the Westin Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles, “a constant busyness gives the feeling that emptiness is here absolutely packed, that it is an element within which you yourself are immersed, without any of that distance that formerly enabled the perception of perspective or volume. You are in this hyperspace up to you eyes and your body” (Jameson 43). The queue produces such a feeling of busyness without content, without the sort of spontaneous sociality that emerges from an unrountinized crowd. The queue cleanses the crowd of its volatility, managing risk through the spatially and temporally serialized distribution of travelers. In what sense do we initiate or regulate our becoming-docile? How does
agency figure in this transaction? How can we participate even as we give up capacities that constitute our humanness?

**turbulence interval: docile bodies**

In writing on docile bodies, Michel Foucault articulates the mechanisms of power through which normative time structures, specifically those governing large social projects like educational programs and other pedagogical sites, are mapped onto and into the individual body both physically and spatially. Through these various techniques of control, the individual is not repressed but produced, reworked in ways that open new ways of being in time while foreclosing others. Thus, what Foucault describes as “disciplinary power” is not an external force imposed upon the body but operates in ways that collapse the individual and social body so that the distinctions between the two, between identity and power, between individual agency and the parameters erected around it are upset. Yet, in its deployment, this discipline “dissociates power from the body...it turns it into an ‘aptitude’” (Foucault 138). At this point of convergence, abilities and capacities that give shape to the agencies of the individual subject nest with intra-individual formations of sociality.

As Foucault outlines, this style of “discipline creates out of the bodies it controls four types of individuality, or rather an individuality that is endowed with four characteristics: it is cellular (by the play of spatial distribution), it is organic (by the coding of activities), it is genetic (by the accumulation of time), it is combinatory (by the composition of forces)” (Ibid. 167). Each of these four characteristics are enacted and maintained through the specific techniques of disciplinary power: “it draws up tables; it prescribes movements; it imposes exercises; lastly, in order to
obtain the combination of forces, it arranges ‘tactics’” (Ibid. 167). These are the specific procedures through which the individual in its various social capacities, including the student and teacher and, more generally, the subject and object, is brought into being as a working component of hegemonic temporal regimes.

Many of these techniques rely on constitutive spatial operations within the individual body, between individual bodies, and across larger social bodies. The enclosure of space, particularly the “principle of elementary location or partitioning” is used as such a disciplinary mechanism of power to “avoid distributions in groups; break up collective dispositions; analyse confused, massive or transient pluralities” (Ibid. 143). In short, enclosure is one technology in a more extensive spatial network that “individualizes bodies by a location that does not give them a fixed position, but distributes them and circulates them in a network of relations” (Ibid. 146). Foucault shows how this occurs extensively in pedagogical sites like schoolrooms where “in the eighteenth century, ‘rank’ begins to define the great form of distribution of individuals in the educational order” so that the space of the schoolroom becomes at once a sort of “learning machine” and a “machine for supervising, hierarchizing, rewarding” (Ibid. 147).

Echoing Barad’s subject-object cut, this partitioning of space allows “both the characterization of the individual as individual and the ordering of a given multiplicity,” providing a structure that enables and is enabled by the perpetuation of the temporal regime aimed at “constituting a totally useful time” (Ibid. 150). Through and within these cellular spaces, the gestures of the individual become wholly visible, legible, and measurable in the gaze of authority (e.g. that of the teacher and the pedagogical system ze represents), able to be analyzed and systematized to, in the schoolroom, maximize efficiency and speed and, thus, to enact “a correct use of time” (Ibid. 152). In this way, the individual becomes constituted through its gestures.
Foucault describes how the act of hand-writing, for example, expands in a pedagogical context to become a “whole routine whose rigorous code invests the body in its entirety” involving erect posture and precision of movement in a specified sequence, a routine whose continuation relies on the positioning of the individual student in the partitioned space of the classroom, as the both visible and blind subject. (Importantly, the teacher is not the sole or knowing agent of disciplinary power. Instead, these regimes of normative time structures work through each individual within the pedagogical practice, denying the possibility of a single source of control.)

In tandem with this partitioning of the collective space is the partitioning of individual space and time, “the ‘seriation’ of successive activities” within the pedagogical space—particularly that of dictation—that “makes possible...a detailed control and a regular intervention (of differentiation, correction, punishment, elimination) in each moment of time” (Ibid. 160). These interventions, in their rhetorical possibility as well as their actual deployment, guide the individual through an educational program toward some stable epistemic endpoint, like the airport guides travelers toward a deceptively definitive destination. In this way, the time of pedagogical practice is linear and cumulative, working with the cellular composition of space. Just as the space of the classroom is partitioned into individual units, the time of pedagogical practice is composed of ever further linear, segmented moments. This spatial network of cellular units opens the actions of each individual to the intervention of the hegemonic pedagogical regime (or in the airport: national security regimes) and the (re)assertion of its serial, cumulative time in the form of small disciplinary gestures like a slap of the wrist or a verbal cue. Conversely, this time structure maintains the cellular space through mandating the partitioned placement of individuals through time, and thus in space.
The airport draws on similar spatial and temporal disciplinary tactics, inscribing hierarchical attributions of agency among travelers. This docilizing effect strengthens the intended security function of the queue by enacting cuts that mark the boundaries of the individual traveler. Separated by partitions and preoccupied in waiting, the individual travelers are atomized and opened to the security apparatus that incorporates the gazes of fellow travelers and security personnel as well as automated surveillance systems. The placement of individuals into rows makes each individual accessible not only to such surveilling gazes but also to security actions that require the spatial isolation of the individual and his physical contact with security technologies. For example, “in a public site, we grow accustomed to viewing individuals pulled from queues, their possessions opened and studied, their bodies turned into maps of hidden threats” (Wood 337). In the queue, each traveler is both individuated through the threat of the exposure of such personal markings and deindividuated since these private, hidden elements of the person are divulged and then rapidly dispensed with or passed over for the inspection of the next item/person. More broadly, “in terminal space, secret locations are almost always illegal. Viewing and surveying the choices made by strangers, we become accomplices in the construction and maintenance of a security apparatus designed anonymously” (Wood 338). In the queue we feel this repeatedly as we gaze ahead, prompted by the arrangement of the queue itself that orients us forward, to ‘survey’ those anonymous fellow travelers passing through the checkpoint before us. This repetition, the way the process works through each and every individual in roughly the same way, dulls our attention to the process itself and the intensive power relations that work through us. We participate in our own surveillance, managing our own exposure to
risk by claiming a spot in the queue over alternatives like throwing ourselves into a non-queued crowd.

Yet this queuing process does not transform all individuals into a universalized subject of ‘the traveler.’ Instead it presents each with a different iteration. Through the queue, systems of power are performed and maintained in stark ways, such that “air travel and its visible inequalities are a synecdoche of the increasingly global pattern of social inequalities deriving from huge variations in...network capital” (Urry 32). The stratification occurs first officially in the airport’s operational procedures. Many airports, like SVO, have recently begun splitting the queue into a hierarchy of multiple queues for travelers of different levels of competency and experience. Signs designate each queue, generally marking one for single, experienced travelers (those with substantial network capital and implicitly able-bodied), one for intermediate travelers, and one for beginners (those who require extra supervision and time). These explicit markings create a hierarchy across queues based on the extent to which the travelers’ bodies mesh well with the airports body-mapping apparatuses like security queues. While “mobile people whose wealth and privilege insulate them from another world marked by provincialism and dead ends” pass through the queue assuredly and easily (Wood 324), many other travelers face rampant friction in their passage through infrastructural space. The airport thus produces difference based on network capital, providing a set of time-space relations that enable extra-mobile passengers divested of attachments and other sources of friction to realize the functional identity of global capitalism, engaging in the ‘consumption of distance’ and thus performing the “hyper mobile ‘way of living’ or ‘way of working’” constitutive of movement-based personhood (Cwerner et al. 183).
However, even those mobile elites must wait in the queue in order to travel through the airspace that binds up stillness intimately with mobility. In the airport, our movement over space is transferred to larger technological systems that do the moving for us, enacting a virtual form of travel through which our immobilized waiting facilitates transport. Such integrated systems allow the mass movement of people at rapid rates, pacifying the traveler as ‘the passenger,’ a shift that began with the proliferation of carriages and then trains in the beginning of the 19th century. In these transport systems, “the passenger became a symbol of industrializing modernity—a figure evoking both solitude and crowds,” a synthesis we experience in the airport queue, as I’ve described above (Albrecht et al. 44). Waiting has proliferated beyond the realm of transportation with the expansion of bureaucratized society, becoming our primary way of interfacing with our everyday institutions—waiting for registry at the Department of Motor Vehicles, for example. We wait in the airport queue because “in previous circumstances, waiting paid off” (Fuller 67). Yet, in the carefully orchestrated and maintained apparatus of air travel, waiting is no longer conditional—it is mandatory, necessary for the continued functioning of the network.

As we wait in the airport queue becoming at once travelers and passengers, we share a specific orientation of time and space with those waiting with us since queue-waiting is “predicated on a shared ‘future’ that pre-empts the present,” the moment at the end of the line for which the queue is just a pretense—“a future that paradoxically stops us in our tracks” (Fuller 64). Waiting confuses linear time by overloading the present with the anticipation of the future such that the present assumes the presence of the future. Immobilized by the future, we are lulled into stillness that itself promises mobility, of passing through the checkpoint and of arriving, eventually, at the destination. Thus, “in waiting we distribute our agency
somewhere between here and now, here and there in a shared system of anticipation” (Fuller 67). Displacing action and attention beyond the here and now, waiting assumes the promise of freedom or security of movement always just beyond the scope of the present space and time—just on the other side of the security checkpoint, just through the terminal gate—yet causes us to do nothing but continue waiting, implying that the future will come to us, that our waiting will in the end be effective and carry us forward. That is, we submit to waiting because it makes our transport progress more smoothly. The queue releases us from the attention and responsibility of the present since by waiting “we are already doing something by doing, apparently, not much,” somehow facilitating our travel by keeping still (Fuller 67). Waiting thus appears, and feels, like a placeholder for an anticipated future event, without implications in the present. Often those travelers waiting in line distract themselves from the here and now with their phones, signaling that there is nothing pressing or worthy of attention in the present.

Despite our willed distraction that conjures a feeling of passivity, waiting is productive within the space and moment of the present, facilitating our pacification. By waiting in passivity we are not dislocated from the present but participate in making ourselves docile passenger-travelers by off-loading some of the capacities that constitute our personhood. This becoming-docile involves layered calculations of value and works on our attachments within the world. In waiting we give up our “time, energy and relationships” for a sense of security, we readjust our relations with our surroundings to ensure our successful and safe passage through the airport—and this capacity manifests differently for travelers according to infrastructural agency. In this way, waiting at the airport becomes a productive activity not individually but more systemically, naturalizing a broader “financialization” of time within our everyday lives through which the present is
traded for the productivity of the future even as the future seems increasingly precarious, our arrival at the destination never wholly guaranteed or decisive as “arrive and depart become elastic terms, blurred and endless, deferred through recursion” (Albrecht et al. 45). From this docile embodiment in which the promised future is always deferred yet anticipated, we form attachments to the whole architecture of transport, “a form of contractuality and a temporally displaced form of trusting relationality forged between subject and event-to-come” (David Bissell cited in Fuller 67). We perform our trust of the air-transport system by waiting, which in turn reproduces our present configuration without ever fully delivering the promised release since there is always another queue after the one we currently find ourselves in, even beyond the gates of the airport—waiting has in this sense become a self-perpetuating mode of being in the world. The airport queue thus obscures our complicity in the security apparatus of the airport and beyond. We realize the myths of global flow networks without realizing, doing nothing less than sustaining global capitalism by doing what we feel to be nothing but waiting.

This last qualifier, “nothing but,” underscores the apparent emptiness of waiting. Waiting appears content-less, but participates in the opening of bodies to surveillance, the facilitation of capital exchange and mobility. Waiting is content-ful, productive—it is a mode of engagement and involvement but of a kind that sidesteps forms of intentional action fetishized in the promotion of frequent-flyer personhood. In this way, waiting is perhaps not an action in the strong humanist sense but remains a mode of engagement in a de-individuated, dehumanized sense. In saying that waiting is productive, I do not mean to deny the passivity of it, the ways in which it is simultaneously unproductive. The productivity of waiting is located beyond the individual, at the scale of flight schedules and service operations. Our capacities, including command of spatial navigation, are off-loaded to the macro system.
Waiting initiates and sustains this off-loading, it is this off-loading of capacities. In waiting we do not just let go of capacities. They do not just recede leaving an absence behind. Rather, in waiting, we give away these capacities. The system requires this giving on our part for it to be animated in operation. Waiting opens us onto the world not through the individual actualization of capacities that mark personhood but through exporting these capacities to a larger mechanism of engagement. But our giving up does not need to register as a deliberate decision—often it occurs without our attention, as a practice of habit. Our encounters with airports, and their queues in particular, unfold through cues that initiate our entrance into docility. The off-loading of capacities is activated not by our judgment as autonomous persons but through an intimate back-and-forth exchange between our bodies and other components of the infrastructural scape.
I want to push strongly against the kind of conclusions that usually follow from characterizations of contemporary life like the ones I am feeling my way toward above. The thinking on this subject generally finds itself stuck in an impasse between two equally unpalatable paths. The first is to argue that the alienating, disabling conditions of contemporary techno-social life are not real, usually by recourse to contraindicating historical precedents. As my account brings into focus, this cannot be so since infrastructural systems like air transport ones interact with all travelers in disabling ways (although the nature of them vary). The other approach, usually following a Marxist tradition, accepts that such conditions are real and escalating and that we must find ways to counteract them. I find the latter position mostly right in the first assertion, that disabling conditions persist, maybe increasingly so within this particular delimited domain of the everyday. But rather than respond to this with humanist-ethical calls to resolve disability and restore a kind of lost humanity, I want to question the anxieties that lead us to a such a position in which the encounter with disability prompts us to rehumanize agents. We need to grapple with experiences of contemporary ‘dehumanization’ or ‘alientation’ like waiting in the airport queue without the traditional fears that lead us quickly back to the cold comforts of the human. We need to hesitate before asking, “Where are you all headed?”

As we have encountered, humanist accounts of de-humanization gain their tight hold on our thinking and doing through cementing associations between action and personhood, on the one hand, and inaction and objectification, on the other. Action, as directed, deliberate movement, is said to actualize features of personhood, like intentionality and agency. It does so, along Marxist lines, by allowing intentions to show up in the world. In effecting changes that extend beyond us, we come to recognize ourselves as agents capable of initiating worldly changes. Personhood, then, emerges from an itinerary of discursive thought and material activity. By extension,
personhood does not show up in the same way in undirected movement, in gestures that happen beyond a locus of agent. An arm repositioning in an embodied formation comes to echo a book falling off a shelf. The characteristics of personhood are exhibited in complex organization of activity and matter, including responsiveness to surroundings and complex sets of relationships among things (doings and ways). But in infrastructural systems we find this same organizational and operational complexity even as its ‘human’ components function in non-human ways, giving up capacities of robust directed movement and falling into disabling states. According to these humanist itineraries, it would seem that infrastructure only fully realizes a kind of human agency at a scale beyond the individual, at which the direction of movement is masterfully orchestrated. And at that point, what role does the designation of agency as human still serve?

The sit-in of 1977 engaged with a configuration of citizenship that works through similar sedimentations between action and personhood. The reformist Civic Center Plan aimed to re-establish reliable patterns of interaction among citizens, governmental bodies, and civic and commercial space. The plan choreographed movement, designating a delimited field of acceptability in which improvised actions by citizens were supposed to fall. The architecture of the Federal Building carries through this coercive itinerary, making some moves physically impossible or risky. In these sites, particular actions or stillnesses threaten to unravel the lives of some entities, delineating what matters or shows up as a person. This field of structured action and inaction is metaphorically tied to the biological unity of an organism such that the moves possible are tied to functional patterns of an organism’s biological systems—action within this context enacts a naturalized itinerary of citizen, person. If patterned movement according to reformist principles constitutes the life of the city, what place do practices of stillness have?
The disabled activists moved into and through this integrated action-architecture matrix in sequences that amplified friction against its coercive pull. In sitting-in, the activists passed time, finding ways of occupying it pleasurably without succumbing to frustration with ‘inactivity,’ as action-based matterings of personhood might lead us to designate such a practice. From personal histories and interviews with activists, we get the sense that the participants did not view this time as an empty duration instrumental for the realization of a goal. Rather, the activists filled the sit-in with a density of experiences and effortful doing, with political formations and possibilities of its own for building a more desirable shared habitus. The duration of the sit-in remained charged for the participants, the presence of risk dwelling with excitement and hope and futurity and with moments of quiet, rest, and exhaustion. For the protestors, these moments of giving in were just as constitutive of being-in-the-world, although not necessarily of a coercive human kind upholding intentional action as its zenith. While the sit-in resisted demands of bureaucratic productivity, of the kind operationalized in the Civic Center, it was not unproductive on other registers. Here, I want to affirm the force that kinds of inaction that follow from giving up can carry—the force of letting oneself fall into the docile domain of thing. The power of the sit-in spread from the protestors’ giving in beyond the boundaries of acceptability and responsibility. Toeing the line with being beyond life.

In drawing on these tactics, the sit-in worked through a kind of political action that doesn’t register on the radar of established political convention with recourse to movement-centric conceptions of personhood. The meeting of bodies and built structure opened up tight couplings of action, intentionality, and natural personhood. On one front, the sit-in shows that action is not the sole modality of intentionality. Stillness is directed and content-ful and thus intentional but not instrumental—the intervals of stillness in the sit-in enacted meaning but without
immediate purpose. That is, the sit-in opened up emergent patterns of practice and relating that, despite serving the secondary function of pushing for specific political demands, were content-ful in and of themselves. On another front, the directedness of being in the Federal Building did not come from individual agents but instead from a shared giving in in resistance to itineraries of responsible, engaged civic action. Beyond decoupling action and intentionality, the sit-in also foregrounds the ways in which intentionality is not an intrinsic feature of natural personhood. Rather, intentionality is a prosthetic configuration of agencies, in which active, normalized bodies need not play the central role.

These decouplings lead us to ask: how do forms of stillness enact a content-ful orientation to and within the world even as they feel—and in some cases are—empty, unproductive, and dehumanizing? Waiting gives. In waiting we give, either against established itineraries or in confluence with them. Like the San Francisco sit-in pulled on the constricted humanist association between action and personhood, Snowden’s airport sit-in accentuates the stillnesses of travel obscured in capitalist narratives of mobility. Snowden’s stay in SVO functions in this work to move us from events of resistance into the seat of the normative, and so foregrounding the constructedness of distinctions between alternative and normative sites of being articulation. Disabling configurations of movement and stillness are not restricted to bodies marked as disabled medically. They permeate and structure our relational presence in the world, as we experience in the airport queue.

As I have shown, the ontological and material cuts that give us subjects and objects work through patterns of movement and stillness, action and inaction. This is inescapable, a pervasive, constitutive feature of being in the world—matterful parcelings are a precondition for having a world. My aim has not been to argue that boundary-marking practices—and the disabling conditions they unleash—are
necessarily damaging. Such a claim would bring us back into Marxist-inflected territory in which classifications of being are conflated with constricted views of their possible outcomes. The problem, as I have argued, rests not in the presence or absence of boundary-making but in the pull some cuts exert on bodies, persons, publics, and other worldly entities. By slowing the pace of air travel and our thinking of objectification, I have tried to parcel out the ambiguities and potentialities of dwelling within thingness that tend to get lost in the sweep of our person-making itineraries.
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