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Jonnet Middleton

MENDING
the SENSIBLE

ontoexperiments
for a politics of matter



MENDING THE SENSIBLE

Ontoexperiments for a politics of matter

Jonnet Middleton

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Disclaimer

I declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted in substantially the same form for the award of a higher degree elsewhere. To the best of my knowledge it does not contain any materials previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

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Jonnet Middleton

Mending the sensible: Ontoexperiments for a politics of matter

Abstract

Mending performs an experimental material ontology to test and reconfigure what mender and matter can become. Mending enacts a radical response-ability for and towards liveable more than human worlds. Yet mending seems impossible to do. I unravel this trouble with Jacques Rancière's politics of perception, the 'distribution of the sensible'. The 'sensible' becomes shorthand for the neoliberal ordering of reality which conceals the material trouble and 'unexists' alternative ways to inhabit a world. 'Mending the sensible' is a sensory unravelling of givenness to create the conditions for mending's material possibility.

I turn to technoscience and feminist materialism — principally Barad's posthuman performativity, Papadopoulos, Stephenson and Tsianos' imperceptible politics, and Yusoff's insensible matter — to apprehend mending as an outside politics of matter. Mending is material action which does not count in/for the 'sensible' order, and which constitutes noncapitalist worlds by reconfiguring capital's excess.

I am an *ontoworker* living in/as experiment. Previous roles of artist, activist and researcher have become undone. *Ontowork* is the everyday sensory and material testing of ontological rearrangements of self and lifeworld. *Ontoexperiments* follow emergent protocols to bring material entanglements into relation through risky ontological manoeuvres and concrete everyday matterings, like consuming no more clothes ever, or escaping the sensible force field and its comforts by moving to Cuba.

The thesis is a diffracted onto-ethnographical account of cutting myself apart from sensible givens, and my experience of becoming otherwise in an alter-ontological construction site. It comprises five *ontotales*, one for each ontoexperiment, and an *ontomanual* which grounds an unknowing, indeterminate performance of un/becoming in continuous experience and outside politics. The aim is for scholarship about mending's possibility to perform itself in material worlds, to achieve material and sensory alignment between everyday experience and what we are *for*.

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The Trouble

Matter is before thinking,
matter is in thinking,
matter is everywhere ...
Matter is a political exit.
Matter is escape,
the making of a life,
matter can break the capitalist spell.

— DIMITRIS PAPADOPOULOS, *Activist Materialism* (2010, 73-4, 77)

The trouble kicked off close to home, a dozen generations or so before my birth. In my ancestors' back yard, he was forging iron, she was banging chains. The trouble I refer to is that of matter and capitalism. And home is the Black Country, the area to the west of Birmingham, UK, and specifically the borough of Dudley. From the 16th century, the Black Country was a hotbed for proto-industrialist production before manufacturing migrated to bigger sites and scales in the emerging industrial power houses of Birmingham and the North.

The reason the trouble started here is down to geology. Dudley's fossil capital was second to none in Europe. The Dudley Museum and Art Gallery, now mothballed, used to display a colour-coded geological map of the UK in which the Black Country jumped out like a bag of brightly coloured jewels. Its stellar hand of mineral matter was diverse, plentiful, easily extractable and rapidly depleted. The Black Country is said to get its name from either the UK's biggest coal seam which once lay beneath it, or the dense smoke as it was expeditiously burned away. Typically, my house sits crookedly atop the honeycomb of missing matter underneath. The matter that didn't matter was piled up on a spoil heap whose lasting testimony is the garden's steep pitch. The Victorians crowned their wastelands with parks and libraries. The neoliberals rebranded them as nature reserves, and rewilded them with orchids and equine anomalies borne of pit ponies and gypsy mares. Toxic indeterminacy ruled out more lucrative ends.

I was born in 1971 in the dying embers of Dudley's glory when the valuable matter was exhausted and production was grinding to a halt. Dudley was a dump, in the

literal and the figurative sense. I grew up seeing the damage; landfill sites, abandoned factories and scrapheaps. I saw the cancers and the blindness of my grandfather and his three brothers, Jim, Reg, Bert and Frank, who between them had clocked up 200 years in the same foundry. And I saw the ulcerated flesh and amputated limbs of Aunt Rose and Uncle Ben. In the early 1980s, the mammoth Round Oak Steel Works closed down and local unemployment shot to 25%. In 1985 the Merry Hill Centre, the then second largest shopping mall in Europe, opened its automatic doors and monorail across the road from the steelworks site. I recall ditching hopes of a proper job and sensed the future was grim. It was decades before I grasped the global displacement of industrial capitalism or the birth of neoliberal consumer society, but I was a modest witness.

At school I studied the *making* of the industrial revolution, epitomised by a lifeless line drawing of the Newcomen Engine. This history-making, planet-changing, steam engine was first put to use a few miles from my school.¹ The textbooks didn't say as much, and the locals had long, long forgotten that anything important had ever happened round there. History lessons left me cold.² What really hooked me was an incidental education into industrial capitalism's *unmaking*. It was my fortune that, in the 1980s, the aesthetic marks of the Black Country's material undoing were still everywhere apparent. As a teenager I fixated on the abject scenes of aftermath in a sensory education which I knew at the time as art homework.

I spent my weekends deciphering the wreckage of systems of extraction, production and transportation. With imported tubes of acrylic paint, I depicted omens of collapse. I tried to render the sublime signs of life and death of buddleia and carparks sprouting from factory shop floors. I observed the redundant triumphs of industrial engineering. The humble, choking mouth of the historic Netherton Tunnel, 26.5 million bricks and 'only' 9 human lives spent in its construction (Jackson 2018), uncountable shopping trollies protruding from the slime. The majestic viaducts leading nowhere ever again, the invincibility of their exuberant blue brickwork fit to outlive this civilisation and the next. The bitter irony of long term thinking. Of believing that a world will last. And the wonder of making a whole new world, with hope and care. I was mesmerised by an unfathomable

¹ In 'The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming', Andreas Malm (2015) argues persuasively that climate disruption began in Britain with the rise of steam power. That is to say, something of the most profound importance to human civilisation happened 'round here'.

² The only lesson which rang true was one in which the headmaster played one of his son's 7" records. It was 1980s pop band, Talking Heads' 'Road to Nowhere'.

bigger picture of what used to matter, of what used to make sense. I couldn't name this system as capitalism, but I saw in its redundancy a bygone ordering of the world.

When Dudley became a ghost town, we all had to shuffle along the Merry Hill Centre's slippery floors. I sensed coercion to the new imperative of neoliberalism long before hearing its name. Shopping became the only sure thing to make sense in the doleful post-industrial dawn. But I sensed this was a phoney way to make a world. And a pointless way to end one. The neoliberal noose kept tightening. The engineered closure of Dudley town centre brought a deeper presentiment of shutdown, a consistent shutting out of past hopes and future possibilities. And a bulldozing of alternatives. Futility leached into my hopes of a meaningful life.

None of this could I say in words at the time. The words that flow now recall pre-verbal perceptions that prefigure a lifelong question of which I've never let go. What alternative forms of material existence could make sense in these times? This account is my attempt to answer that question and help steer a toxic project out of a dead end. Of all the troubling entanglements that constitute the ongoing planetary mess, I like to think that the particular trouble of matter and capitalism is the one with my name on it and, thanks to my situated material beginnings, the trouble I can best attune to. Perhaps my Black Country descendency also affords me a dogged tenacity to confront the heavy duty task of material activism.

What I present here are experiments in moulding new forms of noncapitalist material existence. Just as Jim, Reg, Frank and Bert hammered and bolted the capitalist world into shape before me, mine is the task of forming new lifeworlds, in the physically embodied sense. The challenge this time is to do so beyond human imaginaries *and* within planetary limits.

Mending the Sensible

Neoliberalization is hegemonic, but it is not invincible. It is merely hegemonic now. Counter-projects are possible; indeed they are inevitable.

— MARK PURCELL, *Resisting Neoliberalization* (2009, 144)

‘It is possible, from any given point, to try to reconstruct the conceptual network that [] causes reality to appear transformable or inalterable’

— JACQUES RANCIÈRE, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2004, 49)

We will go onwards in a different mode of humanity, or not at all.

— VAL PLUMWOOD, *A Review of Deborah Bird Rose’s Reports from a Wild Country* (2007, 1)

Changing our minds is going to be a big change. To use the world well, to stop wasting it and our time in it, we need to relearn our being in it.

— URSULA K LE GUIN, *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* (2017, M15)

The one thing that's clear is that new ideas won't emerge without the jettisoning of much of our accustomed categories of thought — which have become mostly sheer dead weight, if not intrinsic parts of the very apparatus of hopelessness — and formulating new ones.

— DAVID GRAEBER, *Revolutions in Reverse* (2011b, 384)

A world can whisper from a half-lived sensibility.

— KATIE STEWART, *Atmospheric Attunements* (2006, 6)

In which world would you like to live, and what can you do to bring such a world into being?

— WOOLGAR AND LEZUAN, *The wrong bin bag* (2013, 326)

MENDING THE SENSIBLE: FOR A POLITICS OF MATTER

Troubling holes

Becoming troubled is necessary before a transformation can occur.

— ASTRID SCHRADER, *Abyssal Intimacies and Temporalities of Care* (2015, 684)

My sock has a hole. It's an imperceptible hole that couldn't possibly matter. But it matters to me. The threads unravel. The hole expands. Its existence nags. It's a trifling trouble, but I sense I must respond. I want to mend the possibility back into one tiny hole in the world. But I don't mend the hole. *I cannot*. Somehow mending feels impossible to do.

My inability to mend becomes a thesis. The hole in my sock takes on unthinkable dimensions. It expands out into more troubling holes which should concern us all, holes which urgently require our response, the mending of which feels more impossible still. My ambition expands first from mending socks to mending material worlds, and then to mending perceptual worlds. The thesis becomes a set of experiments in how to make mending a *possible, everyday* response for troubling holes, large and small. Long before I am able to articulate the material and sensory trouble which is unravelling our lifeworlds, I can see, and touch, and think with the undarned hole in my sock. And I sense that in the possibility of darning lies the possibility of new worlds. With Donna Haraway's 'loopy materiality' (2016, 79), Elizabeth Grosz's (2011) 'becoming undone,' Barad's quantum 'ongoing un/doings' (2015), and Puig de la Bellacasa thoughts on care (2017), I think of the darn and the hole as the un/doing of damage, and the un/doing of care. Mending and breaking cut together/apart a world (Barad 2010, 244). The trouble is that breaking keeps on happening, and mending barely happens at all. Socks and holes have no fixity. They go unmended. And so too the holes in our worlds.

At the outset, this was a thesis to force me to take a darning needle to the hole in my sock, in the most literal sense. Over time, it has become a material experiment to bring the trouble into intimate relation, to weave in and out of it, performing the agile dance of what I come to identify as an inside-outside politics of matter (with



First time darners take a needle to holey socks at the Sock Exchange, Absolut Fringe, Dublin, 2011.

Papadopoulos et al 2008; Papadopoulos 2014b; Sandoval 2000; Purcell 2008, 2009). The forwards-backwards, right-side wrong-side motion of the darning needle follows the course of an undisciplined inquiry which darts across the boundaries of the im/proper. I make a profusion of unknowing attempts to fill gaping holes but they expand incommensurably as I sense out their more than human limits. The trouble is fathomless. The dominant order of neoliberal capitalism is generating a multiple pile-up of material wrongs. It is undoing the liveability of lifeworlds and fast-forwarding our collective freefall into planetary unliveability. Faced with radically unmendable holes and radically unstoppable trouble, this is a project to perform vital planetary politics starting with humble, barely perceptible gestures like darning a sock.

Mending as experimental ontology

Mending³ is a material response to the question of how we⁴ might proceed when a thing as small as a sock or as big as a lifeworld is coming apart. Mending is the material experiment to test how a broken object might be able to carry on (and on) when it is perceived to be unmendable or of no use. Through mending, an object and its function, (what it is *for*⁵), may be able to carry on as before, or may need to be reconfigured in the process and become other. Mending is a reconstituent material politics which can piece matter back together in unthinkable, unrecognisable ways. It's the piecemeal reconfiguring of possible material alternatives to the predicament of breakdown. As an experimental ontology for troubling matter, mending can reconfigure what matter can *be*, what it can *do* and what it can be *for*. Mending is an experimental material politics of possibility.

This is a thesis on mending as ontoexperiment (ontological experiment)⁶ to test how to reconfigure matter in ways which permit humans and more than human⁷ lifeworlds to carry on. The current conditions are not favourable to mending, and the *possible* solutions towards liveability may be *unthinkable* by normative ideals. For this reason, the process of ontoexperiment extends equally to the mender as to the broken object — both are the subject/object of the mend. It asks what we are *for* — what mobilises our everyday actions? To reconfigure a material world around principles of liveliness and ongoingness requires that we also become otherwise ourselves, so as to be able to accept and tolerate, or even first to imagine, how otherwise material worlds can be. Liveable reconfigurings of broken and breaking worlds are unrecognisable to the worlds we currently inhabit, and deeply disorientating and disturbing for the types of human beings we (Global Northerners) currently are. Mending is the material reconfiguring of possibility, testing out how else mender and matter might possibly be. Mending is an ontological experiment in how mender and matter can become otherwise *for* liveable worlds.

³ My working definition of mending materialises through the ontoexperiments, see chapter 4. I deliberately do not make a cut between mending and material activism — the former is my approach to the latter.

⁴ I discuss the 'we' in the second half of this introduction.

⁵ On this question, I will turn to Yusoff (2013).

⁶ For a full explanation of the term, see the Ontomanual.

⁷ I follow Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) and others in adopting Whatmore's (2002, 2006) term 'more than human' as the preferred term for the 'posthuman'.

Mending performs a noncapitalist politics of matter in response to capital's excess.⁸ It is a practice through which humans saturated in excess can reconfigure everyday lives and everyday worlds *for* noncapitalist, more than human modes of liveability. To mend a hole in a sock is to refuse to consume a new sock and send an old one to landfill, to refuse to endure the precarity of yet another hole, to refuse to maintain the delusion that there is no hole, or to keep anticipating the day a mending bot will mend the hole. *At the same time, as I mend, I am performing — physically bringing into existence — an alternative to the hole.* Mending fills the hole of the new thing that was never extracted, never fabricated, never needed, never thrown away. Mending makes the productivist option redundant and compiles the material evidence that copious alternative responses to capital's excess can and do exist. We already have all we need to reconfigure liveable lifeworlds in the *now*. Mending tests how the matter we have, capital's deathly material legacy, however seemingly unmendable, abject, toxic, illegal, or imperceptible it may be, might possibly be reclaimed and reconstituted as useful parts of a much livelier world. There is nothing irreversible about the matter currently (dis)regarded as waste (Douglas 2007, Gregson and Crang 2010, Wynne 1987, Hird 2012).

Mending creates vital tensions with the logic of capital as it develops noncapital relations with matter. Every mend is arguably part of an as yet imperceptible unravelling of the global political economy. By breaking ties with capital, mending precipitates the possibility of capitalism's undoing. Mending is an improper, more than human relation borne of capital's material excess. Being 'improper' (Panagia 2009) or 'wrong' (Woolgar and Lezuan 2013) is a fundamental criteria for a politics of ontology, as I go on to explore. Improper relations with matter resonate with what Papadopoulos et al (2008) call 'inappropriate/d sociability,' (although their usage refers to human relations), following Trinh T. Minh-ha's (1987) 'inappropriate/d Other' (also Haraway 2004). What Papadopoulos et al do is to make the link between the inappropriate/d and excess. They define 'inappropriate/d sociability,' as 'a sociability which exceeds what can be appropriated for the purposes of value creation in embodied capitalism ... something which is incommensurable with, that is inappropriate to, the current regime of labour regulation' (2008, 255). Mending,

⁸ I choose 'noncapitalism' as the working term through the text for an economic alternative, as a more affirmative option than the most commonly used term, anticapitalism, and in preference to postcapitalism, which suggests having to overthrow capitalism first. My use of noncapitalism is also intended, with Gibson-Graham 2006a, to acknowledge the underestimated existence of noncapitalist economies which operate alongside capitalist economies.

by extension, is an inappropriate/d sociability with abiotic Others. Holding onto, valuing and reworking matter which is not supposed to matter is incommensurable and inappropriate to capital's material regime. Mending a sock is a nonsensical gesture on a piece of material scum which shouldn't even still be kicking around.

Mending is a gesture of human response-ability (Haraway 2008; Barad 2010, 2012)⁹ in the more than human world. 'Care is a human trouble, but this does not make of care a human-only matter' (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, 2). It's an operation to do what is humanly possible for an abiotic other. For this, I claim that mending performs the 'more than humanly possible' by extending human relations with abiotic matter within the finite physical limits of the more than human world. Mending disrupts Western, humanist perceptions of material entitlement and material privilege. Mending's unending creative possibilities reconfigure perceptions of brokenness and tolerance of non-normative performativity.¹⁰ Mending is a means of human escape out of the given world into new insensible worlds that we become able to make with material resources for which we previously didn't spare a thought. It's a wonky ride in the material otherwise in which being and doing materialises as an othering of everyday experience. Mended matter breaks with dominant expectations of perfection, functionality, newness and nowness, and it reverses the almost naturalised anticipation of obsolescence. Mending is at once a constant reminder of material limits, both a materialisation of, and a brake on excess. At the same time, it is ever testing and pushing at material limits, and its practice emerges from, and materialises as, the abyssal potential of the abiotic excess.¹¹

The hole in my sock is an awkward more than human material arrangement which I sense as a friction rubbing against my human desires and needs. I want a comfortable life, not a chafing heel. No-one and no-thing else cares about 'my' hole. Not even the sock. It is my responsibility to mend it myself, as it is up to humankind to attend to 'our' material precarity, which is not just 'ours'. Lest you think I could simply get some new socks, that mode of response is not available to

⁹ I work with the notion of response-ability in the Ontomanual.

¹⁰ Queer Theory offers potential ways to expand this discussion which I do not pursue here. In fact, mending could be framed generatively as a queer material practice following, in particular, the work of Elizabeth Freeman (2010) and Eve Sedgwick (2003) on queer time, Eve Sedgwick also on reparative justice, Lauren Berlant and Katie Stewart on queer affect, Heather Love (2007, 2013) on the politics of refusal, and José Esteban Muñoz (2009) on queer utopia, among others.

¹¹ I return later to the abyss with Astrid Schrader and Kathryn Yusoff.

me (see chapter three), in the same sense that we can't ditch this world for a new one. Humans have a daunting asymmetric responsibility to keep fixing the material arrangements of the more than human world if we want to maintain a level of liveable cohabitation with our more than human others (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017).

To assume this responsibility, the urgent ontological task is to reconfigure perceptions of what is necessary, desirable, risky, acceptable and enough, while at the same time unfixing notions of what it is to be working, to be broken, to be useful and to be waste/d. This thesis promotes a material reordering of lifeworlds based on currently impossible, unimaginable modes of being and doing, together with radical reconfigurings of use-value¹² and extreme prolongations of usefulness. This requires both unthinkable degrees of maintenance, fixing, and making do with and without, as well as impossible feats of endurance and transformation. For this reason, the preliminary task of this project is to 'mend the sensible.'



The phone in my nan's sewing room, Wolverhampton, 2017.

¹² See Massumi's contribution to reconfigure use value within noncapitalist parameters in his *Postcapitalist Manifesto* (2018).

The sensible

'The sensible' is borrowed from philosopher Jacques Rancière's account of the 'distribution of the sensible' which is his term for the particular arrangement of the dominant ordering of reality (2004). The distribution of the sensible describes:

'the implicit law governing the sensible order that parcels out places and forms of participation in a common world by first establishing the modes of perception within which these are inscribed. The distribution of the sensible thus produces a system of self-evident facts of perception based on the set horizons and modalities of what is visible and audible as well as what can be said, thought, made, or done. Strictly speaking, 'distribution' therefore refers both to forms of inclusion and to forms of exclusion' (85).

In a later articulation, he clarifies this as 'the play of relations between the visible, the sayable, the thinkable and the doable at the heart of which gazes operate, things are named, discourses produced, actions undertaken' (2011, 242). The distribution of the sensible explains the experience of living in a bounded, shared world which is created through a politics of exclusion. There is no outside, there are no alternatives, it is held, because, although the planet is teeming with alternatives, the excluded parts are imperceptible. This, the only imaginable world, the only possible world, fits together in a knowable way with clear and determinate limits. Given that all that exists is knowable, the impossibility of alternatives is naturalised. The sensible subject can only improve her lot, or our planetary futures, inside the sensible order, with the existing sensible means. It is an ordering of reality which Boaventura de Sousa Santos describes more compellingly than Rancière:

Modern Western thinking is an abyssal thinking. It consists of a system of visible and invisible distinctions, the invisible ones being the foundation of the visible ones. The invisible distinctions are established through radical lines that divide social reality into two realms, the realm of 'this side of the line' and the realm of 'the other side of the line'. The division is such that 'the other side of the line' vanishes as reality, becomes nonexistent, and is indeed produced as nonexistent. Nonexistent means not existing in any relevant or comprehensible way of being. Whatever is produced as nonexistent is radically excluded because it lies beyond the realm of what the accepted conception of inclusion considers to be its other. What most fundamentally characterizes abyssal thinking is thus the impossibility of the

co-presence of the two sides of the line. To the extent that it prevails, this side of the line only prevails by exhausting the field of relevant reality. Beyond it, there is only nonexistence, invisibility, non-dialectical absence (2007, 1).

The sensible order, then, is an ontological mapping of the entire perceptual contents of a given world. In Rancière's most succinct framing, it is 'the world you are given' (Rancière in Dasgupta 2008, 71), the givenness within which all else in a world is understood. The sensible governs not only *how* a world is understood but what indeed *can* be understood within it. Everything which is excluded from the sensible is rendered insensible in absolute terms. The sensible is the only knowable, thinkable, possible world because it comprises *all* the worldly phenomena which are *perceived* to matter and *perceived* to exist. By sensible sleight of hand, the insensible simply unexists (de Sousa Santos 2007).¹³ The sensible conquers the whole of reality. No other forms of thought are 'available to think with' (Haraway 2016, 30). It dominates our field of possibility and radically limits how we can inhabit a world. It excludes all the imperceptible possibilities for what we and matter can become.

There are innumerable sensible orders, all in ongoing flux. My particular use of 'the sensible,' however, refers to the dominant ordering of reality which is currently available to sense perception in my UK location.¹⁴ The particular world that has been given to us in the Global North is that of global capitalism, a given world now thickly blanketed in neoliberal ideology. It is the sensible world in which this research arose and, for the most part, the world it will be read from. In this thesis the sensible is a repeated figure which works as an adjective and as a noun, as shorthand for the givenness of the ordering of reality in neoliberal capitalism. Its nuanced meaning infers the condition of perceptual stuckness of those subjects who are sucked into and suspended inside the sensible order. The activist intent of this work is to escape this sensible impasse.

¹³ I subsequently use 'to unexist' as a verb in the sense of 'to make a material possibility unavailable to sense perception, as if it didn't materially exist.'

¹⁴ This is not to pin down a particular composition of the sensible, as the sensible order has no fixity, but rather to identify a pervasive and dominant characteristic. In fact, the composition of the sensible order has shifted noticeably in the course of writing, but its core meaning in my working usage is intact, the sensible is still *for* capital.



Wall fan, La Víbora, Havana, 2013.

By the 'sensible order,' then, I refer specifically to the ordering of sensory and material reality in the global political capitalist economy in the era of neoliberal governance. The sensible order is the set of current ideological forces which preclude engagement with the trouble. It is the ordering of the arrangements which support productivism, the growth-based capital economy, the neoliberal hold on all forms of life, and the pathogenic sensorium of late liberalism (Berlant 2011; Povinelli 2011). Elizabeth Povinelli describes neoliberalism as 'an ontology, a social project and a metadiscourse' (11). It is widely concurred that neoliberalism is a hegemonic project (Hardt and Negri 2000; Harvey 2005; Hall et al 2007; Fisher 2009; Purcell 2009; Leys 2001) or, in a different framing, a 'public pedagogy' (Giroux 2004; Larner 2000, in Purcell 2009, 141). It goes beyond being a form of economic organisation and is instead a hijacking of reality, an ordering so absolute that it has created a stranglehold over sensory and material conditions of life. There is no critical distance to apprehend the present, it's an all-encompassing lifeworld (Jameson 1984, Sandoval 2000), the 'regime of life control' (Papadopoulos et al 2008, 86), the 'organizing principle of almost everything' (Graeber 2011a, 376). In the sensible order, the dominant sensible logic makes perfect sense, it is the 'common sense,' 'natural' response (Hall et al 2007), regardless of the damage it may wreak, even when we are aware of the damage taking place. If capitalism had already created a world in which its subjects dedicated themselves wholeheartedly to perpetuating a lethal logic of growth, neoliberalism has devised a cryptoworld so

disorienting that it is impossible to see its own logic, and from which it is seemingly impossible to escape (Purcell 2014). In David Graeber's words, neoliberalism is 'a vast bureaucratic apparatus for the creation and maintenance of hopelessness, a giant machine designed, first and foremost, to destroy any sense of possible alternative futures' (2011a, 382).

I focus specifically on the sensible order as a mattering apparatus which determines which matter matters (Papadopoulos 2014b) and which matter is perceived to exist. A candid look shows that the only matter that really matters in the current sensible order is that which permits neoliberal capital to reproduce itself. Socks don't matter. Holes don't matter. Humans don't matter. The biosphere doesn't matter. In Karen Barad's (2003) words, matter doesn't matter. Or at least not if it doesn't serve in the value chain of neoliberal logic. Neoliberal mattering is an incommensurably monstrous exercise. Neoliberal economics is a material tragedy. The neoliberal system is not merely an *abstract* entity. It is not just a story we made up that has got out of hand (Harari 2014). It is a deathly *material* predicament. It is a sensible ordering *towards* death. It orders death and calls it forth. It is an entire material world in incommensurate undoing. Put another way, capitalism is not the monster we have built it up to be. Capitalism is a fragile system which can and will end (Purcell 2009, Connolly 2013) and from which, in the meantime we can walk away. As earth scientist Wallace Smith Broecker warns, the planet is the monster we should respect and fear (Wallace-Wells 2017). We can not walk away from the planet's wrath. There are plenty of economic alternatives, but there is no alternative planet on which to practise them.

The *sensible* responses to the trouble serve neoliberal capital ends, and neoliberal capital exists as deathly relation. The sensible order self-manages its deathliness by making as much of the trouble as possible unexist. It then separates off the unhideable parts of the damage as inevitable externalities, and counters guilt and anxiety by marketing ways to invite us to slip into something a little less deadly, or to make us feel good about doing deadly deeds. The personalised panda credit card offered to me by the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), for example, is clearly not *for* nature, nor *for* humans either. Its a radically asymmetric form of anthropocentrism which feigns human privilege. Human (and panda) supremacy count for nothing beside the exceptional status of the handful of humans holding the neoliberal reins. These few humans are the only life forms that the neoliberal agreement is working *for*.

Neoliberal mattering spells the end of the material foundations for life. It is 'structural genocide' (Leech 2012). And at the same time its sick ideology has become a substitute meaning of life for its servile sensible subjects. Entire lifeworlds are dedicated to its logic. It has infiltrated the most intimate relations in our social lives (Purcell 2009). For as long as we live the sensible life, we are living our lives *for* the benefit of neoliberal capitalism, over and above any other goal we think we are *for*. It is, Gibson-Graham assert, 'partly our own subjection—successful or failed, accommodating or oppositional—that constructs a "capitalist society"' (2006a, xvi). The available, possible modes of everyday life known to exist inside the sensible order 'reinscribe and legitimate' its sensible logic (Purcell 2009, 158). We *perform* the sensible order, day and night (Thrift 2005, Harvey 2005). We act it out as a mass choreography (Žižek 2004, 78). We maintain it. We enforce it.¹⁵

We are a mass of 'bodies committed to wrong or useless futures' (de Sousa Santos 2017, np), all of us doing 'the damage of the everyday' (Shukaitis 2009, 143). We do so because we sense it is the natural (Hall et al 2007), inevitable thing to do, the only way to be. We are trapped in the *idea* that we can't get out of capitalism when, in practice, it's not as impossible to do as we are wont to think. *We do not have to do this*. We do not *have to* buy new socks. We *can* mend the ones we have. The alternatives may elude us, they may require reconfiguring entire systems of everyday life, but they exist. We, who live under the oppression of the sensible order, can become able to respond. We can stop taking part. We *can* resist. We *can* refuse. We *can* escape. We can reconfigure modes of living and thinking (Harney and Moten 2013). We can stop being and working and thinking (for) capitalism. We can stop dreaming and driving and shopping and liking and eating (for) capitalism every day. We can start growing and consuming and relating and keeping and caring and maintaining and inventing forms of noncapitalism everyday.

Mending the sensible

[A]n understanding of how sense is enrolled into our habits of thought and theories of materialities is crucial if we are to create new practices of sensations and new sensibilities.

— KATHRYN YUSOFF, *Insensible Worlds* (2013, 208)

¹⁵ I pursue this in chapter 3 with Rancière's notion of 'the police.'

Mending the sensible carries multiple meanings and resonances throughout this project. It refers, in the first instance, to the impossibility of mending that which cannot be sensed. Prior to the act of mending, a troubled object must both be perceived to exist, and be perceived to matter. The sensible order dictates what is visible, sayable and sensible, and capital works hard to maintain the invisibility, unsayability and insensibility of all that which is detrimental to it. The subjects of the capitalist economy do not perceive the massive extent of what the sensible order hides, nor the tremendous and relentless work it undergoes to police sensible boundaries to secure its own future and to maintain its ideological stranglehold.

Mending the sensible is based on Rancière's key concept of the 'redistribution of the sensible' which is his conceptualisation of how politics can and does take place. In Rancière's view, when the boundaries of what can be seen, said and sensed are reconfigured, new elements are perceived to exist or to count in a world, *and this is when politics happens*. Anyone can perform politics in this way by unsettling the sensory parameters of a world and by bringing new elements into sense perception, a view that leads to the energising conclusion that *politics is possible* (Purcell 2014b). Rancière's politics of possibility is a post-politics (Žižek 2004) which bears no resemblance to party politics. It's rather 'a struggle over who in fact is a party to politics, over who can speak and be heard in political debate, over what the stakes of politics are, and over who defines those stakes' (Purcell 2014, 117). In sum, it's a possible mode of doing politics in a post-political era in which traditional models of both top-down politics and bottom-up political activism are widely regarded to be defunct (Gilbert 2012, Jameson 1984).

The figure of 'mending the sensible,' then, stands directly for the process by which politics is done. Specifically, in this thesis, mending the sensible is presented as a means of creating the conditions for mending and material politics to take place.¹⁶ This requires making new sense of the predicament we are in, in a significant shift of what is acceptable, proper, desirable and doable in today's everyday. To make new sense we must undo the 'illusion[s] of givenness' (Barad 2007, 360) which currently stand in the way of noncapitalist, more than human matterings. When new sense is made of the material predicament of population and planet, as new elements of the material trouble present themselves to sense experience, the

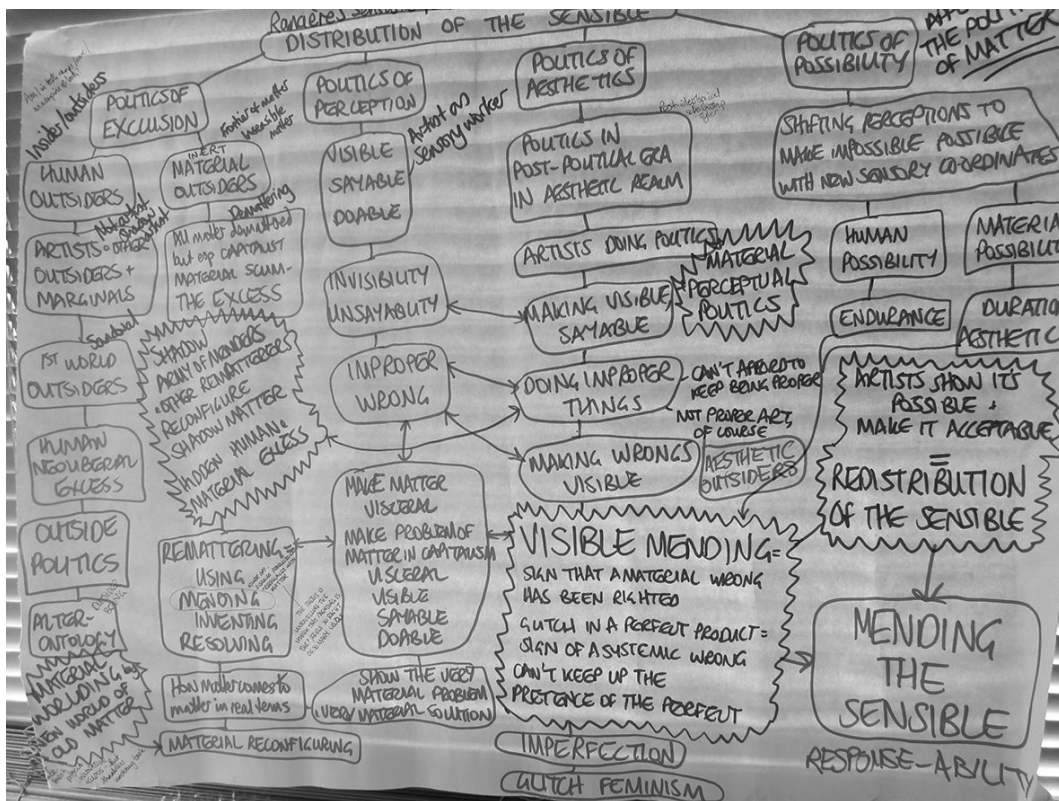
¹⁶ The idea of creating the conditions in which political action becomes possible, a recurring theme in the thesis, is borrowed from Papadopoulos et al (2008).

'frontiers of matter' (Papadopoulos 2014b) can shift in noncapitalist, more than human directions.

The thesis calls for a reordering of how matter matters in everyday worlds based on the vital limits of planetary matter rather than an economic imperative for growth. In practical terms, this means pausing material lifecycles and maintaining matter *ad perpetuum* in the use phase, and reclaiming pre- and post-consumer waste. This amounts to switching mattering processes from the logic of production to a logic of care (Tronto 2012, Puig de la Bellacasa 2017). My sense is that, in neoliberal times, capital's reduction of matter to market value has extended beyond an economic principle into hegemonic normalcy, and that, as a result, we have become insensible to the limits, possibilities, qualities, troubles, and dangers of matter beyond the logic of the market. I explore the notion of capital as a demattering machine with Papadopoulos (2010c) in chapter 2. It is for this reason, I suggest, that mending has become an insensible, unthinkable, impossible act in the dominant ordering of neoliberal capital. Mending has become scarce and matter has ceased to matter because of a severe sensible shortfall.

Mending can undo the givenness of the dominant ordering of the world in which its very existence makes no sense. Mending works, I assert, as both a *sensory unravelling* of the 'sensible' dominant order (Rancière) and a *material reconfiguring* of the myriad troubling holes. To mend is to *touch* and *think* with the splendour and tragedy of a troubled world. Mending breaks ties with capital as it builds intimacy with the matter that is available with which to rebuild a world. Every mend is an opportunity to become more sensible to the material world. I assert, with Papadopoulos (2010a) that, as a mode of material activism, every mend is a possible performance of capitalism's undoing. Mending proves that the limits which bind our sense of possibility in the capitalist order are pure invention, that human subjects can mend and broken matter can be mended to radically unthinkable degrees. Mending shows how much more matter can do, and how much further human subjects can go to live within planetary limits.

This thesis turns the floodlights on the 'sensible' because if we don't address the material trouble at the sensory level, I don't think we can arrest it at all. As our priority, I call for a great undoing of sensible thought because if we don't mend the sensible, we can't mend much else. We must mend the impossibility of mending and reconfigure the possibility of other worlds.



Mind map of the thesis, Lancaster, August 2016.

II

MENDING THE SENSIBLE: A THESIS

Conceptual framework

Reading Jacques Rancière (2004) brought a sudden clarity to my thinking and offered the thesis its central argument, as the mindmap above shows. But his work only takes me so far, in conceptual and political terms. In contrast, Karen Barad (2003) had been entangled in the thesis from the start without me being able to justify my need to struggle with the complexities of agential realism and posthuman performativity. Inadvertently, Rancière also helped to clarify what I needed from *her* account. In an unexpected and uncannily generative coupling,¹⁷ Barad does the work I can't do with Rancière, so I cut together Rancière's 'sensible' with Barad's account of how matter comes to matter in the following way: On the politics of perception, I think of the 'distribution of the sensible' together with Barad's work on

¹⁷ It is relevant to note their common genealogy in Foucault.

the givenness of traditional Western epistemologies and optics; on the politics of exclusion, I think of Rancière's notion of 'parts' that 'count', with Barad's 'phenomena' that 'matter;' and on the performativity of boundaries I think the 'redistribution of the sensible' with the 'agential cut.'

Cutting Barad and Rancière together sheds light on the *materiality* of the boundary practices which constitute the 'distribution of the sensible' which, in my opinion, Rancière's focus on boundaries as *immaterial* events overlooks, and it turns the problem of mattering into a sensory problem, which Barad (2007) is aware of but doesn't dwell on enough. It also helps to deal with the limits of Rancière's model for doing politics. In Purcell's (2014b) view, Rancière falls short of providing a theory of revolution, stuck as his model is in the *disruption* of the sensible order. Disruption is both a minor and a temporary political event which lacks the possibility to lead to more substantial transformation. Quite the contrary — disruption is just what capitalism needs — it's the rocket fuel for capital's ongoing reincarnation (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005), and capitalism itself is so disruptive that it is built to profit from its own fallout (Purcell 2014b). This is where I bring in Barad for the *reconfiguring* of material worlds and possibilities. Reconfiguring is an ongoing experiment in indeterminacy with the potential for escaping the vicious circle of recapture by capital. To this I add the inappropriate(d)ness of menders and mending in Trinh Minh-ha's (1998) sense of that which can't be appropriated, or recaptured, by capital. This is how I come to understand the reconfiguring of material and perceptual possibility, what I term 'mending the sensible,' to have political potential.

With this scaffold in place, I encounter the work of Dimitris Papadopoulos, both alone (2010a, 2010b, 2010c, 2014a, 2014b) and with co-writers Niamh Stephenson and Vassilis Tsianos (2006, 2008), which connects multiple parts of the thesis together and provides invaluable theoretical and historical insights on key points; the marxist legacy of material activism, the fate of matter in capitalism and the role of experience in political action to name but three. With these contributions I am able to conceptualise and validate troubling elements of the thesis, including my inclination towards outside politics and ontological transformation, and the significance of unknowing experience in everyday material worlds. In sum, their contribution across the thesis frames (and encourages) its political ambitions in conceptual and concrete terms, and validates my claim that alternative worlds become possible through an imperceptible politics of matter.

At the outset of this project I am an artist with a stagnant mending box and a research opportunity in the digital economy. I start out on the very margins of the art world, of research communities and the world of digital innovation, and I'm equally marginal to the mending box I want to bring to life. I am indebted to the feminist science studies scholars, the technoscientists, feminist materialists, third world feminists of colour, anthropologists, geographers, discard theorists, political theorists and more, who commanded my attention on literature searches which set out with no disciplinary north. In addition to the writers I single out above, contributions from Jane Bennett (2001, 2010a), Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2007), Silvia Federici (2004, 2012), Jennifer Gabrys (2012), JK Gibson-Graham (2006a, 2006b), David Graeber (2011a, 2011b), Elizabeth Grosz (2010, 2011), Donna Haraway (1997, 2003, 2008, 2016), N. Katherine Hayles (2017), bell hooks (1990), Stefano Harney and Fred Moten (2013), Michele Murphy (2015), Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2011, 2012, 2015), Elizabeth Povinelli (2011, 2012), Mark Purcell (2009, 2014b, 2016), Chela Sandoval (2000), Astrid Schrader (2015), Stephen Shukaitis (2009, 2016), Kathi Weeks (2011) and Kathryn Yusoff (2013) have helped me tear through layers of givenness, fuelled my ability to respond and, I hope, legitimised my improper scholarly adventure.

The questions I have asked of the literature have concerned which theories *matter*, in the most physical and political sense. Who are the 'theorists of possibility' who can help me perform *matterings of theory* in everyday worlds (Roelvink 2015, 231), who can bring the trouble into relation and release the hold of the sensible impasse? To this end, I have built up a toolkit of conceptual figures and language to think with, much of which I have come to internalise and use liberally. The following figures, in a far from exhaustive list, have enabled and shaped the thesis in fundamental ways:

Barad's kicking back (1998), intra-action (2007), im/possible (2010, 2015), matterings, reconfigurings, givenness (2007); Lauren Berlant's cruel optimism (2011); Grosz's becoming undone (2005a, 2011), indeterminacy of excess (2011); Haraway's diffraction (1991, 1997), response-ability (2008; also Barad 2010, 2012), staying with the trouble (2010, 2016), loopy materiality (2017) unavailable to think with (2016); JK Gibson-Graham's (2006a, 2006b) noncapitalism; Murphy's (2015) vexing of care; Papadopoulos' alter-ontologies (2010b), frontiers of matter (2014b); Papadopoulos, Stephenson and Tsianos' (2008, Stephenson and Papadopoulos

2006) excess, outside politics, continuous experience, creating the conditions for a thing to become possible, populating a space, may (or may not), inappropriate/d sociability; Povinelli's will to be otherwise, the threshold of being and knowing, (2011, 2012); Puig de la Bellacasa's posthuman ethics of care, relations and timescapes of care (2017), Purcell's affirmation, getting over ourselves (2016); Rancière's disagreement, disruption, the sensible, sayable, visible, and possible, uncanny, improper, wrong, police, talent to speak, onstage, stealing time, to count, to enter into sense experience (1999, 2004, 2007); Sandoval's insider-outsider (2000); Santos' (2007) nonexistence; Joan Scott's (1992) being constituted through experience; Stenger's (2010) nonhumans forcing thought; Yusoff's (2013) bringing into relation, and what a response is *for* (from Jean-Luc Nancy), which I think together with Star's (1995) *cui bono*? In addition, Connolly (2013), Gibson-Graham (2006a, 2006b), Graeber (2011a, 2011b), Papadopoulos et al (2008) and Purcell (2009, 2014, 2016), have been fundamental in helping me trust that capitalism is not all there is, that it's a pathetic thing that we need to, and can, walk out of.

There are three disclaimers. This is an unfinishable project which is presented in an unfinished state. No activist project or knowledge practice ends at a final full stop and I hope that any discontinuities do not overly disorient the reader. As is the case with any writing task, when new phenomena enter into sense experience and new theoretical orderings start to make sense, other elements stop making sense and parts of the thesis become undone. This being an activist project, however, my priority has been to create a politically cogent and urgent document which pushes the limits of activist thought rather than neatly tying up its own loose ends (or at least appearing to). For this reason the conclusion looks forward with new articulations, rather than back over existing ones, to keep working at the terrible question of planetary liveability right up to the end, as this is what really matters.

Secondly, due to the combined factors of the extended timespan of this project (seven years) and my full immersion in ontoexperiment No 5 in Cuba over the latter of these years (which has occasioned a near-complete disconnection from scholarship, scholars, UK and global events, and more specifically, from boundary

events on the frontier of matter in the UK and global context),¹⁸ my account may suffer from omissions and, at times, appear outdated.

Finally there is the inevitable question of who is the 'we' that peppers the text. My 'we' is deeply unsettled and entirely unresolved, as is the 'my' that precedes it.¹⁹ A personal pronoun is an agential cut that makes an exclusion between those who count in a particular 'we' and those who don't (Hillier 2003, 42).²⁰ I cannot speak for others and say who is with me and who isn't. The reader will count herself in or not. And nor can I speak unproblematically for myself, as I am not one, but some indeterminate, more than singular, more than human form of a 'we.' Every one of my 'we's' is indeterminate, and none of them are 'mine.' This is, after all, an experiment in becoming other so my own subject/object position fidgets and bolts around frantically. The world I write (in), and the self I think I am, can be unrecognisable from one day, one year to the next (especially when I travel to/from Cuba). A 'we' cuts 'us' from the 'Other,' (Trinh Minh-ha and Grzanic 1998) and yet 'I' am constantly becoming other/ed, and my 'we' keeps shifting to the Other camp, so I can't keep track of who 'we' are.

In each 'we' I cut together those who I sense to be with me in a collective experience; 'we' for whom the Global North is our privilege; 'we' for whom neoliberal capital is the world we are given; 'we' who can't escape from that world; 'we' who are struggling to escape, 'we' on the margins, or the outside; 'we' who refuse to perform the sensible order; 'we' who mend; 'we' who don't; 'we' who want to; 'we' who sense the trouble; 'we' who are subject to the trouble whether we sense it or not. 'We' is also the more than human combo of my darning needle, my sock and I; and of me and the critters and the abiotic traces of the Capitalocene currently inside me. My 'we' spans time and space. The thesis has led me to an extremely solitary place and right now the 'we' I experience is no more than my

¹⁸ I connect to the internet for less than 24 hours a *year*, in an outdoor public wifi spot, a car park with no shelter and, since Hurricane Irma, no shade. Connectivity is complicated by power cuts, poor availability of wifi scratchcards and caps on purchasing, and weather. My principal points of reference have been the Guardian online, (I load selected pages at an outdoor wifi spot and read them offline), and a selection of books and articles previously downloaded in the UK.

¹⁹ I follow Papadopoulos' (2010b) 'grounded approach' and Sandoval's (1991, 2000) oppositional consciousness.

²⁰ I'm grateful here for Purcell's explanation of Jean Hillier's work which, he recounts, draws on 'Derrida's notion of the 'constitutive outside', the idea that every identity must be constituted as much by what it is not (its outside) as what it is (its inside) (Mouffe, 1993). The constitutive outside is necessary to all social identity; every inclusive 'we' must exclude a 'they' in order to exist (see also Agamben, 2005)' in Purcell 2009, 153).

child, the thesis and I, but at the same time this solitude helps me attune to a cosmic 'we' of all time and space. And still, an earlier 'we' lingers — the 'we' I left behind, the sensible self I remember intimately but no longer am, and, most poignantly, a future 'we' beckons, the 'we' of the kin I am desperate to find, an anticipatory 'we' of those always already with me. This 'we' is my building site, this is the 'we' that's constitutive of alternative, possible worlds.

My 'we' doesn't answer any of the questions of feminist or postcolonial theory to which it is accountable. It just poses questions that are beyond me. The vocabulary and grammar we are given to reconfigure a world with is troubling, and troubled, and conspires against our best efforts to think and talk in inappropriate/d, more than human ways.

Thesis structure

Beyond this introduction lies an 'ontomanual' (in lieu of a methodology) and five 'ontotales' or chapters. The ontomanual cuts together research design, methods, methodology, epistemology, ontology and ethics by skirting these terms in favour of the neologisms 'ontowork' and 'ontoexperiment' which are more generative devices for explaining this particular project. The ontomanual is a methodology for the reordering of everyday life based on the refusal of the dominant order. I am an *ontoworker*, an affirmation borne of dis-identification with the roles of artist, activist and researcher. I live in disagreement with the sensible order's material wrongs. *Ontowork* is an everyday, more than human, sensory and material labour which tests out alter-ontologies by living in/as experiment.²¹

Following the ontomanual, the ontotales flesh out the details of my experiments in living as if matter matters, in/as an alter-ontological construction site. They are diffracted onto-ethnographical accounts of cutting myself apart from the sensible force field which draw the reader into affective worlds and political skirmishes with the trouble. Each chapter unfolds around a particular ontoexperiment. Each experiment's emergent protocol brings material entanglements into relation, undoes specific aspects of givenness, and experiments with material reorderings. The ontotales are not told in the chronological order they were, or are being lived in,

²¹ [A]lter-ontological politics, [refers to] the practices of new social actors emerging in the wake of the alter-globalization movements in the past 10 years. The main concern of these politics is to create different forms of knowledge production that act as constituent forces of political change: forces aiming to craft alternative regions of objectivity (Papadopoulos 2010b, 2).

but are sequenced to reveal how my argument for a politics of matter has emerged. For chapter 1, the protocol is to mend a suitcase of broken items on a trip to Cuba (Havana, 2013), thinking with the reconfiguring of possibility in material worlds; chapter 2's protocol is to run a fake cake shop and leave the cakes to rot (Liverpool, 1991-2), reconfiguring sensible scripts of productivism, gendered labour, excess and consumer desire; chapter 3's is to consume no more clothes ever (2008-ongoing), a pledge which reorders temporal and sensory possibilities for escaping the sensible world; chapter 4's experiment is to organise a symposium on mending with a mending ethic (Cumbria, 2012), and deals with the challenges of reordering infrastructure collectively; and the final protocol in chapter 5 is to escape the sensible order by making Cuba my home (Havana 2014-ongoing), deleting my sensible settings and reconfiguring thresholds of durability, vulnerability and risk.

The ontotales arise as an affective excess. They are tales I have been moved to write out of a sense that I am undergoing the experience of something inexplicably uncanny, othering, or wrong. In the main, they are not tales I consciously opt to tell, but that flow unbidden, often when I sit down to write something else. As the stories materialise as text, I do not yet know why or how (much) they matter, and am yet to imagine the politics they can do. The writing of the tales forces thought on what this sense of uncanniness, wrongness or othering *is*, and what it *reveals*. Compelled by the materialisation of these auto/onto-ethnographic accounts, each chapter pushes to find out how they can become constitutive of a political argument.

The chapters evidence a knowledge practice which 'tarries with time'²² by overlaying successive diffractive readings²³ of an auto/onto-ethnographic story over extended time periods as new layers of evidence become available. New conceptual tools and new waves of conscious cognition of previously un/non-conscious phenomena force thought over and again (Hayles 2017). The tales are stories to think (and do) politics with. They think of uncanniness and wrongness as cracks in the sensible order, as excess which forces attention to the trouble (Holloway 2010). The forcing of thought forces open the cracks in the sensible

²² A concept of Stephenson and Papadopoulos 2006b, Papadopoulos et al 2008 which I develop in the Ontomanual.

²³ Diffraction, unlike reflection, digs away at layers to givenness to reveal posthuman entanglements and generate more accountable knowledge practices (Haraway and Goodeve, 2000; also Barad, 2007).

facade, and chisels at the fault lines in the sensible order's foundations. It forces to the surface non- and un-cognitive layers of knowledge (Hayles 2017), and gradually, unthinking stories can start to resonate as political argument (Rancière 2004). Below I offer a breakdown of where, as political scholarship, each chapter is taking me next, and what I am becoming able to articulate through the political knowledge practices which are set in motion. These are the conceptual parameters of the political work each chapter aspires to do.

Chapter 1, (The mending pledge) on *the politics of possibility*, opens with the question of mending's impossibility in the sensible order. Once it dawns on me that mending is impossible, the focus of the thesis shifts from mending *per se* to the performance of political possibility. How might the conditions be created for a politics of matter to be able to take place (Papadopoulos et al 2008)? How can mending become a possibility? How might we radically reconfigure the sensory and material possibilities for things, worlds and selves²⁴ to become radically other?

Chapter 2, (Reality Cakes) on *outside politics as performative method*, traces the origins of ontowork as a performative mode of insensible knowledge practices. It provides an example of how, as ontoworker, I translate the sensory signals of non-conscious cognition into material practices and lifeworlds. This chapter shows how, in concrete terms, experience can materialise as the unrepresentable excess of non-conscious sensory processes, and how an alternative material lifeworld can be created, lived and sustained in saturation and unknowingness.

Chapter 3, (The clothing pledge) on *inside/outside politics*, is a treatise on escapology from sensible worlds. It tackles the very tangible hurdles which make perceiving, touching and constituting worlds outside of the dominant one impossible. It locates the performance of outside politics inside the material worlds we know and live in. The alternative worlds we strain to capture lie *inside* the physical boundaries of the sensible order, but *outside* its sensory boundaries. Flipping a world inside/outside is not a political imaginary but a reformatting of mundane practices in everyday material worlds, with the material resources we already have to hand.

²⁴ On the idea that a self is neither one nor one's own I am thinking with Barad (2010) and Irigaray (1985).

Chapter 4, (The Mending Ethic) on *mending as an outside politics of matter*, makes an agential cut between mending and repair. Material practices which fix and maintain worlds do vital political work which can either restore and perpetuate the sensible order (repair), or constitute alternative orderings which seek more lively planetary fixes (mending). Mending is material escapology from the damage of neoliberal capitalism. It's a material practice which refuses to work for a deathly material regime. Mending is an imperceptible political performance between people and matter which does not count in or for the sensible order.

Chapter 5, (Reality mending) on *posthuman outside politics*, tackles the trouble of the incommensurability of in/sensible worlds. It first addresses the task of translation between the sensible order and the in/sensible alternatives of my own knowledge generation as an imperceptible escapee. And then it confronts the abyssal relation between the sensible world and the more than human worlds in which I/we are deeply entangled. We are incommensurably unprepared for the everyday ontological challenges of becoming posthuman. It's a vulnerable mode of relating outside humanist comfort and privilege. Becoming intimate with thresholds of indeterminacy and risk is an inseparable part of performing posthuman politics in and for more than human material worlds.

Running throughout these chapters is the vital practical and political question of how, if we are to refuse to sustain the deathliness of sensible modes of everyday life, we might get over ourselves. What abilities, knowledges and practices might we need for performing alter-ontologies (Papadopoulos 2010b) in everyday material worlds. Each ontoexperiment brings me into intimate relation with a new aspect of the trouble, and forces me to try to get over a new thing. In chapter 2 I am trying to get over productivism, in chapter 4 I'm getting over capitalism as a whole, after understanding that it is always part of the trouble and never the solution, in chapter 3 I'm getting over it's nefarious neoliberal incarnation which hides the damage *and* all the alternatives, in chapter 5 I'm getting over it's humanist underpinnings, which elevates us above and apart from the trouble and the more than human world and, to conclude, I'm still getting over the Global North's pervasive sense of privilege and entitlement which rolls all of this givenness into one and entrenches it in fiercely defended human-centered identities. This expanded sense of the trouble, of layer on layer of privilege and imaginaries, is what, over the course of the thesis, my working definition of 'the sensible' has become.

Contribution

The question of ‘what is my contribution?’ is inseparable from the question of ‘what is my contribution *for*?’ This is, itself, part of, and deeply unsettling to, the bigger, pressing, but under asked question of what a scholarly contribution could possibly and necessarily be *for* when we find ourselves in a global predicament which is incommensurate to the traditional Western episteme. Our knowledge systems are not designed to help us work out how to cope, or to train us up in more than human survival skills, nor to escape their/our discipline to invent new undisciplined knowledge practices which are better able to respond. The ivory towers unexist the possibilities for alternative scholarly spaces to emerge, in earth bunkers deep underground and perched perilously atop towers of ocean waste — material possibilities in which ‘floating subjects [can] deregulate all representations of places and portions’ (Rancière, 1999, 99–100).

If the academy is able to recognise when humanism is no longer working for humans, (without getting started on nonhuman Others), it is unable to stop reproducing old-school humanist modes of response - like a proper thesis with a proper contribution to fill a proper gap. This thesis has abandoned cares of properness as it confronts an uncontrollably unravelling hole. The academy is marooned in tradition and delusion, and part of my contribution is simply to *refuse* to be complicit. To be able to *respond* to the trouble, however, scholars, (and human beings of all persuasions) need to reconfigure themselves and their work, our collective work, around the trouble, and this is what this improper contribution tries to do. It had to refuse to be a proper thesis from the start, and the rest has been an experiment in what else it/we can be and do, and how our experiments can start to matter.

My struggle has been to flip proper scholarship inside out by saying the unsayable and making the unthinkable count — for scholarship *about* the trouble to materialise *in/as* everyday experience. It’s a task which is of singular importance for scholarship claiming to be/do material activism, which is *nothing* if it can’t darn a sock or *materially* reconfigure a world. The resulting thesis is an entanglement of novel emergent method and indisciplined workings-out of theory, with an excess of impetuous declarations and inappropriate/d political ambition. Here I (over)claim the key inappropriate/d contributions which the thesis may (or may not) make.

Firstly, I claim no originality for my scholarly dissent, or for the concept of mending the sensible bar the phrase itself. My contribution here is to flag these phenomena up as im/perceptible obstacles which need to be tirelessly acknowledged and addressed in order for a politics of matter to get off the ground. My account shows the intractability of sensible habit and thought, in scholarship as in everyday life, and it documents the difficulties of reconfiguring the trouble as a phenomenon which touches our bodies and is *there* for us to perceive. Mending the sensible is a preliminary step, without which, all further action and thought is likely to be frustrated in a feedback loop which is *for* capital. Where my original contribution cuts in is with the method of ontoexperiment, its extensive rehearsal in real worlds, and specifically its validity for the thinking/doing/being of mending as experimental ontology.

I present ontoexperiment as a method for developing the ability to sense, to respond to, and to endure living in and with the planetary trouble. I understand this study to be the first explicit process of ontological experiment which translates across scholarly and everyday worlds, and which is conducted by living in/as experiment. The unimaginable innovation of this experiment is that it happens for real, all of the time, as saturation, in the un/folding and un/becoming of everyday life. This is fleshy, sweaty, dirty, risky labour, *before and beyond the work of theory and speculation*. Ontoexperiment generates vital and complex knowledges about how to live in a world which is not ours, about modes of being and doing which are for more than ourselves.

How this method works as a knowledge practice is to identify examples of existing scholarly contributions which it is possible to ‘do ontological politics’ with — and by this I mean thinking which can be pushed beyond theory to contribute towards *becoming otherwise for real* — and to test what happens when the theoretical and speculative propositions of this generative body of thinking are followed through in real worlds. The everyday experiments have arisen before, and independently of theory²⁵ but are diffracted through theory to force action and thought. Hence the loopy thinking processes to reconfigure a self, a sock and a lifeworld materialise back through experience into everyday worlds. As a result, the thesis provides a rare empirical body of ontoethnographic material in answer to the speculative questions ‘how can we...?’ and ‘what happens if...?’

²⁵ See the Ontomanual for my explanation of ontowork.

The thesis is an autoethnography of ontological politics in the making. It's an account of a process of dis-identification, refusal and reconfiguring, of selfhood and lifeworld, which has been intensified and forced through the method of ontoexperiment. With this method, physical efforts and affective energies are repurposed, and habits and infrastructures are reconfigured in the everyday. The thesis documents some of ontoexperiment's principal findings, openings and dead ends, and shows prospective ontoexperimenters how they might proceed, alongside the difficulties and rewards ahead. Ontoexperiment is presented as an available method for others to apprehend what really matters, and then to overcome the obstacles which prevent making what really matters the constitutive basis of everyday life.

Ontoexperiment also generates new sets of questions, and suggests new concepts to work with (as a rush of neologisms attests), all of which hopefully validate ontoexperiment as a knowledge practice better able than proper methods to respond to the trouble. This study begins to build up a practical knowledge base for the daunting, often unfathomable, task of decentring the human in everyday experience (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017), and of becoming otherwise towards liveable worlds. It hopes to erase the very impossibility of this task, and make it a perceptible, touchable, necessary and urgent aim that is within our grasp.

I also understand this to be the first study of its magnitude on mending. I present mending as an experimental ontology, a mode of doing, being and thinking radically otherwise (Povinelli) which generates material possibilities for reconfiguring concrete worlds. Mending describes a way for us to live and think with what we have, in order to reconfigure and resolve human needs within more than human limits. The study defines mending as the noncapitalist relation to repair, and claims a discrete role for mending in theories of maintenance, care and repair. It offers a particular framing of mending as an inside/outside politics of matter, a material mode to escape capital and its cycle of recapture which, at the same time, bodes together still possible alternatives, on the go, to constitute noncapitalist lifeworlds.

This material activist thesis is a minor shimmer in the starry sky of still possible worlds. Human kin everywhere are populating the promise that there are other ways to think a world by living and being materially otherwise. My contribution

overflows in ambition, and is troublingly amateur and incomplete. (There are no proper ways to work out the planetary practicalities — we can only make it up as best we can). There are more layers, more theses even, to write from the excess of this one. This is the warm-up, the groundwork, the prototype which I need to betatest collectively with others, to mend and amend, over and again until, perhaps, we can shift out of beta mode and get a firm enough footing in the alternative worlds or our making. This thesis is to help create the conditions for alternative modes of response to exist, both inside/outside scholarship and across everyday worlds. This thesis is for a mass of embodied cognition to be reappropriated in communes of inappropriate/d thought, in busy brigades of ‘wrongdoers’, forging improper habits across physical habitats, over fields of unimaginable indiscipline, in a lively undercommons (Harney and Moten 2013), where the sense of the old ways is composting down and the soil is getting richer by the day.²⁶

²⁶ I am thinking with Haraway (2015, 2016) on being compostist and Puig de la Bellacasa (2015, 2017) on soil times.

Ontomanual

INTRODUCTION

The ontoworker's song

This is the song I sing every day, in the shower and out. It's a love song to the universe, a song without beginning or end, a song working out what to sing, having to learn how to sing and what I am singing for. I am part universe, part song. The trouble flows through me and, like a musical, I break out into a rush of troubled songs, sung all through a life, all over a world. The noise is overwhelming, far bigger than me, but agonisingly, it falls as earthly silence. I rehearse over and over again. I am an imperceptible body of dissonance struggling to articulate a tune, a trouble, a world. I cut myself apart to find new parts and turn my song inside-out, outside-in, until there it is, a melody, a canon outside all canons which lives deep inside all kin. It's the unthinkable unison of our multiple parts singing together in the ongoing performance of the world.

The ontoworker's song defies representation in the old-world format to which this account is obliged. In its capture, it can fade out or escape. The text follows its cadences as honestly as possible, trusting that, on the inside/outside, an entirely other way of singing a universe exists. If you too are singing a world together, you can recognise our tune. The melody is incommensurate to translation, but some of the verses materialise as words. This body of writing is a practice, to gather fleshy bodies and force thoughts. The melody is the excess, the politics that materialises in the things that can't be said as we perform our selves and our worlds inside-out.²⁷

²⁷ For this formulation, I am indebted to Papadopoulos, Stephenson and Tsianos (2008) to think with the tensions of unrepresentability and imperceptibility, and to trust in that which may or may not exist, and, together with Barad, Haraway and Hayles, the experience of becoming no-one and everyone in a more than human outside politics. I specifically reference Barad's 'love song to the universe' (2007, 395) and 'ongoing performance of the world' (ibid); Tsing's 'rush of troubled stories' (2015); Phelan's 'excess heard as silence among riots of sound' (1993, 27); Rancière's parts and noise, and Havana-based musician David D Omni's line 'although I sing in the shower, the message is universal' (Yo pensé, Recopilando Historias).



Self portrait in the bathroom mirror, Lancaster, 2012

She does politics by introducing what is outside of politics

... The performance moves people. Her politics are effective.

— NIAMH STEPHENSON & DIMITRIS PAPADOPOULOS, *Outside Politics/Continuous Experience* (2006b, 440; 443)

Her allegiance — we might say, her only allegiance — is to the future she is birthing ... She respects and interacts with material forces, recognizing them as the foundations from which life springs; most of all, she wants to use her capabilities, conscious and nonconscious, to preserve, enhance and evolve the planetary cognitive ecology as it continues to transform, grow and flourish.

— KATHERINE HAYLES, *Unthought* (2017, 200)

Why does this person strive to remain otherwise - to speak truth at the threshold of being?

— ELIZABETH POVINELLI, *The Will to Be Otherwise/The Effort of Endurance* (2012, 471)

Emancipation would be about creating for [oneself] a new body, a new lived world.

— JACQUES RANCIÈRE, *Art is going elsewhere. And politics has to catch it* (Dasgupta 2008, 71)

But they had to remake themselves to do this.

— JK GIBSON-GRAHAM, *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It)* (2006a, xvi)

Ontowork as troubling methodology

Ontowork: A saturated mode of being, thinking and living in/as:
trouble

im/possibility

question

experiment

rehearsal

opposition

incommensurability

indeterminacy

vulnerability

excess

risk

I live in/as an incommensurate phenomenon called *ontowork*²⁸ which exists outside of the sensible boundaries of methodology. This is how I can best describe what I am and what I do. In this ontomanual, I propose ontowork as a possible mode of being, doing and knowing to develop response-ability for planetary liveability. Ontowork, and its principal methodological tool, *ontoexperiment*, have the capacity to test out possibilities for how else we and worlds can be. Ontowork works to erase the givenness of the sensible order as it materialises in everyday experience. It can make perceptual limits of im/possibility vanish *and* can make in/sensible alternatives materialise in/as fleshy bodies and concrete worlds. If there is a mode of action capable of taking on the complex ambition of ‘mending the sensible,’ I propose that it is this.

Ontowork is an *unintentional* and indeterminate methodology which I (un)know inside out, it’s what I’ve always already been doing, but is fiendishly difficult to step outside of to describe the forms that it takes. I did not choose to be an ontoworker. I never knowingly agreed to be part of such a complex methodological operation. The methodology I now know as ontowork appeared in its incommensurability when I started pulling on the question of what it is that I do. As I/we unravelled, the chance of a quick response came undone. Simply, and troublingly, ontowork is an unknowing sensory and material practice which flows through everyday

²⁸ If others have presented performative ontological labour before me, I have only found calls for it (Gibson-Graham 2006a) and not examples of it.

experience. Then in addition, as ontoworker, I *intentionally* put experience to work as a knowledge practice by initiating specific ontoexperiments to force new possibilities into existence. An imperceptible more than human politics materialises through my everyday decisions and gestures. I'm a fleshy cogniser translating nonconscious cognitions into more than human material worlds.

This mode of scholarship is wildly over-demanding and un(der)-rehearsed on multiple counts, even in a posthumanist feminist scaffold. I understand ontowork principally with Karen Barad's posthuman performativity (2003, 2007) and Niamh Stephenson and Dimitris Papadopoulos' continuous experience/outside politics (2006b, also Papadopoulos et al 2008), with decisive insights from cultural theorist N. Katherine Hayles (2016), anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli (2011, 2012) and performance theorist Peggy Phelan (1993). Epistemologically, it's based on a tricky triangulation between a more than human understanding of experience, (Whitehead, via Stengers and Gabrys 2012), nonconscious modes of cognition which are barely explored in feminist theory, or indeed elsewhere (Hayles 2017), and experiential knowing, which has been both fundamental to, but heavily problematised in, feminist thinking (Scott 1992, Rose 1996, Papadopoulos et al 2008, Lykke 2010) and performance studies (Zarrilli 2001). And then it claims that this more than human un/knowing experience can perform more than human politics in real life concrete contexts at a time when the hopes for alternative political projects have been long dismissed (Jameson 1984, Gilbert 2008, Graeber 2011). I insist on chasing modes of political possibility because this is, first and foremost, material activist scholarship, which is redundant if it can't escape the confines of theory, into worlds.

As for conducting political inquiry based on personal experience today, my strong sense is that processes of decentering human experience require our urgent attention (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017) because it creates a subjective vacuum. If anything, we need to be self-obsessing²⁹ with novel posthuman subjectivities in a new 'politics of the subject' (Gibson-Graham 2006a, xv; Roelvink 2015, 226). We must think afresh our not-one-not-selfness and to account for experience of our inseparability from worlds (Barad 2007). My own forays into posthuman auto/ontoethnography (see chapter 5) open up important questions about the givenness of anthropocentrism

²⁹ As Purcell also says in the context of escaping neoliberal capital's domination of subjectivity (2016).

and the subjective vacuum that a shift into becoming a posthuman no-one/everyone creates (see Papadopoulos et al 2008, 79). Of all the critiques which question the validity of the standard, ie humanist, 'personal is political', the most pertinent here is the observation that, while this was initially a powerful feminist move, neoliberal governance has captured the realm of the personal for its own ends. Experience has been hijacked by sensible regimes of auto-regulation and disabled as a mode of doing politics (Papadopoulos et al 2008). Ontowork scales the hurdle of the sheer impossibility of political action in the sensible order by materialising imperceptibly as 'outside politics', in new political formations of bodies and worlds (Stephenson and Papadopoulos 2006b, Papadopoulos et al 2008).

As a possible politics, this is a liberating affirmation grounded not in abstract hopes but in everyday worlds but, as political scholarship, its fundamental unrepresentability constitutes a new set of concerns. Ontowork is politics performed in and through everyday action which also materialises, in this specific instance, as experimental scholarship, and whose representation risks recapture by the sensible order, which it counters by being always already in agile escape, by performing in excess of what can be said (Papadopoulos et al 2008, Phelan 1993, Purcell 2016). Dealing with the in/determinate theoretical troubles of ontowork is the easy part, however. The truly im/possible task has been to determine what ontowork is. The incommensurable challenge has been to think an unthinkable methodology and to say an unsayable one, so as to make a non-existent mode of scholarship exist.

To do ontowork justice, that is, to fully lay out its theoretical and material foundations and explain its validity and potency — as concrete experiments in outside scholarship and outside everyday ontologies, or alter-ontologies (Papadopoulos 2010b), towards a new possible outside politics — would require a thesis of its own. My limited aim here is to introduce the methodological framework in which the project of mending the sensible evolves, which I do by presenting the figure of a fictional character called Myrtle (Stephenson and Papadopoulos 2006b). I follow on with the process of defining ontowork; how ontowork unfolds as everyday experience and as scholarship; and how it performs imperceptible politics. The ontomanual grounds the vital practical questions which run through the thesis: How to live according to one's theoretical understanding of the world, how to become other through ontoexperiment, how emergent lifeworlds

materialise through everyday experience. The chapters, or ontotales, which follow on from this manual offer nonlinear accounts of how ontowork and ontoworker have evolved, along with examples of how ontoexperiment is performed in, and performs, everyday worlds.

Ontoexperiment as performative method

Ontoexperiment starts out with the problem of not being able to respond to a problem. It's a performative method for mobilising response-ability to troubling problems which are resistant to conventional problem-solving approaches. Feeling *compelled* to respond to a problem, but not knowing *how* to respond, ontoexperiment forces a *possible* mode of response. If planetary crisis is the problem, and alter-ontologies are the goal, I propose that ontoexperiment is the everyday practice we need. Ontoexperiment is a tool for becoming otherwise which performs a simple question in a deathly situation: what would happen if I simply refused? Each new day I refuse to perform the same old world, following self-devised protocols based on dis-identification with, and refusal of, specific sensible everyday practices; ten years ago I pledged to consume no more clothes ever; I have pledged to mend my things; and I have pledged to escape the sensible order by making Cuba my home. The protocols work to bring material entanglements into relation, and create an ability to respond to a specific trouble by forcing new im/possibilities into existence and testing them out. Ontoexperiment holds open the possibility that new ways of being, new knowledge, new worlds, may, (or may not), materialise through the unfolding of everyday experience which is other to hegemonic norms.

Ontoexperiment turns bodies and lifeworlds into a laboratory of the everyday. It's an ongoing betatesting of alternative subjectivities and lifeworlds, and the possible performative undoing of the trouble. It's an embodied experimental process which explores how experience can materialise as forms of knowledge which perform political change. What specifically drives ontoexperiment are those particular modes of experience which are orientated towards change. To this end it prompts improper and unthinkable behaviour that refuses to do the sensible thing, behaviour that escapes sensible limits, that escapes as the sensible's excess. Ontoexperiment is a reconfiguration game played out between the parameters of the sensible, the possible and the excess. It's the generative struggle to regain equilibrium after a change in material relations has been forced.

In practical terms, ontoexperiment is a method for living in experiment (Marres 2012) based on self-devised protocols to force self and world to become otherwise. The ‘forcing’ most often occurs in the form of a pledge, which tips the ontoexperimenter into force-fields which compel change of some kind. A pledge sets a task or a trial which is governed by a protocol. I know pledges as affective outbursts, and protocols as a simple set of rules which characteristically occur instinctively and which hold fast without modification. In my experience, the protocol appears with clarity, in an inspired moment, is usually unwritten, and is followed for the length of the experiment.

The specific purpose of ontoexperiment is to change the deathly clichés of everyday scripts. As I go on to describe, my ontowork materialises as a physical *inability* to follow the scripts that most follow without issue. But, unlike ontowork, which is an *unintentional* mode of being that is always on, ontoexperiment is an *intentional*, targeted action to chase particular questions, intuitions, worries, or a series of political or ethical commitments. Ontoexperiment is an external trigger, a ‘controlled disruption’ (Marres 2012, 79) and a motivational device, which *forces* a change in the script. For this reason, ontoexperiment is an available, possible method for anyone interested in becoming more ‘ontologically inventive’ in response to the planetary crisis, as Haraway (2017) and others (Connolly 2013, Coole and Frost 2010) say we must. The uncompromising nature of the ontoexperiments described in this thesis should not deter others from starting off in a milder manner, as ontological toe-dipping which may or may not lead to deeper ontological immersion in projects of becoming. *Anyone* can do ontoexperiment, at any self-set degree, around any self-devised pledge or set of protocols. Think of it as a game of consequences played out in everyday experience. The game follows steps to refuse one thing, and then another, towards a gradual dis-identification with the greater project of the sensible order and, ultimately, escape. It is in this way that the perceptual parameters of the im/possible shift, and new possibilities emerge, and with them, new perceptions of limits and needs.

Ontoexperiment could be described as a ‘technology of otherwise’ (Povinelli 2012) — a set of tricks for otherwising a self and a world. I have gathered a nest of verbs for the ontoexperimenter’s toolkit: to disrupt (Rancière), to reconfigure and to touch (Barad), to apprehend (Whitehead, Stengers, Gabrys, Stewart, Berlant) to respond (Haraway and Yusoff), to refuse (Sandoval, Shukaitis, hooks), to dis-identify and

escape (Papadopoulous, Stephenson and Tsianos), and to endure (Povinelli).
Ontoexperiment is a method to develop response-ability, but there are two other -abilities which I regard as crucial to its operation. Change on an ontological level, I suggest, requires a triad of *sense-ability*, *response-ability* and *endure-ability*. *Sense-ability* is the ability to apprehend the trouble in the first place. *Response-ability* is the material work of bringing into relation, refusal, dis-identification and escape. *Endure-ability* follows on, as the hard physical and affective labour of maintaining a response, so that the emergent lifeworlds which materialise through everyday experience can be populated and sustained.

The remainder of the ontomanual focuses on ontowork, which has been a near impossible mode of being to unencrypt. Ontoexperiment, in contrast, is rudimentary. It's simply a long slow journey of an abundance of tiny steps. The fuller dimensions of the method unfold themselves amply through the ontotales.

I

ONTOWORK AS CONTINUOUS EXPERIENCE

Meeting Myrtle

One day Myrtle crosses my reading path, and in her, I recognise myself as ontoworker to an uncanny degree. In an instant my methodology makes sense. Myrtle is a fictional character in a film I haven't seen.³⁰ She is enrolled by Stephenson and Papadopoulos (2006b) to present their concept of 'continuous experience' which explores how political action can materialise through the excess and indeterminacy of everyday experience. Continuous experience, they explain, is an active mode of being towards change in an unfolding present. 'Working with continuous experience entails refusing clichéd subject positions in the absence of alternatives, anticipating and orientating towards non-existent, contingent possibilities which may or may never come about' (439).

Myrtle is an actress recognised to have to the capacity:

'not just to represent a role – but to be *in* the play, to move with the part, straining and opening new possibilities in the script, to put her vision into motion in the connections between actors, to allow it to emerge in the

³⁰ Opening Night (1978) by John Cassavetes. Myrtle is played by Gena Rowlands.

performances of others even in the scenes in which she herself is absent' (439-40, emphasis in original)

but, as we meet her, she comes across as troublesomely uncooperative. Her unscripted response to a troubling situation shows continuous experience as it happens, and the outside politics that it performs. Faced with the scripted obligation to perform a disempowering and clichéd response to the question of female ageing — which she is responding to both as herself and in her role in a play her company is rehearsing which is about to open on Broadway — Myrtle simply cannot do the scripted thing. She refuses to accept the single, impoverished option she is given to represent 'a woman's experience of ageing as the gradual loss of one's ability to have an effect on the world' (440). It feels deeply wrong, on a level she cannot communicate with her peers. She refuses to act out a cliché that is performative of a wrong. But the rest of the cast resort to a clichéd explanation for her refusal — her trouble, they think, is that she can't handle getting old herself. This, in turn, conflates Myrtle's sense of wrong and locks her in misunderstanding, *inside* the trouble, *outside* communicative relations with peers. She can find no possible alternative, but neither can she let the trouble go, she is living the sense of wrong at all hours of the day and night. The last rehearsal is a shambles and there are no routes out of the impasse. She turns up drunk for the première, forcing her fellow actors to work together on a new reading of the play which accounts for her altered state. Her inebriation forces a new relational situation and a new possible reading of female ageing forces its way out (ibid.). The script is reconfigured.

Myrtle and I share a particular series of qualities. We sense the wrongness in the world more acutely than others and, whether we recognise this receptive ability or not, we are compelled to respond. As Myrtle is to the wrongness of patriarchal scripts around ageing, I am to the wrongness of the sensible scripts which have us performing deathly material relations day in, day out on the planet. I cannot accept that this is the ending we have to perform. Like Myrtle I cannot *not* refuse although I can barely begin to formulate the shape of my refusal. My disagreement is experienced in an embodied sense, before and beyond consciousness. My inability to be able to express the trouble, and less to provide a ready alternative, does not deflate my will to refuse to accept it. I must fight the trouble even though it seems an impossible task. I refuse to accept that there are no alternatives, even when none appear to exist, and, as a result, I let in the faint possibility, out of the sheer force of embodied refusal, that something might blow, and that that, in turn, may (or may not) enable a new possibility to appear. Living in disagreement is arduous and

damaging to myself and those around me, and it may or may not be worth it. It may be experienced as anger, disorientation or disempowerment, as giving myself and others an unnecessarily hard time.

Just as there is no separation between Myrtle the actress and the part she plays, she can't switch the trouble of normative female ageing off, I too sense no separation between myself and the planetary trouble. Myrtle and I are in ongoing performance, a very different experience to the on/off of performing in a temporally limited performance.³¹ Our capacity to respond derives from throwing all our bodily and sensory resources at addressing a wrong and, in the same way, we endure the temporal and affective demands of seeing pressing ontological commitment through, because it is all we can do.

Outside the frame

I have affirmed myself as ontoworker after an arduous process of dis-identification with previous identities of artist, activist and researcher in which I only ever had a marginal status at best. I tried to define what sort of an artist, or activist or researcher, I was by working through hopeful lists. Sholette's shadow artist (2011), Ardenne's economic artist (2010), Bruguera's useful artist, '*arte útil*' (Bruguera and Nobles), behaviour artist, '*arte de conducta*' (Bruguera 2003), and, more broadly, feminist performance artist (see chapter 2) were some of the possible ways to belong in the discipline of art which was the closest thing to a home. But each presented unresolvable tensions and, ultimately, I realised that I could only define myself outside of all disciplines, with an exaggerated list of what I am *not*.³² That meant embracing postdisciplinarity in a radically embodied form (Case 2001, Lykke 2012), as belonging nowhere, with no-one to hang out with, no rules that count, no guidelines that matter, and, not only being outside of every discipline, but of the whole humanist set-up which creates and maintains the divide.

³¹ Performance artist Guillermo Gómez Peña made an observation of me, at a performance research festival in (University of Aberystwyth, 1996), that, even among performance artists, it was striking that I didn't stop performing for the whole three days, I fully lived it (personal communication).

³² These are some of the disciplines I have tiptoed through, squatted in or borrowed from: Feminist materialism, feminist science studies, feminist theory, human geography, material culture, media studies, discard studies, English literature, social movement theory, feminist economics, sustainable fashion, philosophy, political theory, radical pedagogy, repair theory, performance studies, feminist art history, critical art theory, critical theory, marxist studies, anthropology, ecology, action research, cultural studies.

I aim for the rigorous post-disciplinarity which Barry et al suggest can exist, one which 'leads to the production of new objects and practices of knowledge, practices that are irreducible both to previous disciplinary formations and to accountability and innovation' (2008, 42). Post-disciplinarity is a mode of organising knowledge production around a problem or issue (Lykke 2012) because, as Case says, disciplinary structures 'will not hold' me or my project (2001, 150). I work on the outside, 'at the intersections of materials and theories' (ibid.), in and with the cracks between matter and theory. Outside is who and where I am, before and beyond finding outside politics to state my case.

Belonging nowhere meant operating as an undisciplined scholarly savage in 'a wild place that continuously produces its own unregulated wildness' (Halberstam 2013). I am ever poised to commit 'disciplinary transgressions' (Lykke 2012). But rather than *lacking* rigour — rigour in the traditional sense of doing a doable, possible thing well following established norms — this improper rigour tries to do an impossible thing as well as possible when established norms become eclipsed by the scale and urgency of real life problems. The aim is to be response-able, not proper. Rigour both drives quality and polices the boundaries within which quality scholarship must remain (Rancière 2007). Rigour here is reconfigured as an ability to respond to the most vital and complex of planetary problems. What, in a traditional framework, is a *lack* of rigour, in a posthuman postdisciplinary frame is a messy excess, the undisciplined fallout of a frantic, passionate response to the trouble in experiments to retrain rigour to do political work. Rigour is no longer an academic question. Ontological performativity is required. Posthuman postdisciplinary rigour is a self-discipline for performing response-ability in and with one's life.

My experience of exclusion has an extensive feminist genealogy around the concept of radical negativity. Red flags asunder warn of the risks of getting stuck in 'the negative stasis of what cannot be seen' (Case 1990, in Phelan, 1993). But other feminist theorists flip the experience of negation into a site of potential, for resisting reproduction (Phelan 1993, 17) and for the political possibility of oppositional consciousness (Sandoval 2001, see also hooks 1990). From the liminal embodiment of being no-one, nowhere, it has been my task to affirm what on earth *is* this being and doing and knowing that I can perform with my eyes closed. I don't *need* to write a manual for how to proceed. I sense signals which tell me what to do. But

the obligation to represent this unknowing cognitive process in words has been by far the toughest part of this whole project, so easy to carry inside me, and so hard to consciously share. As this document finally emerges from beyond the cliché and cringe of pedestrian drafts, the ontomanual materialises through the pain of the journey to get here, without anticipating that anything at all will materialise in return, beyond the ability to say an unsayable thing, or rather, to apprehend that which eludes representation, and to try to make it materialise inside and outside the text.

Perhaps, importantly, what has been gained is the gestation of political possibility. Citing Johannes Agnoli's work on subversive theory, Papadopoulos et al claim that the 'conceptual and theoretical work' of negation and subversion 'obtains its efficacy only through 'laborious mole-work' (Agnoli, 1996, 226 in 2008, 80), precisely because insensible methodologies *unexist* in sensible scholarship. My subversive task has been to '[reclaim] a form of praxis which is there but is forgotten, suppressed and rendered seemingly absent' (ibid., 80) as a preliminary action which 'prepares the practice of escape itself' (ibid., 81).

Until the mole-work, the only cognitive understanding of ontowork that could surface as speech amounted to three phrases: *It's all one big thing, it's so much bigger than me, and I make it up as I go along* (Middleton 2013).³³ As scholarship, that just didn't cut it, but these doubt-free assertions summarise *absolutely* the entangled, nonconscious, more than human experimental practice which I now recognise ontowork to be. The snappy, brightly-coloured thesis, as it was in first flush, was a speculative activist fantasy scribbled across the innovation department's infinite supply of post-its. Crucially, it had no framework. When asked to frame it, I became bewildered and distressed. The word, and the request were uttered repeatedly. I was none the wiser. What I was being asked for still made no sense. My whole body tensed as if in refusal of fitting my whole self, my whole life, my whole world into a tacky, off-the-peg frame. There was a vital tension between *representing* my self/world and my *being* (in) it. Surely we are, and should remain, unframeable, was my nonconscious thought — whatever we are, we are *outside the frame*. We are the parts that don't count. I barely knew the work frames do. I didn't regard them as constructions which hold together ideas and stories and worlds. I

³³ To counter this, in the earliest PhD proposal I claim 'I am an invisible artist leading a life of performative experimentality,' which is uncanny to (re)discover now.

got that with Rancière. A frame is a 'sensory representation' which gives discipline where there is none so that a thing can make sense (Rancière in Dasgupta 2008). I was reluctant to represent or legitimise an indeterminate process within existing frames because I wanted to perform into possibility something that didn't exist. I wanted to sing scholarship in a new key. Only now do I see that my repeated refrain has become 'how people can change the sensible frames of existence' (ibid., 71), and that framing is crucial to my political task.³⁴

My blunt pencil embossed my despair deeper and deeper into the paper because of my inability, at the most basic level, to represent how my process happens and how it counts. At the first year assessment event, a *sustainability* professor, who had carefully annotated my submission, barely discussed the content and instead established forthrightly, with disciplinary rigour and patriarchal certitude, the multiple ways in which my (amateurly improper) contribution *did not count*. I had no words of defence, and a huge task ahead — to negotiate the insensibility of the trouble, the insensibility of my methods, and the sensible scholarship that was invalid to me. I needed to turn these in/sensible relations inside out, to find an insensible mode of scholarship that would make the trouble, and my mode of response to it, perceptible to me, a model of scholarship to mend the sensible with.

This text is an affirmative distillation of the laborious process of scholarly dis-identification which ensued. I trawled the weighty methodological manuals with prescriptive guidelines to follow — which are redundant when I am always already following guidelines of my own. I was trying to spot my own thing in someone else's account, so as to point and say 'look, there it is!' Some literatures resonated strongly on one level but proved inoperable on others, and thus became 'unavailable to think with' (Haraway 2016), such as first person action research (Marshall 1998, 2016) which is a mode of activist self-inquiry that has boundaries which my experience can't recognise, and Noortje Marres' (2012) 'living-in-experiment.' I sought out method's 'cutting edge' (Law 2004; Lury and Wakeford (eds) 2012; Barrett and Bolt 2007; Lykke 2010) and still nothing encompassed my 'one big thing'. I encountered shifts from epistemology to ontology at every turn, but I couldn't find anything akin to an ontomanual for how we are to proceed.

³⁴ I am thinking with Phelan's question of 'how to retain the power of the unmarked by surveying it within a theoretical frame' (1993, 1-2).

The Age of Mending

The art of disruptive innovation for new economies of mending

How do we know when the time has come to give up on a thing?

What makes us stop giving up and starting to care?

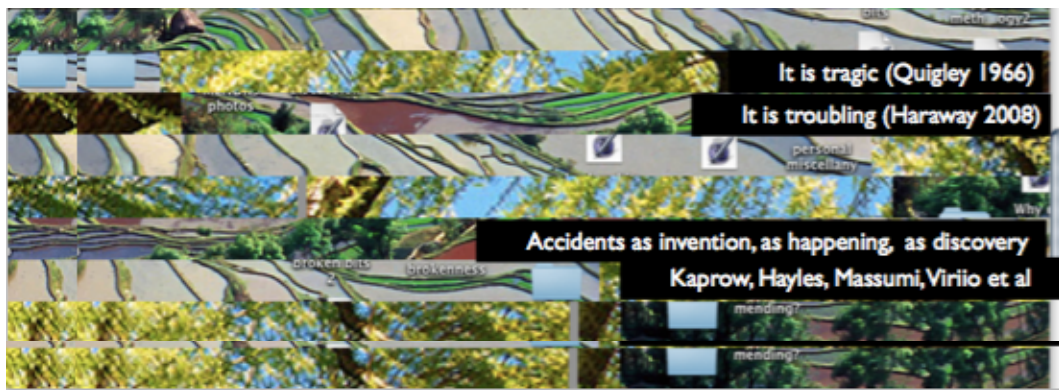
How can we maintain vitality without love?

How can we reconsider the no-longer as the not-yet?

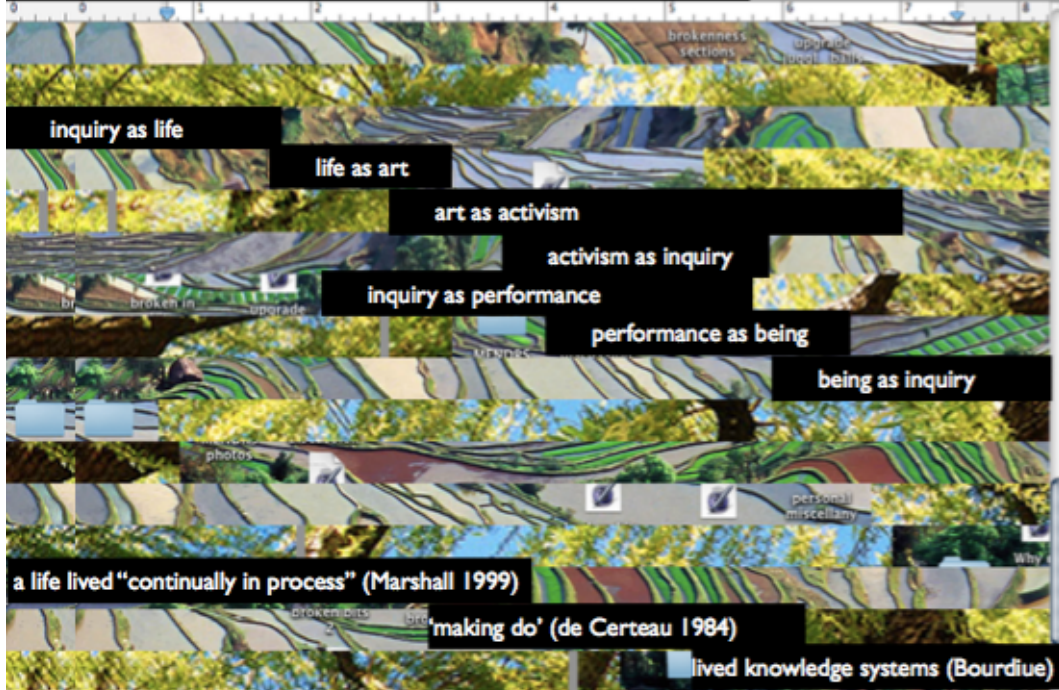
What does the act of breaking teach us about repair?

Mending is...

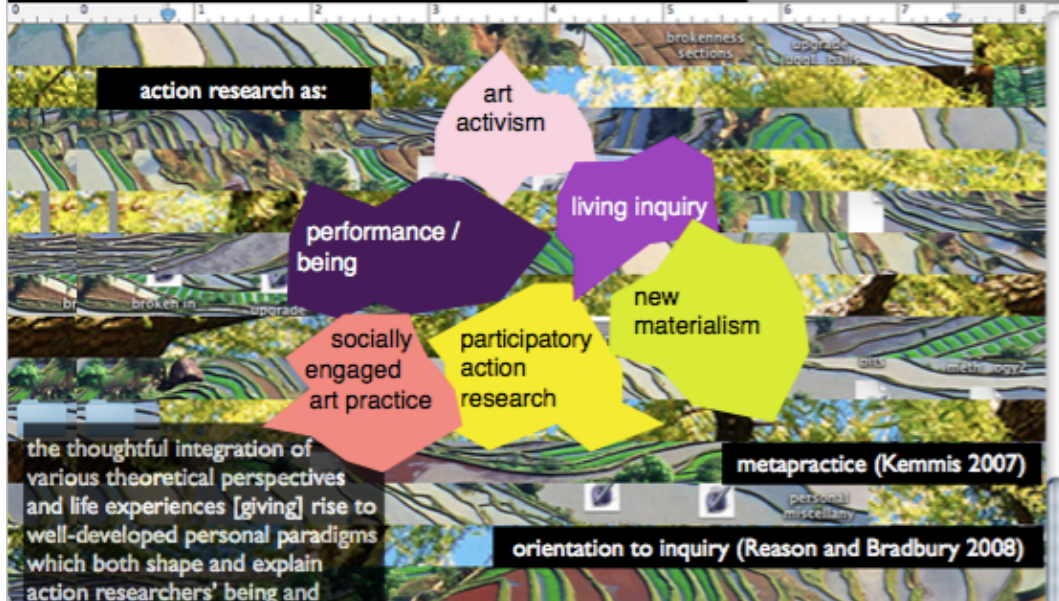
- the practice of things not going to plan
- ownership and control
- the unplanned maintenance of vitality
- the adhoc extension of purposefulness
- the reiteration of function
- resistance and intentionality
- a non-normative solution
- political, economic, social and environmental intervention
- material innovation
- disruption and interference
- creative violence
- neverending
- reenchantment and flourishing
- emotional labour
- touch
- enacting an object
- the performativity of expectations
- ontological transformation
- the axis of solutions (Suchman)
- making things as they ought to be
- the alteration of perceptions
- the fixing of relationships between human and thing
- the reconfiguration of realities
- never fixity, never stasis



Blending ontologies



Bending methodologies



Previous pages: Collage of screenshots from the upgrade slide presentation, Lancaster, 2012

Many literatures, nevertheless, inspired and informed me and gave me a firm base to think from - notably Patti Lather's (1991, 2004) feminist methods, Peggy Phelan's (1994) ontology of performance, and Baz Kershaw's (1992, 1999, 2007, 2009) radical performance and performance as research, but between their account of performativity and Barad's posthuman performativity, there is still a gulf. Other methodologies made me want to let out a full-bodied scream - and I still sense the lingering affect - such as the computer science (non)methods I was obliged to study at the outset of the funded research. In a particularly painful class, an hour was dedicated to the relative benefits of *dragging* or *pointing* - methods for the digital economy, methods forced into my consciousness when those I needed were forcefully locked out.

Theories for doing politics with

Previously, in the introduction, I recognised a list of theorists of political possibility who have helped me develop an argument. Here, I turn to the theorists who offer practical possibilities, or methodologies, for doing material politics with.

Paraphrasing Butler and Haraway, it matters greatly which theories we try to do politics with. Perhaps the most concurrent literature for transformative political action is the thinking of, and that which is inspired by, Gilles Deleuze. I had an overlong romance with feminist sexual difference theorists, and Deleuzianists, Elizabeth Grosz and Rosi Braidotti who, *conceptually*, tick all the boxes to think matter, politics, posthumanism and self transformation together. Ontowork is a labour of becoming otherwise which entails becoming un/done, mending is an untimely practice, activism needs to be affirmative (Grosz 2005, 2011, Braidotti 1994, 2002, 2010, 2013). These theorists appear to be talking about the transformation of self and world, but I could not do material politics with them. Their thinking forever led me back to Deleuzian theory and not to real worlds. Grosz consciously shuns the empirical and works on a purely conceptual level (2010a, 2010b). Braidotti (2010) is ostensibly more useful for activism, and has carefully considered individual response to sustainability and becoming otherwise. Her accounts of pain, vulnerability and oppositional consciousness are useful theoretically but they do not resonate with my everyday experience of ontowork,

and make me wonder of which, or whose, suffering she is talking. After a wild goose chase in Deleuzian-derived thought, I decided to dump them both.

Instead, on the pain and vulnerability of striving to be otherwise, Elizabeth Povinelli's accounts of willing to be otherwise, the effort of endurance, and radical worlds (2011, 2012) speak volumes to my own account.³⁵ She focuses particularly on social projects that have not yet achieved a concrete existence but persist at the threshold of possible existence, based on extensive fieldwork and academic and activist texts. On oppositional consciousness, the work of US Third World feminist Chela Sandoval (1991, 2000) is infused on every page with modes of suffering and of affirming becoming otherwise. I trust that these writer's battleground is the everyday real world and take great inspiration in how their accounts are grounded in experience.

Hayles (2017) validates my suspicions about lingering with Deleuze.³⁶ She reasons that, while he is first and foremost an ontologist (Grosz 2011), working with Deleuze's thinking on dynamic processes, transformative potentials and political action, as Grosz and Braidotti do heavily, 'veers towards the ideological' and gets stuck in a 'self-enclosed discourse' (Hayles 2017, 67). Ontowork is the antithesis to this, rooted in physical everyday reality with dirty nails touching, and digging down into the troubling matters. I doubt Grosz or Braidotti get their nails dirty, as anthropologist Anna Tsing does picking mushrooms in the capitalist ruins (2016). I also doubt that with them, I would ever get to touch the material trouble myself.

Barad for material activists

Barad provides the closest thing yet to the 'one big thing' I've been seeking ontologically in her important treatise on 'ethico-onto-epistemology' (2007). For years, I find her account, (part of her body of work on quantum entanglements and agential realism), too weighty to work with, but I cling to her thinking as my one big rock. Barad provides the theoretical foundations for understanding the 'ontological inseparability' of ontowork, which she describes as an 'entangled form of being - lacking an independent, self-contained existence' (2007, ix). One feature

³⁵ Like Rancière, Povinelli follows the genealogy of Foucault, who understands the very material burdens of becoming otherwise that as ontoworker I know only too well.

³⁶ On Deleuze, I reserve judgement. I am suspicious, but see instances where he is put to political work, Papadopoulos et al 2008, Purcell 2014b.

of this inseparability is the experience of living inside an ontic knot so dense that I can only perceive a small, partial view at any one time (Haraway 1988), which makes mapping the whole terrain so hard. The name 'ontowork' is, in part, a compact, everyday response to Barad's arduous ethico-onto-episto term³⁷ which foregrounds the embodied human labour of daunting ontological proportions involved in performing this posthuman theoretical stance. Ontowork starts from the premise that Barad's account changes everything in our perception of material worlds and yet, down on the everyday estate, materially and perceptually, everything stays the same. Inspired and unsettled by what I can and cannot do with Barad's system of ideas, I write her an (unsent) letter:

Hiya Karen,

I've been interpreting your writing as if it were a posthuman activist instruction book which explains how the world hangs together (and falls apart), how it can be changed, or more precisely, how it is constantly unfolding in change, and how the average fleshy critter like me can live as if matter really matters. Is that an intended, and indeed advisable, use for your work, would you say? For the radical activist your hardcore stance is singularly inspiring but it seems there is an incommensurate amount of groundwork required to pull it off as a matter of fact. The sheer effort of 'fleshing out' our posthuman performativity 24/7, is becoming my very embodied undoing. I might 'get through' it but I may never 'get over' it (2010, 248). What advice would you give to someone who, instead of 'reading' your account, 'performs' it?

I sometimes wonder whether I'm being a buffoon in taking your work, and for 'taking responsibility for [the trouble which I] inherit' so seriously (2007, 264). But it is really hard *not* to take you seriously as you are so wedded to materiality that I can't imagine your words ring hollow as no more than a great intellectual performance. I don't know anyone else who is performing as you suggest *we are all obliged to do* with their every breath.

'Responsibility is not an obligation that the subject chooses but rather an incarnate relation that precedes the intentionality of consciousness.' (2010, 265), you say. And then: 'Only in this ongoing responsibility to the

³⁷ Barad's hyphenated construction leaves the traces of a historical separation which the conceptualisation itself fully eradicates.

entangled other, without dismissal (without 'enough already!'), is there the possibility of justice-to-come' (2010, 264-5). That seems to me a big ask of the human part of the entanglement, given that most humans haven't the slightest inkling of their planetary entanglements and scant sense of obligation towards matter. And us material activists who care about material justice, past, present and future can never do enough.

It unnerves me that you don't appear to account for (or be blown away by) the incommensurability of your gravity-shifting thinking with the world it is *for*. How might we perform a responsibility to create the conditions in which a posthuman performativity and materiality is *able to emerge*?³⁸ Your account of the 'Quantum Eraser Experiment'³⁹ got me wondering. It seems a 'Cartesian Eraser Experiment' would be a useful apparatus to experiment with human(ist) beings rather than atoms. It may help us think with the im/possibility of erasing the anthropocentricisms which have seeped into every atom of human being, which are undoing our ability to respond to the trouble we're in. Do you think, Karen, that the foundations of classical physics and traditional epistemology which are 'written into our bones' (2010, 249) might ever be undone?

Yours in im/possibility (past, present and future), Jonnet Middleton.

Later I find Rancière who legitimises the political ambitions of the scholarship and justifies being, doing, saying and thinking in improper ways. Barad is one's of matter's greatest defenders, but she spooks me with her own material absence in her materialist account. Rancière, in contrast, washes his hands of matter by refusing entry to non-living things in his own distribution of the sensible,⁴⁰ but between them, I have the bare bones of an outside politics of matter. Mine is a very practical posthumanism learning to perform response-ability in material worlds with a roughshod rigour across the inseparability of being, doing and knowing.

³⁸ I thank Papadopoulos et al for helping me frame the question.

³⁹ Following the renowned two slit experiment which determines whether an atom passes through the slits as a particle or as a wave - the basis of the Schrödinger's cat phenomenon of existing in more than one state, particle/wave, alive/dead - the QEE can show an atom to be a particle even though it has just gone through the slit as a wave, thus erasing the past identity of the atom or, in a more sensationalist reading, changing the past. Quantum 'Erasers': Thought Experiments Made Flesh,' (Barad 2010, 258).

⁴⁰ See Bennett 2010a. As I show later, other scholars have to disrupt his own humanist distribution of the sensible to do posthuman material politics with his account.

There is a growing literature that falls into the category of ‘Rancière for activists’ (May et al 2008; May 2008, 2010) including two special issues (Papastergiadis 2014; Purcell 2014a), but less of an activist response to Barad (Savransky 2012, 2016; Hollin et al 2017).

I do ontowork like Columbo, the 1970s US TV detective, solves a crime.⁴¹ I bumble around living earnestly in ontoexperiment, a marginal character, not taken too seriously, not regarded as a threat. My skill is to ask stupid (improper) questions and endure the performance of being, doing and thinking in improper ways to generate knowledge that others perhaps cannot generate by proper means. And so it has fallen onto me, the self-confessed Columbo of feminist theory and method, to embark on writing a beginner’s ontomanual for those, like me, who take Barad seriously, and who also believe in the possible politics of Rancière, to use their accounts as a basis by which to perform posthuman politics in everyday life. Barad and Rancière conceptualise worlds in ways which are uniquely able to erode givenness in thinking, but they don’t work towards eroding the givenness that materialises in everyday experience. What they offer this project is based on meticulous, thoughtful empirically grounded theory, (Rancière’s (1989) study of eighteenth century workers, and Barad (2007) on Bohr’s quantum experiments), which speaks truth to my experience of everyday worlds (which other thinkers have failed to do, perhaps in part for the lack of empirical basis). But neither thinker treads the tarmac of the everyday world.

The on/off trick

Haraway, Barad and other feminist critics of traditional epistemologies have stressed repeatedly how we are compliant in and performative of the worlds in which we study. And yet, in method after method, the researcher, having accounted for her situatedness, goes home at the end of the day. There is a temporal and spatial inseparability of researcher and world, an invisible on/off switch, *on* for the day job, *off* for everyday life. Life without that switch is unthinkable. Even in performance studies, the performance stops, and performance is theorised as a finite event.⁴² The

⁴¹ I refer to the popular TV sleuth/buffoon played by Peter Falk.

⁴² In performance studies, the notion of performance is a broad one, including both art practices and performances of everyday life (Rosenberg 2016), and there are examples of performances of extremely long duration (Heathfield 2009, 2013). However, there exists a separation between ‘habitualised’ or everyday performance (as understood with de Certeau (1984) and Bourdieu (1977)) and ‘virtuosic’ performance involving a ‘specialised state of consciousness’ (Zarrilli 2001, 33).

available methods allow the researcher to step in and out of the world of study at will. There is a material separability between researcher and world, *even when, on a discursive level, the fantasy of this separation is foundational to thinking.*

From an ontoworker's point of view, I misunderstand how, if feminist theorists have long wised up to the 'god-trick' of positivist epistemology (Haraway 1991, 191-196) in which a bodiless knower can detach herself from the world, is this not effectively a trick any feminist scholar can pull off when she's 'not at work'? (I trust there are exceptions and I need to find them). I simply do not understand the 'on/off' trick which demotes response-ability to being an extremely part-time affair, unproblematically so, what's more. The trouble with the biosphere is *always on*, and *always worsening*. And yet we only address it as a day job, to the measure our sense of privilege permits us to get involved. That is still the only possible, proper form of address. We think it impossible to radically reschedule our everyday and professional worlds around the trouble, and so we let the trouble's flames lick our feet while we cling on to proper paradigms of life and work. It amounts to writing about the troubling worlds we perform, and then declining to 'Press Enter' (Haraway, 2004, 79).

Ontowork is a mode of inquiry which is always already at the scene of the trouble, and always on. I have no *off*. Ontowork is overwhelmed by troubling entanglements but nevertheless does not attempt to push insensible relations under the planetary carpet. As ontoworker, I am frazzled — this is my more than human undoing. But the humanist options for holding my self together, giving my self humanist treats or grabbing a disentangled getaway, just displace the burden of becoming undone to other humans, other places, other times, which is an equally discomforting thought. Ontowork, as I've been performing it, involves an uneasy shedding of layers of humanist skin. However disturbing in practice, I can't pretend my entanglements and response-abilities turn themselves off when I shut the laptop lid. But within the wide literatures which acknowledge more than human planetary entanglements, I see no practical advice for dealing with our temporal and spatial inseparability, for *stepping out of the ruins of givenness* of the Global North, or for constructing new subjective and material destinations for escapees. The gravity shifting accounts that undo received notions of planetary relations are haunted by a spooky absence of empirical experiments to catch up in practice with the world as we now understand it, and with the trouble which is always racing ahead. One could be excused for believing that the intention were to never do it for real (Roberts 2013). Haraway's

politics of location and Barad's posthuman performativity change everything, and yet we face each new day performing the same old world.

III

ONTOWORK AS PERFORMATIVE THEORY

Scholarship in/as material politics

My trouble is exacerbated by a continuous, crashing sense that, *surely*, the priority of any activist scholarship in/as a politics of matter has to be working out how to perform itself in material worlds. 'The performance of theory,' says Phelan, is 'the act of moving the 'as if' into the indicative 'is' ... [it] 'is to replot the relation ... between self and other' (1993, 165). Following Phelan, then, the performance of this thesis is for replotting relations between self and matter. The task requires a new game plan, a new scholarly and political ordering. This is not an identity politics to reclaim material justice. This is a politics to reconfigure material conditions. Material politics must *surely* reconfigure the practices and assumptions of representational politics. And yet, as Jameson (1984) predicted, new bodies of scholarship are intellectualising and analysing the material crisis.

The questions of to what extent, and in which ways can scholarship reconfigure material relations run throughout the thesis. I am mistrusting of the activist work that scholarship can do in general, given its burden of conflicting commitments, and I am particularly concerned how it can help reestablish relations with matter in the physical world. The political imaginaries which I suspect to run through some of the new materialist literature which informs my thinking is summed up neatly by Papadopoulos' phrase 'happy and hopeless posthumanism' (2010c, 148). My own response to these unsettling questions is to orchestrate an exit from the intellectual institution and, to the greatest extent possible, from capitalism, as part of my ontological process of noncapitalist mattering and worlding. In the process of formulating this response, I write fantasy letters to other new materialist scholars. Here I am searching for answers with Jane Bennett:

Dear Jane,

My motive for ungraciously troubling your thinking is that I am unable to let go of the question of what our thinking does for matter and I'd like to ask

you, as a kindred material activist, where your reckoning on the material troubles we face (and those we are unable to face) currently lies. I wonder what the tide of new vitalist literature has actually done for human relations with dead rats and electricity in the global political order so far.⁴³ I recognise that new vitalist thinking performs a disruption of the sensible order of matter by bringing hidden material forces into the light (see Papadopoulos 2014), and, following Rancière, these acts of making visible are the enactment of a new material politics. But as you say, demystification is not enough, so the question I keep returning to is this: Is the force field of this growing body of thought being felt tangibly in the physical world?

Would you agree that vitalist scholars need to work through the conundrum of how materialist thinking can materialise beyond text, of how scholarship might write *with*, and be *with*, matter, rather than about it? Do you suspect, like me, that vitalist politics may demand a reconfiguring of scholarship itself, of stamping out a new ontological terrain in which to operate? Does it incite new ontological commitment of scholars for physically starting to act, and be, as if matter matters?⁴⁴

To my mind, vital materialism is not an *opportunity* for revealing a wondrous realm of new material horizons and possibilities for the pondering of matter. Rather, if taken to its logical conclusion, it delivers us lorry loads of new *responsibilities*. Vitalism is our material burden. Now that we can sense, *we must respond*. Not only with reams of theory but with vital human responses of material action. No vitalist worth her spots can stay aloof to the plasticity of the physical world. I wonder if you are with me on this. I admit I am not, in the first instance, a vitalist scholar but an artist engaged in mending activism to 'Make Mending Vital'. This affords me a different perspective on the efforts of theoretical vitalism, and in the penning of this letter I realise now why a common feature of mending research workshops and symposiums is hands-on mending activity. While we make mending sayable in theoretical discourse, we are also about the

⁴³ Although I think Papadopoulos might be suggesting it has had some impact, and that the material frontier goes beyond scholarship.

⁴⁴ Like at MENDRS. Mending research events invariably include physical mending alongside and during academic sessions. I now understand this has been our attempt at alter-ontologies, at doing scholarship differently.

equally if not more important work of making it materialise. It's a small gesture but, I think, a fundamental one.

Vibrant wishes, Jonnet Middleton

Scholarship as continuous experience

Going back to the deeply unsettling first year assessment, my submission flows raw with uncontained continuous experience. The sample chapter, 'Brokenness,' opened like this:

I want to break things. I want to smash them to smithereens with sledgehammers and fleets of bulldozers with an energy bordering on violence. I want to crush and puncture and rip apart something so big that the very notion I might even try seems absurd. I have no way of getting a measure of it. I struggle to find words that capture its scale and urgency without falling into triteness and naivety. Undeterred, I dream up tactics of destruction.

This is not about mending. Not for now. This is about brokenness.⁴⁵ That is the only name I can give to the situation that this inquiry confronts head on. Brokenness is the problem, mending a proposed solution. Ultimately I want to mend, but first I need to break. Habits, desires, systems, structures. There is a daunting amount of breaking to do.

And then I will sit down and with eager hands, a deft manoeuvre of the needle, an economical dab of glue and a shrewdly sourced rivet or two and patiently, I will mend. And I will invite you to join me. Mending is the aftermath of damage, it is the creative destruction of brokenness (Spelman 2002) but for now I am not the mender but the activist seeking rupture (Middleton 2012).

I was (evidently) not expected to *perform* the text,⁴⁶ but that is how it turned out. My discomposed delivery was, if nothing else, a smashing performance. Brokenness

⁴⁵ I thank Lara Houston for bringing brokenness into mending research at the MENDRS 2012 research symposium.

⁴⁶ Even though this is a practice-based PhD, my mode of ongoing, everyday performance was firmly outside scholarship's bounds. Even in radical performance studies, performance and text are separate things (Kershaw 2009a).

poured out of the presentation through glitchy visuals (screenshots from my laptop that started breaking as I was writing the text, as did I after a broken relationship), material evidence of mending as the creative destruction of brokenness (trainers with knitted espadrille soles⁴⁷) and my uncontrollable crying at the end. *None of this the proper professor purported to notice.* The ontoworker and her labours were imperceptible. His eyes were on the inadmissible sensible gaps in the text. The insensible content was not mentioned, almost as if it, and I, did not exist.

Unlike Myrtle's drunken performance, my broken spectacle did not force a change. An alternative did not emerge. Limits of legitimacy and possibility did not shift. Politics was not done. I was treated perfectly correctly, others present congratulated my innovative ambition,⁴⁸ and supervisors were ever helpful towards a sensible end result (in spite of my un/intentional efforts, like Myrtle, to thwart that). While Myrtle's performance forced new relations between the cast and the play, my relations between the institution, traditional epistemologies, and my responsibilities to scholarship came out unscathed. And worse, my tears had reinforced the universal reading that I was another (female) candidate reduced to pieces. An improper scholar is nonchalantly dismissed as a poor one. My problem, they thought, was that I was not up to the sensible mark. I was *underperforming*. I was *overclaiming*.⁴⁹ I was foolish. I was wrong.

I am saddened to think it has taken a further six years to say these things with a degree of properness, and that I have not ultimately succeeded in pulling the final thesis off as the outside politics/continuous experience that, somewhere along its winding trajectory, it lost the conviction to be. As the improper scholar, I was driven deeper into silence (and self-censorship and self doubt) by the proper professor's booming voice, even though I sensed that his traditional credentials were riddled

⁴⁷ Mended by bespoke mender Tom of Holland at MENDRS 2012, <https://tomofholland.com>.

⁴⁸ The doctoral training centre for digital innovation prized itself on allowing students carte blanche on alternative modes of scholarship, but there was no support, emotional, practical or intellectual, for pulling this off. Most students stayed safely within positivist limits and many of those who didn't left or transferred out. As Berlant says 'we want to be at the cutting edge, but not go too far.' *Affirmative Culture* 2004, 447. At interview I asked what would happen if I got 'too radical' and was told I was exactly the sort of person they wanted to recruit. Hark the positivist alarm bells in the strapline: 'creating innovative people for radical change' — the positivist academics wanted to impress my body so that through it their innovation could materialise.

⁴⁹ My opening gambit was the utterly unsubstantiated claim that I was working towards bringing about the 'Age of Mending,' a claim which, substantiated or not, did not count as scholarship.

with wrongs.⁵⁰ *The brokenness was equally his*, for clutching on to a broken system of thought (especially for thinking sustainability with). *But I was the only vulnerable one*, doing the reconstituent work of picking up the pieces to see how and what else we (the people in the room, the academic institution, our lifeworlds) might become.

In the intervening years I have discovered science studies and feminist theory which has helped me make my case with much greater rigour, and Rancière (1991, 2004, 2007), who gave it a frame and a political legitimacy, but six years, even when punctuated by significant life events, is an inordinate amount of energy spent trying to say a thing — time that could have been spent *singing* my full-bodied song in the universe — especially when my theoretical contribution was only ever intended to work out how to respond to a *material* problem, and when the award of PhD is irrelevant to a project which is neither *for* me or *for* an academic career. I am angered that I have lost the confidence and creativity of indignance and have become all scholarly and mild. On the inside I am seething that we, the thesis, the mending and me, still haven't done outside politics yet.

I know this project can never be, or desire to be, proper scholarship. A proper thesis is antithetical to my argument, and it's frankly embarrassing to see how my improper, loopy inside-outside process is brushing up nicely as a sensible end product, a result for the neoliberal-academy-kerching. It's an awkward measurable of my incommensurably indeterminate ontological efforts in opposition of the whole neoliberal plan. Yet the tensions are unavoidable, and are put to work. I appreciate the time my funders/oppressors have given me to develop this project. I stole sensible time to plan my escape into the lifeworlds that materialise through it (see chapter 3). The result may be only a few fairy steps towards imagining how an outside scholarship, and an everyday outside politics, might be. But this is precisely how imperceptible politics works. This im/proper piece of scholarship is but a sideline to the real political event, an outside, undercommons (Harney and Moten 2013) event of the thesis's unrepresentable excess. This is *much more than* a cogent, finished, single-authored thesis with the odd rhapsodic refrain. This is one of many messy, troubling, imperceptible beginnings to constitute more than human worlds. I trust this is just the tentative start.

⁵⁰ I thank Ros Gill (2009) for helping me translate my silence and discomfort.

I wish someone had heard my cries as a ‘posthuman insurgent in the digital economy,’⁵¹ and precipitated my escape into the undercommons with a band of kindred maroons. To my credit, I did the part that few others manage to do, I have pulled off, and am enduring, a form of escape. But I have barely any insurgent energy left (Povinelli 2011, 2012). The thesis thinks itself over the finish line with a limp, holes and all. I hope it will bring its readers into relation with the trouble, in the way that Myrtle’s drunken premiere performance brought the cast into new modes of relation by responding to the new situation that her drunkenness forced, so that other critters like us can bypass the exhausting preliminaries, and throw themselves directly and whole-heartedly at becoming other for liveable worlds.

The unrepresentable excess

I’ve been tarrying with the trouble, living in and as trouble. The trouble is the hot coal smouldering inside me which makes me troubling to myself and my world. I sense its monstrous proportions, I take the heat, I digest it slowly — seconds, days, years pass — and then somehow, perhaps painfully, I manage to force it out. Tarrying (Stephenson and Papadopoulos 2006, Papadopoulos et al 2008) is a temporal quality of continuous experience. In my experience, it’s the delay between sensing the trouble and the forcing out of a response. For long periods my thinking is petrified in a cognitive jam, and it’s a hold up which may or may not be generative. Chapter 2 emerged after a 25 year long delay which, without the force of this inquiry, would have probably stayed jammed inside me for life (and, incidentally, it was the first part of the tale to spew out). Tarrying causes my writing to become jaded and out of sync with experience. When I’m having the experience it is unrepresentable, and by the time I come to say it in words, I sense only the absence of the experience, the negative space of an experience no longer issuing through me — what I come to understand below as its ‘disappearance’ (Phelan 1993). How to proceed, then, when the remnants of experience keep disappearing from the page?

The unrepresentability of experience kills off attempts at its possible documentation. The evidence: the harrowing memories of this ontomanual’s aborted, unfinishable drafts. The ontomanual almost killed off the thesis, because a thesis without a methodology is sentenced to death. The slow violence of forcing the ontomanual out has scarred my relations and my self. Violence I don’t even

⁵¹The term is borrowed from Papadopoulos’ (2010c) ‘insurgent posthumanism’.

begin to represent. Unrepresentability is not synonymous with unsayability, (which is another of ontowork's tasks). It is not about finding, or daring to say, the words. Unrepresentability demands, instead, a performative understanding of what writing can and cannot do, starting by relinquishing the idea that words could ever do justice to experience (Barad 2007).

Barad describes how a performative account 'insists on understanding thinking, observing, and theorizing as practices of engagement with, and as part of, the world in which we have our being' (133). But she gives little indication how this performative account of response-able engagement can ever escape *beyond* performance. For the question of how to *represent unrepresentable* performance in textual documentation, (a specific burden of this thesis), I turn to performance scholar Peggy Phelan's (1993) seminal text on the ontology of performance, 'Unmarked.' Like Barad, Phelan understands performativity through the quantum principle that measuring, or representing, an event fundamentally transforms the event. The attempt to write 'the undocumentable event of performance' translates the performance through the 'rules of the written document' (148). Writing performance flirts with recapture (preservation), the performance risks becoming something else, performing *for* a different cause.

Performance's only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance. To the degree that performance attempts to enter the economy of reproduction it betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology (146).

But crucially, Phelan claims, performance's very unrepresentability has a political potential which she terms the 'power of imperceptibility' (ibid). 'The challenge raised by the ontological claims of performance for writing is to re-mark again the performative possibilities of writing itself' by writing not 'toward preservation' but 'toward disappearance' (148). Interpreted in the context of this thesis, to write *about* material politics so as to *perform* material politics, and not some undesirable, sensible goal, means writing toward, and into imperceptibility. This project must live on in actions and subjectivities, not words. And indeed it has been my inclination, when trying to perform my more than human response-ability in a meaningful, truly performative sense, to (almost) disappear without trace. I stopped



Self portrait, Playa, Havana, Christmas Day, 2017.

blogging, stopped publishing, declined interviews, deleted my websites, and I am curious to see if this document can really exert imperceptible power. Phelan has it that representation

‘always conveys more than it intends; and it is never totalizing. The “excess” meaning conveyed by representation creates a supplement that makes multiple and resistant readings possible. Despite [or because of] this excess, representation produces ruptures and gaps’ (2).

Experience, performance, consciousness, and matter are unrepresentable, and from my account of these phenomena the excess escapes. Phelan asserts that what I *cannot* do in/with writing ‘is so much more vast than what I [can],’ that ‘it is impossible to “ruin” my song, my performance, or my material activism through its representation (27). In Phelan’s view, ‘[t]here is real power in remaining unmarked; and there are serious limitations to visual [or textual] representation as a political goal’ (1993, 6).

The constitutive excess

I sense that the political goal I am pursuing by trying to write performance goes beyond both sayability *and* representability. Once this everyday performance has settled into, and disappeared through, the textual account, *I evidently will not rest*. Representation is rather a fine hoop through which, to count as scholarship, a project in the performative politics of matter must pass. The ontoexperiments have not finished. The ontowork never ends. Along these lines, Stephenson and Papadopoulos are careful to stress that Myrtle's struggle is before and beyond *refusing* or *saying* a wrong. Her struggle is far more constitutive — to physically erase a wrong and so force an alternative into existence. Her continuous experience of being in refusal, and of being imperceptible, is what is harnessed as a constitutive power to enable outside politics to emerge (ibid., Papadopoulos et al 2008).

'Myrtle is in the game of neither articulation nor resistance, she attempts to introduce the players to another game altogether. She does politics by introducing what is outside of politics, by bringing the fundamental indivisibility of experience into play. Nor is Myrtle seeking others' affirmation of her own unique experience. Rather, she emits signals which might fire shared experiences of the continuous and contradictory nature of aging' (ibid, 440).

The constitutive potential of my own struggle is the only reason I can provide for enduring it. Myrtle's struggle, like mine, is her own and much greater than it. It is not about personal justice, comprehension or reward, although that is how it may be seen. Myrtle struggles for all victims of gendered, ageist exclusion, as I struggle for planetary futures and Othered matter in a more than human outside politics. What I struggle for is outside of the text. The real material politics is what remains unsaid, the minuscule details of everyday decisions and actions, the affective experience of needs and desires. My struggle is to sense that equivalent responses can and *are* materialising in the everyday experience of my kin. I live in anticipation of such response, and I have no guarantee if and when I shall sense it. My work is to keep labouring to create the conditions in which others can respond to the trouble in, as yet, insensible ways. This text is but one part of the task to prepare a landscape of possibility in which new conversations, new responses, new habits, new desires, new ambitions, and new relations can grow.

The constitutive potential of enduring a life lived in/as performance, as the ontoworkers and Myrtles of the world do, speaks to the heart of my oft-recurring questions about the validity of material activism as scholarship, and to the specific challenges and potentials of doing material politics in material worlds.

Papadopoulos is emphatic on this point in relation to his terms alter-ontologies and constituent politics:

constituent politics attempt to think through and *literally* make alternative forms of sociability and materiality (2010b, 18, emphasis in original). It is crucial here that these alter-ontologies are primarily engaging with matter, that they practise the politics of matter. This is probably the most profound dislocation of left politics that posthumanism has affected, a post-anthropocentric politics (2010c, 145).

I understand, then, that a politics of matter, in order to operate as such, has to be approached as a performative method. Whether it emerges in/as scholarship and/or everyday life, material politics, like performance, like ontowork, for reasons of ontology, cannot lounge complacently in the realm of representation. Material activism must acknowledge both the terrific tension of its burden of unrepresentability, and the potential of the power of imperceptibility which that unrepresentability affords. Material politics — if it is to keep being and doing material politics, and not be transformed into a powerless representation of itself — has to *re-mark*, to reconfigure the performative possibilities of the conditions of its material emergence. Material politics has to touch matter, hold onto matter, and never let go of matter, so as not to disappear without material trace, into an immaterial realm.

It is no coincidence, I believe, that Myrtle is a performer, and that my roots as an ontoworker trace back to feminist performance art. ‘Performance is the art form which most fully understands the generative possibilities of disappearance’ (Phelan 1993, 27). I sense there is a vital connection between performance, imperceptible politics, material politics and noncapitalism. My claim is that the performative methodology of ontowork is a powerful tool for doing an outside politics of matter with. Phelan sums up ontowork’s validity as a method for escaping the sensible order:

Performance in a strict ontological sense is nonreproductive. This is the quality which makes performance the runt of the litter of contemporary art. Performance clogs the smooth machinery of reproductive representation necessary to the circulation of capital (1993,148). Performance's independence from mass reproduction, technologically, economically, and linguistically, is its greatest strength. But buffeted by the encroaching ideologies of capital and reproduction, it frequently devalues this strength (149).

I am assured of ontowork's strength. It does no work for capital, it escapes capital, it remains imperceptible to capital. By capital's measure of value, performance is 'empty.' As a noncapitalist methodology, '[p]erformance indicates the possibility of revaluing that emptiness; this potential revaluation gives performance art its distinctive oppositional edge' (148). What's more, because it disappears, it leaves no trace for neoliberal capital to grab at. The resolution of the ontoworker is to be (in) the gap where a sensible self used to be. My performance becomes itself by disappearing from capital. The ontoworker performs her disappearance. I fake my sensible suicide and slip out of the sensible building. I have left the sensible building. Escaped. The thesis is my sensible suicide note. The trace that remains. I have become an escapologist, an escapologist of psychic fortresses and deathly everyday worlds.

Inside/outside politics

Her labor is as necessary as it is unwelcome. The university needs what she bears but cannot bear what she brings. And on top of all that, she disappears. She disappears into the underground, the downlow lowdown maroon community of the university, into the undercommons of enlightenment, where the work gets done, where the work gets subverted, where the revolution is still black, still strong.

— STEFANO HARNEY AND FRED MOTEN, *The Undercommons* (2013, 26)

I started this adventure dressed in a proper suit, driving a proper car to a proper job, and going home to a proper house in Dudley, in the UK. I escaped to study a doctorate, I escaped the university campus to work in/with a marginal community, I escaped the neoliberal UK to a crumbling apartment in the unregulated chaos of



Top: Brand new workspace at HighWire Doctoral Training Centre, LICA building, Lancaster University, 2010. **Bottom:** Converted office space, Central Havana, 2013.

central Havana, Cuba, I escaped the city to work in a vibrant patch of tropical (under)growth. As I sign off, I wear a faded dress I've turned inside out, I filter and ferry buckets of water, I work as and when there is electricity and gas, and I live in a rickety wooden house at the mercy of hurricanes and critters that can kill. This is more than an outside politics of geolocation. With each outsiderly movement, I exit a system of thought, a sensory and material landscape. This is what I experience as constantly unpeeling new layers of givenness. This is what living in and as ontoexperiment is. This is what ontoexperiment generates — a deeply troubling ontological phenomenon, the forming of a political subject (Bassett 2014) — a human escapee. Indisputable pulsating evidence this experimental ontology can do political work.

I become otherwise by occupying the negative spaces between all the things I am not (Bassett 2014). I invent the otherwise in the gaps, filling in the holes in my socks and the holes in my worlds. My labour spreads like insensible weeds between the sensible concrete, performing lively (but unrecognised, unwanted) planetary labour. We are not supposed to be here, we don't count, but we try to thrive imperceptibly, or sometimes we might just struggle on in a down-trodden way. When our existence is noticed we may be policed, killed off or cut back, because we are an eyesore on the sensible order's fantasy facade. We are the glitches that are the sign of a wrong (Russell 2012). We wreck the smooth untroubled enjoyment of sensible myth. But, like the buddleia on the vertices of Victorian viaducts, *our will, and our spectacular talent, is to keep sprouting back*. I am one experiment of many in the undergrowth, even if we cannot know what or where each other are, even if we cannot see or touch yet, we are looking for sociable cross-pollination. We are the undercritters of the undercommons, urgently underperforming a weedy politics by growing in the gaps. We are the energetic undergrowth of vital new liveable worlds. We will never be proper growth, growing for sensible ends. We refuse to grow for neoliberal capital, and its deathliness. We grow improperly in/as the more than human undercommons, or not at all. In our flourishing, the capitalist ruins become otherwise. What will survive sensible civilisation are the weeds, the abundant, vibrant lifeforms that will never count.

The Mending Pledge



Restitching the neckband on my cardigan while visiting friends, El Vedado, Havana, 2013.
Photograph: Liz Parker.

Aim	Mend a suitcase full of broken things
Protocol	Go to Cuba for one month. Take only broken things in a broken case. Mend as much as I can. Find other menders to mend the rest. Return with everything mended.

Jonnet Middleton's first, month-long visit to Cuba was a semi-improvised research trip based around the concept that everything she took with her was broken and had to be brought back mended, wherever possible by herself, including the clothes she travelled in and her suitcases. She accomplished this mission after spending her time mending and meeting other menders, the experiences of which she documented in video, photo and journal writing.

INTRODUCTION

Im/possibilities are centre stage.

— KAREN BARAD, *Quantum Entanglements* (2010, 244)

In this chapter I set up the problem of mending's im/possibility which the remainder of the thesis works to unravel. The chapter begins with the romance and the novelty of discovering the ability to mend. This is my first trip out of the sensible order to an exotic site of mending's possibility, but it's only a temporary escape. I depart from the well lit and wipeable beige tones of the neoliberal material regime and land in the penumbral material anarchy of night-time central Havana in a street lit sporadically by car headlights and the flicker of the *novela* on soviet TVs. By daylight I see unthinkable colour combinations where paint is available, bare breeze block and cement where not.

Matter articulates itself differently here (Barad 2007). I see a world that is crumbling and hanging on, where material doings and undoings happen right up close, and where matter can perform in unthinkable ways. I encounter mending's possibility, not in a hyperskilled repair culture, but as radically otherwise spacetime-

matterings⁵² which make im/possible material experiences possible. Mending happens in the cracks where I can't believe even the thought of its possibility could possibly sprout. *The leeway of possibility is ontological*, in what is thought to be mendable, what mending is, what is it to be working, and even, when a thing is a thing.⁵³ At the same time, Cuba breaks with sensible schema of what is considered a job well done or good enough, and when a trouble is 'resolved.'

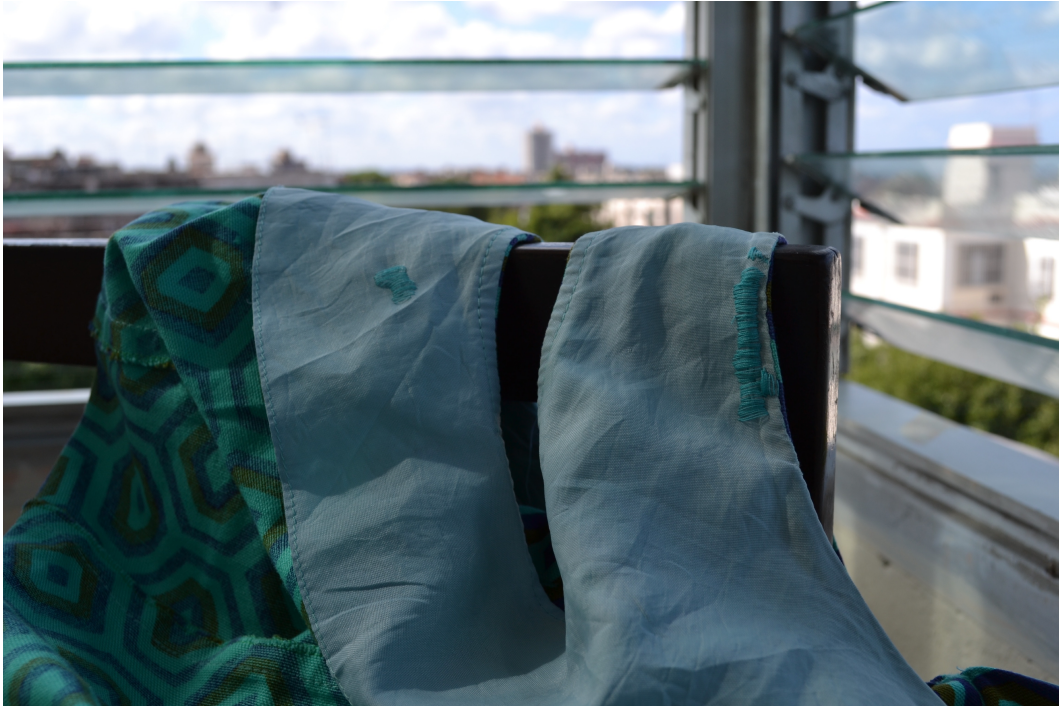
What counts as a seat, as glue, as rope, as a nail? In Cuba, half a breeze block on the pavement, a chair with no back legs (proppable on a ledge, or on a chair with no front legs), or a palmful of concrete fashioned into the base of a tree trunk is a seat, (often seen at bus stops and outdoor wi-fi hotspots). In the UK, an old nail stuck in a wall is, in the operational sense, no longer a nail. If a nail is needed, a pack of new nails is bought. The thought of wrenching out and hammering straight a rusty old nail is *unthinkable*. In Cuba, rope is any strong fibre which doesn't break under pressure, such as old telephone and electric cables, or plastic bags wound into a twine. A strong glue is made by melting polystyrene, with flour and water as a common back up. In Cuba, everyday questions such as 'do you have any rope?' or the commands 'find me a nail', or 'take a seat' elicit responses which evidence radically different material ontologies.

In the second section I present two pairs of vignettes, firstly of a neoliberal mending box which operates in the field of representation, alongside a radically otherwise world in Cuba, where the mending experience is anything but simulacra and an organising principle of everyday life; secondly a broken liquidiser which, to Cuban menders, defies impossibility, and living/working arrangements in Central Havana which defy sensible limits on multiple spatial, temporal and material counts. I turn to Rancière's politics of possibility to understand how possibility can enter into perception, and with Barad, I explore the im/possible as the possibility of possibility. It may or may not happen, but at least there is a chance (Papadopoulos et al 2008). The possibility exists where the existence of possibility was previously denied. That makes possibility worth pursuing. Material action is not in vain. Cuba flaunts its material im/possibility. I am in overdrive soaking it in. Cuba is the sensible order's undoing. The very next morning I start to mend.

⁵² This is Barad's term (2007, 2010, 2012, 2015) to explain that space, time and matter are inextricably entangled or, in her words, 'intra-actively produced in the ongoing differential articulation of the world' (2007, 234), and thus cannot be thought with in separation.

⁵³ Middleton 2012a, on the ontology of brokenness, identifies ten states of broken matter.

Mending's Possibility



Satin stitch repair to the lining of the Turquoise Backless Dress, El Vedado, Havana, 2013.

In/sensible world: mending paradise

[El Vedado, Havana, Cuba, January 2013]

Perched between thumb and forefinger is the threaded needle. I am *finally* ready to mend. I anchor in a couple of inches of turquoise ribbon under the fraying lining and, with satin stitch, I reinforce the tear. Turquoise thread on duck egg satin. I wallow in the luxury of the finish, and in the joy of this small act of repair. I am entranced. In herringbone stitch I go on to fix the hem, and with buttonhole stitch I reinforce the belt loop. Before the sun is too high Turquoise Backless Dress is in a fit state once again. I call myself a mending activist and yet I have never mended like this before. Indeed, it's critical to my argument to admit that I have hardly ever mended anything at all. *There is no need*, and try as I might even I can't find the incentive or the time. I inspire others to mend but can't defeat my own apathy as a victim of material abundance. I made a zero consumption pledge in 2008 to wear nothing but the clothes that I already owned for the rest of my life. But it failed to make a mender of me. By then my hoard

far exceeded what I can physically wear out in my own lifetime. The mending pile keeps growing but I still have plenty of wearable clothes left in the wardrobe. Mending is always postponed. *There are always so many setbacks.* To become a mender more drastic measures were required. I had to make mending irresistible and unavoidable. And so it was that I set out for Cuba in the spirit of a pioneer mending tourist with a suitcase of unwearable clothing in need of repair and a pledge to mend every last thing by my return a month later.

Here in Cuba everything is mended and everybody is a mender. I admire the fearlessness, the determination and the unexpected creativity of the ad-hoc results. There are no rules, just a basic instinct to extend the useful life of material artefacts way beyond what a visitor from the West, a capitalist subject, could ever imagine. I am inspired to put my whole mending pile in order. Suddenly mending is contagious, uplifting, spontaneous and easy. I sit in a former art deco cocktail bar looking out over Havana rooftops to the turquoise blue Straits of Florida, mending out of necessity so that I have something to wear, but mending also out of pure delight as a privileged visitor to a mending paradise. The belt loop broke as I was hurrying to a party, aged seventeen. I fastened a nappy pin inside the waist and there it has stayed in a favourite dress for twenty-five years, all for the wont of a five minute repair. Belatedly, swiftly, I have mended and finally it is fixed (based on Middleton 2014).

The (non)mending activist

I am the mending activist who cannot mend and this is the vitalist climax I have anticipated for so long. It's the embrace between fingertips, needle, thread and dress. My dreams of human 'intra-action' with significant inorganic others have come true. Barad's term intra-action signifies the 'mutual constitution of entangled agencies' (2007, 33), that is to say, my relations with matter bring us into co-constitutive subject positions. The notion of intra-action is fundamental to Barad's theoretical framework, as it is to this thesis, given that it frames the political agency of mending as intra-action between mender and material world.

[T]he notion of intra-action constitutes a radical reworking of the traditional notion of causality. I can't emphasize this point enough. A lively new

ontology emerges: the world's radical aliveness comes to light in an entirely nontraditional way that reworks the nature of both relationality and aliveness (vitality, dynamism, agency) (33).



Working through the mending pile as part of the daily routine — replacing overstretched elastic on my pyjama bottoms before bedtime, El Vedado, Havana 2013. Photograph: Liz Parker.

My fingers are magically engaged in noncapitalist busy-ness. These are the first few stitches of material activism, up close, as it happens, the first instance in which I have ever mended to any serious degree. The mending experiment was a radical device to make myself mend, and the trip to Havana became a pivotal moment in the thesis, and in my life. It led to the (possibly) lifelong experiment of living in Cuba, which is where the thesis comes to a close. In the next chapter I rewind to the beginning of the story, but it is at this climactic midpoint that the storyline begins, when I first defeat mending's impossibility.

I am the mending activist who doesn't *need* to mend for the sheer volume of my matter. I try to do everything humanly possible to try to mend but it seems the *humanly* possible is insufficient to perform *posthuman* response-ability. I have physically exited a capitalist country whose economic logic is to produce material excess, and flown to a distant socialist country with a unique history of resource

shortage and an active population of menders in order to *finally* mend.⁵⁴ For one month I bask in the luxury of a world in which mending is strikingly possible. Mending is the glaringly obvious, ubiquitous, unavoidable, naturalised thing to do. The trip is decisive for affirming mending's possibility, and also for starting to make conceptual sense of why mending is not normally possible outside of these auspicious conditions.

The opening tale about the turquoise backless dress is taken from the entry on 'Mending' to the Routledge Handbook of Sustainable Fashion (Middleton 2014). This account juggles the hopeful and celebratory activist intention to nurture mending as an embodied practice — the stance that characterised my position during the early stages of the research — with a still raw recognition of the very concrete obstacles to mending in the UK, and more generally, in the Global North. I could no longer write an innocent pro-mending piece. I had hit the trouble. I knew the mending paradise I had fallen in love with in Cuba was a fantasy world. I experienced Cuba as a month in a mending theme park and I needed to get to the nitty gritty of why I still couldn't mend back at home. Combined with my knowledge of setting up activist mending projects in Europe, and my own (lack of) mending experience, I sensed some of the material and political circumstances which inhibited the mending of clothing, as well as the perceptual impediments that render mending impossible.

It is not about cost. Many basic mends require but a needle and thread. It is not about time. Iron-on patches, strips and bonding powders make some mending jobs almost instant. It is not about skill. Mending has perhaps the lowest entry level of all crafts and is based on improvisation. Lack of skill, time and cost are the reasons most commonly cited for the demise of mending (Gibson and Stanes, 2011; Fisher et al. 2008), [but] I contend the real obstacles are psychological and systemic in nature (Middleton 2014).

I could suddenly answer the questions the trip left hanging when I later encountered the work of Rancière. But first I shall detail four practical, systemic reasons which, in the specific case of clothing, work to make mending impossible.

⁵⁴ Cuba has a state-controlled economy which has been marked by the ongoing US embargo and the loss of Soviet aid after the collapse of the Soviet bloc, leading to the period of economic crisis known as the Special Period (Hernandez-Reguant (ed) 2010). See Cooke (2014) for an account of more recent everyday experience in Cuba and Santiago Muñio (2015) on material conditions in Cuba from the Special Period onwards.

Why is mending impossible?

1. Consumerism has made mending obsolete.

Mending has become increasingly obsolete in fashion systems which are based on the high availability and turnover of low cost, low quality clothing. Skills are forgotten and mending becomes unnecessary, anachronistic, and even absurd. Fashion is not physically and cryptically black-boxed in the way that digital products increasingly are, in fact it is one of the few sectors where mending is still an easy option in practical terms (Brook 2012), but psychological black-boxing has an equally paralysing effect. Neoliberal economic ideologies have caused the 'complete rebuttal of the subtle cultures of repair' (Graham and Thrift 2007, 14) while at the same time affording the consumer every convenience to discard clothes and buy more. Our habits follow the logic of consumption.

2. There is nothing to mend.

Mending is an activity which, by necessity, follows on from wearing or more precisely, from wearing out. Our clothes aren't ready to be mended yet because today's clothes are so rarely worn out. Fletcher (2016) cites Australian research which finds nearly 70% of wardrobe contents to be inactive (see also Farrant et al. 2010, Fletcher and Grose 2012, WRAP 2012). It could take years if not decades of wearing the booty from the neoliberal era's 'normalised overconsumption' (Gibson and Stanes 2011) before holes and tears appear, although poor construction quality often causes garments to malfunction immediately (Fletcher 2016). It's a radical thought to allow things to get old (Ryan 2012). It's daring enough to wear a party dress twice (Jensen and Jørgensen 2013). Recommendations to wear clothes for just nine months longer, at 'significant environmental benefit' (WRAP 2012),⁵⁵ are extreme by many people's standards yet if we were to wear and care for our garments with the utmost degree of wartime discipline, the need for mending could be postponed for many years yet (Guilfoyle Williams 1945, in Rissanen 2011).

⁵⁵ Wearing clothes for nine months longer is inordinately far from material limits, and the 'significance' of the environmental benefit claimed is a yardstick of a sustainable imaginary in which 'manageable' levels of fast fashion are held to exist.

3. Fast fashion is not worth mending.

Turquoise Backless Dress is a 1960s creation from a reputable brand. It boasts a material quality worthy of repair, unlike the majority of recently produced clothing stock that, were we ever to wear it out, would make an impoverished material arsenal for a future mending culture. How can we be moved to care, emotionally and practically, for a vast and nasty legacy of unyielding tat?⁵⁶ Why prolong the misery of short lived fashions and poorly constructed garments that mock us of our 'failings as uncaring consumers' (Gregson et al. 2009)? The easy, satisfying task would be to design a brand new set of repairable attire (Rissanen). But who has the perverse obstinacy to mend the toxic tat of the existing waste clothing stock back into fashion? When this matter punctures the sensible realm (when fibre waste piles up too close to home, or when synthetic microfibres pollute oceans and the foodchain, for example), it will reveal its repulsiveness and its poor response-ability to human needs. Abjection theorists reminds us that it is impossible to permanently exclude this abject matter. '[T]hat which we attempt to radically exclude constantly returns' and 'thus threatens a breakdown' in the sensible meaning making in the world (Arefin 2015). One artist imagining a new aesthetics of 'poor fashion' or fashion forward tat is US artist Miriam Dym. The gritty underwear, which she terms 'SubOptimal' for being technically wearable but still unworn, (Dym 2009-10) provides grim inspiration for the task ahead of crafting in and with the in/sensible matter of the abiotic abyss. The incommensurable volumes and properties of abject matter are equally an affective challenge for the material activist and a scientific challenge for the chemist.

4. There's no need to mend.

The menders of the majority world do so out of material necessity. But why would we ever care? (Puig de la Bellacasa 2015). Why would we ever mend our way out of a problem when we can buy our way out instead? How can we find the intrinsic motivation to (wear out and then to) mend when, with such overabundance, no-one is short of things to wear? Can we bring tatty matter so closely into relation that we are prepared to wear it on our backs? Can we make our necessity a political or ecological one,

⁵⁶ Rose and Dooren's (2011) special issue 'Unloved others: Death of the disregarded in the time of extinctions' offers generative ways to think with the question of repairing the unlovable.

in the absence of economic or material need? Can we mend not out of need but out of political desire, making mending feel desirable and fast fashion feel terribly wrong? (based on Middleton 2014).

In 2012, one of the most radical of proposals put forward within the sensible order, to wear clothes for nine months longer, is inordinately far from material limits, and the 'significance' of the environmental benefit is claimed by a sensible yardstick which keeps both the real material measurables and the indeterminacy of planetary politics out of the equation. This evidences the huge leeway in which a possible politics of matter can take place. Over the five years which have ensued since writing the above, there are countless new instantiations of mending, as well as initiatives which are radically rethinking the clothing industry within the logic of zero waste, the circular economy and the sharing economy, among other developments.⁵⁷ And, since claiming, at the outset of this research, in 2011, that it would help usher in the 'Age of Mending,' a notion received as absurd, over-ambitious and naive (see the *Ontomanual*), mending has emerged as a concrete phenomenon and is being performed in ever more mainstream communities and contexts in the UK and across the Global North.⁵⁸ Whatever patchy agency I may have had in this turn of events, I believe the mending phenomenon was already set to emerge as an excess of the global economic system. My point is to demonstrate how swiftly and unexpectedly material politics can make seemingly impossible moves.

Along these lines, trend forecaster Li Edelkoort (2015) anticipates a significant analogous shift in how clothing matters. Her influential *Anti-Fashion Manifesto* claims that the new generation will cease to consume fashion and instead curate clothing in myriad ways. Fashion, she says, has become 'old-fashioned.' A corollary of this, I would add, is that mending is losing its frumpiness and is becoming timely. 'The industry has reached the vanishing point of fashion. That means that the economy of clothes will take over from the turnover of fashion' (*ibid*, np). Fashion is

⁵⁷ There are tensions here, which I return to in chapter 4, concerning how mending stays trapped inside the capitalist narrative. Mending is (tacitly) proposed and celebrated as part of a better capitalism, or simply as a capitalist opportunity.

⁵⁸ The flipside of this is mending's reabsorption into capitalism as a fad, as representation. In the UK, I stop people I see with visibly mended clothes to ask if it's a real mend and the overwhelming answer, generally delivered with delight rather than apology, is 'No, it's ... [the name of an online brand]'.

a singularly dynamic example of a sensible order.⁵⁹ Its boundary events occur at breakneck speed, causing the consumption of products that one day seem entirely appropriate to suddenly seem wrong. There is an implacable but fickle line between things one would and wouldn't wear, in any given context, in order to be considered properly, or fashionably dressed. Fashion is a system for buying human inclusion, and to identify the inclusion of human others, at the planetary cost of the material exclusion of the matter that no longer satisfies a human need. What Edelkoort points to is the advent of an age when the notion of the fashion system stops making sense. This generates a wave of questions which can't be addressed here, and doesn't answer the question of how and why we will become menders. Questions of how we might live with with the unmendable material legacies of the fast fashion era are still vastly under addressed, although, significantly, the politics of matter is moving furtively onto the cutting table.

2

IN/SENSIBLE MATTERINGS

Sensible mending: Keep it in the box

My sister gave me a mending box. We'd grown distant to the degree that we barely talked, but the normative consumerist yearly rituals were religiously upheld. She didn't know about my clothing pledge (see chapter 3) and often sent clothing gifts which I silently accepted to avoid offence. But she heard me on Radio 4's consumer programme, *You and Yours*, saying that I had pledged to buy no more clothes ever, and that I planned instead to mend the clothes I had already got. A small plywood mending box arrived the following Christmas, an extremely thoughtful gift for a mending activist. It has travelled to Cuba, and sits beside me as I write.

But what makes it exceptional is the warning on the label: *'This is not a toy. For decorative purposes only'*. The mending box is not *for* mending. Not even for playing at mending. Mending is an unthinkable, impossible, illegitimate outcome. I sense more than a concern for the pricking of tiny neoliberal fingers. The label polices the sensible boundaries around the activity (and the very possibility) of

⁵⁹ On the ability of fashion to police, disrupt and reconfigure the sensible order - important historical examples such as women wearing trousers (Hoskins). Has all fashion rebellion been defanged by the fashion industry and all subcultures become brandable marketing opportunities, as Jameson would say, or could fashion disrupt and reconfigure the sensible order today?



The mending box, Havana, 2016.

mending, both in real life and in play. But the warning is as redundant as it is absurd. Few sensible shoppers would confuse the box's true purpose. Mending belongs to a bygone era and doesn't, cannot, happen anymore. The box belongs to the current, accumulationist era. It is, obviously, not for mending but for storing, for keeping safe things you hold on to dearly, including perhaps the memory of mending, in a casing of nostalgic affect.

The sensible order can be policed in the most trivial of ways, but in many contexts it barely needs policing at all. The sensible limits of what to do with the not-for-mending box are self-policed. The activity of mending is reduced to simulacrum. We seek comfort in the barest attempt at 'authenticity' of this 'vintage-feel' pine box, a reductive representation of the material history of 'Make Do & Mend'. The warning could read: *'For representational use only. Mending must not materialise'. This box cannot participate in political events (including, but not limited to, mending). It will play no part in the mending revolution to come.'* The onus of causality is removed. The box must sit tight on a shelf as a distraction from the real problem, as the commodification of a mending aesthetic in late capitalism. The only mending which sits comfortably in the sensible order is that which can be bought as readymade imitation, like the elbows that are pre-darned in Bangladesh.

Needless to say, I refuse to accept the sensible limits of what a mending box can do and be. I take the risk of using it *for mending*, as an insurgent weapon, in blatant subversion of neoliberal norms. I fill it with mending paraphernalia ready for the everyday concrete action of making do and mending in the physical world (see chapter 3). The distance between the co-existent worlds of sensible and insensible possibility is a hair's breadth. Live sensibly and leave your kitschy box on the shelf. Live insensibly and dare to cross the threshold into a world in which mending is possible. The box is on the shelf. Mending is at touching distance. A world of mending can exist, and it can emerge from within a world of no mending. Get yourself a box.⁶⁰ Any old box will do. Fill it with mending gear and wait for desire or curiosity to pull you in. Mending is a thinkable, possible outcome.

In/sensible mending: we only have these zips

[Central Havana, 28 January, 2013]

Yellow, green, purple and blue. Four 12-inch invisible zips are neatly arranged beneath a small handwritten note, 'We only have these zips' in the glass-topped counter where I am being served. I'm in the Atelier Galiano, a Cuban state sewing and garment repair workshop in central Havana. Nena, the supervisor, is turning a pale turquoise suede-effect skirt which is too big for me into a cushion cover. Not a repair but a repurposing. It's a simple job but I don't have a sewing machine here to do it myself. I make conversation. Does she know where I could find a small coffee cup near here? I broke one at the guest house and the lady has no spares. Nena signals for me to look after the shop while she goes upstairs to an improvised mezzanine floor in what was once a high-ceilinged room. After some time she returns, unhurriedly, with a single coffee cup in her hand. All the saucers had broken and she was left with one odd cup. She categorically refuses to let me pay for the coffee cup or the work. As a supervisor it is not her role to sew so it would be more trouble to charge me. As I assimilate the fact that she has spent the last three quarters of an hour doing me, a rich foreigner, a favour,⁶¹ a customer walks in, a sweating lady in desperate need of skirt lining. She has re-lined the skirt twice before but now lining is 'lost' (*perdido*). The whole of Havana's supplies have run out, yet she won't lower her standards and sit on a hot sticky bus in an unlined skirt.

⁶⁰ I admit candidly that in an earlier phase of the PhD I considered marketing mending boxes online, compilations of vintage mending items and modern ones in vintage wrapping in a cute vintage box or tin. My idea was to promote mending, but I was evidently fuelling fantasy.

⁶¹ Her salary is approximately \$20 USD a month.



Left to right: 'We only have these zips' sign and zips in display cabinet; Nena preparing my cushion cover on the display cabinet containing the zips, Atelier Galiano state sewing and garment repair workshop, Central Havana, 2013.

I offer her the lining freshly cut from my old skirt and now it is her who tries to insist on paying me. I am thrilled by the coincidence, she is totally thrown by the little value I place on the lining and says: 'Well at least keep the zip.'

As we walk out of the shop in the late afternoon sun, both glowing with satisfaction, I ask her where the nearest phone is. I need to visit a friend with a broken doorbell who can't hear me shouting up from the street in his flat. She leads me a couple of blocks down the back streets and into a chiropodist's practice. We greet the chiropodist and the guy busy fixing the ceiling lights and I am handed the phone. As I make the call I marvel at the brimming tool cabinet on the wall and the flurry of mending activity around me. Before I hang up, the lighting issue is sorted and the tool cabinet locked shut. I still need to thank Nena. I slip three bangles from my wrist, my mom's handmade beads, wrap them in a scrap of paper and leave them behind the counter at the Atelier Galiano when I next pass by. Since writing, the repair shop has closed and lies in want of repair. A front section of the curved shop window lies broken, perhaps by Hurricane Irma, and patched crudely with cardboard and brown parcel tape. The configuration of which parts of this alternative lifeworld are working and which parts are broken at any given time plays on in indeterminate fashion.



Atelier Galiano state sewing and garment repair workshop, Central Havana, 2013.

Sensory saturation

Rancière's politics of exclusion reasons that mending is impossible because it is excluded from the sensible order, and because that exclusion is effectively policed. The sensible order dictates that no-one ever needs to mend clothing in the capitalist regime. Mending our way out of a crisis is a noncapitalist solution which currently makes no sense. The most available and most acceptable option is, quite naturally, to consume. In the sensible order, mending will never be a necessity. Now I understand why I had to go all the way to Cuba to start to mend — to see across to the other side of matter's sensible frontier. I had to sit myself down on the insensible side and soak up the sensory signals: *Mending is available here*. It's an appropriate/d, habitual, commonsensical thing to do, an available response. In the UK, sensible citizens busy themselves consuming, while in Cuba, they busy themselves inventing and resolving, terms I describe below. This observation captures two of Rancière's basic tenets, that the essence of doing politics is to make time to do the things which the sensible order leaves no time for (Rancière 1989), and that the key obstacle which prevents doing otherwise is the influence of the sensible population who, merely by going about their business in a sensible way, make alternative behaviours entirely unthinkable and impossible (Rancière 2004, Lie and Rancière

2006). On the one hand lies the potential for emancipation, and, on the other, the stultifying force of what Rancière calls the 'police.'

Cuba is experienced as a saturation of difference. (This first trip constituted the basic level of an othering ontology, sensed as culture shock. The advanced level comes in chapter 5, experienced as the more than human 'natureculture shock'). Cuba is a disorienting country to visitors flying in from the Global North. Human-material relations impact social relations in unknowable ways, and novel sociomaterial practices have built up around material shortage and disorder. The foreigner doesn't know how to negotiate this overwhelming otherness of sociomaterial existence and, in the main, clings to the safe familiarity of Cuba's tourist package. It is common for the newly arrived, unprepared visitor to feel lost.⁶² Cuba messes with the programming of the visitor's expectations of reality. Its dense socio-material landscape is processed as tableau in a theme park. Such is the sensory overload that all the visitor can do is to walk, camera in hand, taking photographs of the exotic other, myself included.

An oft-repeated scene during this first month was that I would arrive at a contact's house with some broken things in a broken case, and his or her (and sometimes the whole family's) immediate response would be to open the case and see what was the matter. Instantly, it would seem, they would have the thing upside down, inside out, assessing the problem, arguing about, fiddling with, inventing the solution. That is the *appropriate* response, even when the mender is fiendishly busy on another task - as was the case with David making the year's supply of tomato puree to store in Havana Club rum bottles at the height of the tomato season when prices are low. And all I could do was to take photographs which, uncannily, I now cannot show, as three of four hard drives containing the images became 'unrepairable' shortly before I could insert them into this text. No matter. The Cubans who helped mend my things were making alternatives materialise before my eyes in ways that were always already unrepresentable.

Cuba supplies instant verification that other worlds and forms of life do exist 'outside' of neoliberal capital. Cuba's material existence makes a mockery of the

⁶² It is hard to find maps. There is minimal street signage giving directions, no identifiable tourist information service and, in 2013, a very low bandwidth internet was only available in a handful of five star hotels. There are two currencies. It was a week before I felt confident to buy anything in a shop, for example. I relied heavily on Cuban contacts to unravel the mystery of how things worked.



Left to right: Carrying the broken case of broken things around Havana in search of repairers during the first week of the trip, El Vedado, 2013; Collecting repaired case from state cobblers, last week of trip, Central Havana, 2013.

dominant denialist view that there is no 'outside' at all. The world is alive with alternatives, both from the Global South and from the ragged edges of the Global North, but they do not count (Rancière 2004), or worse, they are not perceived to exist (de Sousa Santos 2007). Specifically, they are not perceived as *available* destinations given that the starting point is the steel-fenced fortress of neoliberal capital. The sensible order maintains that we could never be, or want to be, anything like these Others. In Cuba the politics of matter is entirely other, material logic is flipped on its head. I am still frequently shocked. My limits of what is (post)humanly possible and acceptable are ever being pushed. I am shifting my notions of what is possible and acceptable, what is enough, how much imperfection can be tolerated, how much or how little it is possible to get away with. I'm gradually erasing the notion of properness and adventuring ever deeper into material impropriety.

I am confounded by the sensible order's ongoing capacity to maintain the perception that There Is No Alternative. The material existence of myriad concrete alternatives had been blocked out of my sensory experience to such an extent that, when I first arrive in Cuba, I am shocked by modes of mattering which challenge



Sewing a laddered pair of tights during a moment of waiting, with Maurice Haedo holding a gaceñiga (see page 146), Central Havana, 2013. Photograph: Liz Parker.

sensible assumptions of what forms of world can exist, and what it means for a world to be ‘in working order.’ Admittedly, Cuba is not the sort of ‘outside’ many of us would desire,⁶³ or consider worth escaping to but, in my view, it can show the Global North a great deal about how to perform a politics of matter (Middleton and Haedo 2013) and how to constitute worlds and subject positions outside of neoliberal capital, if the Global North were to listen.

At the same time, however, growing trends from the unravelling edges of the Global North towards low impact living are becoming an increasingly *desirable* and *perceptible* face of the alternative lifeworlds which are emerging from *inside* the first world with the *potential* to perform *outside* politics. I regard this wave of disjointed social movements as early signs of a more mass dis-identification with, and refusal of, consumer culture and neoliberal lifeworlds to come. It’s an effervescent excess escaping from the bursting points of neoliberal capital, and its existence is creating the conditions for others to dis-identify and refuse. Emergent

⁶³ I would add that Cuba’s organic agricultural model from the Special Period has proved influential to ecological movements in the Global North, but the state’s conscious decision since has been to revert back to petroleum-based agriculture, to the degree it is economically viable, making Cuba’s status as organic role model a Western imaginary, a case made powerfully by Santiago Muiño (2015).

non-toxic, or less toxic, infrastructures are constituted,⁶⁴ increasing, in turn, the potential for outside politics to be performed. Such initiatives are vulnerable to the ever-present and substantial risk of recapture towards capitalist ends (Purcell 2009). Many, too, arise from positions of individual privilege and moral superiority which they are prone to go on, problematically, to reinforce. This is an accusation to which I need to hold myself accountable. Much could be, and needs to be, written on the minefields between the edgy normativity and fugitive alterity of the first world oppressed.⁶⁵

For mending to happen in the Global North, it needs to be reframed in a new material ordering, as a posthuman material need in which it makes sense to attend to the liveability of the planet for humans *and* earth others. This reframing amounts to flipping over Rancière's politics of exclusion into a politics of possibility. The sensing of exclusion evidences the presence of the other side of the boundary, the part that doesn't count or may not be perceived to exist, and it shows that the frontier is a dynamic threshold along which politics is always taking place. For Rancière, politics is the troubling of the existing order, what Rancière calls politics cannot be institutionalised. It is always an outside politics. That is the only politics (1995, 94; 1999, 34).

A world beyond mending

My description of the alternative sensory world of Cuba is a material description. It seems clear that matter is what makes Cuba different. So, what makes the material ordering in Cuba so radically otherwise? Firstly, mending is visible, sayable, doable, and a ubiquitous aspect of everyday life. These are also key tenets of Rancière's thought (2004). Cuba is as extreme in its lack of resources as it is in its ability for making possible, which loosely translates as '*resolver*', a heavily used term which means to resolve a need in the absence of a straightforward or legitimate solution, with the *available* resources, legal or not. To be able to find a coffee cup, line a skirt, make a phone call, or visit a friend without a doorbell requires the ability to resolve. By sensible parameters these are impossible tasks, if there are no coffee cups or skirt lining in the shops. You can't go anywhere without seeing people

⁶⁴ Following on from Murphy's (2015) work on toxic infrastructure.

⁶⁵ See Sharzer's (2012) cutting critique of the outside imaginaries of what could be termed 'bourgeois escape' from the rat race, and Porter and Westall (2013) on how this trend is entrenched in privilege, effectively performing the sensible order in innovative ways around a countryside or local idyll.



Watching the telenovela across two faulty TV sets, the picture on a LG fatback television, the sound on a Soviet television, Central Havana, 2013.

resolving; the plumber transporting a four metre length of sewage pipe on a bendy bus over passengers heads, concrete being mixed in the midst of an otherwise pristine and fully operational hospital waiting area, parcel tape stuck all over a broken shop window, one broken television positioned alongside another - one for the picture (of sorts), the other for sound. *'Resolviste?'* Have you fixed it / found it / sorted it out? A question repeated over and over, every day, until the satisfying response: Yes, I have. The most common reply; *'todavía,'* not yet, demonstrates the ongoing determination to resolve, together with the resignation to endure with/out.

The default stance in Cuba is that everything that breaks *can be* repaired or otherwise resolved, and my experience shows that a Cuban needs much convincing otherwise, preferring to keep holding out hope that one day the right conditions/ parts/money/expertise are found. For this reason, cherished rusty shells of pre-revolutionary cars are commonly parked outside the owner's house, none of which are yet considered to be 'scrap.' The Cuban response is not to give up but to 'wait and see,' (*a ver*), flaunting a brazen matter of factness regarding possibility as if to



Spare parts for repairing electrical devices at reduced price, display cabinet in TRD shop, Jagüey Grande, 2018.

say, why would it *not* be possible?⁶⁶ Waiting and seeing is a resigned mode of living in possibility, however faint that possibility may appear from a sensible perspective. It is the endurance of all the parts of a lifeworld which are, at any one time, unresolved. The crumbling housing stock, the missing ingredients, the lost medicines, the lack of parts. Cubans have shown me what endure-ability is — enduring the unresolved.

Everyday experience in Cuba is of a noncapitalist material landscape, and in the context of this thesis I suggest that a useful interpretation of ‘to resolve’ might be ‘to find a noncapitalist solution’.⁶⁷ Resolving is the opposite of buying a material solution to the problem, as would be the autopilot response in the capitalist

⁶⁶ At the risk of essentialising, I assert that Cuba is an extremely homogenous country, especially seen against the UK. Besides the military, military-backed executives, and the small but rapidly expanding Cuban middle class of entrepreneurs, most Cubans, regardless of profession live in relatively similar material conditions with little difference in wages. (State wages range between \$10 and \$80 a month — this upper limit has recently doubled). Even the nouveau riche cannot buy, say, cheese or toilet paper, if no cheese or toilet paper is available (although they are more likely to be able to travel to nearby countries, typically Panama, to import ‘lost’ goods). Everyone has to resolve, and does so according to their financial ability and ‘*amistades*’. Equally, all Cubans over the age of 30 have lived through the ‘Special Period’ of extreme resource shortage following the withdrawal of Soviet aid during which extreme resolving skills became naturalised.

⁶⁷ Even though much awaited capitalist market reforms are creeping in.

distribution of the sensible. Of course, I was expecting directions to a shop that sold coffee cups. I was expecting that information regarding which shops might have coffee cups in stock, and when, was knowable. I wasn't expecting the indeterminate situation that sometimes coffee cups 'come in' (*entran*) on a container ship and, with luck and persistence, you might find them in a shop. But you have to make an indeterminate number of trips to shops just in case.⁶⁸ With these perceptual co-ordinates, the more Cuban response is to bypass the thought of buying a cup at all, it is of 'resolving' my need by the best *available* means.



Waiting area, state electrical repair workshop, El Vedado, Havana, 2013.

Similarly, I was expecting to be led to a payphone, not a back street chiropodist's. A Cuban will know that payphones are often out of order, and most are coinless which requires having an account, and will instead ask neighbours or '*amistades*' ('friendships,' used to denote members of a wide kinship network) to use the phone. In the UK, shouting in public is considered improper. Bellowing first names repeatedly from the street for lack of doorbells is a constant punctuation in the Havana soundscape, as are the cries of hawkers and peddlers who throw their voices off the buildings, and mothers calling children in at mealtimes. In sensible terrain *we have all the zips*. Any colour, any length, any type, any time, at a click.

⁶⁸ I have acquired the habit of popping into shops as I pass by to do a quick recce of what is on the shelves, to build intelligence on what items I am likely to find when and where.

The drastic reduction of possibility to only four zips (in odd colours, to make it worse) too disrupted my sensible. How could the dressmaker *possibly* manage? To the Cuban sensibility, the note is an affirmation that *zips are available*, unlike many other basic haberdashery items which are 'lost'. (In the display counter there is nothing *but* the four zips). In the Cuban order of material possibility there is an implicit categorisation of matter; that which is relatively easy to get hold of, that which 'comes in' sometimes but requires patience to find, and that which hasn't been seen for a long time, which is termed 'lost'. Lining fabric is 'lost' hence the skirt-owner's pleasure to come across mine.

As Berlant (2016) would say, Cuba is the beyond of repair. Most crucially, mending is not a discrete activity but one element in an entanglement of sociomaterial practices. The story describes recognisable social activities of going about daily life; working, dressing well, doing a favour for a stranger, making home improvements, visiting a friend, asking for directions, using a phone; but in a material landscape so unimaginable that the performance of these everyday practices disrupts the first world visitor's sensible co-ordinates. Mending becomes *resolving*, and *resolving*, is an extralegal activity among extended networks of '*amistades*' which is of mutual benefit to all, direct or indirect (Santiago Muiño 2015). It is the everyday experience of an 'underground society' (ibid, 293) in which everyone lives on the margins of bare and glitchy state infrastructures. Santiago Muiño describes this as 'weaving the complicity involved in everyday survival' (ibid, my translation from the Spanish). Resolving is relational. The politics of matter can get nowhere without kin.

But it is much later in the telling of this account, at the end of chapter 5, that I make the realisation that, in the politics of matter, matter is only half of the story. It matters little how up to date my mending pile is, how plastic-free I can be, or how organic my garden is if I have no kin. My focus for too long was to achieve 'material resilience,' a goal which existed as an imaginary free of social entanglements. For all my intimate sociability with matter, I have near zero resilience without human kin to lean on. Humans look out for me, check up on me, lend a hand, humans can care. In Cuba, humans are my google, my GPS, my apps, and my alerts for when the coffee cups/electric fans/potato rations have *finally* come in. It is possible to leave the house to resolve a need, with no prior knowledge how to realise the task, by asking the first random stranger: Where can I get a broken chair reupholstered? Where can I get a photocopy at 8am? Where can I get any apple software whatsoever installed (answer: a teenager's bedroom in a tiny

apartment at the end of an internal alley (*solar*)? where can I find a (single which is never single use) plastic bag (*una jaba*), and so on, until the need is resolved.

The vast human search engine continues to expand my kinship networks and social entanglements in this sociable world, and human sociability takes the slack when matter fails (Baraitser 2015). When the power's been out for hours, the ailing bus breaks down, the collective taxi with missing windows and no wipers hits a downpour, the house is being fumigated, there's no water at nursery school, there's no flour/cement/fridges available anywhere, even on the black market, the queue for potatoes is five hours long, the street is flooded to the knees, and any of the probable everyday occurrences which 'complicate' everyday life (the list goes on and on), the everyday carries on as un/planned, as well as it can, with extensive tolerance and flexibility, and improvised sociabilities. Everyday experience can be glitchy and grim, it's a material precarity with a human safety net. Human relations buffer material indeterminacy.

3

IM/POSSIBLE MATTERINGS

Im/possible mending: The liquidiser

The liquidizer broke. With raw fruit, vegetables, tubers and dried pulses as the culinary staples, that and the pressure cooker are the two basic items that any Cuban kitchen aspires to own. I immersed the bottom of the plastic jug in boiling water to sterilize it. The screw fastening which I had been trying to clean deformed and would not fit back on the base unit. I gave up immediately. I saw no possibility of repair. My partner, unfazed, reimmersed the jug in boiling water and held it fast around an improvised mould so that it would regain its original shape. It almost worked. But in the heat, the rest of the jug became more deformed. Undeterred he managed to get the by now irregularly warped jug to screw back into the liquidizer base. He turned it on and miraculously, to me, it worked. But by the next morning the jug was stuck fast in the base. In prizing the two apart the jug broke. A large shard of plastic snapped off the bottom of the screw thread. I saw no possibility of repair. My partner said we just needed to glue the broken part with superglue. This seemed so impossible given the force this plastic join needs to bear that I threw the broken piece of plastic away.



Left to right: *The broken, warped and stress cracked liquidiser jug; The day's shopping, to be made into juice, puree and soup in the liquidiser, Central Havana, 2016.*

My partner trawled around all the small electrical repair businesses of Central Havana. A series of repair technicians informed him that no replacement jugs were available for that model. He would have to glue the broken piece back on with superglue or, better still, ship's resin which he could get hold of in the docks. If he couldn't find the broken piece they suggested fashioning a slither of resin to fill the gap in the screw thread to make the jug watertight. They assured him that this could take the strain of the functioning liquidizer full of liquid at full speed. Assuming this solution would be less than perfect, for \$2 the repair technician agreed to deactivate the mechanism that disables the motor if the jug is not screwed in properly. Hence the liquidiser would work however approximately it fitted into the base unit. My sensible limits of the possible are still being stretched. I was utterly insensible to the real material possibility of this repair (and still have my doubts).⁶⁹ At no point did anyone suggest the option of buying a new liquidiser. For the vast majority of Cubans, that option is unavailable, or rather, it unexists.

Im/possible spacetimematterings: The nursery school

Another area in which Cubans stretch the limits of the materially possible lies in the use of domestic space. Colonial era Havana housing has ceilings of 4-5 metres high. Due to severe housing shortages, and the consequent need for cohabitation between adult siblings and across generations, houses have been divided and subdivided, horizontally and vertically, leaving many dwellings of extremely reduced size and often, in the housing stock of Central Havana, with little or no natural light or ventilation. My daughter's nursery school is a typical example. What

⁶⁹ The liquidiser is in limbo at the moment, until ship's resin 'comes in'.



Left to right: My daughter's nursery school, which doubles as a family home out of nursery school hours, occupies the pale green mezzanine area in the centre left; Snack time at the nursery school in the converted family lounge, Central Havana, 2016.

started out as a single large reception room in a traditional high-ceilinged building on a busy thoroughfare has been divided by a concrete mezzanine ceiling into two households, one upstairs, one downstairs, and both floors have then been further subdivided into two domestic residences and several businesses; a DVD seller (who also offers scanning and printing services) and a watch repair business in the front room of the downstairs house. There is a separate printing business in the adjacent narrow hallway which leads to the numerous additional households at the back of the house. A street cafe serves cooked food through a hatch from an improvised stairwell space in which its three female staff squash their bodies to fit at once. Through the street cafe kitchen and up uneven concrete steps is my daughter's nursery school. The cafeteria workers negotiate boiling pans, hot oil and dirty dishes, and the fridge door must be shut for parents and infants to get past. There is no water supply in this space so all the washing up is carried upstairs and through the 'nursery school' to the upstairs kitchen. The stairs are mopped and dried twice daily.

The nursery school accommodates 32 children who sleep end to end at nap time in fold-up cot beds in the bedroom and pee on 32 potties with 32 towels on 32 hooks lined up around the perimeter of the bathroom and hallway. The back door of the nursery, which leads to separate residences, is blocked by a caged chicken and the family's puppy which also serve to cheer up tearful toddlers at drop off time. The standard of childcare and hygiene, and the professionalism of the three staff, is very impressive. And from the age of 18 months, if not earlier, children are (successfully) potty trained to avoid the use (cost/washing) of nappies. At 6pm the nursery furniture is piled up and the rooms are rearranged to form a standard bedroom and lounge, to be returned to the nursery school formation at 7am the next morning.

Sensible assumptions of what is required to set up a business, and run it professionally, are turned on its head, as are notions of what is acceptable and enduring to make a good (enough) living.



Clockwise from top left: Pre-revolutionary car shell, Central Havana, 2018; Neighbours try (unsuccessfully) to get a long-term broken car back on the road, Playa, 2018; A Soviet-era car shell is protected from the elements, Playa, 2018; Bike taxi repair on the street, Central Havana, 2016; Itinerant umbrella repairer, Playa, 2017; Itinerant cobbler, Central Havana 2016; Itinerant umbrella repairers, Central Havana, 2015; Wardrobe repaired with parcel tape, La Vibora, 2013.

Flipping possibility

I have described menders in Cuba as having an entirely normative, naturalised existence. But, my theory goes, Cuban menders can also be *flipping nutters*. On the scale of material im/possibility, Cuban menders are *flipping out there*. It is widely held that, in cases where a material predicament is sensed to be impossible, even by normative Cuban standards, there will always be some nutter out there who will dare to give it a go. My theory derives from the Cuban phrase for these individuals — '*algun loco que se atreve*' — someone crazy enough to dare. Most Cubans are already material anarchists (see chapter 5). But these menders are beyond material anarchy. They are the amazing flipping menders of im/possibility.

One such nutter (*loco*) is Harold, who approached (and fixed) my MacBook with unsurmountable care and absolute irreverence to Apple's planned unrepairability (Weins 2012). Mending is the material cutting together/apart that approaching a teardown, fearlessly and carefully, without a teardown guide, requires. Mending means tearing our broken material legacy apart and cutting it back together in new, possibly unthinkable ways, without any guarantee it will work. Mending is refusing to not give it a go. Another such nutter is Ronny, who bought a rusty motor part of indeterminate origin from an inebriated wastepicker in order to invent a ceiling fan for me when I was pregnant, sick and immobile at the height of summer. There was little certainty the motor would work, no proper materials to work with, no video tutorial, and the material experiment took place balanced on an insubstantial scaffold on a ceiling 5m high (without disconnecting the mains). The result was a working fan of comically slow rotation that offered me little relief. With no sense that this three day endeavour had been a waste of time, Ronny's response was '*a ver,*' let's see how to get hold of a part to make the motor go faster.

Mending is an experiment in the most tenuous material possibility. Mending cuts matter together/apart by forging new material relations in novel configurations that address a situated crisis in a planetary emergency. The point is not how specific material predicaments are resolved, whether the particular object that broke is actually mended, whether an alternative arrangement is resolved, or whether a new invention is made up out of (seemingly) nothing. The point is to resolve ongoing needs in a material world always in reconfiguration, always breaking together/apart. Mending makes Cuba an example of chronic breakdown/robust survival. Mending

means bringing new phenomena into relation, in novel configurations, to keeping coding onwards in liveable lives.

Cuba is a masterclass in tripping the sensible circuitry. I am flipping out. My adventure becomes a material odyssey and proof of theoretical concept, evidence of what Haraway acknowledges as the labour of getting to the bottom of the trouble, 'nurturing, or inventing, or discovering, or somehow cobbling together' (2016, 132). Barad has termed this 'the possibility and impossibility of mattering' (2007, 148), of taking matter deadly seriously in everyday life (132). Cutting together/apart the flipping menders of Cuba and Barad's quantum entanglements, I start to perceive these freaky ongoing goings on as something like *quantum mending*.

Slash politics

Between possibility and impossibility lies the single most vital figure in the conceptualisation of this thesis. The './.' The slash of politics.⁷⁰ A figure for ontological flippability. The mark of a boundary transgression in the distribution of the sensible in Rancière's politics of possibility, the sign of a Baradian agential cut. It's a humble little line, so meagre, so ambiguous that it may even pass by imperceptibly, but it's the vital mark of the possibility of a political event. Slash politics is the particular activity of ontological disturbance (through ontoexperiment or similar means) that takes place by '*working the slash*.'

Working the slash means feeling for other configurations so that new fields of perception and possibility may arise. Barad insists that the way in which we cut a world together/apart inevitably shifts some im/possibilities into existence, and shifts others into inexistence (Hollin et al 2017). Previously unthinkable material opportunities come to exist when the existing order is disturbed, or cut together/apart. New possibilities *can* arise when a belief in downright impossibility is refused. Beliefs, habits, limits and needs *can* be flipped inside out. Insensible, unthinkable, material arrangements *can* become common sense, such as three or four generations living and working together in a tiny space. '[T]here are always several spaces in a space, several ways of occupying it, and each time, the trick is

⁷⁰ I am also thinking with broadcaster Gerry Anderson's coinage of the term 'stroke city' during the Troubles as a *possible* term to escape the impasse of the politically explosive nomenclature of the Northern Ireland city of Derry/Londonderry (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Derry/Londonderry_name_dispute#Avoidance_strategies).

knowing what sort of capacities one is setting in motion, what sort of world one is constructing' (Carnevale and Kelsey 2007, 262). Slash politics is a spacetime-mattering - finding possible time, *and* possible space, *and* possible matter to flip impossibles into possibles. 'Self denial' *can* become 'emancipation' when we become free from the object relations that in the sensible order count as the undeniable basics of everyday life. Waste *can* become the abundant stuff of our survival.

My working protocol for this thesis, and for life, is to flip our material predicament and our selves, to flip what we and matter are *for*. Flipping luxury. Flipping quality. Flipping enough. We need to flip time given away to capitalism to time dedicated towards economic alternatives, to flip selves busying themselves with deathly distractions into collectives pottering earnestly into more lively everyday pursuits, because, out of 'nothingness,' wild and improper activities can ensue (Barad 2015, 394). The very stuff that doesn't count is what we *can* build a lifeworld out of. The human parts that don't count *can* be the builders.⁷¹ Us imperceptible nobodies *can* do politics. What is more, *we are perhaps the only ones who can* (Papadopoulos et al 2008).

Working the slash also operates as the dynamic ability to manoeuvre between inside/outside worlds. Politics is the force of the 'in between' (Rancière 1999, Purcell 2009). Working the slash is a practical device to locate the alternative world of our political desire inside the material worlds we know and live in. It is akin to the vegan's trick of living inside/outside a carnivorous world, cutting the parts that relate to meat and dairy out of relation. Flipping the arrangements opens up new possible ways to proceed, and closes down well-trodden sensible pathways into dead ends. Flipping is a vital thinking prop, and an everyday survival tool in the indeterminate past-present-future. It is border activism on the frontiers of matter (Papadopoulos 2014b), riddled with ins and outs. The '/' is our imperceptible political weapon. We are (on) the '/.' Now you un/see us, now you don't. We keep turning our selves inside/outside/inside/out. Flipping avoids recapture, by flipping over and over again.

⁷¹ I refer to Rancière's (2004) 'sans part,' those with no part, those excluded from the sensible order or, in this case, those who refuse to have any part, also Bassett (2014).

This thesis is one hell of a slashy manoeuvre. The slash is causing quantum disorder(ing) deep inside/outside the ontoworker, and all over the text. A slash stands for a quantum possibility in which something believed to be nothing/only one thing can be something (else). It is inspired by Barad's writing on the quantum principle of ontological indeterminacy (2007, 2015) which I shall cite at length:

Ontological indeterminacy, a radical openness, an infinity of possibilities, is at the core of mattering. How strange that indeterminacy, in its infinite openness, is the condition for the possibility of all structures in their dynamically reconfiguring in/stabilities. Matter in its iterative materialization is a dynamic play of in/determinacy. Matter is never a settled matter. It is always already radically open. Closure cannot be secured when the conditions of im/possibilities and lived indeterminacies are integral, not supplementary, to what matter is. In an important sense, in a breathtakingly intimate sense, touching, sensing, is what matter does, or rather, what matter is: matter is condensations of responses, of response-ability (Barad 2015, 401).

Touch matter. That's what Barad beckons us to do. Touch politics. A slashy politics of matter. Im/possibility is a *sensory* trick which constitutes a *material* reality. It's both a sleight of hand, and a heavy duty material labour. It's a perceptual boundary of a *material* possibility. The slash is a graphic translation of the ontological indeterminacy of everyday experience which helps to make any perceptual residue of the fixity of boundaries and separability vanish. Living in/as ontological indeterminacy is a mode of being/thinking/doing for which language has no purchase. The slash is a bridge between the givenness we're escaping and the new modes of being/doing/thinking which we are performing into existence. The slash represents the ontological construction site which performative methodologies are busy testing out. It shows that ontowork is underway.

Living in/as im/possibility

In the actual world, although we all might have the capacity, the capability, some people do not answer. Some say, I cannot. Some say, I can. Some do, some don't. It is at the moments between these that potential lies.

— ELIZABETH POVINELLI, *The will to be otherwise/The effort of endurance* (2012, 463)

I live a slashy life of ontological un/becomings. Quantum experiments erase my old mode of life, my old self. I perform slash politics by using ontoexperiment to force ontological disruption to take place. The protocol is simple: the everyday refusal of being, doing and thinking for neoliberal capital, and the everyday affirmation of being, doing and thinking for planetary liveability, with all the everyday material consequences that that entails. In/sensible lively possibilities can and will emerge when a deathly thing is refused. As Katie Stewart says, 'a world can whisper from a half-lived sensibility' (2006, 6). An alternative sensed in the nether reaches of nothingness can creep into intimacy, it can seep into a world. It can be reproduced in/as new modes of everyday life.



Crocheting a dress while waiting for the red suitcase to be repaired, state cobblers, Central Havana 2013.

As an ontoworker, I'm totally putting myself on the line. I always am. Living in-slash-as im-slash-possibility means *entering* into possibility without a perceptible, determinate entrance, and enduring being/doing/thinking there, at the limits of radical possibility (Povinelli 2011, 2012). I am 'dwelling in potentiality', as Povinelli (2012) says, at risk and in vulnerability, sometimes at great discomfort, living on the threshold of being, right there on-slash-as the line. Putting oneself on the line means being in the place where possibility may or may not happen. That's the dynamic discomfort of ontological adventure. I inhabit the threshold between possibility and impossibility. I refuse to accept impossibility as a given so I dwell in the potential of possibility, sensing how to 'work the slash', how to make an un/thinkable, im/possible action thinkable and possible in everyday worlds.

I endure until I can sense a material possibility, just as a transmigrant holds out and seizes an opportunity for a border crossing (Papadopoulos et al 2008). I accept that I will not give up, despite the imperceptibility of the possibility. In the most despondent situation I don't say 'well, that's that then' as a sensible person might bid farewell to possibility and seek closure on its promise. Instead, I say 'let's see,' just in case, this time, I actually can work the slash on an im/possible thing. The un/mendable turquoise backless dress, and the un/finishable thesis, stand as proof of im/possibility — two examples that have transgressed into possibility. Impossibility cannot be overdetermined because we simply cannot know what sensory and material turns our indeterminate entanglements may take. We cannot write off an impossibility in one ordering of a world which may just be possible in another.

Reality Cakes



Portrait as cake shop proprietress with flour-powdered face. Liverpool, 1992. Photograph: Mark McNulty.

- AIM Run a fake cake shop
- PROTOCOL Find an empty shop anywhere in the UK
 Turn it into a cake shop and run it like a proper cake shop
 Be the shopkeeper, as an all encompassing mode of being
 Bake cakes daily
 Do so indefinitely, keeping strict hours, Monday-Saturday, 9am-5pm
 but
 Get the ingredients for free
 Make no effort to make money
 Make cakes unappetising
 Make shop unappealing
 Keep making cakes regardless of demand
 Do not clean
 Do not throw unsold cakes away

INTRODUCTION

The sweet stench of matter in capitalism

Performance implicates the real through the presence of living bodies.

— PEGGY PHELAN, *Unmarked* (1993, 148)

This chapter takes us back to beginnings, to the early days when I started sensing, and performing, the trouble — an indeterminate, entirely invisible, unknowable, unsayable, reality-wide trouble spanning the perceptual, material and economic realms. To do this I revisit an early performative work, ‘Reality Cakes’, in order to unlock its vital importance for the political, theoretical and methodological core of the thesis. The chapter’s first aim is to flesh out the concept of ontowork by illustrating the sensory and material labours involved in the performance of ‘Reality Cakes’. Within the framework of feminist performance art I show how the artist as sensory worker operates within an experimental knowledge politics and how this knowledge, made manifest through a cake shop, performs a world. I suggest that the passing of time awards a certain accountability to the onto-epistemological methods in operation here, and indeed throughout the inquiry, as I depict how an



Left to right: Cash till and 'Drink Coca Cola' sign, found on site; Chocolate bars and kit kats sold by the strip, 'If waiting, don't keep on' sign, Reality Cakes, Liverpool, 1991.

artist's unknowing can coalesce political ideas and actions far beyond cognitive reach.

The chapter's second and related aim is to achieve the trouble's 'sayability'. I want to extract words to pin down the trouble which disturbed me to create 'Reality Cakes' over twenty years ago and which still motivates this thesis today. The more I critically reflect on this unknowing work, the more I attune to its contemporary relevance for the present condition. I interpret the material trouble which I first articulated in the medium of cake in relation to the politics of excess matter in a materially abject world. Then I locate the sensory trouble, the trouble with reality and the performance of perceptual co-ordinates in a fake world. These two inseparably entangled troubles prefigure a discussion which takes place in the following chapter concerning the ways in which matter's dematerialisation, its disappearance from politics, operates in the perceptual domain. I consider both the political agency and complicity of 'Reality Cakes' within the neoliberal order and appraise how the fake cake shop was a dystopian disruption of the sensible order, but which ultimately stopped short of reconfiguring an alternative order. To conclude, I examine the productivist urge to make cakes, and end on an activist note by troubling the act of making.

After starting out by mending in the previous chapter, the action now regresses through the material cycle to the prior task of making. Cake making to be precise. I re-present the problem of matter in capitalism by serving up an artist's vision of an over-the-counter sugary, over-productivist dystopia. Cake ingredients are mixed with repetitive, disciplined, gendered labour, churned out as trayfuls of gratuitous goods and turned almost unavoidably into unchecked waste. A year after production commenced, this recalcitrant matter is still there, still resolutely cakey, with barely a maggot in evidence, barely a blue hue to the crumb. The ghostly remains are no good to eat, but refuse to decompose. I remember the indelible sensory quality and I now know what to call it: *The sweet stench of matter in capitalism.*

PART 1

COUNTERSTORY

Reality Cakes

[37 Hanover Street, Liverpool, L1, UK. Late 1991 - late 1992]



The Pickled Shopkeepers: myself (left) and Alyson Rigby (right) in polyester nightie uniform outside Reality Cakes, Liverpool, 1991. Photograph: unknown.

Reality Cakes was an immersive performative work of extended duration which took place in the site-specific context of a lock-up shop in Liverpool city centre. The artist created an operational cake shop from locally scavenged materials, objects found in the building, and donations from the UK food industry, and worked in the role of a disciplined yet dysfunctional cake shop proprietress to bake cakes daily for the duration of the work, conceived as an indeterminate but lengthy period of time. By refusing to engage with expectations and standards of hygiene and presentation, and by producing sub-standard wares, few cakes were sold and the remainder were put on long term display causing the sight and stench of mouldy cakes to increasingly deter custom. Never publicly identifying the shop as art, the shop was open for regular trade but was conceived as a fake cake shop, and it was the most developed element of a larger series of solo projected works around fake shops and services under the collaborative banner of 'The Pickled Shopkeepers'⁷² which included Fake Weddings (Brighton 1992), Fake DIY, and Fake Hotel (Liverpool 1992).



Asleep in my bed, after laying down tools and taking off trainers and outermost layer of clothing, Pickled Shopkeepers gallery floor, Liverpool, 1991. Photograph: Alyson Rigby.

⁷² The Pickled Shopkeepers was established in Brighton, July 1991, as a collaboration between myself and fellow artist and friend, Alyson Rigby. Our aim was to make performance work in empty shops, both separately and in collaboration, and run what we then called a performing arts venue, or an 'artist-led space'. We rented two adjacent properties in Liverpool city centre, an extensive, lofty first floor of one building for the artist led space, 39 Hanover Street, where we also lived, and a small lock up shop at No. 37 which was solely for the cake shop, my solo work.

Performing the trouble

[Liverpool 1992]

I have to get up at six o'clock on the dot every day. In winter it is so cold that I only ever take off my top one or two layers of clothing to sleep. I have layers on underneath that I have forgotten I am wearing. I don't wash because we have no water upstairs in the adjacent building where we live, unless it's raining and rain drips rhythmically into thirteen assorted buckets spread across the room. We sleep in a drip-free corner where the mattress just fits, a mattress recovered from a skip and covered in black bin bags. I open the lock-up shop and light the gas oven. There's a chimney place a foot deep in soot and I have never got a fire going. I have no time to waste. Weighing, mixing, greasing, lining, spooning, licking the bowls, baking, cooling, slicing, icing and putting the cakes out on the shelves. All of this before 9am so that on the pips of the hour of nine I open the door for business and take up my position behind the counter.

Business is never brisk. It's a busy thoroughfare and many people stop to look but few venture in. Sometimes my special offers attract well meaning parents to treat



Clockwise from top left: Greased and floured tins; The kitchen area with donated sugar supplies; Goods on the shelves by 9am: A morning's bake left to cool. *Reality Cakes, Liverpool, 1991.*

their children on the way home from the panto down the road. I found a sign which says five donuts for a pound. I never actually make donuts, but no-one complains about what they are given. If they were at all particular they would buy their cakes elsewhere. My cake shop is by far the dirtiest and most unappealing in the city, and no doubt beyond. I never clean the oven, nor the floor, nor the shelves, nor the windows, although I have spruced up the door with a new lick of tar. The walls are puce pink gloss which notionally repels grime. But the most unredeemable aspect of the shop is the display cabinets which lie right in the incoming customer's line of sight. Any cakes which aren't sold go on display in these cabinets. Most days that is most of the cakes. They piled up until the cabinets could take no more so I sealed them with sticking plasters in a vain attempt at hygiene and now I store all further cakes in cardboard boxes upstairs.

I hide this fact from the landlord as the upstairs of the property was declared unsafe and contractually banned from use. But one day a city council environmental health inspector, the rat catcher, asked to go upstairs. His visit was no surprise as private pest control enterprises have long been interested in my business and post their cards under the door when I am closed. With a powerful torch his search for rat evidence was industrious. He assured me the cabinets were fine at which he moved on to the first floor. After months of baking the volume of mouldy cakes is quite considerable. And now, in the summer, the smell is more intense. But I got the all clear so the cake shop hasn't been condemned. As a precautionary measure I have started to offer surgical gowns to my eat-in customers, a new line of trade.

The people of Liverpool are supportive. They think I have guts to set up a business on a shoestring in a recession but they can see I am struggling to get things up to par. I did put a sign in the window saying 'Help required' and quite a few people have gone out of their way to help me make improvements to boost business. They've suggested I better my window display, that I get some proper lighting as the premises is lit by a worksite bulb rigged to next door's electricity. A homeless man called John helped me strip filthy wallpaper off a partition wall. After living on the streets for twelve years he's schizophrenic and saw faces in the patterns as he peeled. One young man has been coming on Tuesdays to mend the chairs so that I could expand the business with the eat-in section. The lady from Enterprise Allowance⁷³ visits at regular intervals to offer business advice. She has asked if I

73 The Enterprise Allowance Scheme was a Conservative government initiative in 1983 to kickstart small business.



Clockwise from top left: The city council rat catcher inspects for signs of vermin; The newly appointed eating area, with surgical gowns provided; The display area; Mouldy cakes (detail); Mouldy cakes start to accumulate in glass cabinet: Found sign 'No Pinching' and rotting banana skins on shelf display. Reality Cakes, Liverpool 1991-1992.

think there's a market for this sort of thing and so far I've convinced her that there is. She also checks the books and never seems to realise that I add a zero or two to everything to make the takings look more real.

In a bid to improve my wares I shut on Wednesdays for staff training. I'm doing a City and Guilds Baked Goods course at catering college. I wouldn't dare mention that Reality Cakes, only a few hundred yards away, has anything to do with me in case they kick me out. Two evenings a week I also do a cake decorating class but it's highly perfectionist techniques with Royal Icing is not much use for my basic range of cakes. I realise that I keep my cakes basic on purpose. Edible but not appealing. They aren't meant to be desirable. The simplest, cheapest, least number of ingredients. I had a year's worth delivered off the backs of articulated lorries and they're piled up in the shop, the flour and margarine in the coal cellar, the sugar and egg replacer on the shelves.

There's no lack of water in the cake shop, quite the contrary. There's an old Belfast sink, up a couple of steps in a diagonal recess, but the lead piping leaks dreadfully. I can't leave the shop for more than eight hours at a time without it flooding as this is how long it takes the same thirteen buckets, set in a cascading sequence, to overflow. But I don't clean. And I don't wash. I became oblivious to the dirt and when I did find a shower the water ran black. I just make cakes.



Belfast sink and leaky lead piping, and the only thing that is washed — the cake tins, Reality Cakes, Liverpool, 1991.

Situated reality

In art historical discourse, Reality Cakes is a durational performance which takes place in a site-specific installation (Kwon 1997, Heathfield 2013). It explores questions of time and place through the 'expanded temporal production' of cakes on a UK High Street (Claire Bishop in Eschenburg 2014, 176). In the early 1990s site-specific installation was a popular artist's medium but the now ubiquitous format of artists working in empty shops was obscure. The earliest commonly cited reference to this phenomenon in the UK is Sarah Lucas and Tracey Emin's work, 'The Shop' (1993), on Brick Lane, London. One of the conscious inspirations for Reality Cakes was US 20th century sculptor Claes Oldenburg's 'Store' (New York, 1961-4) which, like Lucas and Emin's shop, functioned as a retail unit for the artists' own work. Oldenburg made playful painted sculptures of commercial products, including cake, in the back half of the shop, and sold them in the front half. The second influence is the reclusive 20th century US artist Joseph Cornell's boxed assemblages of found matter sealed behind glass. Cornell was fascinated not by trash but by thrift store items which he treasured. Reality Cakes' methods of on-site production and retail were similar to Oldenburg's although the 'fake' cakes were real and once on display, the shop became the site of their museumification. Like



Left to right: Reality Cakes at night-time; The 'Lyon's cake girl' found beneath existing signage above the flour-painted cake shop door, Liverpool, 1991.

the random found items which adorned and cluttered the cake shop, such as the entire 1991 harvest of my parents' apple tree, rotting, these were precious objects, becoming waste.⁷⁴ In this sense the shop performs durational aesthetics, as a manifestation of what matter endures.

A notable but negative influence was UK performance artist Bobby Baker, who I saw perform 'Kitchen Show' at the Brighton Festival, 1991, shortly before thinking up Reality Cakes. Baker has been an important figure in UK feminist performance art since the 1970s (Harris 1999; Heddon 2002; Aston 2004; Lawson 2011; Barrett and Baker eds, 2007).⁷⁵ Her work explores gendered domestic oppression and 'Kitchen Show's' culinary exploration of oppression is echoed in Reality Cakes, albeit with very different form and tone. I was horrified by what I perceived as the shallow, corny theatricality of 'Kitchen Show', a performance which was repeated nightly on a stage with a paying audience. I disregarded Baker's work as an irrelevance but no doubt it helped clarify my own form of expression outside of disciplinary norms.

The name 'Reality Cakes' was not a clever pun about the nature of the alternative reality enacted in the fake cake shop but simply the name of the previous business, 'Reality Printers', with the word 'Printers' painted out. It would have been too presumptuous a name without this link. Far too precocious, although I knew immediately it was ideal, and it's an uncanny gift.⁷⁶ Working with what there is, and going with the opportunities yielded in a site-specific work, can generate surprisingly dense and original results and, at times, dashing serendipities such as this. Another such serendipity was the stunning realisation, when shovelling up and sifting through the material remains in the shop, that it was once a cake shop in a former existence. Up a ladder in the dead of night I ripped the old signage off to reveal a dimly lit face staring out at me from a square framed inset, a reverential

⁷⁴ Gillian Whiteley (2011) offers a comprehensive survey of artists working with repurposed material and trash.

⁷⁵ Although Gerry Harris suggests that the sustained scholarly attention directed at Baker is in part due to the scarcity of UK feminist performance artists as research material (personal communication). Baraitser's (2009) more critical stance comes closer to my own opinion of Baker's work.

⁷⁶ If I'd had the wherewithal, I could have called it 'Ontology of the Kitchen' in indirect reference to US feminist performance artist Martha Rosler's 'Semiotics of the Kitchen' (1975). I encountered this work in 2015 in a feminist art activist seminar and was struck by the similarities to Reality Cakes - both feature banging on the counter which I mention later - and the differences - Rosler was an articulate philosophy graduate and I still, by 2015, had not articulated any words at all on Reality Cakes.



Left to right: Views through Reality Cakes' shop window, Liverpool, 1991.

position above the door. It was the Lyon's cake girl, and from high up on the abandoned factory building opposite I made out the words 'J. Lyon's & Co.' in proud red brickwork. The sweet ruins of industrial capitalism were haunting my reconfigurings of a world of manufacturing cake.

Shadow shopkeeper

Although now part of the art canon, Lucas and Emin considered themselves anti-art at the time of *The Shop* (Abbott 2013) and Oldenbergh belongs to a more ample history of US artists since the 1960s working partly or wholly outside of the art institution, and specifically using the medium of the shop. Shops, then, offered an opportunity for counter-revolutionary art practice, but Reality Cakes has no place even in this peripheral art history. It was established with total indifference to the art world, which in turn has remained indifferent to it. A few months before Reality Cakes started trading, my Pickled Shopkeepers collaborator, Alyson Rigby, and I had decided at a dinner party to drop out of art college, hitch hike to a random UK city and start working in empty shops. From the very next day we dedicated ourselves to carrying out this plan. We had gone to college to 'learn' performance, but instead had been 'taught' fine art and the performing arts as two separate disciplines, and

concluded that this disciplinary knowledge was no use at all.⁷⁷ What we really needed to learn from was the experience of real life. Reality Cakes had to be in and of the real world. It disregarded the art world's exclusivist divisions. It was for all passers-by in the city centre of Liverpool. It is 'shadow art' as Sholette (2011) describes the invisible underworld of creative practitioners beyond art's disciplinary borders. Without knowing or caring, I was a shadow shopkeeper. Not an artist. I just baked cakes.



The Pickled Shopkeepers in discount supermarket, Kwiksave, Liverpool 1992. Photograph: Unknown.

I can name the elements of the conscious methodology behind Reality Cakes like a list of cake ingredients. It came to me clearly how the cake shop had to be. With a tacit certainty, I never doubted its integrity or importance. I never tussled over details. *I knew what I had to do.* Day in, day out, and without hesitation, I followed a protocol in my head. I knew *it made sense.* I knew that, however personal the cake shop, it had a deeper resonance that one day I would be able to articulate. I knew *it had to be performance-based.* It was the only medium of expression that felt relevant and enabling. *It had to be a shop,* a real life, non-art context and a point of interaction with non-art publics. (I had been nullified by B12, the

⁷⁷ The course, Visual and Performing Arts at the then Brighton Polytechnic, required students to select a performance discipline of dance, theatre or music. I chose the latter.

nondescript bookable room where installations had to take place in the college I had dropped out of). *It had to be fake*, because after my upbringing in an extraordinarily sensible environment (I come to that shortly) I didn't know what was real anymore. *It had to be a cake shop* as cake making was the one skill I had inherited from my mother. *I had to live in role*, the role of me being myself being a cake shop proprietress, myself in an alternate mode of being. *It had to be long lasting*. Somehow, I sensed, this made the experience authentic, more generative, and worth doing. There could be no fixed end point.

And that was all I knew. Beyond that, I knew no more. And when it did come to an end, *I could do no more*. After Reality Cakes, I felt that I had nothing left to say as an artist. I had expressed all that I had in me. To continue to branch out with the fake shop range would have been to keep offering repeat versions of the same thing. Still without understanding any of the analysis I shall present below, I sensed both the strength of the work and its limits. It was just *there*, it didn't *do* anything. It disrupted but didn't reconfigure. I didn't know *how to do* anything. I was aware that in order to take my ideas further I first needed a much better grasp of the workings of the world. So I went off to do a (proper) taught degree, looking for new tools to think with.⁷⁸ I knew I had to do much more.

PART 2

COUNTERMETHODS

The promise of feminist art is the performative creation of new realities.

— PEGGY PHELAN, *'Survey' in Art and Feminism*

[Havana, Cuba, 2015]

Three weeks to go on maternity leave. I have found a childminder so I can start to read again for a few hours every day. My child hasn't settled in as she's unwell, so I sit outside under the shade of the golden flame trees in the park, on benches whose missing slats have been replaced with repurposed hospital window fittings, uncomfortable and buckling under human weight. With my daughter crying in the background, and a succession of locals asking why I'm using a park bench as an office, I read three books. Carol Becker's *'Surpassing the Spectacle'* (2002), Alana

⁷⁸ I chose to study ethnomusicology at Queen's University Belfast, because it seemed the most exotic subject and location, during the Northern Irish Troubles, of all the available options.



The high ceilinged living space in our Havana home, with desk/dining table and cot, Central Havana, 2015

Jelinek's 'This is Not Art' (2013), and Jayne Wark's 'Radical Gestures: Feminism and Performance Art in North America' (2006). These are the paperbacks I happened to squeeze into a case full of baby things on the off chance I decided to carry on with the PhD. This small window onto new literatures opens up significant new vistas in understanding the art context of my practice. It shatters my ambivalence for writing a thesis, and sets me up with a fresh set of concerns and novel appraisal of who I am and what I've been doing all along. I resolve to pursue what my thesis might be.

The instrumentalised ontoworker

In Becker I read for the first time ever a description of a mode of being which I recognise as my own. This is her description of the artist. Becker defines an artist not by the nature of the art practice pursued but as an approach to life, as an all-encompassing form of being. Art as being, not doing.

Artists consider everything that they do to be part of their work ...
Artists flock to the ambiguities and marginalities that cause others to flee. They find inspiration in the seeming disorder of urban life. Aware of and even known to revel in their own otherness, artists desire

environments where they do not need to conform to a uniform version of adult behaviour, acceptable work, or relationships. They then create around themselves the possibility of living the lifestyle that feels freest and most encouraging of creativity. (Becker 2002, xx)

The reason this rang so true is that it is the closest summary I had found of what I now describe as ontowork. Becker describes art in similar terms to Rancière's 'total life programme' (2004) with the artist as ontoworker who 'considers everything they do as part of the work'. Becker prefigures my thinking about the artist as outsider, and specifically of peripheral performance as an affirmative stance — artists 'flock' to the margins, she says — the periphery is not a weak position of the excluded. She presents the artist as an individual who refuses to uphold the distribution of the sensible, who is ready to disrupt and reconfigure sensible co-ordinates of behaviour and modes of living, and who creates their own world in which alternative modes of being can be nurtured. I suggest that artists are inspired by disorder because what 'disorder' signifies is a sensory disruption or absence of the sensible order. Disorder describes the rich experience of a life lived otherwise on the margins. Becker then goes on to celebrate the importance of the artist's (onto)work for generating political change around the term 'innovation':

Because artists bring new ideas about seeing, fabricating, and responding to history into the society, their work encourages disequilibrium, creates its own type of predictable disorder. Although it may take decades to reach assimilation, over time these ideas become acceptable and are absorbed within the society. When this absorption is complete and these innovations of thought, images, or techniques have lost their creative edge, then it is time to generate more new concepts. (Becker 2002, 5-6)

Initially I interpreted Becker's validation of the artist-innovator as a licence to operate. Her writing helped me reflect on the tensions I had experienced in the artist-innovator role on the HighWire programme where I had been expected to fit into an instrumental mould on e-business courses, and in numerous other neoliberal contexts where I had been alternately lauded, castigated, dismissed, or

called on as either an exotic animal, saviour or as a token gesture to grant kudos.⁷⁹ So, Becker appeared as a green light to 'do my thing' regardless of trying to 'fit in'. What I failed to perceive were the tensions inherent in Becker's promotion of the artist as neoliberal creative, exemplified by her Davos address on the subject (2015). This problematic vision is based on showing what artists can do in (or rather *for*) the neoliberal economy.⁸⁰ Artists are ideal for neoliberalism, indeed they are the very making of it, and Becker's inference is that this is somehow a symbiotic relationship. But on the flipside, artists are perfectly suited to the forms of exploitation which creative capital demands. Artists are not just innovative and flexible, they will even work long hours for free and, as neoliberal strategies for artists' instrumentalisation have matured, artists, in turn, have increasingly come to accept the conditions of the new neoliberal precariat (Jackson 2012, 23; Jelinek 2013, Sholette 2011, Harvie 2013).

Becker doesn't trouble the instrumentalisation of the arts in the creative economy nearly enough. But where she was singularly useful for developing my thesis argument was with her notion of the 'neoliberal veil'. This was my first printed, (ie visible, tangible) evidence of the existence of a concrete perceptual phenomenon behind the unsayable, obfuscating force which reinforced 'There Is No Alternative' thinking, which forbid even a murmur about the existence of an 'outside'. It was through Becker's writing that I became aware of a dominant system of perception which obscured reality, and which bewildered and confused as a form of control. Yes, the current neoliberal condition was the result of managed perceptions of reality, of a world of deliberately fabricated 'radical ignorance' (Proctor and Schiebinger (eds) 2008). A-ha. I lived with this thought and, a year later, when I encountered Rancière's ideas, I was ready to appropriate the distribution of the sensible as a thinking tool to (re)think the whole thesis.

The delusional neoliberal artist

For a few days after reading Becker I enjoy a novel sense of situating myself in the world, of knowing myself better and connecting to others. I am one of *those* artists

⁷⁹ For example, I enchant the management school with my exotic clothing pledge (chapter 3); I give kudos to Lancaster University's Knowledge Exchange and Enterprise Group for being that rare egg that 'goes out into the community'; I am discredited by one sustainable design professor for my misguided political ambition and absence of scholarly rigour; another sustainable design professor features me in keynote speeches as a hero figure.

⁸⁰ Based on Florida's (2002) influential record. This instrumental vision of the artist quickly spread in the business world (Austin and Devin 2003, Darsoe 2004).



Studying with a toddler, Central Havana, 2015. Photograph: Maurice Haedo

that Becker describes. Positive identification. Minor elation. Then I read Jelinek (2013) and am put swiftly back in my place, cast back into the shadows, on the outside of art. Jelinek *insists* that I am not an artist. I have no part in the artworld. I do not count. I don't belong because I don't define my practice in relation to contemporary art discourse or care to follow disciplinary criteria. I'm fine bobbing along on the margins, but its disorienting trying to understand what feels wrong, against the current and all by myself. I'm starting to realise that disciplinary exclusions don't matter to me. The art world's criteria do not count for me. But the sting comes when she throws water on any attempts at art activism that I might make. Because, in her opinion, there is no way for the artist to escape neoliberalism, and any art activism which attempts to do otherwise is delusional by default. Political art is a fantasy. Jelinek goes out of her way to stop people like me from wasting their time. I swallow her bitter pill of impossibility, and assess the theoretical dead ends. For a while I cave in and start imagining an apologetic thesis with a defeatist ending. I nearly give up.

The strength of Jelinek's text is her close observation of the neoliberal veil's hoodwinkings in contemporary art practice (see also Harvie 2013 for a thicker description still). Although Jelinek reinforces the disciplinary exclusions of art, she

at least offers a frank exchange about the limits of politically engaged practice. In contrast, critical art historian, Claire Bishop (2012) surveys politically engaged art in a disciplinary bubble with the disciplinary question 'is it good art?'⁸¹ and, despite her more direct engagement, Harvie (2013) seems under-critical of, and overwhelmed by neoliberalism's reach. So it is Jelinek's recognition of the severity of the problem that offers a wake-up call to the uncritical, optimistic artist (such as myself) trying to perform politics through art. Yes, we must grasp art's role in the UK as a creativity engine fuelling the latest neoliberal phase of the capitalist economy (McRobbie 2011, Shukaitis 2016), because to carry on without confronting this staggering reality is deluded. For her ambitious and imperfect book, I respect and relate to Jelinek for saying an unsayable thing, 'all art works *for* neoliberalism' but her chorus of 'There Is No Alternative' blocks all the exit routes. As a result the trouble I am facing looms larger and the solution appears more impossible still. Stasis. When, later, I do find Rancière, I see how Jelinek's response to the crisis is to defend art's disciplinarity, in a fatal exclusion of what can be done, and who is allowed to do it.

The feminist performance artist

In an equally significant discovery, I am then introduced, by Wark (2006), to feminist performance art for the very first time.⁸² I have by now completed an MA in art practice and am halfway through a PhD so the tardiness of the discovery is significant. This is the a-ha moment in which I finally identify my methodology, not as a new discovery but as recognition that feminist performance art is what I have been doing all along. This is what I have been making up as I searched amongst the available methodologies for intellectual study to be able to frame what I do. Previously, I had found strong affinities and partial fits — living in inquiry (Marshall 1999, 2016), participatory activist research (Reason 2005, Heron 1996, Kemmis and McTaggart 2000), auto-ethnography (Ellis 2004, Adams et al 2015), performative autobiography (Gale and Gardner 2004, Spry 2001) performance studies (Kershaw 1999, Phelan 1993, 1997) feminist methodologies (Lather 1988, 1991, Naples 2003) — but I couldn't force myself to fit into those moulds, and so I kept on doggedly doing 'my own thing', until finding what this 'thing' was. Feminist

⁸¹ It was Bishop's writing which led me to Rancière, and so I find it disconcerting that she appears to police the art discipline so exclusively, while acknowledging his work as a major inspiration.

⁸² To qualify this assertion, I knew of a handful of feminist artists and art historians (Bobby Baker, Judy Chicago, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Suzanne Lacy, Lucy Lippard) outside of a feminist context and without being consciously aware of their feminist stance or of what that would, in any case, have signified.

performance art was never a methodology to be followed or fit into, but rather a system of accountability, a political legacy, and a world of being and knowing and acting that I already inhabited unawares.

Reading Wark in the park, it comes as a shock to find just how closely Reality Cakes follows the characteristics of the US feminist performance art from the 60s and 70s which Wark chronicles. The parallels are acute and I had no idea of this major legacy; intuition and experience, experiment, endurance, the use of autobiography and role play and the themes of femininity and domesticity are central themes. I at once saw the many similarities between the work of these artists and my own. Faith Wilding's *Monstrous Domesticity*, the flour on Suzanne Lacy's face in *Ablutions*, the puce pink walls of the 'Nurturant Kitchen' (Susan Frazier, Vicky Hodgetts, Robin Weltsch). The affinities were strongest of all with the Womanhouse project of which the Nurturant Kitchen was a part. Womanhouse was a derelict mansion in Hollywood populated by Judy Chicago's feminist art students with a series of installations around domestic oppression. 'Womanhouse environments evoked ambivalent feelings about the conflation of domesticity and femininity', says Wark (2006, 54). Some of the details were uncannily familiar to Reality Cakes, with works based on repetitive chores such as Sandra Orgel's 'Ironing' and Chris Rush's 'Scrubbing'. But where Womanhouse explored domestic themes in a domestic setting, Reality Cakes was located in a High Street setting to explore consumerism and the capitalist economy alongside domesticity and femininity. But the most important revelation from Wark is that feminist performance art is above all a political project. In fact, the resounding message which comes through her writing is how feminist performance art offered a way to do politics precisely at the time when the rest of the art world was abandoning the political project as I explain below. There was one glaring difference between my own performance and that of the feminist performance artists: my lack of identification with feminism or feminist art, but I since learn this is not unusual. Many of the catalogue of artists now considered feminist have been included retrospectively and many of these either weren't initially aware of or chose not to identify with feminist performance art.

Three books, multiple identities, subjectivities, shifting notions of power. Mother, artist, not-artist, not-activist, feminist artist in quick succession, my agency waxing and waning, the possibility of a thesis (political or otherwise) in the air. But ultimately, my identification with the political power of feminist art is a liberation,



Clockwise from top left: Working late at Reality Cakes, Liverpool 1992. **Photograph:** Alyson Rigby; 'Powdering'; 'Dressing'; 'Weighing', Pickled Shopkeepers' semi-derelict, waterless toilet, Liverpool 1992. **Photographs:** Mark McNulty.

and reading examples of other feminist performance practices gives me license to be myself and helps me to negotiate the awkward relationship I have with scholarship. So it is as a feminist performance artist that I am able to start writing this PhD, with the power that this newfound identity generates. In fact, the story of the cake shop is the very first part of the thesis that I write. Processing this series of revelations from these three books and the tensions they generate, I sit down to (re)configure a thesis after two years of semi or total disengagement. I start to write. I (half) try to write a proper thesis, and yet what pours out is the barely possible, barely imaginable story of how, in a very different life to the one I live now, a life totally unknown to almost all the people who know me, I used to run a fake cake shop. 'Tell better stories' is the only advice Jelinek leaves for the artist negotiating the contemporary terrain, the only way out she can see. It seems a shockingly lame suggestion but, if stories is the best we can do, here we go. I'm going to start by telling mine. I don't sense what Reality Cakes has to do with mending in the beginning, but I do sense it is the place where I need to start. Perhaps, to work out what my thesis is, I need to tell my life story first.

Living as performance

[Dudley, West Midlands, 1989]

Reality Cakes was my second ever performance. The first, (Untitled, 1989), lasted exactly ten minutes and was an autobiographical summary of my life to date. Four unrehearsed performers carried out ten independent actions, each a minute long and punctuated by a violent alarm bell, following instructions strapped to their wrist. From Fluxus, my principal conscious inspiration, the work owed its deliberately unrehearsed and chaotic format and disregard for formal aesthetics.⁸³ But in its essence, 'Untitled' was a classic opera prima of feminist art⁸⁴ — a cathartic, autobiographical performance dealing with how I made sense of myself in the world. I was 'transforming (and thereby controlling and changing) [my] lived experiences into creative products' (Heddon 2006, 134). It brought up issues of gender relations, domesticity and disempowerment that I was far from recognising at the time. I was a naive foundation level art student with little self awareness. Like most of the generation of feminist artists two decades earlier, I had intuitively turned

⁸³ Fluxus was an important point of reference for feminist performance artists, and also a vital tension - see below.

⁸⁴ For a fuller account of feminist performance art see Forte 1988, Agerstoun and Auther 2007, Case 1990, 2001, Phelan and Reckitt 2001.

to the medium of performance as a means of articulating intensely personal feelings that were unexpressable in traditional art media (Wark 2006).

'Untitled' is the moment when I begin to tell, and at the same time to search for, 'my story' through an experimental epistemology of autobiographical methods which leads convolutedly to finding 'my thesis'. In 'Untitled' I told the story in the third person, sitting offstage. From the cake shop onwards, *I am the performance*, and *there is no stage*.⁸⁵ I have situated myself, both literally and figuratively, inside the frame of my work. As Wark says, feminist performance art allowed women to 'assert themselves as the active and self-determining agents of their own narratives. By intersecting the personal with the performative, they were able to blur the distinctions between author and agent, subject and object' (2006, 32). As a result of that decisive critical adjustment I have become entangled in a complex process of knowledge making that originates from the intersection between the personal and the performative; an embodied, experiential epistemology of agential cuts between subject and object; an epistemology that knows far more than I can comfortably apprehend; a feminist epistemology of which experience is an essential and deeply vexed part (Smith 1987, Scott 1992), a thesis about me, trying to get over and beyond myself. This is the moment of becoming ontoworker.

I bet you think this story's about me. Yes and no. This is also when it *stops* being about me, when I start performing a world and become a body which receives and transmits ideas, experiencing and performing an alternative world. I am an entangled part of a much bigger phenomenon, I'm a thinking technology for a world of ideas. As I show in the conceptual framework in the Ontomanual, rather than the subject/object of the story I am the medium through which a bigger story can be told. This story is about alternative worlds, and my role in the story is to sense and perform them. As sensor, performer, storyteller, I put my whole life into this, sensing that I am but a part. Researcher and world are always already entangled in ways which traditional scholarship fails to recognise (Barad 2007), but my entangling is intensified by the radical embodied endurance of ontowork, which Reality Cakes shows.

⁸⁵ Gale and Gardner (2006) provide a good account of the work women create specifically about themselves, and the politics of that work's creation.

Neoliberal Counterattack

[Liverpool, late 1992]

It was capitalist market forces that fostered the conditions in which the cake shop could come into existence and those same forces which brought the cake shop to a close. Property developers Charterhouse Estates, who had just made millions in London's docklands, had moved up to Liverpool for the next big killing. They bought up huge swathes of derelict and semi-derelict areas of the city and were sitting waiting out the slump in a sumptuous office with one of the finest views in Liverpool consuming fine red wine, morning and afternoon. Their strategy was to invent the 'Creative Industries Quarter' to get artists into derelict buildings to gradually bohemianise and then gentrify the areas at which point they would sell up.⁸⁶ As my collaborator Alyson Rigby and I hitched up to Liverpool full of bravado and creative intent, they happened to publish the first (and only — tellingly) edition of "The Creative Industries Quarterly", a tabloid periodical full of spin to inspire local creative talent to sign up for their (illusory) deals. It took persistence and initiative to negotiate a cheap enough rent and we squatted a derelict house while we worked on it.⁸⁷ At the same time the conservative government was offering financial support to new businesses on an almost no questions asked basis and many artists, anarchists, poets and more took advantage of Thatcher's Enterprise Allowance Scheme, EAS.⁸⁸ We got free business banking and free business training. But Liverpool was not London. Even now, twenty five years on, only a fraction of the city has gentrified. The wine drinkers went bankrupt, we stopped paying rent, and when the administrators caught up with us they wouldn't honour our rental agreement. That was how it came to an end.⁸⁹

On the last day of business I padlocked up as per usual and painted the word 'CLOSED' in flour and water on the tar-covered door. I left the shop exactly as it was, with the rusting tins, the leaking pipes, the filthy gas cooker, the spare margarine in the coal hole, the pitiful window display, the mouldy cakes. I liked the idea that passers by could still look in and, perhaps, sense the lingering sweet stench, even see water trickling under the front door. Twenty years later I returned

⁸⁶ An example of Florida's (2002) creative cities, critiqued by McRobbie (2011), Harvie (2013).

⁸⁷ We sealed a favourable deal by meeting Charterhouse Estates executives face to face in their London headquarters.

⁸⁸ Harvie (2013) provides an account of artists on EAS.

⁸⁹ For details of the Creative Industries Quarter and Charterhouse in Liverpool see Millard (1992) and Waddington (2012).



Clockwise from top left: View of Hanover Street redevelopment, an interior design store on the site of Reality Cakes and BBC Radio Merseyside to the right, Liverpool 2011; Tesco Express and car park on the site of the Lyon's Cakes factory, opposite the former Reality Cakes site; Hanover Street view, with the Pickled Shopkeepers gallery entrance, Reality Cakes and Kwiksave from left to right, Liverpool 1991.

to the spot. The entire block had been erased, the cake shop now a characterless designer interiors store. BBC Merseyside had moved to the plot next door, the token creative arrival to the once 'Creative Industries Quarter', overshadowed by a Premier hotel chain. The cake factory opposite had been superseded by a premium price, control society car park, with rolling steel shutters that close after each car's entry and the only pedestrian exit is via the lifts which drop you off a ubiquitous Express grocer's on the ground floor. This was the latest radical reconfiguration of a nation of shopkeepers.

Then, in 2012, as part of the PhD practice, I attended a public meeting with Morecambe residents, local entrepreneurs and the Town Clerk to discuss

Morecambe's bid for £100,000 of government money for ailing towns, the brainchild of a TV celebrity turned government advisor, Mary Portas (2011) who advocated for bringing empty shops and town centres back to life.⁹⁰ An arts organisation from Liverpool had been invited to advise on the value of art in empty shops. Upon questioning, they revealed that a key historical point of reference was my cake shop. With no publicity beyond its material presence, the cake shop's legacy had, it appeared, been maintained through collective memory among the grassroots Liverpool art scene. But this legacy was not versed so much in art historical terms but in neoliberal economic ones. The implicit assumption was that the presence of the cake shop had led to the gentrification of the area. It had made good business sense.

Artpreneurial anticapitalism

Within a year of Reality Cakes' closure, Tracy Emin and Sarah Lucas's shop opened on Brick Lane in London with a very different economic proposition. Their shop marked a new era of 'artpreneurship'⁹¹ (Harvie 2013), of the creative entrepreneur who marketed both their work and themselves. Their interests, however countercultural in principle (Abbott 2013), were perfectly in tune with Richard Florida's (2002) vision of the rise of creative capital in neoliberalism. What I'd like to do now is to think with the trouble of the neoliberal artist's sellout to cultural capital plc by fast-forwarding to the far more recent practice which I have pursued under the banner of 'Futuremenders' as part of this doctoral research. I want to assess how my own 'artpreneurialism' has been carried along by the economic tide by comparing Reality Cakes, from the early neoliberal era, to the Futuremenders projects (2009-2013) which I have carried out in empty shops in the late neoliberal context. My subsequent thoughts on accountability help to explain why Reality Cakes has been cut into the present thesis and my later Futuremenders work has been cut out.

⁹⁰ My participation was part of a precarious process of currying favour with local administrators and neoliberal enterprise in the hope of gaining some rewards for local social activism. The negative clashes and shady dealings worked out categorically in favour of neoliberal enterprise who relied on the artist as creative troubleshooter for the woes of the retail sector. As such, I experienced Jelinek's idea of the neoliberalisation of the artist before reading her account. There is material aplenty for further study here, but this is not an avenue I pursue in this thesis.

⁹¹ Harvie explains this critical term: 'Political, economic and social mandates to foster creative economies are increasingly casting art practice as economic practice and the artist as entrepreneur' (2013, 62).

I would like to think that, while Emin and Lucas created a model of the neoliberal art world in a shop, Reality Cakes had a counter purpose, that it performed a noncapitalist world as a form of pseudo-entrepreneurial anticapitalism. By this, I align myself with other 'economic artists' who work with the 'material economy as the object of consideration [] by assuming a militant, non-profit or parasitic stance' (Ardenne 2010, 84).⁹² I'd like to believe the cake shop had a parasitic relationship with neoliberal governmentality and the property developers, but is this as delusional as Jelinek would have me think? As the story reveals, whether or not there was a direct causal relationship between the fake cake shop and the area's subsequent gentrification, Reality Cakes was enrolled, albeit posthumously, into the business case for creative cities. Hard as it is to stomach that all that anarchic mould could lead to neoliberal renewal, it follows Jelinek's argument that artists are always implicated in neoliberal mechanisms of power, however hard they may resist that fate. In fact, this is precisely Boltanski and Chiapello's (2005) argument, that the very rebellion of one generation of artists fuels the next incarnation of capitalism. Mouldy cakes form the compost⁹³ from which new artistic refusals can sprout. By the late neoliberal times, the stench of dystopian cakes was long gone, their material disobedience was now an irrelevance, and the sanitised memory of Reality Cakes became a flagship for an economic argument which it was unknowingly but deeply against.

Pop-up and mend

[The Sock Exchange, Futuremenders, Cork November 2010; Dublin, October 2011] Two decades would pass before I worked again in an empty shop. I was a month into my instrumental initiation into 'innovation in the digital economy' on the HighWire MRes and was encountering a discomfoting new economic (and sensory) reality. There was no going back to being an ontoworking shopkeeper moulding an anarchic world within a world. I no longer had the luxury of escaping into an alternative mode of being. My artwork materialised as 'projects' which I pencilled in around the deadlines, not a durational aesthetic but one 'quick and dirty prototype'⁹⁴ after another. In any case, the neoliberal landscape had matured

⁹² Ardenne's work is published in Jahn ed (2010) which is a useful contextualisation of art practice which disrupts or reconfigures the neoliberal stranglehold.

⁹³ The compost idea is Haraway's (2016).

⁹⁴ The quick and dirty prototype is diametrically opposed to staying with the trouble, the onus is to have an idea, and then move on to another, each time leaving all the trouble behind, all the material labour undone. See Limn Special Issue Number Zero: Prototyping Prototyping (Ketty (ed) 2010).

and getting a long-term shop was hard to do⁹⁵ — I sensed a general tightening of possibility, a system with no give, a life too busy to keep on trying — and so I went along with the voguish fashion for pop-up shops⁹⁶ (endurance no longer required) and led several short events, of 1-7 days, in venues that were handily set up, and sometimes funded, by curators or commissioning bodies. My first question in returning to an empty shop was: What sorts of counter-action are (still) possible today? The current times were blighted by programmed precarity and pseudo-austerity and I turned to thinking of what genuine forms austerity and resilience might take in the contemporary context.

How might I counter shopping, and productivism as a whole, in this neoliberal moment? I opened my facsimile edition of that trending little wartime book, 'Make Do and Mend' (Ministry of Information 2007, Norman 2007) and determined to do a radical thing — to doggedly carry out its carefully considered and commonsensical advice. Between its dusky pink covers, it espoused an extreme material politics. It described an unfamiliar mode of material relations, including detailed instructions to care for every type of fibre, and *prevent or remedy almost every form of hole*. I was shocked to realise just how radically unthinkable practices such as the pre-darned heel or the turned collar are in the UK today.⁹⁷ The book creates a powerful affective response to bygone material relations⁹⁸ and our very fascination demonstrates the degree of current insensibility to material knowledges and an inability to respond to materials with acts of care.

The holey sock

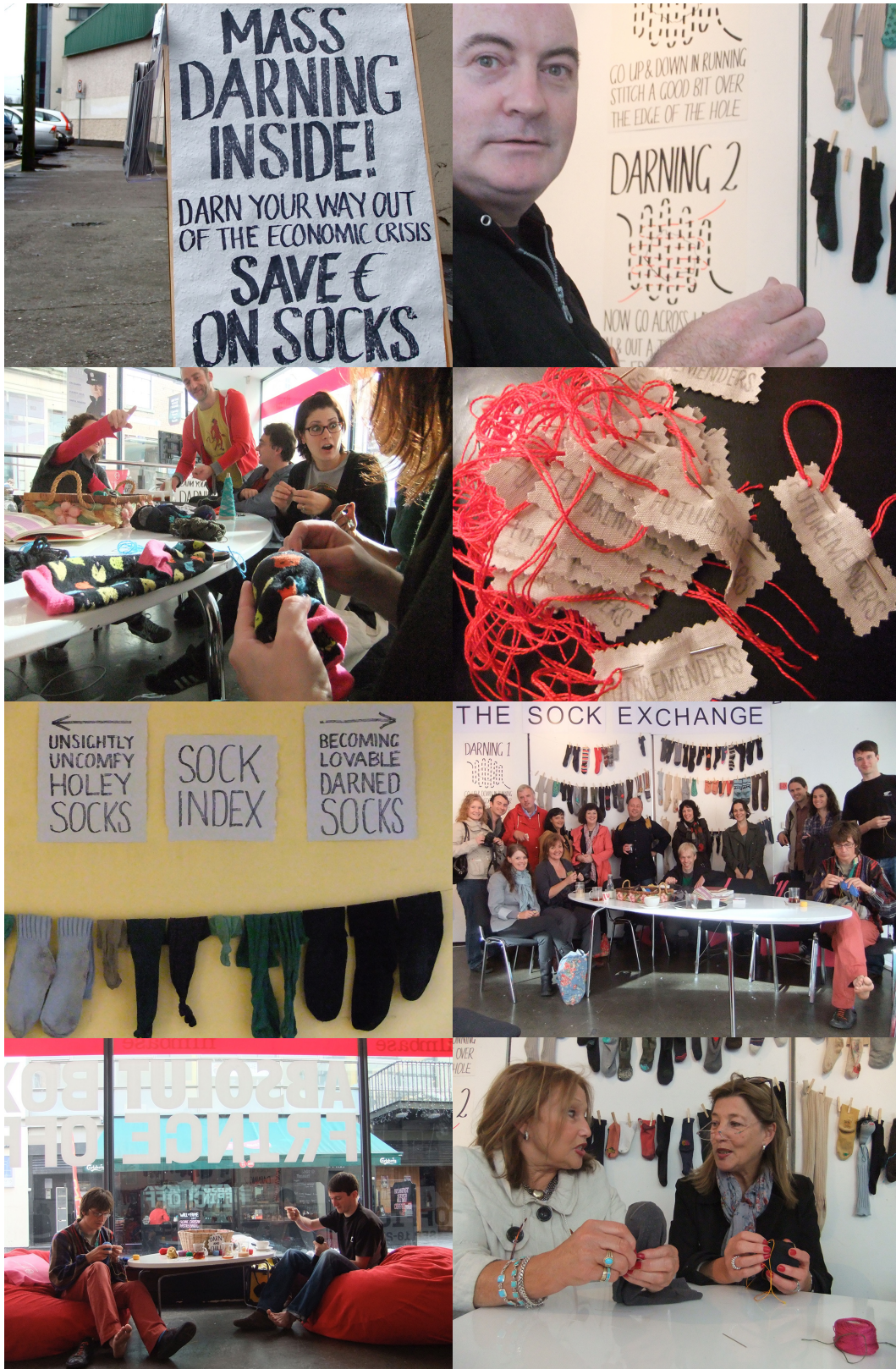
The first of my pop-up shop experiments in mending, and the example I shall introduce here, was The Sock Exchange, a sock darning enterprise in a mirthless

⁹⁵ For the first half of the PhD I invested considerable effort in acquiring a local empty premises in which to set up a long term mending shop and community resource. In fact I wanted to evacuate the university campus and use the shop as a base for all the research and writing up, Morecambe being replete with empty shop units and in need of social regeneration. At the time (2012), 14.6% of UK High Street shops lay vacant (Harvie 2013), a figure which is conservative for Morecambe. See earlier footnote on my dealings with Morecambe Town Council and business leaders.

⁹⁶ Harvie 2013 gives a critique of the pop-up trend.

⁹⁷ I had experience of working in a garment repair and alteration service business in the early 2000s in Spain, where the practice of turning collars was still requested by clients, and monastery-trained seamstresses (called Lourdes and Milagros, 'Miracles') carried out the fine work.

⁹⁸ See Jeremy Gilbert's (2011) analysis of the 'Keep Calm and Carry On' merchandising craze as the materialisation of the UK's affective response to the neoliberal austerity narrative.



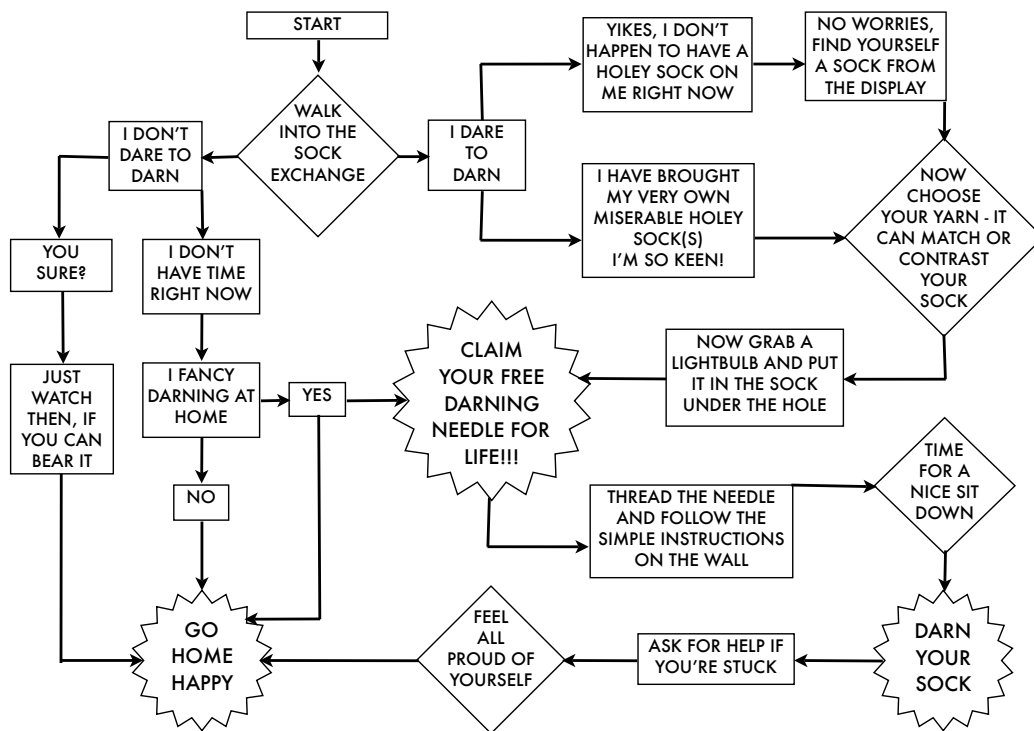
Selected images from the Sock Exchange: On-street publicity; Simple darning instructions for beginners; Darning needles for life given to each participant; The Sock Exchange becomes a regular stopping point for a tour of alternative cultural highlights; Experienced darners darn my socks; Novice darners darn their own socks; Dynamic index of sock value according to holey/darned status; A waiter serves the essential ingredients of tea and cake. Cork, Ireland, 2010 and Dublin, Ireland, 2011.

back room of a former independent DIY store in Cork, Ireland, in November 2010, which I was invited to repeat in Dublin the following year. The events operated following a simple protocol. I provided resources, instructions and a welcoming environment in which passers by could take part by darning a sock 'for fun'. This was the beginning of an experiment to see what it would take for a person to mend a holey sock, and then to see what accrues if a succession of people mend just one hole each. A year later I decided that mending had to be my thesis.

I had no idea how to darn so I referred to two diagrams from the 'Make Do and Mend' book. There are multiple darning methods depending on the yarn, the weave, and the location of the hole, so I began with the simplest. It was lost on me at the time that I had switched from one gendered specialist activity of social reproduction to another, from baking to darning. The cake shop was a world away. But although darning was my new counter-offensive, cake was still the real weapon, *nice cake* that I got the funding body to buy in as a hook to lure unlikely darners through the door. Tea? Cake? Oh, and might you be tempted to darn a sock? Ever so simple. My tactics, like the cakes, had changed from the revolting to the tempting. I now did warm and fuzzy⁹⁹ activism, affective activism (Holmes 2009). I excelled in the production of positive affect to get punters through the door to make change happen, or at least to give the project an air of success. These were the tools of the times. As Shannon Jackson observes, 'creatives are charged with motoring the innovation and the affective life of a globalising service economy' (2012, 11) a reality which troubles the work of niceness, as Ahmed (2010) cogently critiques. Who, or what, benefits from the speed darn, the slice of cake and the smiles?

As a wannabe critical activist I must try to seek to differentiate delusional darning from darning for change. Within the neoliberal experience economy, darning is an artfully innovative nicety which arguably augments the hipster happiness index. It can be marketed as a 'once in a lifetime' experience, which was the extent of my limited possibility, and ambition, because, in the neoliberal economy, you never need to darn again. Relating to a darning mushroom (or an obsolescent light bulb) is a refreshingly anachronistic interruption to a normal day's shopping. In contrast, as a noncapitalist activity, mending is not for laughs, but for matter. Noncapitalist darning is a habit for life, an offer of an extended lifetime of care for socks, and the

⁹⁹ A mode of being I had learnt in my first paid employment at Woolworths, 1987, in an early wave of neoliberal staff training techniques.



Go Home Happy flow chart. Displayed at the Sock Exchange, Dublin, Ireland, 2011.

performance of a world outside of the sensible order. It's a vital difference and not hard to spot.

Darning needles for life

Back in Cork in November 2010, the Global North was obsessed with financial crisis but perhaps nowhere more so at that moment in time than Ireland. To rustle up some topical interest, I speculated with financial metaphor to give the call to darn a hook, and related holey socks to people's experience of crisis in everyday life. I riffed on notions of sock values, sock futures and sock derivatives and then serendipity struck again — government promises that the Irish deficit was under control proved hollow on the very day the sock exchange opened, and the Irish 'bailout' was triggered (Guardian Business Blog 2011). In this context, sock darning went from being absurdly far-fetched to becoming a timely and mediagenic action. I was invited onto a prime time Irish television show where I begged the Irish to 'save euros on socks' and 'watch darned sock values rise'.

I was finding an activist voice. I had got something to say. My call to 'darn your way out of the crisis' was no metaphor. People were demonstrating in the streets while

we mended calmly and industriously indoors. I sensed our political actions were the horizontal and vertical stitches which made the holes disappear. I sensed the revolution was taking place in the darning parlour, not on the streets. I sensed I wasn't for identity politics with placards, but for material politics with a needle and thread. My concern was not financial futures, but material ones. My response was to stop protesting for things to go back to 'normal', and see how the world 'articulates itself differently' (Barad 2007, 335) if we mend.

I bought one thousand darning needles to give away — '*Darning needle for life: Guaranteed to last longer than a bag for life*' — in a wanton over-estimate of demand. I am still giving away these invaluable noncapitalist tools today. (They are far more appreciated — and put to use — in Cuba). But I ask myself about the uselessness of releasing darning needles into the world, as if the lack of a needle were the problem. How many of those needles will have ever darned again? It is hard to assess whether darning for kicks at the Sock Exchange could create a disposition to darn in future, whether a one-off darning moment can induce an affirmative material politics, a more lasting commitment to matter. The wider politico-methodological question which I still can't answer is this: How can the mending activist measure the accountability of her actions? Or rather, how might we think with accountability in the political event of darning a sock, which is incommensurate both to scholarly demands and planetary needs.

Inside-out stories, missing socks

The thesis you are reading has been turned inside out. What was supposed to be inside has been cut out. And material from the outside has been cut in. Material practice that had no bearing at all at the start of this practice-based research has become the heart of my argument. At the start of this research project I was a marginal artist building up the socially engaged 'Futuremenders' practice, an open-ended experiment which came to take the specific form of mending activism in empty shops. These initiatives were intended as relational resources to insert noncapitalist, non-productivist material activity into the High Street, which through skills sharing and remattering, prolonged or reinstated the useful economic and social life of material objects.

In a significant agential cut and paste job, I cut the sock mending out and the cake making in to make a thesis from the parts that previously had no part. It fits that I am working with the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion to make a case centred

on exclusionary politics, paying attention to the insensible matter which is being left out (Yusoff 2013, Papadopoulos 2014b). The Futuremenders projects,¹⁰⁰ of which the Sock Exchange is a part, constituted, in my earlier conception, *the* practice of the PhD. But in the indeterminacy of the process, when I sat down to write the thesis, the cake shop experience came out instead. I listened to the voice issuing through me, of the unknowing one-time performance artist/human sensor, and recognised that *this* is my unique contribution. This is what I can do best: sense trouble and endure it in my everyday experience. This became the basis of my methodology, to see what happens when I throw my every cell at this sensory labour of existing and enduring otherwise. And, by cutting together/apart what I become able to say, the thesis is my response.

I start with, and keep returning to, the motif of the holey sock, but the extensive material I have on sock mending is missing. Far more generative is the hole. Far more troubling is the hole. Sock darning was patching over the hole, weaving up and down and across it, but it wasn't revealing or addressing the deeper trouble. I harboured grave doubts about my ability to do public-facing mending activism in ways that could rise above the delusional or egotistical level *and* avoid the negative task of merely chronicling the troubles. So I opted not to write a dead-end thesis about the joy of darning, which would have pointed to the barest threads of possibility as to what is to be done. And I steered away from taking on the incommensurate endeavour to make mending happen, regardless of how or why. Darning can be a stitch in the right direction towards a new material politics, or it can be fatally co-opted by the global capital machine. And besides, trying to instil a mending imperative in others without addressing the more complex and deeply entangled agencies seemed increasingly ill-conceived.

The Futuremenders work did not experiment in sensory labour. It relied on my talents at event management, and my affective labour of making sure all the one-time darners would 'go home happy', (and that the funders were happy, and that people tweeted, and that the photos looked good online). I had no time or space to

¹⁰⁰ The principal Futuremenders projects which I facilitated during the PhD period are: The Sock Exchange - mass darning event in a city centre ex-DIY store (ArtTrail, Cork, Ireland 2010); The Sock Exchange - mass darning event in the festival box office (Crafts Council of Ireland, Absolut Fringe, Dublin 2011); The Mending Shop - artist's residency and collaboration with the women menders of HMP Peterborough (European Commission with Rideout (Creative Arts for Rehabilitation, Peterborough town centre 2011-2012); Mending Mecca of the North (affiliated to Restore More and Mary Portas Town Team, 2012-2013).

sense or think.¹⁰¹ I was too busy to be receptive to sensory data. It was clear that my contribution (inside or outside scholarship) did not lie in my evident ability to pull off 'successful' mending events. Other people can do that too, in more committed, community-based ways, with greater expertise and more tangible results, and fortunately more and more people are.¹⁰²

In the latter stages of the PhD I have ceased working on, and writing about, Futuremenders projects in favour of the sensory methods of ontowork. The agential cut was to switch the focus from 'how to make mending possible (for everyone)', in effect, how to get *other people* to mend in a participatory mode of activism to 'how to make mending possible *for me.*' I put public-facing activist work on hold to grasp my own ways of knowing and being in relation to mending and activism, with an intensification of ontoexperiment as activist inquiry. My intention is to better understand modes of political and material engagement in my own experience before returning to the question of how to create the wider conditions of mending's possibility. In accord with this shift, I have revised my thinking on what constitutes an activist practice and activist scholarship. As a result, the combination of scholarly inquiry through literature, and ontoexperiment is the methodological framework through which the thesis is written. The concluding stages of the PhD process have been an escape, an opening out, into new literatures and sensory panoramas which I cut together to help to make sense of the present condition.

I recognise that the participatory work of Futuremenders has been a powerful thinking tool for me to work through ideas and troubles, especially in the differential labour of what to encourage and what to refuse. All the 'wrong' turns have helped me attune to wrongness, and my forays across the sensible picket lines¹⁰³ onto dodgy ground have been invaluable to sharpen my critique. The stories I choose to tell about my ontowork, the ontotales I have learnt how to tell to account for my sensory relations, speak more politically and critically to the experimental inquiry. Ontowork generates its own troubles, but I claim these

¹⁰¹ The projects were mostly self-funded and I was busy cadging resources, placating helpers, finding a couchsurf bed to sleep in, while juggling the gruelling schedule (and emotional drain) of the HighWire taught MRes in Digital Innovation.

¹⁰² I believe mending shops are a valuable way forward, and that repair cafes, restart parties etc are important in bringing about a shift in perception and ability to relate to material trouble, and thoroughly respect and support all involved in this work.

¹⁰³ Among the low points, I crossed a picket line to meet a university overlord who promised me an empty shop. We got on like a house on fire and, after a convoluted series of promises, the shop never materialised.

troubles as my own, they are the tensions I am living with, getting to know intimately, and over time I shall share them with others. The concluding part of this chapter explores some of these troubles in an antagonistic assessment of Reality Cakes. It's time to cut into the layers of cake. This is a tardy articulation of the troubles I sensed twenty-five years ago, worlding a world in fake cake.

PART 3

COUNTERARGUMENTS

In the cake shop I used to bang a lot on the counter. Alone most of the day in an otherwise tranquil shop, it was practically the only noise I made. When a Granada Television crew filmed a programme on location there, I kept banging on regardless in the background. The sound technician asked me to stop. A cake baker has little real need to bang, but I kept banging on and on, *as if I had something to say*.¹⁰⁴ Now, after all these years, I have found the *'talent to speak'*. My articulations can now be heard not as 'noise' but as 'argument' (Ranci re 1999). My sensory labour has serious limits, particularly in the 'sayability' of the trouble. For me, staying with the trouble was the easy part. Saying it nearly never happened at all. I say *'I always knew I'd understand [the cake shop] one day'*. But my reading of Reality Cakes has lingered for two decades on the fringes of intelligibility and if it weren't for the PhD process it may well have stayed that way. Now it is time to 'attune' (Stewart 2010, Berlant 2016). '[A]ttunement is a perceptual event that bypasses cognition and hits the subject the way a song does, as a singular perception all at once that is, at the same time, universal' (Berlant 2016, 397-8). By trial and error, my particular process of cueing, or wooing, attunement is a vexatious work of hunting through other thinkers' more developed understandings of the trouble for direct relations to my lived experience.¹⁰⁵ I have to thank diverse minds across all of the disciplines which my reading has traversed to start to 'get' the bigger picture which frames this one.

Given the political aspirations of this thesis, it's imperative to learn to say what's the matter. Apprehending the dominant configurations of a world is understood as a

¹⁰⁴ This is an uncanny, unknowing homage to feminist performance artist Martha Rosler's 'Semiotics of the Kitchen' (1975).

¹⁰⁵ The third and final section of chapter 5 is a particularly strong example of this process.

milestone in the path towards change (Weeks 2011, Bloch 1986). That means clearing that ever foggier neoliberal veil, because otherwise, without clear-enough delusion-free thinking, there can't be clear-enough delusion-free action. In the concluding part of this chapter I pin down the trouble which disturbed me to create Reality Cakes because it is the same trouble (in a slightly earlier stage of its evolution) which motivates the thesis today. I shall spell out this trouble in the following four parts. 'The trouble with Reality Cakes' reviews the efficacy and limits of this performance in personal and political terms. 'The trouble with reality' considers its exploration of a politics of perception. 'The trouble with cakes' probes the ways in which Reality Cakes performs material politics, and 'The trouble with baking' pursues my unease with the romanticised material politics of making. Through these critical reflections I wonder about a possible legacy of the cake shop. Ultimately, after the composted cakes, the bulldozed shop, the gentrified neoliberal shopping experience, did anything political really happen? I aim to show how Reality Cakes surfaces the tensions of the politics of matter and the politics of perception which permeate my sphere of intelligibility and cut through the rest of the thesis.

The trouble with 'Reality Cakes'

In my critical appraisal, 'Reality Cakes' singular contribution was to perform a deep sensory knowledge of an unknowable world. I performed a world in 'sensual saturation' (Berlant 2016, 409). I stand by this early ontoexperiment as one of my highest sensory achievements precisely because of its sensory knowledge production and its more than human expression of embodied entanglements with the world. In fact, I admit to a persistent sense of awe at being the human sensor and performer of a world 'before and beyond' me (Yusoff 2013). It's a rare and powerful sensory testament. But beyond that, Reality Cakes is just another fascinating material representation of the problem of the global political economy's threat to life, with its particular focus on matter and the obfuscation of reality. This ontoexperiment was never going to offer an alternative. It is rather a vital step towards understanding about the operative frames which configure reality which, as part of this larger process, helps me learn how to think and how to act, how to slowly see and say, disrupt and reconfigure sensible worlds of everyday perception.

Reality Cakes' antagonistic aesthetic was wilfully provocative. It intended to shock and shock it did, as the embodied reactions of passers-by repeatedly showed. Shock

tactics or 'making the familiar strange' is a device appropriated by both feminist theory (Strathern 1999, in Tsing 2015) and feminist performance art, which acknowledges the influence of Brecht's "verfremdungseffekt" or "alienation effect" (Wark 2006). As the key political device of Brecht's epic theatre in the 1920s, *verfremdungseffekt* upended audience expectations and defamiliarised everyday situations. Brecht's studied intention was to jolt the viewer into a state of critical awareness and bring into view their own alienation. Art historian Griselda Pollock (1988) identified "Brechtian distancing" as a significant tactic used by feminist artists of the 1970s to disrupt dominant ideological codes. The particular relevance to this study is the specific way in which both Brecht and the feminist artists in his wake countered alienation — by making ideology visible (Wark 2006). This corroborates Rancière's idea that the disruption of the sensible order takes place by a shifting of politico-aesthetic co-ordinates.

Alienation is the common term to describe the disconnection from reality that has rendered us insensible to the seamless performance of capitalism. I hold that by making all the dirty workings of the productivist endeavour visible, *Reality Cakes* defiles this seamless performance. It disrupts the sensible co-ordinates of how a cake, a shop, and even an economic model should or could be. These are not the proper roles and functions of people and things (Rancière 1999). But it is my sense that the disruption operates merely on the superficial level of the shopper's dramatic double take, the raised eyebrow, the horrified stare through the filthy window. A truly political disruption of the sensible in Rancière's (and Brecht's) terms doesn't solicit a reaction of 'how strange is that cake shop' but 'how strange is the real world which it performs'. A redistribution of the sensible in this context would equate to denaturalising productivism in the global political economy, and that is evidently a political aspiration far bigger than the scope of *Reality Cakes*. By denaturalising productivism I mean breaking with the sensible belief that making stuff regardless of limits and needs, human and material, is all we can (and must) do. So beyond the more obvious question to the would-be shopper, 'Do you (really) want a cake?' other imperceptible and more problematic questions hide, unasked: Do you really need to go shopping? Do you sense the damage wreaked by this economic system? Do you sense your complicity?

In the temporal order, Reality Cakes was an embodied experiment in endurance.¹⁰⁶ In the first instance, endurance is about sticking around long enough for the trouble to make itself manifest, and from the first batch of cakes I was waiting eagerly for the place to get rank. I was waiting for matter to kick back (Barad 1998). Because, unlike Oldenburg's cakes, this was biomatter as spectacle, (un)doing its thing. The compelling fascination for watching things — moulding cake, crumbling Havana — edge slowly towards abjection and failure (or compost) is, perhaps, because a durational aesthetic on this scale is deleted from the sensible vistas of the Global North. Endurance is a longer-lasting performance which manifests and magnifies what happens when a thing persists. Endurance disrupts the 'chrononormativity' of sensible lifespans such as shelf life, (the term is Elizabeth Freeman's 2010 in Baraitser 2015). Beyond the grim vistas, endurance is about keeping going even when things get palpably nasty, and about living with the nastiness while averting, or at least softening, a nasty ending. What happens when we endure? asks Baraitser, when we stay with the trouble? asks Haraway. What happens to our worlds? I carry the question, and the experiment, through to the final chapter where I discuss sticking with the trouble as a way to perform a real world.

To the common passer-by, Reality Cakes looms as an anachronistic High Street eyesore that is 'stuck in time' because, following Baraitser's suggestion, it's the 'durational practices [of maintenance] that keep 'things' going' (2015, 21), and the visible cessation of care in the cake shop creates a 'stuck time of perpetual crisis' (ibid, 22). Stuck time is how Baraitser characterises capitalism's current moment following Marxist theorist Franco 'Bifo' Berardi's (2011) confirmation that, following decades of postulation, the future has effectively been cancelled. The promise of a better future is dead. Her sentiment is similar to Lauren Berlant's (2011) interpretation of the dead-endness of everyday life as 'impasse'. The question Baraitser asks of repetitive, durational performance work such as this is 'is anything happening?' (ibid, 26). This is the question I must ask of Reality Cakes.

I venture that yes, besides all the baking, other events are taking place, but that they transpire in 'countertime'. By this I mean Reality Cakes reconfigures the dominant temporal order which hides certain forms and scales of events, such as the (far

¹⁰⁶ Interestingly, performance art is commonly termed a 'time-based' medium. It is more useful to think of Reality Cakes, with Barad, as a performance in the medium of time-space-matter, and that time-space-matter-based performance is the performance of worlds.

slower than anticipated) growth of mould on the cakes¹⁰⁷ and the (rather faster) formings of grime into rivulets on my unwashed skin. It not only makes endurance visible but also, and inversely, it shows what happens when a destructive thing like productivism keeps on, and on. I'm with Rob Nixon's (2011) acute assessment that the violence of capital is too slow. 'Long dyings' and 'delayed destruction' don't deliver a sense of a deathly event. This temporal insensibility is one, but far from the only, reason why capital's violence is imperceptible in the distribution of the sensible. As well as a material reordering, Reality Cakes is a temporal reordering of capital's sensible time. Making fake cakes is *counter*-production (Gregg 2018). It is a counterproductive use of capitalist time. What is actually being produced is a hoard, a hoard which suspends cake commodities in time and paralyses an economic cycle (Guagnini 2015, 115). The cakes are stuck in time, or in more agential terms, they, too, are waiting, waiting to decay. Baraitser identifies recent activist practices to occupy public space, with their tactics of 'massing, sitting, ... camping' as forms of "waiting' for political change' (2015, 24-5). This waiting or 'enduring time' is work done 'against rather than for capital' (ibid, 25, emphasis in original). So I understand endurance in Reality Cakes in these two senses, both as a "waiting' for political change'¹⁰⁸ (ibid, 24) and as a fast forwarding to the sticky ending in which the temporal scale of the material violence becomes perceptible as a grotesque aesthetic feast.

The trouble with cakes

Reality Cakes operated with a dystopian imperative towards purposeless production. In a senseless adherence to the logic of productivism it made sub-standard products which were surplus to need, and then it kept making more and more, ad infinitum, in a perpetual promise to an already flawed idea. With the same inflexible intent, the shop's protocol contravened other equally essential but less perceptible aspects of the capitalist economic regime, such as capital's hidden dependence on human and gendered systems of maintenance (Federici 2012, Star 1991, 1991a, Star and Strauss 1999, Weeks 2011, Ukeles 1969) and the invisibility of undesirable externalities such as waste (Hawkins etc etc). There were no gestures of care, and all the trouble was on public display.

¹⁰⁷ The cakes didn't decay as fast or dramatically as I had hoped, in part because the winter of 1991 was particularly cold, in part because they were made with vegan margarine and egg replacer which delayed decay.

¹⁰⁸ One of my favourite found signs which I displayed prominently in the cake shop read 'If waiting, don't keep on'.

Reality Cakes was my first sensory expression of the trouble of matter in capitalism. It was an absurd performance of an economic logic stuck on repeat which made the material violence of the capitalist system manifest. Anyone walking past the shop's open door couldn't fail to notice, to see *and* to smell, that something pretty troubling was going on (Tsing 2015 on the arts of noticing and on the perception of smell). Smell, she says 'is the sign of the presence of another, to which we are already responding' (ibid. 46). Piling up in the display cabinets was the mounting evidence of the absurdity of over-abundance with its visual and olfactory cues, not to mention the invisible excess upstairs. The shop was revolting. The cakes of the day were reliably off-putting. The moulding cakes from the past were vigorously repulsive. Do you really, really want a cake? was the question asked of passers by. A 'reality cake' defied desire. The 'Reality Cake' shop quashed any compulsion to shop. It disturbed sensible perceptions of desire and need in consumer culture. Reality cakes were void of the sensory qualities which might make humans salivate and instead recklessly satisfied the needs of an economic system hungry for growth. The shop was a sensorium of the abject displaying cabinet-fulls of material wrongs.

The reality cake is a motif for a false need. It's a sugary indulgence which is inessential to human survival, a hedonistic excess. A cake is always already surplus. Or is it? In the Global North, perhaps yes. But in the majority world a 'reality cake' such as I baked every day is an unremarkable example of 'good enough' matter. Who is to say what is good enough? We can survive on this. In fact, we can live well. And to prove it, in yet another Reality Cake serendipity, I can say that in Cuba I now *do* need cake like this. Cuban state bakeries, which share a striking aesthetic likeness with Reality Cakes, although they are notionally cleaner, now provide a staple part of my diet. (I receive one bread roll a day in my state rations). The generic Cuban cake, called a '*gaceñiga*', is an indeterminate confection which comes invariably burnt or underbaked, slopped inside and out of the paper case, with hard lumps of salt/sugar/baking powder/stone to beware of, and alarmingly unnatural food colouring. These real (without scare quotes) Cuban cakes have reconfigured my perceptions of edibility, desirability and need. If anything, they are inferior to 'reality cakes' and yet, except for one specimen which reeked of sulphur, they are perfectly non-abject, non-catastrophic calorie content. And they are far less abundant. Sometimes *gaceñiga* supplies go dry. And after a few weeks of going without, it even becomes a treat again.



State rationed birthday cake with melting merengue topping which reads 'Felicidades', for my daughter's first birthday, Central Havana, 2015.

On my daughter's birthday her rations entitle her to a large iced cake from 'Supercake', a state-run outfit down unlit corridors beside a grim bread factory which makes Reality Cakes look like I made an effort. We collect the cake (together with a dead fly stuck to the merengue icing) on the tray we use to mix cement, washed and covered (hygienically) in paper and brown sticky tape. A cake which by UK standards is inedible is a highly desirable treat. Reality Cakes has truly been turned on its head. My extreme experiment has become my new reality.

The trouble with reality

Reality Cakes was an ontoexperiment which played around with fakeness in an unknowing search for reality. It was a game of 'what if?' in which nothing felt off-limits. Earlier I said that the thesis, as a form of knowledge, is a fiction in Ranciere's sense. The cake shop is an example of a 'fiction', constructed not by locution but by embodied performance. Reality Cakes is a material rearrangement of a real cake shop. I was playing at shopkeepers (a game that took over my life), experimenting with enterprise, faking the business plan and the books. I was performing economic anarchy in a tiny lock-up shop, creating a whole fake world in cake. Even I didn't know what was real. Was I studying business skills and cake decorating for real or

was I just pretending? The one thing I called fake, the cakes, were real. I had no idea who believed what. What of the customers who took home real/fake cake? And the Enterprise Allowance lady? (just meeting her targets I presume.) Through feminist performance art I had the power to create a whole other world, to inhabit it, display it, and enrol others into it. How effortlessly we all played along in this multi-layered fake world of my invention. People somehow 'believed.' No-one dared to say 'there's something wrong here.' I was experimenting in perception management. This is the performance of a world, herein lies power.

The medium of perception in which Reality Cakes transpired was what Baudrillard (1983) and Eco (1987) have described as 'hyperreality'. For Baudrillard, hyperreality is a generated reality, an invented world characterised by virtual production and in which the value of matter is unreal. This prescient term centres around the intentional blurring and layering of real and fake. The real, as in the 'real' fake cake, ceases to be real, and the boundaries between fake and real are governed by what we can understand with Rancière as the politics of perception. Hyperreality creates conditions of radical uncertainty. It's an orchestrated unknowing,¹⁰⁹ a blanking of the real. We are all pretending. We are all playing perception management games, not just industry and government for, following Rancière's 'police', it is the neoliberal imperative for everyone to keep up the pretence, as my discussion of the 'policing' done by friends and family in the following chapter shows. No-one ever stopped to question what on earth was going on with Reality Cakes. I can never really know what the shop's impact was. I would like to claim that its radical rupture with aesthetic and procedural norms produced alienation effects which disrupted the sensible order, but a fairer reading may be that it disrupted absolutely nothing. It was part of the postmodern diversion, the spectacle. But still I wonder in what capacity Reality Cakes was entertained by its entangled participants. In another Rancièrean conceptualisation, Reality Cakes simply didn't make sense and so remained insensible. Its message was unintelligible and was heard as noise. Just me banging on. So, either as spectacle or noise, in the end it maybe just added to the real confusion.

I'd always had a sense I'd been brought up on fakeness, from the lemon juice that came in a fake plastic lemon to the fact that in my family we all pretended everything was OK. 'Nice cake' was one of those set phrases to veto a situation's

¹⁰⁹ Proctor (2008) theorises orchestrated unknowing under the term agnotology.

complexity which performed the smooth social facade of hyperreality. We couldn't, and didn't, ask difficult questions. Not much was sayable at all. I wouldn't be writing this thesis if it weren't for them (and I probably wouldn't have taken 25 years to learn to say it). With Rancière I would now say that the parameters of the sayable, thinkable and doable were extraordinarily narrow to reinforce the family's own fictions. So as not to perforate the fictive facade I learned to perform a fake self, an acceptable version of me (which I still perform today). Hochschild explains this gendered predicament as 'women and the repression of discord', a labour which 'requires one to induce or suppress feelings in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the *proper state of mind in others*' (1983, p7 (my emphasis) cited in Jackson 2012, p26). So I was already fake. Because I wasn't proper.

Maintaining an unswerving 'faith in fakes' (Eco 1987), my parents lived in a Disneyfied special edition of the sensible order. It was the spectacular intensity and rigidity of their self-policing of the sensible that roused my suspicions. I saw cracks in the perfect pretence. I consider my parents to be spectacular subjects of capital, hypersensible to the dominant order. And it's thanks to them, I am sure, that I started picking up signals, disturbance, I became hypersensible to the sensory excess from the outside. I sensed fakeness, I ate it, drank it, defrosted it and watched it on TV. With Reality Cakes I set out to manipulate it and explore what work it could do.

To perform Reality Cakes I stopped being complicit in the sensible order and created an entirely improper world. The sensible intensity of the shop disrupts the order of what is done, what can be done and what can be seen to be done on a UK High Street. I was a subversive shopkeeper in Thatcher's nation of shopkeepers, (a phrase I was no doubt familiar with at the time).¹¹⁰ I performed an alternative world, but only a fake one. The fake cake shop had essentially turned a very material problem into a spectacle. It was a dress rehearsal for the far harder task I am now embarked on (which I present in chapter 5), to rethink a world which turns the floodlights on the problem of matter, to world a real, liveable world, working from a rough hypothesis that takes noncapitalist liveliness as a model of what is real. Reality Cakes' shortcomings are summed up by the moment in which the shop

¹¹⁰ In my original (pre-mending) PhD proposal, I presented the idea of 'reverse shopping' which is a continuation of this thinking in counter consumerism.

was mediatised as an exhilarating backdrop for postmodern reality TV. Mrs Merton, a 'fake' agony aunt with celebrity status, filmed a show from the newly opened Eat-In section of the cake shop while I continued on ambivalently with my work. I hadn't previously considered that we were both faking it together, or that she was essentially offering advice on, and in the medium of, the postmodern condition. So, as a negative embodiment of the pathologic condition of postmodernity, Reality Cakes was a performance of Jameson's dystopia, and of Berlant's abjection, and somehow I knew that to simply perform the problem wasn't enough.

The trouble with baking

In a Marxist reading, I baked daily like an automaton in the global economic system or, in a technofuturist vision, like a glitchy robot who can't stop (Fraser 2016). In a feminist reading, my baking constitutes repetitive, gendered, domestic oppression (Federici 2012, James and Dalla Costa 1972, Hochschild 1997), or the motions of a sensuous body reproducing the capitalist economy (Guagnini 2015). But in an alternative reading, which is the thought I will end this chapter with, I baked as *Homo faber* obsessively rehearsing the impulse to make. I want to think about the relation of mending to making in the context of the politics of matter. Because I sense a trouble with making which goes beyond the economic logic of productivism. It is species man's vital but increasingly problematic urge to make. But making without a sensibility to material limits threatens as more of a destructive than a vital force. At a moment in which making is a fashionable urge that increasing numbers in the Global North are seeking refuge in, I pause to trouble making's relation to material limits and ask: What shall we make with? Do we really need it? And what are we making for?

Since the late last century, popular and social movements have reasserted the right, and reclaimed the time, to make, as the flourishing craft, craftivist, maker and tinkerer movements attest (Hackney 2013, Hatch 2013, Greer 2014, Dougherty and Conrad 2016). At its most radical, millennial making can be intended as a counter-cultural political act and a subversive use of time.¹¹¹ But I want to ask, what does making disrupt, and what does it reinforce? I worry that the new relationship with making is not accompanied by a new relation with matter. Much of the new artisanal and handmade culture belongs broadly within the consumer culture

¹¹¹ I acknowledge the importance of the craft revival in the 'great remattering' (Crawford (2010) Sennett, 2008, Papadopoulos 2010a) despite the consumerist dependencies and capitalist co-option of craft and craftivism.

known as hipster. For the hipster, making is a lifestyle choice which is delivered in a booming 3.4bn economy in the UK (Greenlees 2016). It's an affective regime which promises an 'authentic' route to the 'capitalist good life' (Berlant 2016, 397).

Subversive or not in the first instance, making *feels so good*, it means regaining control — or at least a feeling of control, generating new material knowledges, and reconnection with the material world, both with raw materials and proprietary bits of kit (Ingold 2013, Gauntlett 2011, Sennett 2008). Ingold, Sennett and others' knowing arguments back up what any maker, knitter, potter or home-brewer knows about the power of making. Making relates to something deep within us. Making is important for human flourishing. Rightfully we reclaim making, as without it we are somehow bereft. But what I suggest the resurgent *Homo faber* really craves is the entering into material relation of the making process rather than the material product which results. Could this craving for material relation be satisfied not just by making, but by mending too, or even, dare I say it, could mending be the new making? As making is to human flourishing, mending is to planetary flourishing. I ask that we undo the need to make, as we make do and mend.

I have been troubled by making since an insight from a previous collaborative art work, 'Unitypanda,' which ran from 2009 to 2011. The goal of that project, based in an empty shop, in Coventry, UK, was to collaboratively knit as many pandas as possible. Its successful outcome was the co-production of 130 cuddly toys. In Unitypanda's fairy tale ending, the Chinese Embassy in London offered to 'rehome the bears' in a Chinese orphanage, and an elaborate handover ceremony was arranged by the Foreign Office in Chengdu, the giant panda's native habitat. In a unique act of popular panda diplomacy,¹¹² I bequeathed Unitypanda's material legacy to the People's Republic of China. Exporting panda toys to China is ironic enough but my insight is that once the project finished, (and for the record, the pandaknitters did go home happy), the material legacy became excess. The project's aim had been to incite making through intrinsic motivation and affective relations as a counter-action to shopping. The cute waste was an awkward byproduct which was too affectively charged to throw away or offload on a random good cause. So 'rehoming' the pandas in China was a means to offshore the Global North's waste

¹¹² The project was inspired by the politics of panda diplomacy between China and the West, and the vintage knitting pattern used, 'Miss Unity Panda' had been published to celebrate the arrival of the first Unity Panda to London Zoo in 1946.

without feelings of remorse.¹¹³ This experience planted the question of how the useful work of that particular project, of people working together with matter and sharing material skills, could be reconfigured without generating material excess. Because how on earth could it have seemed like a good idea to bring yet another 130 adorable cuddly toys into the Western world? This was the thought that led to mending.

I want to trouble the accumulationist tendencies of making. Making often starts out as a counter-cultural gesture, as a thoughtful re-engagement with matter but making can chomp through resources and swiftly create material waste.¹¹⁴ Even when what is being made is edible or compostable itself, making requires ‘all the gadgets’. The grassroots maker boom, which set out in part as a critique of the capitalist economy, has been effortlessly reassimilated by capital’s agile machinations following Boltanski and Chiapello’s ‘Spirit of Capitalism’. The spirit of Reality Cakes lives on unrecognisably in its fully neoliberalised reincarnation — the ratings-topping reality cake TV show, ‘The Great British Bake Off’. Baking feels so ‘right’ in the age of austerity. And the affective regime of cake and ‘counterfactual nostalgia’ has been enrolled spectacularly into the self serving logic of capital (Porter and Westall 2013). In these hard times, would-be bakers have the ‘consumptive responsibility’ (ibid. 160) to buy into an aspiration-based self improvement regime to achieve the ganache-topped good life. In Porter and Westall’s vibrant critique, ‘Great British’ baking is a performance of capitalist excess and consumptive privilege. Capitalism has all your making needs covered. Neoliberal making amounts to shopping for expensive ingredients and kit (Kaur 2015). In contrast, the only home baking ‘must-have’ in Cuba is a five litre tin can, cut in half, which is passed down the generations, rust and all, (see chapter 5).¹¹⁵

In sum, a material revolution for planetary liveability does not get off the ground, I suspect, when its *raison d’être*, and its source of raw materials, is stuck fast in capitalist modes of material production. When making is reduced to the crafting of new stuff out of new material components it is fatally trapped in the sensible

¹¹³ As part of the shifting politics of matter (Papadopoulos 2014b), China has since introduced an import ban on foreign waste (Lee 2018) which is dramatically reconfiguring material boundaries in the Global North.

¹¹⁴ The slime craze which hit the UK in 2017 is an intriguing example (Parkinson 2018).

¹¹⁵ In Cuba, home ‘baking’ is often limited to what can be done in a pressure cooker. This is also the means of ‘roasting’ a chicken.

distribution of productivism. It is mere hobby, a proper use of one's time (Rancière 1989), a fantasy of a better life and, as such, the material revolution's cruel optimism (Berlant 2011). Maker fairs need to stop making sense and fixer fairs need to take over as the focus of our nimble-fingered energies.¹¹⁶ Makers can mend. Makers can maintain. Makers can hack the sensible material world to bits. This is meant as a sympathetic address because makers are already in close relation to mending. They are some of the people most likely to attune to this argument, and those who already have the skills to perform material disobedience. Makers (who are oftentimes already great hackers and/or material anarchists) make great menders. We must also be mindful how mending can create its own excess, its own fetishistic accumulation of mending gear. Mending can be done by sharing modest tools. We should mend what we have *with* what we have. I concede that some essentials will still need to be made, including plenty of cake. But my proposition is to follow the principal: *resolve our lifeworlds with what we have*.

*We need to reconfigure the vital urge to make. We need to reconfigure Homo faber, the maker, who Arendt (1958) theorises as species man controlling the planet with the use of tools - to the point of our own destruction, as Spelman's (2003) Homo reparans, species man using tools to care for and repair the planet. The vital distinction here is not so much between making and mending, but between the anthropocentric 'living off' the planet and the more than human 'living with' our planetary relations. Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) has written poignantly about avoiding the productivist ethic of future-oriented thinking and of instead populating a reparative ethos. Calls for this specific 'maker to fixer' shift are not new (Thomson 2013, Charney 2014) but cannot be reiterated enough. 'The future needs a new relationship with making. A forward-thinking, backward-looking, sideways-stepping kind of making. A making born of the imaginative use of skills. Something like fixing' (Charney 2014, emphasis added).*¹¹⁷

Making is an unnecessary violence given what we already have, given that we still have what we have already made. I call for a cease-make. A radical boycott on production. Increasing attention is being focused, quite reasonably, at the opposite

¹¹⁶ During the course of this inquiry, fixfests and maintenance festivals are mushrooming across Europe and the US, (see <https://fixfest.therestartproject.org>, <http://themaintainers.org>, <https://festivalofmaintenance.wordpress.com> for examples).

¹¹⁷ Curator of the influential 'Power of Making' exhibition at London's V&A museum (2011-12), and went on to develop 'The Future of Fixing' open source exhibition (2014).

end of the productivist cycle, with zero waste initiatives. But waste is most effectively addressed at its productivist roots, by taking measures to reduce production to a bare minimum in the first place. By boycott, I mean an inappropriate/d productive strike which reduces production to emergency measures, to production which generates and sustains life, to production made from capital's excess — production for noncapitalist ends. Of course, such a response to the violence of productivism in the North sets in motion new waves of violent upheaval in the human lives that have been marshalled into global capitalist production in the South. I can but acknowledge these vast, seemingly unresolvable, global equations, and insist that we can only address the violence of our entanglements on a planetary scale.

I am for an ontoexperimental circular economy, taking immediate effect, with what we have, resolving our needs on the go. A *great remattering*, in which dumpster designers invent 'aftermarket practices' in a world made of 'abandoned surplus' (Giles 2015). Late capitalism has gifted us the material resources to bury ourselves away in the task. I regard the 'extremity' of the idea of making do with what we already have to be entirely fitting to the real life parameters of material depletion and overabundance. We need a material respite to buy us some time and thinking space, and to prove that alternatives can and do exist. The impact of such a social and economic disruption may well generate a sufficient enough subjective jolt to throw the sensible order out of joint — mending the sensible indeed — in the way that the extreme material conditions of the Cuban embargo forced into being a nation of menders. I encourage others to try out, as I am, the unprecedented experiment of living with what we already have. This is the focus of the following chapter, and it is also the key recommendation of the thesis writ large.

The Clothing Pledge



Tights, bras and pants to be mended, photographed on broken suitcase, Havana, 2013

AIM Acquire no more clothes ever

PROTOCOL Consume no more clothes, neither new, used, swaps or gifts.
Wear only the existing clothes in my wardrobe for the rest of my life.
Maintain, mend, alter and transform these clothes as required.

INTRODUCTION

You hoard against death, deferring life, until you die.
— LAUREN BERLANT, *Cruel Optimism*

This chapter opens onto the world as I sense it fifteen years after closing the door to Reality Cakes. It's a couple of years before the official start date of the PhD research, and a vital moment in the emergent inquiry. I no longer live in a world of

my own making. I have no sensory superpowers to bake a world. I'm not yet a purposeful tourist going places with a suitcase of things to mend. I'm going nowhere. I'm stuck in Dudley, (where me and the trouble were born), where I have no choice but to slip into the Merry Hill Centre for the Guardian or brown bread.¹¹⁸ I'm just another neoliberal navy feeling the wrongness, picking away but not figuring it out.

After the cake shop I went back to university to learn how and why a world pulsates.¹¹⁹ In the performance of becoming student I wore a single grey school pinafore every day for the first year to *be* the part. Teflon. Durable but toxic. Surplus stock. £1. In the summer break, I made two dresses, and wore nothing but those two dresses, to walk the 600 miles across Spain in the Camino de Santiago *because I could manage perfectly well*. It was all I needed. Decades later, I discover others who have pledged to radically limit their wardrobes as a social justice campaign or sustainable fashion project, as a book deal, or as art.¹²⁰ And now, in 2016, I am back to a repertoire of two or three wearable dresses but this time it's *because I couldn't manage* the troubling excess of clothing that, in the intervening years, I had accumulated unawares. With barely any effort on my part, and without even noticing the trouble piling up, I had already amassed more than a lifetime of clothes. I was insensible to the trouble staring me in the face.

My account of the pledge begins in a state of sensory and material lockdown, of buying into a deadly, nonsensical practice of consuming far more than I need, then having nowhere to put it, and there being no 'away' to throw it to. The chapter is stuck between other ontotales which unlock insensible perceptions and possibilities for making new worlds. These possibilities are unthinkable from the impasse that I experience in this ontotale's situated stuckness. They simply do not exist. No such sensing or thinking or making *can* exist (de Sousa Santos 2007). Such is my experience *before* unlocking a sense of the existing order of the world, and *before* having vistas onto other worlds inside/outside this one. Escaping capital relations is really hard. Neoliberalism has ensured our dependence. We are on lockdown

¹¹⁸ See 'The Trouble'.

¹¹⁹ I studied Ethnomusicology at Queen's University Belfast.

¹²⁰ Artist Alex Martin made one 'little brown dress' and wore it every day for a year (in Gwilt and Rissanen 2011, Fletcher and Grose 2012); Sarah Kate Beaumont started to make all her clothes herself for the rest of her life, (in Cline 2012), and Elizabeth Cline turned her pledge into a book (ibid.). In 2009 Sheena Matheiken set up The Uniform Project in which she pledged to wear (seven copies of) the same dress for a year with secondhand accessories and raised money for an Indian educational charity (Gibson-Graham et al (eds) 2013).

inside its faux fortress. The clothing pledge materialises quite off the cuff as an isolated refusal from within my paid up participation in the sensible world. It emerges hanging onto invisible threads of resistance in a world of the not-quite-giving-up-yet. Not quite giving up that I/we can do better than this. The faintest stench of an otherwise still lingers on.

The proposition of this chapter is for an alternative experience of impasse to materialise, one which defeats the inevitability of seeing out one's days ensnared in a sensible trap. I find the 'conditions for overturning the negativity' (Braidotti 2002) of the impasse by recruiting Papadopoulos, Stephenson and Tsianos' (2008) account of imperceptible politics to my more than human excess. My argument pivots on the tensions between the competing forces of sensory lockdown and material excess. My own clothing excess hits me with force, from whence comes the pledge. In an instant, my matter comes to matter. I don't pledge to *give up* clothes. I pledge to *not give up on* my clothes. In sensible terms, the pledge is seen as 'going without' but in my experience it materialises as '*being in excess*'. Not a denial but an unbidden force emanating from the excess. This is my account of sensing the affective and relational forces of the excess, glimpsing an exit, and quietly slipping into another world. In the first section, 'lockdown,' there is no ontological disturbance. In the second, 'impasse,' there is ontological friction, and in the third, 'slipping into another world,' an alter-ontology is seen to emerge.

The Pledge

[September 2008 - ongoing]

In September 2008 Jonnet Middleton pledged not to consume any more clothes ever and to wear the existing clothes in her wardrobe for the rest of her life. There is no written documentation of the pledge and the rules are decided and observed at the discretion of the artist. Since its inception it has been performed matter-of-factly and without event. The first two points of the protocol have been upheld with flexibility exercised to address the unanticipated donation of clothing from third parties in order to avoid personal offence. Despite these leaky boundaries, a state of near-zero consumption has been maintained over the last eight years, up to the point of writing, as giving items away has 'balanced out' the gifts the artist was unable to reject. The final point of the pledge has yet to be enacted to any serious degree and only a small proportion of clothes have, to date, worn out. As such, from 2008-2016, the pledge has materialised as the performance of a non-event.

OPTIONS MOVE

CLOTHING INVENTORY (1 MINUTE AGO)

TIGHTS 47.0±

HEADSCARVES 43.0±

SKIRTS 32.0±

SUMMER DRESSES 31.0±

JUMPERS 30.0±

TOPS 29.0±

EVENING DRESSES 27.0±

SKIRT SUITS 25.0±

JACKETS 25.0±

VESTS 21.0±

PANTS 20.0±

PETTICOATS 15.0±

T SHIRTS 14.0±

SHIRTS 14.0±

SOCKS 13.0±

COATS 13.0±

SWIMWEAR 12.0±

BLOUSES 11.0±

TANK TOPS 10.0±

SHORTS 10.0±

TWENTY-EIGHT MORE ITEMS
122.0

ADD AN ITEM...

TANK TOPS (10.0±), SHORTS (10.0±), GLOVES (9.0±), APRONS (9.0±), FANCY DRESS (7.0±), CARDIGANS (6.0±), WINTER DRESSES (6.0±), NIGHTIES (6.0±), STOCKINGS (6.0±), SMART TROUSERS (5.0±), KNITTED DRESSES (5.0±), HATS (4.0±), DUNGAREES (4.0±), WOOLLY SCARVES (4.0±), OVERALLS (4.0±), LEGGINGS (4.0±), PYJAMAS (3.0±), HISTORICAL COSTUMES (3.0±), WATERPROOF JACKETS (3.0±), DRESS SUITS (3.0±), DRESSING GOWNS (2.0±), JEANS (2.0±), LONG JOHNS (2.0±), CORSETS AND GIRDLES (1.0±), LEG WARMERS (1.0±), TROUSER SUITS (1.0±), SKI SUITS (1.0±), PONCHOS (1.0±)

AVERAGE AGE OF CLOTHES (5 DAYS AGO)

23.2 YEARS

NOTE

OPTIONS MOVE

TIME ELAPSED SINCE LAST CLOTHING CONSUMPTION (5 DAYS AGO)

**7 MONTHS
26 DAYS
22 HOURS**

LAST ITEM CONSUMED (1.0±), ADD AN ITEM...

MENDING PILE (LESS THAN A MINUTE AGO)

1. LADDERED TIGHTS (47.0)	9. RIPS AND TEARS (4.0)
2. HOLES IN SOCKS (21.0)	10. WORN FABRIC (3.0)
3. MISSING BUTTONS (8.0)	11. FRAYED EDGES (2.0)
4. RIPPED LINING (7.0)	12. LETTING OUT (2.0)
5. TAKING IN (7.0)	13. BROKEN STRAPS (2.0)
6. LOOSE ELASTIC (6.0)	14. MISSING PRESS STUDS (1.0)
7. BROKEN ZIPS (6.0)	15. MOTH HOLES (1.0)
8. TURN UPS (6.0)	16. HOOKS AND EYES (1.0)

EDIT MOVE

PERCENTAGE OF CLOTHING REQUIRING MENDING (5 DAYS AGO)

27.67 %

18.1% OUT OF USE, 9.57% IN USE

OPTIONS MOVE

ITEMS MENDED SINCE 1/9/08 (5 DAYS AGO)

0

ADD AN ITEM...

Previous page: *Daytum infographics on the contents and status of my clothing hoard. Collage of screenshots, 2009.*

The contents of the artist's hoard are four wardrobes of clothing, footwear and accessories, some dating back to her childhood, some bought new in the mid 2000s and most found cheaply secondhand between the late 1980s and early 2000s, a small proportion of which is actively in use. The original pledge did not include footwear or accessories although in practice it has encompassed these categories too. The clothing dates from all the decades of the twentieth century, mostly the latter half, and much is not, and never was the artist's size or style, and was acquired for its 'potential'. The hoard also comprises an airing cupboard of assorted fabrics,¹²¹ household linen, haberdashery, yarn and miscellaneous items such as a fancy dress bag, a bag of all the tights she has ever worn and laddered (1985 - present) and a rag bag of all the scraps of all previous sewing projects. However, the hoard is fatally low on essential items. It includes more swimming costumes than socks, more aprons than bras and more silk scarves than knickers. As such the hoard is replete with transformative potential but climate inappropriate and lacking in functionality and wearability.

I

LOCKDOWN

The accident of acquisition

It is so easy and normal and tempting not to mend or look after anything anymore. Pressure all round to buy a new one.

— THE SQUANDER BUG, *Post-war UK propaganda leaflet (1949)*¹²²

Reality Cakes was an experiment in the wilful production of excess. Now I follow the excess down the productivist chain to see it bulging out of the wardrobes, saturating my time, my affective state, my life. One day, sat on the spare bedroom floor, its massiveness assaults me. Where *on earth* did it come from? I had never been a great consumer, and of used clothing at that. Fast fashion had hardly sucked me in.

¹²¹ Much of it salvaged from a garment repair business I once co-owned.

¹²² Reproduced as a postcard.

I never wrote the pledge down. I sat amongst the unmannerly heaps and said it to myself in such a way as to etch it into my memory and my conscience. Like the cake shop, it was another excessive outburst of continuous experience, a realisation of something I had to do without question. As if the imagining and the knowing I'd be able to do it was all wound up together. *I will only desist if it becomes irrelevant, absurd, or life-threatening, in an unknowable future*, I thought. My response was to 'make the hoard art', the first 'art' I had done since Reality Cakes.¹²³ Tackling it as art implied a sense that the problem was bigger than me and that also, perhaps, I could make an example of my material predicament. It was an indeterminate promise to turn the nonsensical excess around. I was a long way off knowing that I was making the excess political, or that by 'art' I really meant the ontological commitment I now call ontowork. Like Reality Cakes, this pledge is another unknowing ontoexperiment with a radical openness to what might emerge. I was expectant that we would become something more, something other, without knowing what. The experiment was specifically (and unknowingly) *for* our ontological transition. It's the key event which kicked this thesis off.

As clothing pledges ago, and there were a flurry in that financial crisis year of 2008,¹²⁴ I consider mine to be the most radical¹²⁵ but even so, in its stated aim of mending, (and its still unknown aim of disrupting capital relations) it initially seemed to have been an ineffective, and even delusional attempt. But in a later assessment I sense an imperceptible material politics is taking place. I am telling two interwoven stories in one here - my struggle to get out of the specific impasse caused by material overaccumulation is also my battle against the life impasse which got me into that condition. This is an account of how matter has tethered me to the dominant structuring of the world, but can also help me become unstuck.

¹²³ As artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles did with difficult domestic tasks such as washing nappies and getting three infants dressed and ready to leave the house.

¹²⁴ A wave of clothing pledges in 2008, mostly in the US, hints that the global financial crisis was a trigger to these self-driven initiatives. Since then, clothes pledging has become an increasing trend, individually and collectively, with media coverage, books, blogs, web-based platforms and online communities [Australian clothes pledge forum etc.] to encourage and support pledges with a range of temporal and material protocols. Examples are the Six Item Challenge, a month-long online pledge to wear only six items, and year-long pledges to buy no new clothes such as the Free Fashion Challenge and The Great American Apparel Diet.

¹²⁵ To the best of my awareness and with one exception — the glamorous elderly lady who decided decades ago that she had enough clothing to last a lifetime and who has, by now, worn out her daywear and lives in her evening wear (Fletcher 2016). Not all pledgers self-publicise. See, for example, Noortje Marres (2012) on the sustainability experimenters who she documents as 'living in experiment'.



Left to right: Reorganising the clothing hoard in charity shop plastic sacks in the airing cupboard; Dresses requiring alteration or transformation on the landing, Lancaster, 2012.

My argument in this chapter pivots on the tensions between the competing forces of sensory lockdown and material excess. I provide a diffracted autoethnography of how material excess can materialise in everyday experience as an affective force, which starts to unpick the mechanisms of sensory lockdown. I understand the experience of lockdown by looking back through the historical record of capital's undoing of human-material relations — the process of demattering which was essential to establishing relations of capital (Papadopoulos 2010c). I trace how and why matter ceased to matter and how deeply ingrained the experience of a demattered world now is. But I also glance ahead to see the ongoing indeterminate advance of excess matter into sense perception. I suggest that this excess is a possible force to reconfigure the human-material stalemate by bringing matter into relation and transgressing the impasse's totalising force when other modes of relating to the material trouble in the sensible order have been wiped out. I begin by thinking what it is to be in lockdown with my everyday experience of working in a prison, which was my situated perspective when I took the pledge.

Slipping

In the semi-orchestrated ongoingness of a life, I slip with the utmost ease into a permanent position in the secure estate. In prison, not even a breeze can caress the sensible regime. Creative Skills Curriculum Leader is my role now. I have not had a

properly proper job before, and I haven't had one since, but I step into line and I manage well. I make sure this job is the *making* of me (which is the inadvertent *unmaking* of the cake shop self). This is my stab at getting a proper life, because the improper life I'd led up to then hadn't ever got off the ground. So I try hard. I self-manage my self-made self. I suck up the professional development opportunities to make my neoliberalisation complete. My success is measurable. I put on a great performance, dressed once more in grey. Proper lingo, proper suit, proper colour. One more grey-suited target-hitter dashing through sensible treacle, shaving seconds off a commute. I get a kick out of performing properly, and (almost) start becoming proper for real.

I come from the outside, from another world. I want to be inside something. And now I am locked in. I spend most of my waking hours locked inside, working *over time*, and although I have the keys in my belt pouch, they don't open all of the doors. I want to count. To add up to something (Berlant 2011). Better myself by chasing possibilities to the here, there and wherever. I am, through the very same gestures, slipping deeper into properness *and* plotting my escape. The parameters of my possibility are ill-defined. I have a will to become something, be it otherwise or the same.

I do a '4 1/2 stretch' inside — time counted in years in the prison, and inside neoliberal governance in the most consummate sense, and I sense the violence of exclusionary politics every day. The prisoners are counted in and counted out, and when the count doesn't add up there is a lockdown. There can be no possibility of escape. Counting bodies that don't count. Some born with slim chances of a proper life, others who'd known the sensible order's promise and simply screwed it up. They are the countable human excess.¹²⁶ They kick off. They lack sensible skills,¹²⁷ and much as I try, I can do little for them. My human capital does far more for the meaningless neoliberal measurable of keeping them 'engaged' in 'purposeful activity.' The students tell me about the dangers of slipping, which in their world means running too much risk of getting caught. Slipping out of one world and into another. In moments in class which escape my control they tell me I'm slipping.

¹²⁶ As opposed to undocumented transmigrants who are an insensible excess, (Papadopoulos et al 2008).

¹²⁷ Creative skills classes were a 'dumping ground' for dyslexic, illiterate, low-literacy level students, and for foreign nationals with no or very little English, often awaiting deportation. Those who could fill in the one-line activity log unaided were the minority.

How true they are. I have slipped into the sensible life. Like them I am totally captive.

The sheer effortlessness of slipping into this sensible world is countered by the intense struggle of getting out of it. I began adulthood with utter disregard for the proper life, and a fairly tough armour against the sensible force field. But despite my continued marginality, I had always already been party to our ascent to neoliberalism throughout my adulthood which, by no coincidence, neatly spans the neoliberal era. I had lost the readiness of my teenage years to make or transform my clothing, I no longer did late night DIY or slept with a hammer beside my bed (see chapter 2), I lost the patience to wait years until I found something I needed secondhand when I could put in a late night, last minute bid online. However, my stretch 'inside' was a far more overt subjective shift, a more brutal experiment in how the sensible order of the capitalist economy operates and, as a Foucauldian reading would attest, technologies of power and subjectivisation were particularly intense in the confluence of the prison, education and managerial contexts. This experience of the sensible forces of inclusion and exclusion has fundamentally informed my sensibility to Rancière's understanding of hegemonic stagnation and the possibility of sensible shifts. It fits that the only thinker to whom Rancière acknowledges a debt is Foucault. I left the prison at the low point of my impasse and I have been trying to shake the neoliberal capitalist sensibility out of my bones ever since.

Becoming frumpy

[Fashion can] dress a man as if he lived in a perpetual spring - he never sees the autumn of his cloth.

— NICHOLAS BARBON, *A Discourse of Trade* (1690)

I don't even mention the pledge anymore. It's as unremarkable as drinking tea. There is no narrative tension, no possibility of me breaking it, or of the pledge breaking me, and certainly no mending action going on. The only story is of stasis, sags and stains. Same old me, same old garb, *becoming frumpy* in our little fantasy world. I know too intimately every tear and discoloration, I peruse the growth of holes after each wash and, occasionally, but increasingly, I admit a mutual giving up. A dress has become too threadbare or misshapen. I've not become able to



Woollens in the clothing hoard on the washing line, Lancaster, 2012.

respond. The flighty joy of the frock's first youth is over. I fold up it's negative affect, the embarrassment, disappointment and regret, and relegate it to house wear or the mending pile, pending transformation or major repair. The dresses I live in all cling to wearability's edge, and the shoes are holding together with stitched on heels,

fraught insoles, and uppers that will never polish up. The material fibre is becoming undone but, on my part, there is zero material action, zero ontological disturbance.

No perceptible politics can be seen. Still no alternative ontology to wear on my sleeve. I'm the not-yet of invisible menders. Three years into the pledge I was justifiably heckled as fake by a lady who was by far the better advocate for the 'visible mending' I was touting at a mending event. The crabby lady, who had a rare, *other-worldly* knack of mending to meet matter's demands, lived on the small Scottish island of Tiree and visited the mainland once a year. On each trip she bought two secondhand outfits to last the year. By the following year's trip, her clothes were in advanced states of repair. She was placated by a hacker colleague who ably mended her anorak zip as, by her own protocol, an anorak had to last for years. But she was not appeased by my defence that I was in the unspectacular pre-

mending phase of *wearing* clothes, a non-activity predicated on delay, and that to show signs of wear is an achievement in itself.¹²⁸ She clocked my mending fantasies¹²⁹ and my anticipatory regime (Adams et al 2009) of wearing as deferral, wearing as refusal to acquire *and* refusal to mend. For her, *a real life mender*, my politics of doing nothing didn't count.

Matter as fantasy

This is my experience of impasse, that sensorial pathology of our times that Lauren Berlant (2007, 2011) and Katie Stewart (2007) excel in reproducing in exquisite prose. On my first trip to Cuba (chapter 1), among the objects I brought to get mended was a string of pearls which had come unstrung. I took them to a jewellery repairer who had no thread. I said no problem, I could provide the thread, to which he looked at me aghast. 'So why don't *you* do it then?' This is my impasse. I don't want to throw the pearls away or keep them forever broken in a drawer. I'm sure I could figure out how to thread them up, but I simply 'can't' do it. But the crux is that it had *never even occurred to me* to do it myself. I can't exit the impasse while the very thought of mending the pearls myself is blocked. I can't touch the material conditions of my trouble.

All that budes in this stuck place is the matter migrating from the wardrobe to the mending pile.¹³⁰ Slipping sordidly into indeterminate nonlife. The mending basket overfloweth as a holding camp for *becoming unwearable* matter, pending my labours to make it matter again. Our ontological adventure was never going to be an 'instantaneous conversion,' warns Ann Cvetkovich, for me or the clothes, '[but] the result of the slow and painstaking accumulation of new ways of living' (2012, 55). On the flip side of *becoming new*, though, is the perhaps more tedious process of *unbecoming old*, the anticipation of overcoming an old mode of living that won't give way. This isn't the comforting 'slow' of 'slow fashion' but the 'slow attrition' (Berlant 2011) of the sensible sediment that clogs the arteries between my

¹²⁸ I make this point in Chapter One. See also Kate Fletcher's *Craft of Use* for a much needed turn in sustainable fashion towards the use of clothing.

¹²⁹ At time of pledge I was involved in historical reenactments in which I escaped into other eras and eagerly embodied other modes of sensible behaviour. I was *so much more authentic* than someone with a 'make do and mend tea towel' with my bakelite darning egg and my pin-curled hair rinsed with 3 drops of vinegar for extra shine. My fantasy was far more sophisticated than theirs, more deliberate and embodied. I was comfortable in this fantasy role, enacting the more desirable highlights of an otherwise far tougher life, with the safety net of simulation.

¹³⁰ To clarify, the mending box is a toolkit, and the mending basket/mending pile is the repository for objects pending repair.



Ribbons and cotton tape in the haberdashery hoard, Lancaster, 2012.

fingertips and my will to mend. I jest we need ontological sorcery to readjust our seams and reprogramme our bones.

I put the mending box on display in the lounge, right beside my chair. It's an 'optimistic attachment,' Berlant would say (2011, 34), as if physical proximity will break the ice. My fantasy enables me 'to expect that this time nearness to this thing will help [me] or a world to become different in just the right way' (ibid., 2). But even with the time, space *and* the matter all ready to go, my quantum leap into mattering is deferred. For years, I keep 'returning to the scene of fantasy,' to stare at the 'potentiality hovering' on hangers, and I quite literally pin hopes onto lapels, bodices and hems (ibid., 24). I design anticipatory regimes for a future wardrobe which, entirely appropriate to a self-named futuremender, is forever deferred. Eight years into the pledge, the clothing is undisturbed.¹³¹ No sagging lycra has been smocked, no warped necklines squared, no stained patches tie-dyed, no motifs embroidered over holes, no collars crocheted, and the list goes on. The unthinkable is happening — my mending box is *in actual fact* 'for decorative purposes only' (see chapter 1). It is performing its *proper* function — to support my own 'reparative imaginary,' an affective substitute to make sure I *don't* mend (Berlant 2016, 395).

¹³¹ See Rissanen 2011 on 'undisturbed' fashion objects, and our inability to 'disturb'.

However fantastic, my anticipatory regime is not based on an abstract wishfulness for liveable worlds but on concrete material projections. It's the very material specificities of the hoard that fuel my fantasies. In Berlant's view, my hoard is a material playground to play the game of fantasy mattering.¹³² '[T]he very vitalizing or animating potency of an object/scene of desire contributes to the attrition of the very thriving that is supposed to be made possible by the work of attachment in the first place' (2011, 25). In this reading the fact that I consider the hoard to be full of potential is 'an enabling object that is also disabling' (ibid.). The sheer excess of its physical and affective promise is too much to bear. The very tangibility of the material potentiality already constitutes a fully saturated life, a life with no room for more. The fantasy matterings keep me captive to our spectacular potential, but my saturation is such that I have no headspace to physically mend.

For Berlant, the impasse is an element of her thinking on 'cruel optimism,' which she explains as follows: 'optimism is cruel when the object/scene that ignites a sense of possibility actually makes it impossible to attain the expansive transformation for which a person or a people risks striving' (2011, 2). In her scenario, the normative scenario of late liberalism, I will never mend. She is spot on, of course, and, without hesitation, I *must* disagree. I refuse to accept that it is pure fantasy to keep trying. I must escape her self-fulfilling scenario. I must understand how to flip a fantasy over into material experience. It may or may not be possible. But I resolve that I will judge the success of this PhD project on whether I start mending and transforming my clothing when I finish it. *Mending is my postdoc*, I state with the utmost resolution, and no hint of fantasy.

It is dangerous even to dither in this dominant narrative of 'no alternative' because so long as we do it can keep coming true. But equally, it is important to recognise the formidable obstacles which have blocked my ontological journey. My line of questioning, moving forward, is not about the experience of impasse, but to understand and eliminate the blockage. The political question is not 'How does it feel?' but 'Why am I stuck here?' and How can I get out? Why is this all I can do with matter, and why is this what matter does to me?

¹³² See also Negt and Kluge (1993) on fantasy.



Sorting out shrunken woollen jumpers to be reconfigured as mini skirts, which then get stuck in the state of armless jumpers, Lancaster, 2012.

Capital relations

It crept up on me slowly that the cause of the material trouble had to be capitalism, unsayable though that still was, and easy as it may seem to say now. My assumption was that demattering was a recent phenomenon of neoliberal capitalism which coincided with the steep decline of my own material intimacy during my spell of salaried labour, as a by-product of the overproductivist times. I started to question how ideological structures are performative of human insensibility to nonhuman matter. I wondered how (on earth) capitalism kept its material crimes so well hidden from its subjects. And I discover, with Papadopoulos (2010c) that the capitalist economy is indeed the villain, but that late capitalism is only exacerbating a process started by the very earliest capitalist formations.

Papadopoulos draws on historical accounts (Linebaugh 2008, Moulier Boutang 1998, Dyer-Witheford 2006 and others) to reveal the beginnings of capitalism's deliberate disturbance of human relations with the material world. The pivotal historical moment is when, in the fifteenth century, disordered bands of 'nonhumanist plebs' begin drifting out of the slave and bonded labour of the feudal era. Unlike the new humanist communities emerging elsewhere in continental

Europe, the nonhumanists use their newfound freedom to enact their desire to create a 'common non-proprietary world' in 'creative relation with matter' (Papadopoulos 2010c, 138). They are eco-commoners, building a self-organised, more than human commons based on the principal of the sharing of naturecultures. Details from the Magna Carta reveal a notable absence of anthropocentrism. The 'law of the land' refers to just that - the land dictates the human labours it requires, tilling, manuring and so on — laying out not ownership of, but human responsibility to the environment. Crucially for my argument, the making of the commons goes beyond human relations with the land and becomes the organising principal of everyday life. '[C]ommoning' as Linebaugh (2008) calls it, [is] the continuation of life through 'commoning' the immediate sociality and materiality of everyday existence (ibid., 138).

The early patrons of capital needed to enrol these plebs into capitalist production, that is, to coerce nonhumanist eco-commoners into becoming humanist salaried labourers. The subjective transformation was colossal and the violent struggles which ensued persisted for centuries, as vivid literatures recall (Federici 2004 among other examples, see Papadopoulos 2010c). The great capitalist shift in subjectivity was from a nonhumanist material freedom to a 'humanist unfreedom' of wage labour (Papadopoulos 2010c, 140). The commoner's world was turned inside out. The 'agreement' was to lose the communal right to land and gain the individual liberty to choose one's employer. The new labour market 'operates through enclosing labour into individual performance, efficiency, precision and the ethics of the humanist subject' (139). It is an agreement which has been bided by up to the present day through the continued enslavement to the idea of the 'proper job' and the proper usage of one's time. The eventual overpowering of the serfs into the emerging hegemony of capital created the conditions for the subsequent capitalist expansion.

Papadopoulos's point, however, which he makes with Moulier Boutang's (1998) 'De l'esclavage au salariat', is that the breaking of material relations with the land was not an externality of the move to capital relations, but intrinsic to the possibility of the new capitalist economy. The single and specific purpose of the bloody transformation to the mode of wage relations was to break, irrevocably, the material relations, and material freedoms, around which the commoner's existence was organised and to force new capitalist social relations as the new ordering principle of the sociomaterial regime.

The key function of wage labour is not first and foremost to oppress or control people's productive capacities but to manage worker's surplus of non-humanist freedom. [] If one thinks from the perspective of the capitalist state, there is absolutely no necessity to change the state in its feudal form. The necessity for transformation happened because of the struggles of the working classes and most importantly the slaves escaping into new forms of non-humanist liberty: this form of liberty is a move to a tighter, more intimate relation between human action and material force (Papadopoulos 2010c, 139).

This is the vital correlation between capitalism and the demattering of matter. From the earliest instance, capital has sought to control human entanglements with matter in order to control people's ability to reclaim their relation to the material world. Capital must sever material relations and, by taking away the freedom to gather material sustenance from the land, locks the serfs into relations of capital.

Today, capitalist mechanisms of demattering tear through planetary resources and deliver orders of risk and deathliness quite unthinkable in the early historical era. Today's context for 'remattering', or reestablishing material relations, is quite different to the original struggle between peasants reclaiming from the early capitalist landlords which they still held in relation. It took centuries to undo material relations and force plebs to live in relation to capital. With the trouble piling up ahead, we do not have centuries to retie relations. A severe order of damage has been done, and is still being done. As Papadopoulos (2010a) points out elsewhere, recent social movements take the form of reclaiming or occupying land but, I argue, for the most part, the reclaimers and occupiers are building up material relations and practical skills almost from scratch. A first step is at least to apprehend that life in the sensible order is lived in relation to capital, and that capital relations depend on the absence of material relations. Remattering, then, is an expressly noncapitalist activity, of refusing capital relations and bringing matter (back) into , making matter matter. Material justice requires the human freedom to relate with matter. It requires a mass refusal of the sensible priorities on which the world of neoliberal capital is based.

Major destash

Capitalism can blithely overcome its own troubles with matter in ways that bolster its self-serving logic. As part of the social contract of the neoliberal regime, consumer sovereignty grants the 'right' to endless consumption, and thus, to create unlimited excess (Winter nd). And for Baudrillard it's less a right than an *obligation* to waste (1998, 43; Barnard 2016). On sensing the troubling externalities of overabundance, consumers are supplied with flatpack formulas that make the trouble with matter go away. The major destash, online minimalism tutorials, the storage facility, and the charity shop drop are some of the set scripts for overcoming the overwhelming sense of overabundance that is commonly entering into sense experience. These sensible scripts leave one Free From* material hassle and Free To* move on to unbox a new phase in a consumption-based lifestyle, neoliberal freedom being synonymous with the 'unconstrained accumulation of commodities' (Pérez and Esposito 2010, 93, in Winter nd). Each of the available tactics share a common goal — distance — to create a physical separation between human accumulator and overabundant matter, after which there are two ways to deal with the matter; 'save for later' and 'get rid.'

Of the available ways to get rid, a booming option is to have a 'major destash' by finding people who want your unwanted stuff. Social media platforms have made the major destash widespread, desirable and potentially lucrative. With a few swipes and clicks, the material and affective labour of getting rid is a piece of cake. But if it's still too much to manage, there's a booming declutter industry there to help — self-styled 'space clearing experts' leave not a trace of matter even in the job title. It's a neoliberal win/win. Then there are more sensate discarders — ethical, sustainable, voluntary simplicity ridders — who take trouble to make unwanted matter go away to the least troubling (most affectively and morally acceptable) destinations,¹³³ although, if such opportunities don't materialise, for whatever pressing reasons, the matter just *has* to go 'away' regardless, wherever the 'away' may be. All ridders face practical questions of where (*on earth*) material excess *can* go, (and how it can get there).¹³⁴ The options are reducing as I write as the waste

¹³³ Lancaster co-housing has a dedicated area in which residents can leave destashed goods, which are later taken to a charity shop. During my fortnight stay over the summer break, when all but a dozen households were away, the area received an abundant stream of (high quality) discards and was emptied several times over. There was an alarming excess of 'bags for life'. I 'resolved' all my daughter's material needs and gifts to bring back to Cuba from this one source.

¹³⁴ In Dudley and Lancaster, as elsewhere, the poorer ridders who do not have access to a vehicle leave unwanted matter in front and back yards and alleyways. Their 'away' is 'outside the front or back door'.

value chain breaks down. UK charity shops and recycling enterprises no longer plead for donations of material excess by pushing an empty bag (of the flimsiest grade plastic) through the letterbox. Destashing used to be as easy as filling the sack and leaving it on the doorstep. When you next looked, the bag of material trouble was already far away. Global waste flows are hitting gridlock because the Global South is starting to say no to 'garbage imperialism'.¹³⁵

Millions of people in the Global North use storage units, other people's houses and garages to save their stuff for later. They all anticipate, in tandem, a less precarious future with more space and more matter than the present (and more time to manage it). This material anticipation gives a concrete weightiness to Adams et al's (2009) idea of an 'anticipatory regime.' All of the above tactics constitute proper responses to material excess because they help the sensible subject proceed in the individuating projects of neoliberal self-management. If it can't be thrown 'away', the massiveness, toxicity, ugliness and stench of the trouble will hold us back in the sensible performance of life goals. '[A]ny objectives or mechanisms designed to ensure economic justice or environmental responsibility are deemed as impediments to freedom' (Pérez and Esposito 2010: 93 in Winter nd).

II

IMPASSE

Im/material practice

Around the time I made the pledge I started to study art.¹³⁶ I was beginning to approach art as a tool for transformation. I was unknowingly posing ontological questions about who I was and the life I led. I was gaining consciousness as an ontoworker. I never made any art of the sort my tutors had in mind, I never developed what, in disciplinary terms, was called a *material practice* (in modernist/postmodernist/conceptual art), and, all through the MA, while moulding a (very material) *activist practice*, I was harangued by what seemed an exasperatingly backward question, 'but is it art?'¹³⁷ A distinguished lecturer terminated our tutorial

¹³⁵ On secondhand clothing imports see Brooks (2013). Charity shops are increasingly restrictive as to the types of matter they accept. Rwanda, Burundi, Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda are phasing out imports by 2019, (Gambino 2017). China has ceased to import plastic waste (Lee 2018).

¹³⁶ Part-time MA in Art Practice and Education, Birmingham City University.

¹³⁷ See Felshin But is it Art? a survey of social art which starts out from this ubiquitous question.



Laddered tights with knots marking the site of the ladder ready to be mended with matching thread, needle and scissors, Dudley, 2009.

curtly: 'Nothing you have said to me so far is to do with art.' I couldn't yet retort 'mine is a political practice that does not try to define or validate itself by the exclusionary parameters of the bourgeois art institution' paraphrasing Shannon Jackson (2011), or what 'does it matter what we call it when there are compelling problems to solve in the world, problems that artists are arguably best equipped to tackle?' as Carole Becker (2002) asks. But I did know that 'is it art?' is a vacant question which performs a facile dismissal of marginal art practices. It perniciously obscures and invalidates all the other questions that need to be asked.¹³⁸ The ubiquity of this question in the art world demonstrates how the sensible order (and escape attempts from it) are policed.

In lieu of a '*material practice*' I take choice picks of my meaningful matter along to tutorials or 'crits,' hoping they might give clues. One day, I present a selection of laddered coloured tights, each placed with a needle and a carefully matched coloured thread. 'I have no idea what I'm supposed to do with that!' is the bewildered collective response. (The ladders are marked with a knot on the laddered leg(s), a mender's sign from a folk tradition which is lost in translation).

¹³⁸ See Jackson on the need to address marginal/social art with a different set of questions. Ranci re has since expanded my understanding of such exclusionary practices enormously.

The question of why this mute matter might matter is not even askable yet. *'Mend!'* — the simple, *blindingly* obvious one-word answer to what to do (when faced with broken matter *and* the means to quickly mend it) is an unthinkable response. No-one is able to respond to a hole. No-one even threaded a needle. Not even me.

My art student colleagues were too busy engaged in purposeful sensible activity to feel obliged to *make time* for noncapitalist relations, human or nonhuman. I was shocked by the depoliticisation of the coffee-grabbing student cohort who had no time to sit down with a coffee, let alone to 'do' coffee with a colleague. Not talking, not touching, but grabbing. Grabbing a break to grab a material need. Not crisp packets but grab bags. Gone was any hope of material rebellion if the art students were *all too busy grabbing*, or of collective resistance if we were too 'saturated by capitalist forces and rhythms' (Berlant 2011, 192) to find *time even to talk*. No time to create the conditions for politics to *even exist*. Always busy, too busy for others, too busy for ourselves, and always, always, *far* too busy to mend.¹³⁹

I carry on in my unknowing, slow apprehension that the stuff of my improper life *is* the stuff of my improper art. I am thinking through what it is to embark on a life with a hoard. For assessment, I pack my whole material predicament into suitcases and drive it to college. Single-handedly, I struggle to get the 'significantly problematic object' (Berlant 2011, 24) up to the top floor to show my 'work in progress,' but there is dismay at my naivety *for having gone to all the trouble* to cart the weighty matter into the building. It's so cumbersome, disciplinary folk could cringe. The smart move would have been to essentialise it in a weightless post-modern concept. The matter inside doesn't matter. That's just my *individual* material burden. *Not* our very material question. *No-one even opens any of the cases. No-one ever even sees the matter. No-one cares to assess the contents.* It's an embarrassment. A misunderstanding. They redefine my struggle in disciplinary terms as an inability to do anything that counts as art.

I have much to learn. I read voraciously, Certeau (1984), Lefebvre (2008) and Kaprow (1993) on art and everyday life, Dewey's *Art and Experience* (1934), Suzi Gablik (1991) on enchantment and much on sustainability and technology (eg

¹³⁹ There is a vast literature on time and the temporal imaginaries of capitalism which I am grateful for, particularly Apter (2010), Baraitser (2015), Grosz (2004). Most importantly, Rancière's focus in *Nights of Labour* (1989) on making time for and as emancipation is a fundamental point to this thesis which could be expanded on elsewhere, see also Highmore (2011); Papadopoulos et al (2008); Puig de la Bellacasa (2015).



Suitcases containing the hoard, Birmingham Institute for Art and Design, Birmingham, 2009.

Sterling 2005). I also audit all the theory modules that I can, but neither myself nor the many artists/educators I speak to can situate my 'practice' within an art historical context. Our collective failure to recognise the significance of feminist art (particularly knowing my performance background at Reality Cakes) or anything vaguely like material activism to who I am and what I do is alarming. The most proximate work I encountered did not resonate. A prime example is my encounter with US maintenance artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles' sanitation work (Ukeles 1969, Finkepearl 2000) in the context of a course on social art through an oft reproduced photograph of a handshake. The lecturer's reductive summary of Ukeles' (who went on to become my singular art inspiration) left me untouched. Her deeply political performance did not translate. Activist art was about tactical media, performance art was on phenomenology and the body, feminist art was about identity politics and gender oppression, social art had to translate itself into a critical gallery context and digital art was about what artists could do with all the new cool tools. I do none of the above. To the art world I don't really count. I'm an anomaly. Neither my material effects or affects count as 'material practice'.

Managing with/out matter

Coping with excess is what passes in late-modern society for individual freedom.

— ZYGMUNT BAUMAN, *Excess: An obituary* (2001, 90, in Hird 2012)

My pledge was trying to articulate a new script for dealing with excess matter, because no acceptable, response-able scripts were available. For its novelty, it was enrolled into the neoliberal publicity machine,¹⁴⁰ where it generated shock and concern.¹⁴¹ The oft-repeated response was ‘how could you possibly live without new boots/knickers/socks?’ (even from individuals who cluster around sustainability) as if superhuman powers were required to resist shopping, and as if



Prioritising which of the hoard to take to Cuba for repair or other reconfiguring, Lancaster, 2012.

¹⁴⁰ For a while I was the mediagenic hot property of Lancaster University PR department which secured an interview on Radio 4’s consumer programme, *You and Yours*. The pledge was sensationalised within the make do and mend trend.

¹⁴¹ The other notable response is my mother’s contrary insistence on providing me with clothes in *her* new need to care for and clothe me, a long-dormant need which she hadn’t fussed over since my early teens. Without capital relations though, she couldn’t imagine how I could cope. An ongoing battle still ensues at which we fight over the mother/daughter frontier of matter. Her ammunition ranges from, ‘but it’s only secondhand’ ‘but it cost nothing’ ‘but I’ve had it in my wardrobe for years’ to the most telling, ‘but you work so hard, you deserve it’ and this ‘caring’ is sometimes a tactic for her to divest of her own tat, and deal with her own issues of accumulation.

human life can't be sustained without new pairs of pants.¹⁴² I became an 'exotic animal' beyond popular points of reference and an object of pure fascination. I made no explicit attempt at publicity or online presence. I resisted blogging despite being aware of popular curiosity, out of shyness and my ill-preparedness to deal with co-option or to set the pledge in a critical frame. I was torn between a sense of activist responsibility to be vocal and a distinct discomfort at not being able to control the terms of the conversation. The focus was always on my denial, the 'managing without' and never the rich and complex experiences of 'managing with'. The insensible questions concerning how I will keep what I have going, how I will cope with so much stuff, and what I/we will become after dressing otherwise throughout a lifetime, remained unsayable and unsaid.

In the intervening years, clothes pledging has become an increasingly common activity, especially in sustainable fashion contexts.¹⁴³ Many of the pledges are framed as a temporary respite from overconsumption, to increase self-awareness and to foster a more modest or more conscious mode of consumption in the aftermath. Given that an average 60% of a wardrobe contents has never been worn (Fletcher 2016),¹⁴⁴ a one year pledge can be an opportunity to wear unworn, or underworn items. In most cases it is far from materially *doing without*, and is still not even about *doing with*, about interacting *with* matter. More accurately it amounts to a forfeiting of one's consumer sovereignty to have whatever one wants, whenever one wants (Schor 2007). It means doing without the constant possibility of new things to wear, and doing without the means to solve false needs before necessarily being able to sense their falsity, (which explains why pledges tend to get easier, rather than harder, over time). It is about becoming self-confident and creative with the limits of what it is acceptable to wear and how often, about witnessing early signs of wear, and about living towards repair, although probably not yet with it.

¹⁴² I have broader historical references, I can live without seamless lycra, I can deploy the wartime tactic of making camiknickers out of my silk scarves, or make post-apocalyptic pants like Miriam Dym's (chapter 1), or forego pants altogether. I know how to make Tudor hose (leggings) by cutting old sheets on the cross. It is easy for me to dismiss the false need for culturally acceptable/sensible underwear — thanks, in part, to other ontoexperiments which I do not detail in this thesis such as historical re-enactments of the Second World War and Tudor periods.

¹⁴³ My thinking is informed by a significant body of literature on tactical political non-consumption, see Portwood-Stacer (2012); on commodity activism, tactical consumerism, and consumer resistance Mukherjee and Banet-Weise (2012); on the 'alternative hedonism' of consuming otherwise, see Soper (2009); on the pre-emptive co-option of attempts at 'alternative consumption,' see Littler (2009b). On the gendering of both consumption and anti-consumption as feminine, see Littler's (2009a) feminist critique of 'radical consumption and revolt'.

¹⁴⁴ See also, the growing field of wardrobe studies (Fletcher et al (eds) 2017).

Pledgers are the acceptable face of resistance to capital's material politics because the pledge doesn't refuse the consumer's sovereign right to accumulate *per se*. Acquisition is put on pause in support of the consumer's moral right to achieve success and wellbeing. Pledgers are letting off steam as all consumers *deserve* a break — consumption is hard work (Tranberg Hansen 2000). The tendency is to define a pledge by what comes in, and not by what goes out. People pledge to buy no more, but not to look after what they have. In sum, pledging arises as a response to capitalist excess which is framed in terms which make sense to capital¹⁴⁵ although, as I argue below, the potential exists for these sensible limits to be transgressed.

Woven relations

We need to learn how to manage *with* and toward *matter*. When I pledged to refuse to consume any more clothes, ever, I also pledged *to refuse to give up on the clothes I have, ever*. This is not a 'doing without' but a 'managing with' which materialises in my experience as 'being in/as excess.' The essential difference is to frame the pledge within noncapitalist, more than human limits and possibilities. Faced with the material predicament, I stretched *toward* matter to articulate a response. I promised to live in relation, in entanglement with the excess. And by 'entanglement' I don't mean just any old kind of connection, interweaving, or enmeshment in a complicated situation,' to cite Barad's definition, but a full-blown posthuman entangling 'with all its requisite refigurings of causality, materiality, agency, dynamics, and topological reconfigurings' (2007, 160). I sense that remattering my hoard — bringing it into relation — is potentially more politically effective than protesting in the streets, as I start to realise in chapter 2. A pledge to mend all the holes that ever appear in my socks does not grab media attention in the way that a whole year without new clothes does. It performs its politics imperceptibly.

I cannot get rid of my entanglements. If not me, who else will be able to respond to this matter? Instead of trying to get the clutter out of my life, I try to get the capitalism out instead. So, I keep *my* part of *our* material predicament in the wardrobe, in the suitcases under the bed, in the cellar, in plastic sacks rammed into the airing cupboard and other places besides (Middleton 2017). I live with the trouble, with the very material obstacles in my face. When I move house, it moves

¹⁴⁵ See EA Moore (2007) on the lack of tension between mainstream and alternative consumer culture.

with me. It's a drag. Pledging feels good and hoarding sucks. Stuck matter sucks the life out of you. I walk the line between pledging and hoarding, between managing matter with assertion and being a poor copier living out a material breakdown. *Managing* material relations means being able to (pretend to) get rid, being able to believe the material trouble can go away.¹⁴⁶ *Hoarding*, in contrast, is a failure to produce, or recognise, waste (Falkoff nd). By the sensible script, to consume matter, to almost whatever extreme, is a healthy, and even therapeutic activity. But the inability to throw matter away when it becomes an obstacle to individualist thriving, and to further cycles of consumption, is a pathology. Shopping is a sign of success, material entanglement an affective dysfunction, hoarding a sign of mental illness. Pledgers get book deals and hoarders are the freaks of reality TV. The sensible message is that material relations are for the losers in life.

It is no irony, then, that in our over-accumulationist lifeworld, minimalist living has become a designer lifestyle, a sensible life goal. Shed matter and you will thrive. One of minimalism's attractions is to minimise the perception of the trouble. Minimalism is waste's 'vanishing trick' (Gregson and Crang 2010, 1029). It's the fantasy of a clean slate, of clearing away past and present and making a new future without the troubling baggage (Haraway 2016). At the same time, it reproduces the trouble and the coping imaginary to deal with it. Keeping a grip means letting matter go. At the opposite extreme, hoarding is a visible, visceral sign of a pathological economic system, a systemic blockage, a sensorium of planetary excess bursting out of a suburban bungalow. The pathology of hoarding is not the keeping, I suggest, but the material and psychic stalemate it embodies. Hoarded matter is doing nothing for capitalism, and nothing for an alternative economic system either. The hoard is a mirror to late capital's over-accumulation (Guagnini 2015). Hoarders live in the midst of the trouble, and show how it is increasingly hard to function in the most basic of senses when the trouble piles up *inside* a lifeworld, when no *external* storage is available. They have no room left to be, no liveable place left to continue their very existence. A hoarder's house is a finite world already heaving, a hotspot of excess. But in lesser intensity our own waste is already piling up in our biomes and backyards. The stench of a hoarder's house is a warning of the planetary material pile-up, of a world with no safe, or comfortable, or healthy place left to be. We all live in severe material dysfunction. Every crisp

¹⁴⁶ Evidenced in the substantial waste and discard studies literature (Douglas (1966); Gille (2007); Gregson and Crang (2010); Hawkins (2006); Hird (2012); Kennedy (2007), Liboiron (2012, 2013, 2014); Packard (1960); Spelman (2011); Strasser (1999); and many others), which I can't begin to engage with here.

packet we keep is a small act of personal violence. Every crisp packet that we discard is a small act of planetary violence. We launch it on a violent demattering adventure which one day will land back in our houses and in our gut. (Crisp packets are an unnecessary violence when we can fry our own crisps.)

Excess

Before taking the pledge, I was on sensory lockdown, a dulling and deadening (of) life. A life lived in attention deficit, not noticing the matter. I experienced 'the stultifying effects of a consciousness unable to transform in relation to its environment' (Hayles 2017, 77). I remained on lockdown until I came into relation with the piles on the bedroom floor, the force of the excess. Thinking with Papadopoulos et al (2008), I believe the hoard's material excess possesses a generative force which enabled a transformation to occur. The impasse I then entered into is a more dynamic subjective space based on the promise and the potential to mend. The sensorium, or 'atmosphere' (Berlant 2011, Stewart 2010) of the impasse, as I experience it, is a mush of affective friction of fondness and frustration for my stuff, and of cognitive dissonance for living in disagreement and ontological disturbance. The sensible signals and the material evidence don't match up. The force of affect grips me all over. It beats me softly, in a barely sensible barrage, which keeps me firmly outside the possibility of going towards an emancipatory horizon. I'm suffering a 'loss of traction' to get my arse out of the 'overwhelming present' (Berlant 2011), but I refuse to accept I never will.

My impasse arises from 'being in disagreement' (Rancière 1999) with the terms of exclusion of the sensible order. My clothing pledge arises out of my refusal to follow the available, sensible responses to my material predicament. I refuse to do a major destash as it feels *far too wrong*. I am determined to do *something*, but I have no idea what. All I can do is *nothing* (nothing *for* capitalism, which is something). I can't mend or transform my clothes (yet) so I refuse to consume and make a pledge as an IOU to mend and transform the hoard *over time*. This is the impasse I am stuck in. An inability in the present and an anticipatory potential to become mender in the future.

Tension accrues from living in discordance over which matter matters *while at the same time still being superglued to the sensible regime*. Tension is sustained between my ongoing quest to be *moving forward* and the blockages on the exit routes. I know I need to *get over something*, (which itself is an advance on the state

of lockdown), but I have no sensory or material leeway to *get past*. The dynamic power to move in any direction at all is thwarted by the perception there is nowhere else to go. The routes that do appear are counter-productive and lead back down sensible alleys. All the time my discomfort intensifies, as does the determination that things can't stay the same. The impasse is a platform with no departures on which the sheer volume of affective and material wrongness keeps piling up. The excess simply has to have somewhere to go.¹⁴⁷ The excess is a force which can break out, suddenly or unhurriedly, and send sparks of disagreement flying which, on odd occasions, land in another inside/outside world, and, some time later, catch. For years it feels like nothing much has happened with my pledge. I describe it as a non-event, a non-movement, because the sense of arrival at anywhere otherwise is an indeterminate, deferred sensory event. Overcoming the impasse is an imperceptible, atemporal achievement which drops you off some place before and beyond the trouble, a place where trouble is sensed differently. I write this a full ten years after the pledge, from a very different subjective location.

With Stephenson and Papadopoulos' (2006) work on the political potential of the excess, I frame the pledge as an example of continuous experience in which the force of excess matter materialises as an 'excess of everyday sociability' (Stephenson and Papadopoulos 2006, 433), which I interpret as an affective excess in human-material relations.

[W]e suggest that this excess is neither mystical nor extraordinary. This excess is carried with experience as it circulates amongst people, things and situations (Irigaray, 1985; de Sousa Santos 2001). It travels in continuous experience, materialising and moving people, allowing them to connect with, instead of repudiating disparate and unexpected trajectories. Working with continuous experience entails refusing clichéd subject positions in the absence of alternatives, anticipating and orientating towards non-existent, contingent possibilities which may or may never come about (Stephenson and Papadopoulos 2006, 439).

I propose that a pledge, although being subject to the sensible force field, and in many cases, unlikely to push beyond it, constitutes inroads of possibility into the

¹⁴⁷ I am thinking with Papadopoulos et al's (2008) example of transmigrants as excess, the sheer volume of undocumented bodies that are legally nowhere but have to be physically somewhere - those who purposefully burn their papers.

otherwise. Ultimately, if material politics *can* happen in everyday experience, I venture that it looks something like this. Something like ontoexperiment. A pledge is a reconfiguring of the self around what there is. It's an ontological mode of commitment which stays with the matter and follows the trouble. As ontoexperiment, a pledge is not about the management of matter, nor the self, but about overcoming the shock of more than human relations, of managing the novelty of living in relation to whatever the available matter may be, no more, no less. The pledge is an accountability - taking account of what matter there is - and accepting that if this is the extent of the matter available, then with that I shall sustain life. Not a living without, but a living with.



Reconfiguring my daughter's clothing, with mending box, Central Havana, 2015.

A pledge is an everyday material experiment propelled by the excess on an adventure into the otherwise. The force of the excess accumulates and surges forth through the *material* excess of the hoard, and materialises as the potent *affective* excess which forces itself into the domain of everyday sociability. It forces an affective response, and from here emerges a reconfiguration of everyday action. From here emerges a response.

Ten years on, flatpack wardrobes bulge open, MDF shelves sag, meagre wardrobe rails give up, cheap hangers snap, lowest-grade flimsy plastic sacks rip helplessly to reveal their entrails, clothes folded with care are despairingly creased, beautiful dry clean only garments are rank with damp, shoes are black with mould, the mending pile is infested with cockroaches, there is no hope of finding the one thing I need, and the only clean, easy to reach items appropriate to the climate are fancy dress. This is my affective/material excess. My health risk, my to do list, my memories, my absurdity. This is my material pastpresentfuture. This is everything I need for a well-enough clothed life, *moving forward/backward — if I give it enough care*. The excess creates movement. It can push toward abjection and despair, or, as in my case, ever deeper into the otherwise. I cannot go back to the sensible dysfunction of a normative everyday life. The excess keeps me tiptoeing along the trouble's edge. It keeps me on my toes, in lively response-ability. As I say earlier, a pledge gets easier and easier to do. I now mend and resolve my clothing needs without any sensory struggle at all. My hoard is quite demanding, but I am, we both are, full are of life.

A pledge is a possible method for slipping into another world. It offers a motivational framework to start making material gestures in the right direction but (given the state of sensory and material lockdown in the sensible default settings from which a pledger typically departs) a pledger must engage in sustained sensory and material groundwork to disrupt capital relations and for noncapitalist relations to emerge. Each new sensory or material discovery — what I am able to do, what I really need, what different things I start to desire, what I feel good in, happy about etc — propels the pledger round the next insensible bend.¹⁴⁸ Pledges aren't automatically recaptured by capitalism. Mine brought me to write this. A pledge is a fine start for revealing the hidden binds which make us buy and throw away, without bringing matter into relation. It's a valid start for mending the sensible. The everyday experience of a pledge triggers questions, observations and troublings which can fold and unfold capital relations and convey sensory suggestions that other forms of dressing, of consuming, of understanding, and being in the world do exist. Notions of scarcity and abundance can be turned inside out so that, instead of always needing more, it is possible to sense we have all we need.

¹⁴⁸ I recall particularly Liz Parker, fellow pledger, and my companion on my first visit to Cuba, whose first darn was a cheerfully inexpert banana motif. Six months later, she was teaching herself intricate darning techniques on fine knitted fabric.

The pledge is an ontoexperiment which throws me into the force field of the excess. The excess is a release button. The force of the excess propels me through the gate of the sensible estate. The excess is the dynamic force that permits boundary events along the inside/outside to occur. The excess is nothing extraordinary, Stephenson and Papadopoulos say. We live *among, in and as* excess. But it is an indeterminate force of unknown violence. And the *force* of the excess is felt, I counter, in the *extraordinary* moments of everyday excess. *The excess is the passionate kiss that bursts forth between bodies to seal a new relationship when it can't contain itself anymore, when an affect held inside to bursting point forces its way out, when the tectonic forces of attraction and repulsion between bodies create cracks in which new attachments and new worlds are formed. Kissing the universe is how politics is done.*

The Police

Now, doing politics involves refusing who one is supposed to be, refiguring the perceptible and making the incommensurability of worlds evident.
— STEPHENSON AND PAPADOPOULOS, *Outside Politics/Continuous Experience*

Pledging is simple. One day I simply refuse. I think I am *able* to refuse because the force of my excess matter kicks me back. I am able to *notice that I already have (way more than) enough*. My unanticipated, unqualified refusal appears in uncontroversial clarity. Before pausing to think *how* or *if* I can, I refuse more clothes. I must find the 'how'. I can not keep partaking in the trouble. I refuse to keep on as if things will turn out OK. I refuse the Merry Hill Centre on my doorstep. I refuse to have anything to do with the grabbing and unboxing and liking and unliking of matter. I refuse to perform neoliberal labour. I refuse sleeping and shopping and working and driving and relaxing and relating as sensible people do.

I also refuse the neoliberal traps that easily ensnare. I refuse to believe I don't have the time or the money which refusal demands. I *make* the time and I *make* the money by reconfiguring proper uses of money and time, and notions of how much I



Run down and exhausted at my leaving do after resigning at HMP Birmingham, Birmingham 2009.
Photograph: Unknown.

need.¹⁴⁹ A proper income is redundant once I renounce a proper life. I refuse to (pretend to) *buy* my way out of (and hence back into) this mess. This chapter is about sharing the everyday engineering of emancipation, so I recall what materialises after the flash moment of the pledge. Within weeks I lose interest in all forms of shopping. Within a year I hand in my resignation from my proper prison job. A year later, I start the PhD. The pledge was the first (un)conscious step in the ongoing process which this thesis documents.

Few around me had confidence that I would keep up the pledge¹⁵⁰ or that the odds of me ending up any better off after ‘throwing it *all* away’ (‘all’ being the proper job, the proper life) were worth the risk. At the prison we were in the business of minimising risk, and the air we breathed, inside and out, was loaded with it. In effect, this amounted to a magnification of risk which, like the LED prison signs,

¹⁴⁹ I buy a house with a student stipend, couchsurfing for the first term and living off £1 bags of potatoes and Lancaster University microwaves and showers. The maths of PhD writing up as an (by now) unfunded single parent paying for childcare do not add up. The thesis would be impossible. The cost of 2.5 days childcare in the UK covers a whole month’s living costs in Cuba and makes my ontowork towards the otherwise possible again.

¹⁵⁰ Within weeks, I was often asked if I was *still* keeping it up.

flashed 'threat levels' across our conscience.¹⁵¹ My colleagues could sense alternatives, but not better ones. Indeed, in the precarity of the neoliberal economy, I could have started slipping into social scum, careering into homelessness, mental health issues and chronic underclass failure (Tyler 2013). I could so easily have stopped counting at all. My attempt to exit the impasse was dismissed by my peers, or, in Rancière's term, they 'policed' my escape by curtailing the limits of human possibility within sensible co-ordinates. I acted in spite of all around me. As it was, I found the funded PhD studentship months after my resignation and, not long after, many of my ex-colleagues were laid off in prison education cuts. My indeterminate world of im/possibility plays on against their sensible redundancy. I was tiptoeing out of my impasse, and they were sinking deeper into precarity.

The difficulty of escaping the sensible order is not solely because its very existence as an underlying social structure is denied, but that it is policed as a naturalised mode of everyday life by the sensible population. Rancière's treatise on democracy holds that a sensible order is populated, in any situated context, by a majority corpus who maintain and reproduce the sensible order, called 'the police', and a small minority who disrupt it (2004). Neither hierarchical organised force nor hegemonic power figures, the police is anyone in the shared community including, and especially (in my example), well meaning friends and family who uphold the boundaries of the sensible order. 'The essence of the police, therefore, is not repression but rather a certain distribution of the sensible that precludes the emergence of politics' (89). Those who maintain and police the borders are custodians of the sensible world, sensible common folk of all positions and functions, and 'policing' as verb is the sharing, and therefore *reinforcing and replicating, of sensible assumptions and beliefs*. All those who do not challenge the sensible order, actively keeping things in their proper place, are the police. To turn Occupy's mantra on its head, the 99.9% who weren't engaged in the act of occupying, were the police. By this reckoning, peer groups unknowingly maintain the stasis in which politics can seemingly never happen.

It stands to reason that our nearest and dearest have our interests closest to heart and are most likely to protect us against shared sensible risks, but such well intended acts of care may prevent the visionary dreamers of the world from doing anything as rash as making the world a more liveable place — because the ways of

¹⁵¹ It was Becker's (2002) discussion of risk in neoliberal society that made me aware of this point.

doing this, at first sight, won't seem sensible at all. The ontoworker must be ever wary of these gatekeeper peers and their protective/controlling forces which police the very possibility of sparks of the otherwise from catching light. This thought presents a further vexation of the ethics of care (Murphy 2015) which implicates the act of caring in the everyday policing of sensible limits. Giving up a proper job, raising a child in Cuba, living with no income and buying no more clothes are just some of the improper and seemingly *careless* acts that I have done which fly in the face of sensible assumptions, and which have had friends and family angry, bewildered and worried stiff.¹⁵²

The point about the police is their crippling efficiency. The distribution of the sensible is policed so seamlessly that it makes the sensible order impossible to see, reinforcing the incapacity to apprehend the present condition and to perceive the impasse. Because if we were to become aware of the whole sensible set up on which ideas of a 'proper life' are based, all our sensible hopes and dreams would come crashing down (Berlant 2011). All who dare to show that 'other worlds are available' beyond these sensible limits have to contend with the mighty conservative force of the police.

III

SLIPPING INTO ANOTHER WORLD

Sensible misfits

For the vast majority of the time, sensible subjects police and perform the sensible order unthinkingly, even unconsciously going out of their way to do so. But any member of 'the police' can step out of line at any time by doing or saying or being something that is unthinkable or improper in sensible terms. 'Rancière's work begins with the premise that our world is composed of lives in constant movement, alignment and realignment' (Panagia 2009, 297). Anyone can take a pledge. Anyone can set an ontoexperiment in motion. These disruptors, these refusers are those who can potentially perform politics. We may become material anarchists. We may develop entirely unanticipated habits, and start doing illegitimate things. We may become out of sync with our sensible sense of self. We may become other.

¹⁵² Among a range of affective responses including also support, jealousy, distancing and indifference.



Mending on the front porch, Playa, Havana, 2018. Photograph: Raul Olivera.

Rancière insists that we all possess the same sensory apparatus, but counters that there are ‘degrees of subjectification’ (Purcell 2014b, 179), by which he means that some neoliberal subjects are more sensible than others. Some soak up the sensible like sponges and deliver a seamless performance of the sensible world.¹⁵³ The ‘sensible sponges’ are likely to be the most fastidious members of ‘the police’, the job’s worths of the sensible order. At the opposite end of the sensible spectrum are the ‘sensible misfits’, or inappropriate/d others, the least sensible and most potentially disruptive subjects of the neoliberal world, (like myself).

Sensible misfits are the marginal subjects who embody the otherness which the sensible tries to either bring to heel or exclude.¹⁵⁴ Our entanglements in the sensible web are no less intricate but our embodied otherness breaks up the seamlessness of our experience of the sensible. We are inappropriate/d because, due to our marginality, we are unable to conform to sensible ideals. Sensible misfits

¹⁵³ For this insight I thank my parents for being supremely sensible subjects. Being brought up in a sensible bubble, as I was, yielded a unique set of challenges and opportunities to arrive at the insights of this thesis.

¹⁵⁴ By marginal, I refer to those who, due to ethnicity, gender, ability, age, class, provenance, precarity, political beliefs, ecological ethics, direct exposure to the trouble, etc do not fit or self-identify with the sensible’s normative ideal.

don't have to do anything special to perform politics. It simply materialises through our everyday experience as we perform misfitting modes of thinking, being and doing which deform the sensible mould in protuberances of otherness (Panagia 2009). Our extraneous existence, as sensible excess, carries the possibility to mess up the seamlessness of sensible experience for our more spongy kin.

Our lived experience of the world is incompatible with the world that is given. We find it harder to maintain the (mis)belief that the sensible order is working for *us*. The sensible story is relayed via a glitchy signal. This grants sensible misfits a greater disposition to attune to the trouble and sense the fine hair cracks in the sensible veneer. The signs of trouble which are captured from the insensible frequencies of the excluded zones are termed by Rancière (1999) as 'noise'. 'Noise' is the sound of the excess (Swyngedouw 2014, 128-9). It's an in/audible backdrop to the sensible order from the insensible zones which lie in perceptual non-existence. Sensible misfits are the conduits of sensory traces that the otherwise exists. As more and more cracks appear in the sensible order, neoliberal subjects are increasingly attuning to capitalism's 'legitimacy problems' (Purcell 2009, 144) and hearing the sound of trouble (Cobo Guevara et al (eds) 2018). More and more of us are experiencing the world as a sensible misfit. We are becoming 'disturbed and disturbing' to the sensible regime (Panagia 2009, 298).

Everyday escapology

In Havana, when someone pulls off an im/possible deed with aplomb, when she has the nerve to resolve an un/resolvable need, when she invents an unthinkable solution to avoid having to keep on enduring more of the same, she may receive the compliment '*estás escapada!*' You are escaped! I wish to appropriate this phrase, for escape is what experimental ontology is all about. Escaping the scripted versions of the everyday, escaping unbearable conditions, unsustainable arrangements for life. Escaping predictable endings, monotonous excuses and never ending imaginaries. Escaping the pull of the police who will keep telling us 'No!' Note: This is an ontology of escape. Not 'you *have* escaped' but 'you *are* escaped.' It's not a linear movement across a boundary. It's not about orchestrating a one-off, one-way exit from the sensible order — escape is nothing if you can't keep it up — but in maintaining an ongoing, everyday physical existence outside the sensible walls. Escape is living in opposition to, and in refusal of the sensible. It's an ontological shift, a new way to inhabit a world and a self, a subjective emancipation.



Relaxing on the front porch, Playa, Havana, 2018. Photograph: Esme Morales Middleton.

They escape into the reorganisation of embodied ways of existing and relating, mutating the meanings of what social and human relationality means, they escape into novel embodied material practices which put their subjectivities at the forefront of doing politics (Papadopoulos 2010c, 142).

There is always an otherwise and an elsewhere to escape to:

Every social context, every material arrangement, every moment has enough space for conflicting forms of life: alter-ontologies. There are no closed spaces, there are no lost spaces. Re-appropriation and reclaiming is the practice of liberating closed terrain (Papadopoulos 2010c, 145).

With jubilation, I can over-claim/celebrate that *I am escaped*. Escaped like leachate. Capitalism will not recapture me. I live in and as escape and I like to trust that I can keep it up. I am living as an agile escapee (Purcell 2016), running to keep

up with the trouble, and dodging the damage of the sensible entanglements I have left behind. I share my experience as a manual on ontological escapology, so that more of us can *become escaped* together. To escape the sensible order, us sensible misfits must become everyday escapologists. We must unshackle ourselves from some mighty sensible knots. This is my contribution to give the 'posthuman exodus' (Papadopoulos 2010c, 142) a push, so that we might more 'easily slip into another world'.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁵ I thank Henry Threadgill for this phrase, from the 1987 album.

The Mending Ethic



The Mending Shed, MENDRS 2012, Docker, UK.

Aim Organise a symposium on mending and do it with a mending ethic

Protocol As part of a mending ethic:
Find a non-institutional venue
Do it without funding if none is available
Make it affordable to everyone interested
Invite practitioners and scholars from diverse disciplines
Make mending integral to the event
Make mending sayable and visible

INTRODUCTION

The politics of caring have been at the heart of concerns with exclusions and critiques of power dynamics in stratified worlds.

— MARIA PUIG DE LA BELLACASA, *Matters of Care in Technoscience*

Feminist projects of care are within a skein of appropriation and re-appropriation, of antagonistic and yet enabling relations, of implicated and uneasy animations that are not merely political economic and complicit, and yet also not merely reparative or oppositional or better. Projects of care, feminist and otherwise, are full of romantic temptations that disconnect acts that feel good from their geopolitical implications.

— MICHELLE MURPHY, *Unsettling Care*

This chapter develops from the moment I first identified mending as a research interest. Mending was a frumpy word, and a forgotten action. Its marginality lured me. Excitedly, I made a ‘speculative commitment’ to this ‘neglected thing’ (Puig de la Bellacasa 2011, 85). I sensed the gravity of my adventure. Repair is later reclaimed as the most urgent issue on the digital research agenda (Jackson 2013). And yet mending as ‘innovation in the digital economy’¹⁵⁶ was a fascinatingly troubling proposition, and compellingly absurd. Mending weaves mockingly, to and fro and up and down, across the panacea of digital-based, unidirectional futures. Its untimeliness subverts the imperative for progress-oriented research (Puig de la Bellacasa 2015). Its counter-productiveness renders it an irrelevance that could surely never count. With mending I intuited that I was escaping the boundaries of proper research, and that my project belonged with the unknowable possibilities of an insensible world. The politics of exclusion beckoned me unconsciously forth.

Mending’s exclusion from academic discourse was a problem, however, because I had barely anyone to think and talk with, and I didn’t know where to start. I was an unmarked maroon without a compass, so I set out, with others, to build a research community and to find mending research kin. We cut together a research event so that the parts without a part, those scholars and practitioners interested in mending, could shape a new collective world around mending’s excluded practice and

¹⁵⁶ The role of the HighWire doctoral training centre.



Luis Rodil-Fernández, Martine Postma and Sue Bamford (left to right) in the Mending Shed, Docker, UK, 2012.

thought. And we did it as a collective ontoexperiment in material politics, building and populating a fleeting, but very concrete world in which mending made sense.

But I have to stop to ask whether we are mending, and researching mending, as a political act. In pursuing a thinking trail which leads to me defining mending as an outside politics of matter, I see how my very journey is riddled with exclusions. This ontotale illustrates the doing of outside politics as an unfolding process of exclusion and escape, of fixing new (physical and conceptual) co-ordinates and coming unstuck. I experience a temporal layering of dis-identification and refusal, accompanied by a repeated refrain of seeking, or at least yearning for, new kin. I find, or create, a generative place to settle, to be and do and think, and then I start to feel unsettled, and to unsettle that which previously made sense. My thinking slips out of sync, and, in turn, I slip out of communities of knowledge practices where I no longer fit. I set up a new shack to un/settle my thinking and being and doing, somewhere unthinkable, somewhere marginal, initially alone.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁷ I am thinking with Murphy's (2015) use of unsettling.

In chapter 2, I explored the relationship between matter and capitalism, and here I narrow in on the relations between capitalism, mending, and repair. Specifically here, I dis-identify with repair research, and even with (the specific practices associated with the word) ‘repair.’ I then unpick the naturalised notions of repair as inherently good (Murphy 2015) and problematise what mending and repair do for, and against, capitalism. In a situation I refer to as the ‘fixer’s paradox’ I ask whether repair, and with it repair research, in fact polices the sensible order of the dominant regime, an outcome which would renders repair research a cruel optimism (Berlant 2011) with the sourest of tastes. I realise that repair research is troubling for noncapitalist, more than human outcomes, and I stake out my own work on mending as a vitalist politics within feminist science studies. It is here I set up my theoretical base camp to ground my undisciplined thoughts.

PART 1

MENDRS 2012

The MENDRS research network was initiated in July 2011 by Jonnet Middleton, Giuseppe Salvia and Rebecca Collins, later incorporating Blanca Callén. It focused on organising the MENDRS International Research Symposium (29 June - 2 July



MENDRS 2012 venue, Slough Farm, viewed from the fell at dusk, with the Mending Shed far left, Docker, UK, 2012.

2012, Slough Farm, Docker, Kendal, UK), to generate and connect research on mending, with a series of follow-up events.¹⁵⁸ The symposium included keynotes, themed panels and presentations, and there the similarities with a conventional academic conference ended. Activities centred around a large covered barn (The Mending Shed) comprising presentation area, kitchen and dining area, exhibition space and bathroom trailer, situated on a working farm in the north-west of England, between the Lake District and the North Yorkshire Dales. There were 60 participants.



Discussion group on e-waste led by Blanca Callén with Åsa Ståhl and Kristina Lindström in the library, Docker, UK, 2012.

The Mending Ethic

An artist, a designer and a geographer, the three of us had just met and we shared a feeling that we had something in common. We went for a drink and it came to me: 'Let's do a conference on mending,' I burst out. In our circles *no-one had ever said 'mending' before*. I had not yet said that mending was my PhD. Sustainable, collective, grassroots, hacker, maker, designing, keeping, wearing, discarding was the extent of our vocabulary, words that kept mending hidden away. Mending was a new word to cross my lips, a new word for all of us, a powerful descriptor to bring

¹⁵⁸ There have been follow up events: MENDRS Barcelona, December 2012; MENDRS Roadshow, Jan - April 2013; MENDRS workshop at PLATE, Nottingham 17 June 2015.

a whole new movement forth.¹⁵⁹ Let's make mending sayable. *Mending is the name of our game.*

An even more novel thought ensued. Let's do it with a *mending ethic*. The concept was utterly undefined and yet we had a tangible sense of what it might be. A principled methodology. *Mending is how we do it.* We research mending by performing it from the start. It was a protocol to work with and aspire to, to be defined on the go. Part challenge, part battleground, we saw how imagining the mending ethic revealed our very different individual senses of the limits of the possible, in material and social terms. My experience of organising large scale unfunded art projects put me in the position of reassuring the others it could be done. But, as the more radical and provocative member of the team, some of the settlements I proposed were uneasily received. They undermined working notions of professionalism and what it meant to do things 'properly'. They danced and dined with irreverence and acceptability. We wanted to be taken seriously but even this meant contradictory things to each of us, and for me seriousness meant a refusal to compromise, an insistence on carrying the mending ethic through all aspects of the event. At this extreme, the mending ethic changes all the rules of the game.

Considering a venue, I was sure the mending ethic would be annihilated by a neoliberal educational institution, unless we were to use the facilities parasitically or illegally — occupy the campus, camp in the grounds, and cook in the staff kitchens etc.¹⁶⁰ There was something in the very material fabric of the characterless campus buildings that felt so 'anti-MENDRS'. The award-winning new LICA (Lancaster Institute for the Contemporary Arts) building I worked in, which had topped the education sector's sustainable new build category (LICA BREEAM report, 2011), was a sensible ode to the sustainable imaginary (Middleton 2011). The tightly controlled homogeneity and financing of the university's corporate event regimes crushed all opportunity for enacting scholarship differently and, in any case, our commitment to pulling the event off with or without funding ruled this default option out. (Think of all that is hidden and all that is eclipsed by the anonymous catering trolley which is discreetly trundled in neat and full and

¹⁵⁹ Although this was rather a forgetting. Two years later, I remembered I used to run a garment repair workshop in Spain, although I didn't do the mending myself. I paid two monastery-trained women named Lourdes and Milagros (Miracles).

¹⁶⁰ We used the university online booking system and AV equipment loans.



'Now make your fantasy PhD a reality' activity designed by myself and Helen Pritchard in a gratuitous attempt to enact scholarship differently within the institution, DOCFEST: EPSRC doctoral training centre research event, with Chris Csikszentmihályi on the stage, LICA building, Lancaster University, Lancaster, 2011.

shuffled away empty (or not) and dirty - I refuse to swallow the logic the trolly performs). In fact, working to a shoestring budget made the mending ethic an imperative, the two factors went hand in hand, and financial constraint helped to consolidate unconventional decisions. Which shall it be? Borrowing a tractor load of plastic chairs from a church hall, or university room hire which charges extra for the furniture? The sensible options stopped making sense.

Doing it without funding was also a refusal to linger in the anticipatory regimes (Adams et al 2009) and deadeningly slow timescales of funding rounds. It was a refusal to *police* and *perform* the sensible belief that, without proper funding, nothing can happen, and a refusal to spend time applying and waiting for funding when I could be getting on with organising the event itself. With Rancière I understand funding as a distribution of the sensible - the chosen ones beget obligations of properness, they are the ones who are trusted to perform its logic. I was impatient to build a mending research scene and foster mending discourse at this early stage of my PhD. I wanted to find mending scholars to think with but the existing repair literature amounted to a handful of texts (Henke 2000, Spelman



Giuseppe Salvia photographing the sunrise, tents squeezed into the chicken coup, Docker, UK, 2012.

2002, Graham and Thrift 2007, Gregson et al 2009, Denis and Pontille 2011, Brook 2012). This was before making vital connections with literatures on in/visible work (Suchman 1995, Star 1991, 1999, Star and Strauss 1999), and the ethics of care (Mol 2008, Puig de la Bellacasa 2010). Locating mending kin meant teasing them out of the woodwork, cutting together a research community from the margins of other disciplines, because the field of ‘repair studies’ did not yet exist. In the end we got a funding grant and put it towards participants’ travel costs and a kitty for future events.¹⁶¹ All other expenses were covered by the event fee which ranged between £0 for an unwaged helper and £90 for a waged participant, and an honesty box. The ‘price’ of the funding was the presentation of a much lauded ‘impact report’ (Middleton 2012c) which represented our parasitic or subversive use of neoliberal finance in a way that ticked all the funder’s boxes. Our exciting off-campus knowledge exchange looked delightfully innovative to stakeholders.¹⁶² I thought I had found the perfect venue, Kurt Schwitters’ Merzbarn in the Lake District, but relations with the director were extremely trying and three weeks before the event he withdrew his support. This was a relief, but there was precious

¹⁶¹ The £4000 funding from a Lancaster University ‘Knowledge Exchange’ grant covered transport costs for those who requested it, 100% for UK travel, 50% for overseas.

¹⁶² See Gibson Graham (2006b, xxvi) on subverting capitalist funding to noncapitalist ends.



Reconfiguring the Mending Shed with Bill Lloyd (centre) and Steve Grundy (centre left and right), Docker, 2012.

little time to mount a plan B from scratch. Scouting for solutions I rang musician Bill Lloyd of Slough Farm to ask if he knew of any possible options. He didn't hesitate. 'Do it on my farm'. Although 'Merz was *so mending*,¹⁶³ as I had often been reminded, Bill and family were busy performing the mending ethic on a daily basis and even had a mender-in-residence, Steve Grundy, who lived on site in a converted camper van. Bill, Steve, and a team of enthused MENDRS volunteers reconfigured a working farm into a full-board conference venue from assorted

¹⁶³ Schwitters' Merz Barn is one of the series of Merz Bau installations, transformative configurations of collage, found objects and garbage, which were radical conceptual innovations in the art world of the time. See Wilson (2018) for an insightful account.



Resolving accommodation needs, despite the flooded camping area, Docker, 2012.

materials found lying around. We all agreed that the mending ethic, whatever else it might be, was about making do with existing resources and available options, as well as embracing indeterminacy and changes of plan. It was also extremely sociable, and the fact that Bill welcomed sixty strangers into his home was the making of the event.¹⁶⁴

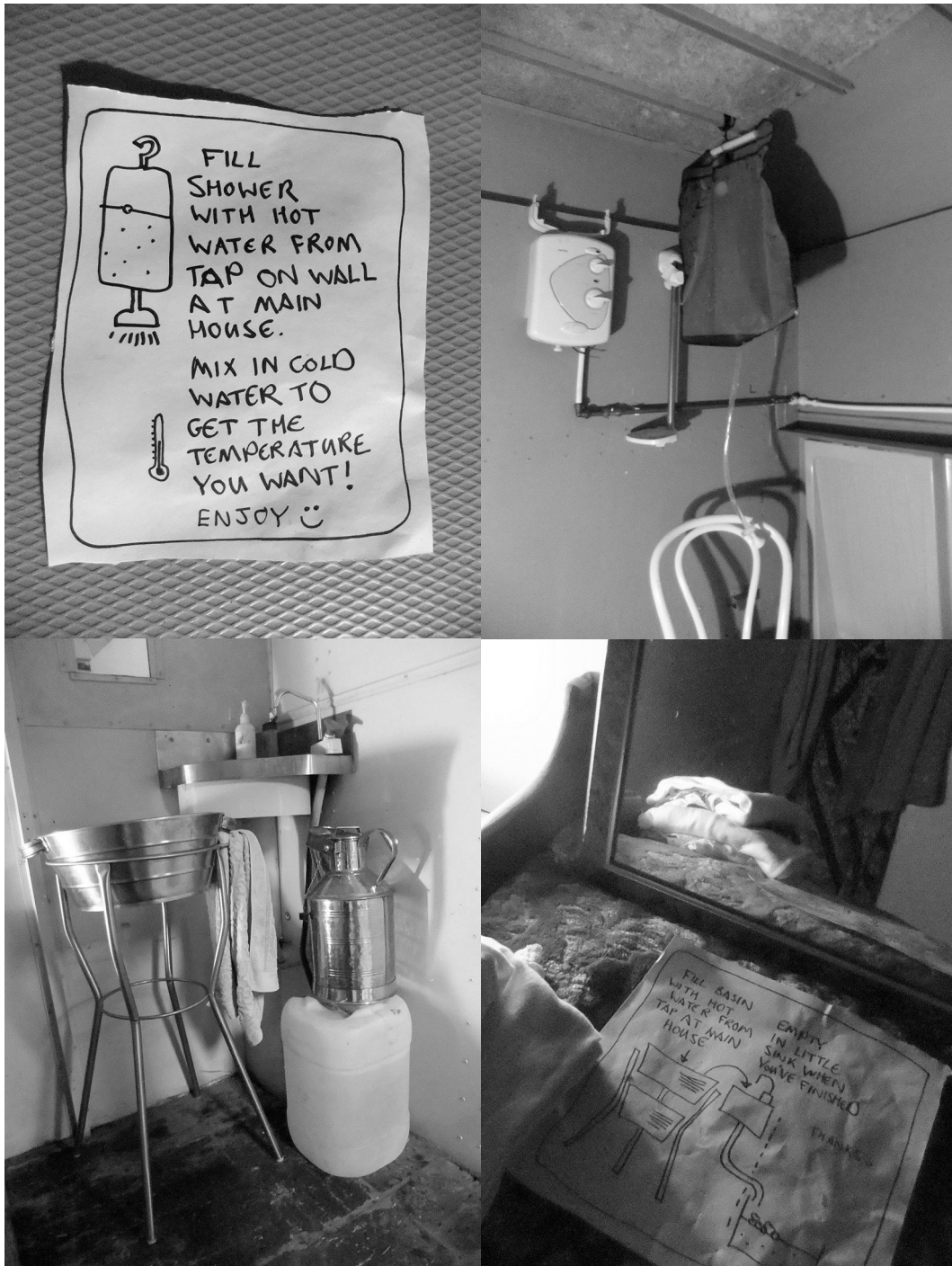
¹⁶⁴ I am unable to maintain protocol and refer to the individuals at this event by surname, raising, but not answering questions of feminist methodology around how to undo hierarchy in the mending ethic. How should I refer to my kin and the different strengths and qualities of relation when, at the same time I refer to the 'Italian chef' and a 'farmer' whose names I don't recall, and continue to cite academic sources, among them my scholarly kin, as protocol demands?

The material reconfiguration was transformational. The 'Mending Shed' venue was spectacular, the antithesis to the university's bland hopelessness.¹⁶⁵ The mending ethic had materialised before us and a new mending aesthetic was everywhere we could see, smell, hear and touch. Novel combinations of material arrangements assaulted the senses, conference screen on trailer bed faced by rows of orange chairs on sawdust floor, a china blue pitcher in an army trailer dry bathroom parked with at an exaggerated tilt in the corner of the barn, in the opposite corner, the field kitchen with a functional aesthetic that was the envy of the coolest pop-up eateries in hipster London, a cattle trough for candid washing up and, alongside systematic stacks of timber being seasoned, the already seasoned timber rearranged to constitute tables and seating for the dining area. The mismatched crockery was on a 5 day loan from the back room surplus of the university campus charity shop, part of the massive material arsenal that vacating students leave behind. The kitchen was manned by a volunteer Italian chef, a much championed figure of the event, and a rota of earnest symposium helpers. Large pots of tea and biscuits were ready at session breaks, and the smell of the evening meal wafted over the day's closing questions. Each day ended with a campfire and live music into the early hours with our hosts and other musicians who lived on or near the farm. In collective spirit, the vast majority of participants stayed on site, and if tents were too wet, crashed out in the yurt or on the library sofas by the fire.

The Mending Ethic As Posthuman Sociability

Organising the event around the mending ethic placed a new emphasis on human-material relations and this in turn raised ethical questions about social relations, questions around how to perform posthuman ethics on (still only) humans who are used to being treated like they are special, or even, *more* special than others. Do we approach keynote speakers with the usual hierarchical reverence and pay for a taxi and a good hotel, or will they wait around for a liftshare and bed down in a horse-drawn gypsy caravan parked up on a verge outside the mending shed? Questions such as these required debate as to whether they were askable at all. Could a professor with a husband and toddler be asked to sleep in a tent in a field without toilet facilities? And the question which inspired most heated debate: Would participants go for three days *without showering or washing their hair*, bearing in mind they needed the self-confidence to deliver a contribution to the

¹⁶⁵ I'm thinking of Graeber's 'hopelessness isn't natural. It needs to be produced' (2011b, 31).



Clockwise from top left: Shower room instructions; Shower room; Dry bathroom instructions; Dry bathroom, Docker, 2012.

event? Not to mention no wifi, one outdoor hot tap, two portaloos, no shops or services for miles, and our request to travel to the event by public transport.

This is when I first asked myself Katie King's (1994) question 'how do we get over ourselves?'¹⁶⁶ It's when I started to realise that 'feeling special' lies at the heart of

¹⁶⁶ Also posed by Purcell 2016.

the problem. How do we recognise, and shun, the ways in which capitalism and humanism make us feel special? This collective ontoexperiment was the first (and only significant) time that I had conducted experiments in more than human sociability with others. I recognise now that my tone was almost apologetic to cushion the blow of the potential transformation. It's a delicate act to invite others into a world that's organised by turning practices of business as usual inside out. Today I could confidently proclaim: Join us for thinking and doing and being the mending ethic together! Come and populate a new noncapitalist world! But back then, the mending ethic didn't exist yet. We couldn't imagine what it would feel like, or if indeed it would work. It was birthing in our imaginations, and we needed to keep performing it until it became a world.

All these concerns vaporised when the event got underway. Somehow, all the material and social relations felt special in a radiantly unfamiliar way, as if they/we had been brought alive. As it happened, real world problems focused our thinking, being and doing into a mending ethic from the start. On the day prior to the event serious flooding hit the venue, brought down all mainline train services and made local roads impassable, galvanising our efforts towards the forging of a new more than human sociability. We had to make do, and we had to do it collectively. Some participants had already shifted to 'mending ethic mode' in their ingenuity at getting to the venue.¹⁶⁷ Upon arrival all the participants worked as one to repair the farm's cobbled yard which had been entirely washed out into the fields when a tiny beck became a raging river. We were all mending from the outset. *Mending was the new normal. In this new world of our own creation, mending was the unquestionable, natural thing to do.*

The field designated as the campsite was underwater so the campers crammed in beside the chicken coops. It was June but temperatures dropped to near zero so people wrapped themselves in blankets, or wore all the layers they had. We found comfort outside our comfort zones. Recordings of the event are accompanied by howling winds and the banging of the barn doors, as well as swallow song and cooking noises from the kitchen left of stage. The portaloos overflowed and a local farmer promptly (and illegally) emptied them, bypassing the neoliberal control regimes of slurry. And in the end, the participants barely got to use the dry washroom as the bathroom trailer was declared off limits to humans until the

¹⁶⁷ Incredibly, all but one of the participants arrived in spite of the extreme weather conditions.



Clockwise from top left: Amy Twigger-Holroyd and partner, Luis Rodil-Fernández, Sue Bamford, Tom van Deijnen (Tom of Holland), Sara Li-Chou Han, Liz Parker, Gillian Wylde, Docker, 2012.

nesting swallows were fledged. The humans made do. It made sense not to bemoan the lack of showers but to get over ourselves and follow the tidings of the swallow chicks.

Performative Reconfigurings

MENDRS successfully achieved its stated intent to catalyse a wave of mending discourse and create an emergent research field. It made mending sayable (Rancière 2004) at a time when the word was absent in scholarship, to compliment and critically challenge the existing literature on maintenance and repair. MENDRS became a collective ta-daa moment of having hit a problem on the head. Mending became available to think with. It reconfigured research questions and generated questions of its own. Scholars for whom mending was originally a marginal concern centred in on its importance (Lindström and Ståhl 2014; Harvey 2015; Twigger Holroyd 2016). For others who had not yet named mending as an object of study or concern, the MENDRS call for papers resonated, and mending began to relate to their practice and/or thinking. It was the catalyst for several ongoing PhDs. In this



Clockwise from top left: Miriam Dym and Kate Lynch; Bridget Harvey; Jonnet Middleton; Giuseppe Salvia; Steve Saville and Jack McClafferty; James Wallbank, Docker 2012.

way, MENDRS helped to create the conditions in which mending as research and as practice could (re)emerge (Papadopoulos et al 2008).

But more centrally to my present argument, this was not merely a disruptive event but, I claim, a reconstituent one. MENDRS was a redistribution of the sensible, a performative rupture which tore up the neoliberal rule book of event management. It enacted an alternative, improper model of scholarship following principles which are insensible to hegemonic norms. For those who experienced it, MENDRS was an enchanting event beyond representation (Middleton 2012c)¹⁶⁸ and, as a

¹⁶⁸ See also the blogroll which ten participants wrote contributions to shortly after the event at <https://futuremenders.wordpress.com/2012/07/27/mendrs-blog-tour-2012/>.

performance metric, enchantment is an achievement of some merit (Gablik 1991, Bennett 2001). The realm of representation was something I, at least, was consciously trying to escape. In selecting participants from the responses to the call for contributions, it was not hard to identify those applicants who were interested in the representation of mending, a small minority it must be said, and those who thought and worked with mending as a performative practice. The 'representationalists' were invited along too, but in the role of volunteers.

Even for mender-in-residence Steve Grundy, to whom mending was already a way of life, 'magical' was the only word available (Middleton 2012c). What was this magic? I suggest that it was our collective performance of a world in which mending made sense — our newly constituted world turned the productivist, consumerist, throwaway, individualist world inside out. It was also the unexpected sensory qualities and depth of this fledgling world, and the delightful surprise of the ease, and joy, of socialising in, and populating it. The mending ethic was performed into existence, and we experienced it in embodied form. It took shape as a noncapitalist material ethic, a materialisation of the everyday posthuman vitalist world which this thesis calls for. The sensible shift that took place in order for the mending ethic to make sense is a prototype for the material and perceptual reordering that I argue needs to take place across sensible everyday worlds. We all lived in/as this prototype, the mending ethic was performed by and through us, so we know it can work for real.

We were bodging together a model, a particularly compelling one, of what a world would look like if we were to mend. In this world of mending, people found the time to mend, they had patience to learn to mend. Bespoke and hardcore menders inspired others to mend and raised the bar on what could be mended, and how beautiful, skilled, daring or shocking mending could be. Mending was what we did with our hands while listening to presentations, conversations and live music. Mending was what we saw, wherever we looked. Mending was visible, and possible, during the whole event. What had been, until then, a mending imaginary, we performed into material possibility, and with joy. Mending sprouted in the cracks, in holey elbows and armpits, turning these negative spaces of possibility into the parts that counted in an inside-out world. In the same way, all of the workings of our inside-out world were thrown on display. We could see how this world had been put together, and all the energies that stopped it falling apart. The



Clockwise from top left: Waxed cotton signage by Kate Lynch, The To Do list blackboard, Katherine May and Sara Marty paint signs, Clare Thomas washes up in the cattle trough, Docker, 2012.

field kitchen left of stage was a powerful sensory indicator of the off-stage work that counts to make a world.

MENDRS materialised as material politics before blindingly obvious keywords like ‘capitalism’ and ‘mattering’, or even ‘matter’ formed a conscious part of my, and our, vision. Evidently, ‘our’ vision is not one but many, but these words, in general, were not heard to resound. We performed noncapitalist mattering by getting our hands dirty and by insisting that ‘all we need is here.’ The scale of our challenge was lessened enormously by the fact that Slough Farm was always already performing an insurgent politics of matter - fences tied with baler twine, (and a song which listed the possibilities of baler twine for codging together a world), and a barn heaving with random farming ‘junk’ which became our arsenal of possibility.

From the shadowy matter and forgotten objects of one world, we reconfigured another. Bill and Steve were the natives, who knew how to do the ‘heavy lifting’ and ‘heavy (un)thinking’ to shunt and plumb the disparate elements of the mending ethic into place. They were our life support system, our guides into an unknown adventure, our firm anchor in concrete possibility, and unimaginably congenial hosts.

It was a temporal worlding, a collective construction project, a pop-up otherwise, a microcosm of mending bodies reconfiguring a sensory, material and cognitive domain. And at its furthest reach, it was a fully operational posthuman noncapitalist ontology. Mending became a mode of being, doing and thinking for the people who arrived as participants and left as menders. A tight community was founded from day one by constituting the mending ethic in all aspects of everyday life and work. A tangible material and sensory disruption occurred, *and* a reconfiguring. Everyone sensed it. Everyone *performed* it.¹⁶⁹ We were a self-contained collective ontoexperiment in more than human sociability. We held together the mending ethic, each in our various ways, as an exhilarating sensory overload, without conflict, or interference from the sensible signals of the world we had temporarily left behind. We didn’t think to compare or look back. All we needed was there.

Our ecstatic achievement was to have become the object of our unknowing desire — a world built on/as a mending ethic, and a mending research community — when neither thing had been a possible, thinkable outcome. We had a new way to articulate the trouble, and to affirm an alternative to it. This other, possible world of our thinking was also, at the same time, the material world of our own making. We talked and drank and sang and performed the mending ethic, and it materialised as a concrete world through our experience. We had stopped performing the trouble and had proved that a radical otherwise can exist — just by radically changing the rules of the game and ontologically rearranging the furniture. In the world of our mending sensorium we were all loved up.¹⁷⁰

World Premiere Performance

Building a temporary world of mending required imagination and persistence, and meticulously thought out spreadsheets for reconfiguring the basics of everyday life

¹⁶⁹ I use ‘everyone’ advisedly so as not to underclaim our collective achievement.

¹⁷⁰ I am thinking with art activist Brian Holmes’ (2009) book ‘50 ways to leave your lover: Exit strategies from liberal empire.’



Clockwise from top left: The Italian chef, Giacomo Miola; Meeting and mending in the library; Bill Lloyd serves afternoon tea; Kate Lynch's signage; Mealtime in the Mending Shed; Mathilda Tham with partner and child, Docker 2012.

for all on site. But in material terms, shifting an entire sensory and material world for a long weekend was relatively easy to do, merely following unknowing notions of how a noncapitalist, posthuman, vitalist world might be. Once all the preparatory work to establish a mending ethic was done, with the arrival of the participants, the mending ethic started to perform itself. There was little micro-managing to be done, the practical to-do list was perceptible — because the workings were on show — and everyone fell into helping with scant need of further instruction.

What left me exhausted was the holding together of the mending ethic across all of its elements, by maintaining a blanket refusal of normative solutions so as to not let chinks of the sensible back in. Socially, that meant placating, negotiating, respecting, appeasing, listening and convincing, with the lightest possible human touch and the firmest possible more than human resolve. The effort lay in maintaining the will *all of the time* (Povinelli 2012), throughout the planning and the event. Harder still, though, was sparking and sustaining a collective will, in the sense of creating and maintaining the conditions in which everyone was collectively *for* the mending ethic, even though the collective desire for this was, in the most part, already present. These tasks both fell onto me, and were greater than me, and they were also instinctively performed across the collective body. I endeavoured to be a creative compass, balancing refusal with ways to solve situations otherwise.

In conclusion, I surmise that only by flat out refusal do im/possible alternatives emerge. Once having committed to a new, im/possible path, and by living as if the deathly paths of possibility are unavailable to tread on, there is no choice but to find or invent a new untrodden path, and to tread it into existence. This amounts to erasing the existence of the well trodden paths. They are so deathly they must be ontologically abandoned forthwith. It is possible, and sometimes surprisingly easy, to find alternatives *when you insist that alternatives exist*. Additionally, a new sensory order powerful enough to crush all desire for the old one needs to be experienced as a saturation. The tiniest details matter to keep sensible back up plans blocked right out. The conference welcome pack, for example, included items that mattered — including a candle, locally sourced flapjack and kendal mint cake, and a darning needle, all in a small, hand-printed paper bag — to bypass sensible cravings, and avoid slippage when the familiarity and convenience of sensible habits threaten to sneak back in.

Experiments before and beyond theory

We pulled MENDRS off before consciously knowing and conceptualising that which was materialising among and through us. MENDRS predated my encounter with Ranci re and the distribution of the sensible as a way to understand the ordering, and re-ordering of the world. I needed to know that to write a thesis, but not to physically re-configure a world. As scholarship, this specific experiment in outside politics demands that the theoretical scaffold be erected posthumously around what is already built. The conceptualisation tarries along, six years after the

event. Humans and lifeworlds can become otherwise by 'making it up.' The labour of living in experiment, in my experience, is lightweight compared to the labour of apprehension. Outside politics can happen without theoretical foundation but our naivety left us vulnerable to romanticism and recapture in sensible traps. Mending affect both fuelled our experiment and papered over its potential for self-critique. This is what Žižek refers to in his counter-intuitive command to activist scholars: 'Don't act. Just think' (2012). But this awkward binary between thinking and acting does not account for the possibility that maybe we can learn to think better through action, nor the sense of urgency of the problem we are thinking for. We cannot afford the luxury of waiting until we can work out how to respond. We must instead notice which of our backwards, forwards and sideways steps take us where we need to go in practice, and which do not.

There are important questions that scholarship must ask itself to justify prioritising scholarly knowledge practices over experiential knowledge practices. I, for one, am haunted by the inordinate amount of time that proper scholarship takes up, given that, to me, ontoexperiment is a practice that comes naturally and, as this experiment has shown, can generate knowledge in a short time across an emergent community. In contrast to this, the obligation to produce a proper representation of the experience keeps me suspended agonisingly on the threshold of knowing and being (Povinelli 2012). The MENDRS event may have left me exhausted, but I didn't question or resent the effort it sucked out of me. The particular course of the thesis, however, (the course I freely took) which has taken me away from communities of mending, as well as the biological kin that I bore during the process, causes a more disorienting fatigue, an obliteration of collective energies and potentials, and this feels very wrong. As Stephen Shukaitis says,

'surely the struggle to create a better, joyous, freer, more loving world is not one that is premised upon a constant struggle that leaves one tired and run down. The question is one of creating communities of resistance that provide support and strength, a density of relations and affections, through all aspects of our lives, so that we can carry on and support each other in our work rather than having to withdraw from that which we love to do in order to sustain the capacity to do those very things' (2009, 141-2).

I live in disagreement, or at least in question, that I should be even trying to represent this conceptually at all. I wonder how to balance the ways in which

scholarship prevents outside politics from being done with the ways in which its knowledge generation enables outside politics to be performed.¹⁷¹ The rigorous question which is uppermost to me is whether the inside-outside form of this doctoral scholarship can have more political consequence than that which could have been achieved unknowingly, by continuing to practice outside politics and knowledge generation in unknowing but concrete collective contexts like MENDRS. For this reason, the very practical question of what I go on to do with this knowledge, and how I fold myself back into collective worlds is paramount to if and how the thesis performs politics.



Tom of Holland, Liz Parker and Sara Li-Chou Han (left to right) mend while listening to the presentations, Docker, 2012.

Collective ontoexperiment is one aspect of this project which I have not conceptualised or experimented with further. I have chosen instead to dwell in the potential of my own ontoexperimental experience, as that is already incommensurate enough. My experiments in living in individual refusal beg the questions asked by Shukaitis (2016) regarding how kinds of refusal initiate kinds of collectivity, and how we might get to a place of collective refusal. Collective

¹⁷¹ My inference is that outside politics is the only possible form of politics that currently exists (Papadopoulos et al 2008).

ontoexperiment is the vital next level of ontological experiment in becoming otherwise for liveable worlds (Gibson-Graham 2006a, Papadopoulos 2010b, Connolly 2013). For Gibson-Graham, the work of constituting noncapitalist worlds pivots between ‘a politics of the subject—cultivating ourselves and others as subjects of noncapitalist development’ and ‘a politics of collective action—working collaboratively to produce alternative economic organizations and spaces in place’ (2006a, x). Collective and individual level ontoexperiment support and inform each other. Conducting ontoexperiment in an experimental vacuum, as I have, without the support of fellow experimental kin, has aggravated its difficulty.

Finally, MENDRS was inevitably ephemeral. It was proof of concept, but we could not keep holding our world together beyond the event. We left Slough Farm saturated in experience of the mending ethic and it fizzled out as we each slipped back into the world that precludes mending’s existence. The sensible force-field of meeting deadlines and enduring commutes and losing ourselves in social media and dashing into supermarkets and grabbing coffees swallowed us back up. MENDRS had marked us and given us affirmation and hope, but it was a tiny step along the way to reordering my material and sensory limits of possibility in everyday life. The MENDRS experience left a long trail of questions, and the question I chose to live in/as next (which I pursue in chapter 5): How can we exit capitalism for more than a long weekend?

PART 2

REFUSAL AND RECAPTURE

Mendrs recaptured

Three years on, in June 2015, I am invited to a follow-up MENDRS workshop,¹⁷² where I encounter repair scholarship being performed to a different tune. I by now had a child and I had spent most of the previous year bringing her up in Cuba. The combination of motherhood and life in a socialist state, with very different qualities of material provision, was a powerful othering device which set me off apprehending and questioning the givenness of the sensible order. After our original ontological adventure, I am shocked by the sensible order’s domination over this

¹⁷² ‘Cultures of Mending’ workshop, June 2015, Product Lifetime and the Environment, Nottingham Trent University, UK.



Clockwise from top left: Participants of the ‘Cultures of Mending’ workshop; Discussants of the ‘Cultures of Mending’ workshop; Kyle Weins’ keynote speech (note the PLATE T-shirt in the audience); Rapturous applause for Kyle Weins. PLATE, Nottingham, 2015.

‘reunion event.’ Sensing a wrong, I start to dig at the invisible workings of mending and repair in the capitalist economy.

I see that MENDRS was our honeymoon. It was a moment of innocence, openness and possibility in which we shared a common purpose and a common world. We could all believe we were *for* the same thing, because we didn’t express explicitly what it was we were for. The mending ethic had resonated through the collective on an embodied level, but when I try to theorise this, three years later, in an anti-capitalist framework, I feel shut down. We had performed the mending ethic as a noncapitalist worlding without having to say the ‘c’ word. The mending ethic put its material workings on full display, but it hid the nitty gritty of its politics and the nasty excess of the political tensions at the roots of repair. It also papered over the disabling incommensurability of our individual, situated positions. It was clear that my MENDRS collaborators didn’t share my will to take the mending ethic seriously as a lifeworld, as an alter-ontology, and I set out to work out why.

Capitalism As Awkward Relation

At the close of the MENDRS workshop I asked an awkward question about mending and capitalism. Awkward because I've never sat down to study Marx, and am at pains to avoid sounding so naive that my question doesn't count. My question was all the more awkward, though, because it fell as an unnecessary incursion into politics after an invigorating conversation about skills share, community regeneration and embodied practice. It would have more polite to flow with the group's enthusiasms, or to stay mute. I don't wish to belittle the fascinating dialogues that were taking place, but what about a sense of priority? It matters what research we perform. What we choose to talk about and study performs worlds (Law and Urry 2004, Barad 2007, Puig de la Bellacasa 2011).

I wonder if we concur that mending, and by continuation, mending research, is a political act? If so, what are our politics? How on earth can capitalism be an unsayable word? What is our research *for*? (Yusoff 2013). And what is it against? Do we choose to research repair as *more* than just another intellectual line of inquiry? I have reason to believe that some of us do. I am interested in our motives as repair scholars, and I expect, or hope, we are for earth matters. It would be useful then, vital even, to recognise whether our scholarship even addresses these issues, let alone whether it is performative of the earthly material relations we are oriented towards. My own sense is that repair scholars are, or should be, material activists, although they don't act like they are. My suspicion is that mending research makes us feel good and we go home happy, self-content, and the thing we are for is untouched. I worry how neoliberal measurables police scholarly ambition and keep politics out of matter. I wonder if scholarship can only ever be an unloadable gun.

I want to address my mending kin provocatively. I want to shout out: *Matter is what we are for!* We keep talking over matter. It's the immaterial elephant in the room while we rhapsodise about how nice and sociable mending feels. This is such a disciplined gathering in need of some undisciplined behaviour on my part — letting my continuous experience out rather than holding it in to see what response is provoked. I want to test a political hypothesis and hopefully open up a rich dialogue which resonates with my kin. Their response will inform what I do next with my uncomfortable anti-capitalist thoughts. I brace myself to form my question. For a lifetime I have been too shy and unknowing to ask questions in public. This is a first. A double first to say 'capitalism' to boot. 'Are we ultimately trying to overthrow capitalism?' I venture, the very words baring my own oppositional

politics and my misplaced view of the available options, 'or make it more benign?' By 'we' I hope to mean 'some of us', 'any of us'? or could it be, my heart sinks, I'm the lone utopian at this gig (and the vulnerable lone female yet again)? I ask for a show of anti-capitalist hands (a tiny show of support would give me so much strength). I'm clamouring to read reactions and learn how repair scholars manage their relationship with capitalism. I am totally perplexed.

But I have asked too much. My colleague, the session convenor, nimbly polices the impassable line into personal politics, protecting the paid-up participants from the vulnerability that I have subjected myself to. A kindly senior soul cuts through the nervous laughter with a brief and authoritative answer. 'Repair only impacts on the system of production of commodities, we'd still be operating in a trading system.' I wonder how a trading system of skills and tools could maintain year on year growth. Might this scenario you describe be a post-capitalist economy? I want to interject. In the immaculately maintained shrine to neoliberal enterprise that is the PLATE conference venue, the hands of the clock hover before the hour. That apparatus of control of the age of capital arbitrates. My untimely doubts are out of time.

My very attendance at the event was awkward. I turned up as an alien. It was my first 'work' outing since the extended intellectual hiatus of pregnancy and motherhood. I made a last minute decision to show up and leave a sick child back home. I hadn't got a ticket and I had already decided I would refuse to pay for one. This meant I had compromised a colleague by gatecrashing as an anti-capitalist freewheeler because, despite having co-organised this workshop, I was liable for the full PLATE conference fee of £360 (early bird rate) for the two hour event. I was the unwaged, by now unfunded, student single mother paying full time childcare and writing up fees.¹⁷³ I was the co-founder of MENDRS who had ensured that the original three-day MENDRS symposium was affordable to all (£0-£90). Powerful neoliberal protocols stopped the mending ethic getting a look-in at our long-awaited MENDRS reunion. Although I thought MENDRS was relatively easy, it was not such a replicable model after all, as the first step is to tear up the rule book, and this takes courage, tenacity and imagination. But most of all, full-on refusal is an incommensurable multi-pistol showdown to take on the very *raison d'être* of a whole world.

¹⁷³ The workshop was originally intended as a fringe event, and I understand that unsuccessful attempts were made to reduce or waive this cost for participants.

I started to apprehend the political and ethical diversity of repair scholars, from those like myself, and only myself, who refused to fund the neoliberal coffers to get in, to those who, literally, had been there and got the T-shirt. I marvelled at the neoliberal balls of a sustainable design conference to produce *Product Lifetime and the Environment* T-shirts and likewise wondered how irony escapes those delegates or volunteers who go home sporting the crisp PLATE logo across their backs. I want to see it on their backs ten years from now. And twenty or more.

I was invited to open the workshop session and I delivered a short, steady account of MENDRS 2012 that tried to be faithful to the event, describing the ways in which MENDRS had embodied the mending ethic and the memorable, transformational, results of this alternative methodology, while all the time trying not to let slip the blindingly obvious: The MENDRS reunion is *SO ANTI-MENDRS*. With every word I spoke, I was trying to avoid saying the tragically unsayable thing, trying not to derail the event I've crashed in on, but surely we're all thinking the alarming thought: '*The mending ethic has disappeared.*' It's an imaginary, a ghost we can tell stories of from the hegemonic fortress we are gathered in. No-one was performing the mending ethic anymore. Not even me. We were collectively performing the neoliberal erasure of any other possible way to play the event.

I didn't even dare to joke; apologising for the apparent neoliberalisation of the MENDRS movement; how we've stopped mending during our events because the risk assessment was not approved; how we've progressed from a standpipe outside the barn to designer bottled water, sparkling and still; how there are bathrooms for the humans this time, and not just for the swallows; how I'd feel a bit more at home in this immaculately restored and maintained venue if there was at least a hint of baler twine, how the perfect ambient temperature has put normative dress codes back in fashion, not a blanket in sight. I didn't even quip that this time I bet *we'd all had a shower.*

It was almost too much to bear, my complicity with this glaring contradiction and my lack of response-ability to do otherwise. Three more years have passed since, and now I could stand up with confidence to present a powerful counter-discourse, an outpouring of then unsayable thoughts. But on that day all I had was the deepest feeling of abject wrongness. And of trying to confront it alone. I couldn't say a thing. And so my silence effectively policed the sensible order just like everyone

else, remaining deferential to our hosts¹⁷⁴ rather than reconfiguring the event into a radical, parasitical counter-workshop. There is no alternative, we all tacitly chimed. How can we pretend this is OK? I start apprehending my own naivety to think this whole sustainable research exercise was ever anything other than a capitalist public relations job. It dawned on my that *maybe my mending kin aren't trying to be anti-hegemonic after all*. It's my naivety to harbour political ambition for MENDRS, or to think repair scholarship could ever fix anything of the trouble.

Incommensurable Positions

The purpose of the MENDRS workshop had been to generate a co-authored publication from the four founder members which addressed the current state of mending research. In its wake we deliberated on this outcome via email. This was a test of how to negotiate unsayability and incommensurability in real life contexts and to attend to the tensions of our divergent individual goals and needs. The following letter put paid to our attempts at co-authoring, for the time being.

October 2015

Dearest MENDRS

I've been working on some ideas and possibilities [for the paper] and unfortunately have become increasingly unclear as to how to proceed for a few reasons. My work is getting very political, feminist, and activist. It troubles the norms of peer reviewed publishing and even if I were able to frame it in such a way as to make it acceptable, it would probably sit uncomfortably with Beck and Giuseppe's contributions, but perhaps would work alongside Blanca's, as she is half in/half out of the university, literally and politically. I think a joint publication with the four of us would require a prior discussion to make transparent the tensions that arise between our respective positions. This in itself could be quite generative and intellectually compelling, but it is a project of greater scope than perhaps any of us have time for right now.

I realise I'm throwing a spanner in the works but better now than to all be spending time working towards some unresolved goals.

Hope you're all well, warm greetings from the Caribbean, Jx

¹⁷⁴ By hosts I refer to the entanglement of the university, the conference venue, the conference, as much as my colleagues, the session convenors.

Indigestible Thinking

In November 2015 I am invited to present a position paper at another repair research event in Denver.¹⁷⁵ I approach it innocently enough, but the more deeply I diffract the problem, the more capitalism keeps creeping in. I keep tripping over what Michelle Murphy calls (speaking of care) the ‘non-innocence’ and ‘discomfort’ of repair. I can’t see a way to do mending research without taking on the global economic system, and then my discomfort stretches to repair research, and then even to repair itself. Is the surge of interest in repair research itself a feel-good device, an exercise of scholarly affect to save a repair imaginary? Is repair research conceptualising our very own cruel optimism (Berlant 2011)? I audaciously press the send button with what I consider, at the time, to be a controversial position paper, ‘The Mending Paradox’, in advance of the workshop.

I slip out of my noncapitalist hiding in Central Havana for three days, curious to see how capitalism will hit me now. Where you from? drawled the taxi driver. Cuba. Anticapitalist, I add for free, test driving my new-found identity, shaping a novel word with my tongue. Aw, we love capitalism round here. And why wouldn’t you? In Denver, Colorado, it’s still in its prime. On the first day, capitalism’s excess hits me hard and low, in the belly. After the first meal my belly biota are struggling to defeat a formidable foe, and it dumbs down my capacity to engage with the business of my trip.¹⁷⁶ I have come to spend a day with repair research colleagues. Or more to the point, I have come to hear what they make of my paper. I have gone out on a limb to try to apprehend the reality of repair research, supposedly our common reality, and their reaction is vital to gauging the validity of my line of thought. I (and, I think, we) need to talk. I seek frank responses to my troubling of our discipline because my political conundrum is too big a burden to work out for myself.

We gather in the nooks of a Denver hackspace to give close feedback in small groups. I expect that my capitalism outpouring will force some form of critical response, but the paper drops without a ripple. I think I’m onto something weighty but, (like the ‘Brokenness’ text in the ontomanual), in performative terms, it’s a dud. Close colleagues apart, hackneyed consensus marks it as ‘interesting’ and the word

¹⁷⁵ 4S, Denver, November 2015, an event unaffiliated with MENDRS.

¹⁷⁶ The real business was to generate a SI on repair for the journal *Continent*. I had been collectively orchestrating this for 4 years but, in the end, I choose not to make a submission (Houston et al 2017).



Clockwise from top left: Downtown Denver; The Denver Hackspace; My bloated, blotchy belly; The catering leftovers; Denver homeless; Discussion group with Lara Houston, David Pontille, Jerome Denis and David Ribes, Denver, 2015.

'capitalism' avoids being said. If it has performed imperceptible politics, I am not to find out. The lack of resonance disturbs me. I am troubling our very sense of purpose as repair scholars, and yet my words fall as silent speech (Rancière 2004). My ability to vocalise, and my bodily equilibrium, break down together. I am feverish, mushy minded and hushed. I can't prod for reactions or offer useful thoughts to anyone else. I want to take home gut feelings from the junior scholars, and expert oversights from the repair canon fathers, but I leave with little with which to refine my paper for publication, from an event overbrimming with themes to discuss. I find dis-identification where I sought answers, detaining my activist hopes.

It is suggested that I write (ie instead) around the generative, and affirmative idea of 'broken world thinking' (Jackson 2013) in Cuba. That's a more sayable and desirably exotic option which is less risky for all concerned. To riff on reparative fantasies of a faraway Cuban mending paradise, is more digestible than delivering the trouble to our capitalist doorsteps. Nobody seems ready to bring the trouble home, me included. Nor am I ready to write polemically about Cuban repair, as my honeymoon period isn't over yet. I decide to go underground and publish nothing at all. As a publishing scholar, I cease to exist, and have published nothing since. After the event, I (re)encounter the work of feminist economic geographers JK Gibson-Graham and this intellectual and political lifeline helps me to think with the relationship between the practice of mending and the economic system of production prior to discovering Rancière. Thanks to them, I no longer flinch defensively from saying my politics out loud. In fact, it shocks me now to recall how fearful I was before meeting their empowering account. I'm starting to affirm what sort of a scholar I am, and how I might politically situate my work.

How can the activist operating in the dark work through the limits and possibilities of her own unknowing ideas? Under what conditions can a non-hegemonic discourse be initiated and sustained, and not be dismissed as noise? What can I learn from the silence of unsayability, about doing the work of oppositional thinking in an intellectual echo chamber because I can't even open the dialogue? How might I *meet* with scholars in the production of knowledge when I'm drifting ever further *away*?¹⁷⁷ And so, doubled up in a corner of the hackspace, we keep churning through it, the bacteria and I, in our own troubling belly-up world, and we come to perform a new reality together — an enhanced sense of marginalisation from the repair research field and an estrangement from the heady momentum around conceptualising repair. I wonder how much it all matters. Am I missing a chance here, or am I at the wrong gig? Being othered by bugs, with my conflicting, more immediate matters of concern, I become able to define what I am not: I am *not* a repair scholar. And that's not the half of it. I am *ANTI-flipping-REPAIR*.

¹⁷⁷ Both politically and physically. After setting out expressly to find mending kin with MENDRS, I am dropping off the research circuit, and dropping offline. Internet conditions in Cuba greatly limit my potential to connect with scholars and multiply the sense of working in a vacuum, and I don't want to fly places to connect.

DIS-IDENTIFICATION

Unsettling Repair

From the start, my word for it was always mending, and not repair. Repair felt too official, too formal, too top down. I sensed repair as masculine, visible, rewarded, skilled, perfect, conservative, proper and safe. I sensed mending as female, hidden, domestic, unrewarding, unthanked, insignificant, invisible, skilled and/or bodged, bottom-up and slow. The distinctions are unscientific, and there is ambiguity in common usage, although repair is the undisputed king of the terms. And, in the available literature at the time of my troubling, it's the only word with any grip.

The refrain of the repair literature goes like this: A part of a world grinds to a halt, a chink of a vast invisible infrastructure is glimpsed, an unacknowledged dependency on repair is sensed, hi-vis repairmen are seen to arrive and, through a process spanning sheer mundanity and magic, order is restored and normality is resumed (Henke 2000, Graham and Thrift 2007, Denis and Pontille 2011, 2013). Repair's great achievement is the triumph of order. These accounts reveal the fundamental work that repair and maintenance do; they are key to social order (Henke 2000), 'the engine room of modern economies and societies' (Graham and Thrift 2007, 19), and the 'bedrock of modern capitalism' (Thrift 2005, 3). Without repair, we and worlds fall apart.

I am unsettled by the available accounts (up to 2014) of repair as, from my own experience, when I finally mend the hole in my sock there is no spotlight shone, no moment of glory, no reward. No-one notices that I have noticed a hole, or cares that I have cared. I darn imperceptibly, against the sensible order's onward march. And, despite the ubiquity and importance of repair to hold together a world, my extended experience indicates it is almost impossible to mend (for) myself.

Mending's infrastructure isn't hidden. It physically and psychically doesn't exist. It has taken me until now to realise that those actions referred to as mending/repair do not necessarily perform the same task. In fact, they may be in disagreement with each other and perform quite opposite (re)orderings of worlds.

The Fixer's Paradox

My conundrum is this: On the one hand capitalism has an absolute dependency on maintenance and repair, and yet on the other, it has systematically wiped out the possibility of mending (for) ourselves. To avoid etymological quibbles, I shall switch to the more neutral term 'fixing' while I put 'mending' and 'repair' in the dock, so what was the 'mending paradox' becomes the 'fixer's paradox'. Chasing the relation between capitalism and fixing, then, the alarming question I took to Denver is: Does fixing need capitalism as much as capitalism needs fixing? Back then I struggled to make my case, but armed with the thinking of Gibson Graham (2006a), Murphy (2015) and Puig de la Bellacasa (2011, 2015), and framed with Rancière's politics of exclusion, Barad's posthuman performativity (2003), Susan's Leigh Star's (1995) question '*cui bono?*,' and Yusoff's (2013) question, what is response *for?*, the trouble is simpler to lay out.

Herein lies the paradox: Fixing is both essential and threatening to capitalist reproduction and the imperative for growth. As Puig de la Bellacasa recognises of care, fixing is 'a necessary everyday doing' which can 'become a moralistic regime of power and control' or a force of disruption (2015, 707). If we *don't* fix capital infrastructure, capitalism will crack and crumble, crisis can ensue. But, by the opposite token, if we *do* fix capital's consumer goods to the extent that consumption falls, capital fails to meet its 'healthy' level of growth (Harvey 2010), capital will also suffer, and again, crisis is cued. Can it be, then, that fixing and capitalism are engaged in such a delicate dance of the 'just enough' and the 'not too much', each dependent on the fate of the other? Of course, we know that capitalism loves a crisis (Deleuze and Guattari 1983, Boltanski and Chiapello 2007). But at the same time, capitalism is dependent on finite material resources and vulnerable to the impacts of climate change (Connolly 2013). Capitalism's fragility can be revealed by material crisis (*ibid.*). Crisis will not fuel its engines indefinitely.

Returning to the repair literature, I reassess what it actually reveals and what it hides. A pivotal moment in these accounts is held to be the moment of visibility which ensues from a breakdown (Henke 2000, Graham and Thrift 2007, Denis and Pontille 2011, 2013, also Verbeek 2004). It's the moment the 'world disclosing properties of breakdown' are revealed (Jackson 2013, 230). This conceptualisation that breaking and fixing afford a glimpse at a hidden reality works closely with Susan Leigh Star's legacy on the invisibility of maintenance work and infrastructure

(Star 1991, 1999, Star and Strauss 1999, also Suchman 1995). However, I wonder whether the theorisation of fixing, and fixing itself, is revealing enough. Fixing, and the breaking that cues it, reveals the existence of insensible worlds within worlds, and in doing so, I argue, it threatens to reveal more than the back room workings of a system that masquerades in its transparency (Star 1999). Breakdown reveals the vulnerability of capital infrastructure (Graham and Thrift 2007, Denis and Pontille 2011, 2013), a vulnerability which is, at the same time, our very own. Fixing hides vulnerability, not solely of material artefacts but of people and worlds.

Large-scale breakdowns and tardy or inadequate regimes of fixing risk puncturing the over-inflated narrative of capital's invincibility. The breakdown of material order can escalate into a breakdown of social and political order. The sensible stories that hold us together can start to fall apart. What the repair literature does not reveal, then, is that fragility is not momentary and eradicated by the fix but the everyday state of neoliberal capital's material world (Connolly 2013). As a sensory and material construct, neoliberal capital depends on an extended web of material relations which is incommensurably more fragile than sensible subjects are wont to believe (ibid.). The dominant order is inarguably and inordinately deathly, but it is neither inevitable, robust nor an invincible beast (Gibson-Graham 2006a). It hangs together as a flimsy web of material and social relations and vulnerable dependencies. Graham and Thrift wonder whether what is being fixed is 'the thing itself, or the negotiated order that surrounds it, or some "larger" entity' still (2007, 4)? My view is that it's our planetary vulnerability that is being hidden and the cracks in a fragile neoliberal capitalism that are being fixed.

The work of restoring and maintaining a world is a material performance of ordering matter within and *towards* a particular distribution of the sensible. Every fix we do does work *for* and/or *against* capitalism. This is neither to set up a binary, or to underestimate the indeterminacy of what fixing can actually perform. It is rather, to establish a clear recognition that fixing can be performative of both capitalist and noncapitalist worlds. Being *for* fixing can equate to being radically *against* capitalism or *for* a less deathly capitalism, or *for* a consummate capitalism of deathly relation. For this reason it is vital to know what we are fixing *for*. The fixer's paradox, then, is of the utmost importance to those fixers who want to perform an outside politics of matter, fixers who want to fix the diminishing liveability of worlds. It matters what we fix, and how we fix it. As Michelle Murphy

(2015) says in her vexation of care, there is a fine line between fixing and breaking, between fixing for a deathly hegemony and fixing for liveable worlds.

Cutting Mending Apart

To make a conversation possible about the very different work that fixing practices can perform, I will make an agential cut between the terms mending and repair. This means diffracting a fixing practice to identify what economic system it is working towards, and whether this aligns with the mender's intent. This is not a clean cut distinction, and, like the two-slit test of quantum physics (Barad 2007), gives indeterminate results. A non-capitalist intent to mend can end up doing work for capitalism, and a repair job to maintain the sensible order may actually disturb it.

The cut performs the political work Gibson-Graham call for to create 'a language of economic difference to enlarge the economic imaginary' (2006a, x). As they assert, such linguistic novelty 'has the potential to offer new subject positions and prompt novel identifications, multiplying economic energies and desires' (ibid, xv). With this aim, I hereby designate 'repair' as forms of fixing which perform the maintenance of the sensible order of neoliberal capital, and 'mending' as forms of fixing whose performance is for noncapitalist, more than human worlds. This positioning of mending aligns with Puig de la Bellacasa's (2015) work on the feminist politics of care. '[C]are requires thinking from the perspective of the maintenance of a web of relations involved in the very possibility of ecosystems rather than only from their possible benefits to humans' (701).¹⁷⁸ I make mending available as a term for noncapitalist discourse which 'include[s] all of those practices excluded or marginalized by the theory and presumption of capitalist hegemony' (Gibson-Graham, xii). This most closely approximates the cut I've been operating unknowingly since the thesis began. This thesis is not, and has never been, about the practice I henceforth describe as 'repair.' Mending is the refusal to repair.

Repair is the absolute opposite of 'mending the sensible.' The revelation sends shivers down my spine. As repair scholarship has declared upfront, repair is the maintenance of order (Henke 2000, Graham and Thrift 2007). Repair is nothing

¹⁷⁸ The feminist literature on the work of social reproduction is also a significant genealogy to my argument (Federici 2012, Weeks 2011, Precarias a la Deriva 2006) which could be developed in terms of (re)producing capital relations or performing labour which is unproductive for capital.

other than the material branch of Rancière's sensible police. Repair is the hands-on ordering that maintains the material distribution of the sensible. Repair is taking 'control of the object of care,' putting the commodities of productionism 'back to work' as Puig de la Bellacasa says (2015, 700). It's 'a form of exploitative and instrumentally regimented care, oriented by a one-way anthropocentric temporality' (ibid.). Mending, in vital contrast, disrupts the sensible order, and experiments with ways to shape vulnerable materialities otherwise. Following Murphy, mending is a vexation of repair. It does 'the work of stirring and putting into motion what is sedimented, of decentering and cracking open the smooth into accounts of the messy and the partial' (2015, 731). Repair protects capital's vital organs. Mending is the indigestion in capital's self-fixing system.

The repair literature does indeed hint that in the act of fixing also lies the possibility of change. Graham and Thrift recognise that fixing can enact the political work that the practice I distinguish as mending can do. 'Repair and maintenance activities have not just more grip but more emancipatory potential than may be thought by those who want to write them off as simply mundane or slavishly repetitive,' they say (Graham and Thrift 2007, 2). After a rigorous and extensive survey of maintenance and repair, their parting definition unmistakably evokes the practice I call mending — 'a minimal discourse ... which whispers the world into existence' (ibid. 20). Stephen Jackson's 'Rethinking Repair' is a watershed in the vexation of repair scholarship, and the first account with a working notion of 'repair' as ontology and as material politics. For Jackson, mending heralds new ways of ordering the world, opening up the possibility of new world orders (2013).

'Repair occupies and constitutes an aftermath, growing at the margins, breakpoints, and interstices of complex sociotechnical systems as they creak, flex, and bend their way through time. It fills in the moment of hope and fear in which bridges from old worlds to new worlds are built, and the continuity of order, value and meaning gets woven, one tenuous thread at a time. And it does all this quietly, humbly, and all the time.' (ibid, 223).

If we believe that mending is performative of worlds, then it follows that the things we choose to mend, and how we mend them, perform the worlds we're reconfiguring to live in. Starting among the brokenness of worlds we must ask: What shall we mend, and what shall we refuse to repair? Which parts of the sensible world shall we leave to fall to ruin? Which parts of the ruins constitute

resources for new inventions for living? Which are the already existing lively orderings to be nurtured? Which new worlds do we need to configure from the place where we are, with the resources that we've got?

Mending As Politics, Repair As Police

It is critical, if we are to perform material politics, to pay close attention to Murphy's questions. Are we working 'with and through the grain of hegemonic structures' or against them?' (2015, 719). Are we guided 'by the terms of global capital' or are we truly executing a material escape (ibid, 729)? Which orderings restore life, and which orderings destroy it? Lest there be no doubt as we distinguish between alternatives within capitalism (repair), and alternatives to capitalism (mending), here is an indication of the ways in which repair does policing and mending does politics, of how repair restores order and mending reconfigures it:

Repair is sameness, mending is difference.

Repair is a discipline which follows the regs.

Mending makes a world wonky, and we walk off-balance.

Repair brings a world into alignment and pretends we're OK.

Mending creates disorderly becomings, simply by making it up.

Repair is a blackboxed hegemony programmed to keep matter in its proper place.

Mending painfully unravels the trouble and keeps troubling the hole.

Repair covers the trouble with a profitable, pre-determined patch.

Repair holds the wrong world together, mending pulls the wrongness apart.

Mending refuses to leave the world the same, it performs im/possible combinations.

Repair conforms to sensible regimes, it restores the sense of a world as it was.

Mending disturbs the ontological parameters, repair, never.

Mending can transform matter and mender, repair leaves repairer and matter the same.

Repair reproduces an existing reality, mending constitutes alternative material worlds.

Mending weakens and dismantles the sensible grip on everyday life.

Repair is a human solution, mending a more than human offering.

Repair is for humans, mending, for the material commons.

Repair is a red herring towards liveable worlds, mending is the liveliness limping along.

Repair is anthropocentric greenwash, in the safety of a risk-assessed embrace.

Mending is posthuman politics performed in vulnerable relation with material worlds.

Repair fixes first world problems, leaving planetary trouble tearing away.

Mending is risky, out of our comfort zone, the back of the beyond of repair.

Mending is plain im/possible, it starts out as an ontological puzzle.

Mending is a possibility which needs to be brought into existence, before even tackling the mend.

Mending touches matter which is inexistent or thoroughly dead.

When repair becomes unthinkable, mending is a still available way to resolve.

Mending carries on when there is nothing left to repair.

Mending is the everyday performance of an imperfect but just-liveable world.

Outside Politics Of Matter

My original hunch was that mending is the 'killer app' to take on capitalism because it disables the system of production and is ruinous to growth. It's specific killer tactic is to perform alternatives in/as concrete worlds. By innovating outside of the capitalist economy, mending puts a spanner in the neoliberal mechanics. But now I realise trying to kill capitalism is the wrong way to fix on the target. Mending needs to stop obsessing with capitalism (Gibson-Graham 2006a, Purcell 2016) and, by performing itself, bring about the physical disappearance of capitalism in everyday lives. The role of mending is for *forgetting about capitalism*, and for getting on with the noncapitalist alternatives. Mending freezes capitalism out of everyday lives. It gives it the classic cold shoulder simply by *doing nothing for capitalism*. The idea of capitalism will live on, no matter, but it no longer has purchase on a mender's concerns. I 'flee capital relations rather than resent them' (Purcell 2016, 618). No energy is expended trying to 'kill' capitalism. All energy is redirected towards preventing capitalism from killing off planetary forms of life. The snub cuts off capitalism's support mechanisms, letting it wither, denying it the chance to refuel. Like the troubled cockroach in my bathroom, it doesn't really matter how long it keeps on writhing. I don't stamp on it. I don't need to see entrails, feel the juiciness or be hit by the remorseless stench. I don't need to help kill it. It may sound cruel (to cockroach lovers), but I am clear that neither capitalism nor cockroaches get my compassion or care. I have far more lively work to do.

Mending is a matter of life and death. Mending is not the killer app but the lifesaver. Mending is physical, material escapology from a deathly material regime. Mending is outside repair. Mending is outside capitalism. Mending is an excluded practice

performed by excluded people on excluded matter.¹⁷⁹ Mending is outside politics through and through. Outside politics ensues by *making more menders*, and by *mending more and more*, taking the im/possibility of mending to ever greater extremes. We menders must take very seriously our ability to perform worlds. Instead of repairing the world that is given to us, our task is to mend for an inhabitable world for ourselves and our kin.

A year after MENDRS 2012, myself and fellow participant, Liz Parker, travelled to Havana together, as I recount in chapter 1. MENDRS 2 was scheduled for two years later, but by that time, I was back in Havana with a newborn half-Cuban baby. Cuba has been our base ever since. The final ontotale tells of neoliberal control freaks and 'regs is regs' repairers who only perform repairs between the narrowest sensible parameters, making it palpable why I am *ANTI-flipping-REPAIR*.

¹⁷⁹ As I conclude this chapter, I am excluded from attending a restart party unconference (Manchester 2018) for not being active in a repair community. To put this in context, I was actively organising community mending projects several years before restart parties began, and this PhD was to work out how to do such work more effectively. Now my findings are unwelcome in the repair activism community. 'We've had heaps of interest from academics,' I am told, 'but in the end Fixfest UK is an unconference for activists who fix or help others fix at a community level.' As an outside scholar doing outside politics, I sense the irony of now also being considered outside of repair activism. It is suggested that I attend an alternative, more academic event which is not engaged in material activism, *proper*.

Reality Mending



Waiting, Central Havana, 2017. Photograph: Maurice Haedo.

Aim: Make mending possible in my everyday reality

Protocol: Mend *my* sensible (ie work purposefully to erase the layers of givenness which govern what I do/am/think)
Refuse the sensible order (cease to police and perform it)
Escape the sensible order (starting with physical escape, to Cuba)
Reconfigure the sensible as modes of being, doing and thinking otherwise
Populate un/thinkable, im/possible modes of life
Create an alter-ontology in which mending becomes possible

INTRODUCTION

Every breaking world becomes as real as it gets.

—KATHLEEN STEWART, *Atmospheric Attunements*

This chapter is an ontotale of making sense and bringing into relation. It is a diffracted onto-ethnographical account of my intentional escape from the sensible

order into a radically indeterminate zone of my own reconfiguring. The unknown ontological destination which I travel towards is one in which mending is a possible response to and for troubling matter. I have done the groundwork in previous chapters. I have apprehended the reality of the present condition through a lifelong process of sensing and unknowing,¹⁸⁰ and through an engagement with critical scholarship which has consolidated the process of attunement and given me the 'talent to speak' (Rancière 2004). I have disrupted the reality of the sensible order with a series of material, artistic and scholarly interventions. But there is much (onto)work still to do towards reconfiguring what is available to my own sense experience.

This is an experiment in piecing together the parts of an alter-ontology (Papadopoulos 2010b) which is *for* matter in a liveable world. As the concluding ontoexperiment, it is the culmination of the thesis and can be read as a materialisation of its argument. I am being, thinking, and living the thesis in a slow, unsteady movement to perform a world otherwise (fashioning an alter-ontology), a world that I can not possibly know and which I have to piece together myself. The reconfiguring of self and lifeworld demands living out on the margins of in/sensibility, sensing that which is insensible to me, and processing incommensurate sensory data. The experience of living 'at the threshold of being' (Povinelli 2012) generates radical instability and vulnerability. My modes of being, doing and thinking are in ongoing motion, othering and being othered. I am constantly fixing and coming unfixed. This is a significant ongoing sense event in my everyday experience and a long and unresolved chapter of my life.

In the first part of the chapter I recount some of the specific impediments I have experienced in trying to escape sensible domination. In the second part, I offload my struggles to negotiate my ongoing relationship with the sensible world in which multiple apparatuses try to police my escape and cause friction when I proceed to live and think otherwise. In the final part of the chapter, I travel deeper outside of sensible comforts and force fields, and into an unthinkable and insensible ontological terrain of unknowable otherness. The troubling hole I have been unravelling becomes an exotic other, an incommensurable relation. My experience materialises beyond the threshold of cognition, at the material and sensory limits of my being. I make sense of my encounters with the otherwise by thinking with the

¹⁸⁰ A feat that Jameson (1984) (and others) wrote off as impossible.

concept of abyssal intimacy with the more than human material world. This final ontoexperiment stretches even my own understanding of radical im/possibility. It is at once a preposterous proposition and a deadly serious experiment to push the human limits of living and thinking with the incommensurability of the more than human trouble.

PART 1

MENDING (IN) MY DREAMS



The car picking me up from the airport breaks down on the approach to the terminal building, Havana, 2013.

Cuba as mending theme park

When I *finally* started mending on the first trip to Cuba it was as a visitor to a material world with entirely different sensible co-ordinates. I was a 'sensible tourist' who had landed in a 'vitalist paradise'. I encountered Cuba as a spectacular mending theme park and I came home with hoards of inspiring memories and photos to prove it. I had the representational evidence that other forms of material world can exist. But, like most theme parks, the mending experience stopped at the exit. My stay constituted a temporary sensible relocation whose momentous effects were swiftly and nonchalantly wiped out on landing in the UK by the familiar

barrage of unattended baggage alerts, flushing toilets and flat white coffees, a world that makes Cuba seem so materially otherwise, so sensorially exotic. Mending in the UK was still flatly impossible.¹⁸¹ The same sensible reformatting had happened previously to MENDRS participants once the mending ethic dissipated after the event (see chapter 4). The dominant sensible forms blitzed out the fledgling otherness and ‘things went back to normal(cy)’, replaying Jameson’s (1984) hopeless projections for the creation of alternative forms of reality.

I recognise these limits and I refuse to sit back and accept them. And so I embark on this concluding ontoexperiment ‘Reality Mending’. In this final chapter I explore the possibility of going beyond the ‘experience tourism’ mending of Cuba (chapter 1), the fatally postponed ‘futuremending’ of my art activism (chapter 2) and the fantasy mending of my hoard (chapter 3). ‘Reality mending’ is for an ontological ‘total life programme’ (Rancière 2004). My aim is nothing less than to shift my sensible co-ordinates to such an extent that my sensible mode of being engulfs mending as a reality. I want to be able to respond (be response-able) to matter in the vitalist manner of the Cuban sensible order, where mending appears as the naturalised response. I want mending to be an ordinary, everyday event, not an extraordinary achievement. I want to mend on autopilot and mend in my dreams. I want to turn to the mending basket when I sense a material need without encountering a neoliberal obstacle course of sensible impediments in the way. To achieve this I need to ramp up my resistance to capital’s demattering and to keep disrupting and reconfiguring my sensible assumptions until mending becomes my new reality. I will keep resisting until mending is for life, and not just for a holiday. I will keep struggling *until mending is for real, and not just a thesis*. This is *mending the sensible*.

Staying with the matter

First of all, let’s get back to the material trouble. It’s so easy, even for vitalists, to keep forgetting the matter. We have seen throughout the thesis how matter gets left out. It’s a drag. A slogan to take away, paraphrasing Haraway’s (2010) ‘stay with the trouble’ is ‘stay with the matter!’ So I insist now we revisit the abiotic cast of the opening scene, the contents of the Cuban suitcase experiment who we left pending repair. ‘*We’re still here*’, they might whisper in a vitalist sci-fi B-movie. The opening protagonist was Turquoise Backless Dress. I had coveted this dress for a quarter of a

¹⁸¹ The research question I brought home was What can Cuba do for mending in the UK?

century but, consumed by nostalgia and broken promise, I had never raised a needle to it until I got to Cuba. Once mended, it became my 'best dress', wearable, flattering and cool. But now, three years on, Turquoise Backless Dress is languishing again in the mending pile, (the abject mending plastic bag in actual fact, reeking of cockroaches and damp), awaiting a more considerable human commitment to attend to the effects of breastfeeding and childwearing, a child fascinated by fraying whose little fingers trouble tiny holes into bigger ones. The entire silk facing of the bodice needs replacing but, once this is done, the dress is otherwise in sound material order and good for another innings. I open this final chapter by recounting the fates of some of the other mending pledge garments that I left in the hands of Cuban menders.

Imperfect endings

Havana 2013

I went to Gardenia on David's recommendation with some of the bigger clothing jobs which required a sewing machine. She lived out in La Víbora area of Havana and I was fascinated to watch different types of architecture crumbling and being repaired in distinct ways along the bus route. Gardenia was a pensioner with a neat long white plait and an infirm husband who couldn't leave their modest first floor flat. I arrived with a large bag of clothes and she moved aside the cuddly toys in plastic bags so that I could lay them out on the bed. The machine sat where a dressing table might go. I tried the garments on one by one and laid out the materials and trimmings I had brought (from my hoard) to carry out the repairs and alterations.

She was much revered as a seamstress by all of David's family and, they said, the whole neighbourhood - 'she could sort anything out' (resuelve cualquier cosa) and so I was shocked a week later by the quality of her work. Visible imperfections, unintentional asymmetries, totally the wrong colour thread, thread ends untrimmed. She had worked quickly and without attention to detail. About half of the finished clothes were wearable/tolerable, the rest were unsatisfactory either through poor fit, poor execution or poor attention to materials and I had to find others to do remedial work. I was frustrated that I hadn't done it myself, an illuminating reaction which recognised that I *could* have done it myself. I disguised my disappointment, the damage was done, and I paid more than she asked and left a long length of print fabric which she had refused to chop up to line one of the jackets because it was 'far too good'. I showed the finished clothing to David's family who

unanimously agreed she'd done a great job and still I said nothing, trying to work out how our quality standards could be so divergent. Radically uncanny, this was a research question.

David also recommended Dyrsa, his sister, for some of the easier repairs. She had learnt basic sewing by repairing her son's clothes. Again, her treadle sewing machine was beside the bed. This time I was shocked that her level of ability was far below mine, and yet her disposition to mend was far higher, her threshold of possibility was high enough to tackle all but one of the items I left with her. I might ask, with Rancière, who can and who cannot mend? Whose role is it to mend? I could have done a better job than Dyrsa but the point was that I hadn't, and now I had at least got some more or less wearable clothes. But I was left with the nag that I should be respecting my hoard better, and not carving it up so carelessly with alterations that might limit its futurity. I still valued the idea of my garments as perfect, static items over matter in motion, matter in use. I decided to dye some of my clothes as David recommended some dyer friends. The results were mixed. One good, one bad, one acceptable. Uneven results because of 'invented' dye stock.

Then there was the city centre tailor with the hand painted sign: 'All types of transformation possible'. Heeding this, I took him my most complicated alteration, a vintage embroidered drindl dress, several sizes too big and, despite the discouraging aspect of the elderly man, I suspended my disbelief in what might indeed be possible. Perhaps he was a genius. I followed him upstairs and to the very back of a first floor whose interior partitions had partly collapsed to reveal a high-ceilinged, semi-open plan domestic space which was fascinatingly and photogenically 'hipster ruin chic' and through a small door into a two storey dwelling with the proportions of a trailer van. He closed the toilet lid and gestured towards it to me a seat. He sits at his treadle machine. At the first fitting session we have to switch places so I have room to pull the bodice over my head. It sits well so far, the new seams are neat and pressed although I see no sign of an iron. He taught tailoring for many years, he says. We divide 27 by 6 to work out the width of the skirt panels. He only has five pins which makes it difficult to mark the bodice and the skirt at once. He makes slow progress and by the fourth and final fitting I conclude that he is a competent tailor but that womenswear pushes the limits of his capability as he hands over a proficient transformation except for the absence of darts for the bust.



The tailor assesses the drindl dress in his tiny living space, Central Havana, 2013.

After this trilogy of imperfection I nervously entrust Ernestina on Calle Gervasio with my much prized 1939 green worsted jacket on the recommendation of a man claiming to have been Carlos Acosta's ballet teacher, a flamboyant individual who, I expect, recognises the work of a fine seamstress. The jacket needs reducing by two sizes. I try it on and she pinches with two fingers at the waist. Come back tomorrow, she instructs. I fear leaving a favourite garment with this stern looking stranger after nothing but a pinch. The next day she invites me in to her equally stern abode. Like the tailor, hers is an interior dwelling with no natural light which has been divided vertically into two floors. Instead of first just tacking the jacket as I thought we had agreed she has finished it completely. I try it on and it is an excellent fit with the finest workmanship. She has executed the tailored curves of the nipped waist expertly and adapted the armhole and arm seam to the exact degree. It is a perfect job in all but one respect. Ernestina doesn't have an iron so I will have to get rid of the lumpy finish by opening up the lining and pressing all the seams myself. Surely even she would accept that her fine work would benefit from an iron. No, she says, that's how we do it in Cuba.

Misfitting the sensible

The work of getting all my clothes mended in the Cuban suitcase experiment was successful according to its own protocol, and by Cuban standards each item was 'resolved'. I returned to the UK a month later with almost everything mended, but mending doesn't turn out as the first world citizen would expect. A successful mend, in Cuba, is not measured by the first world's sensible parameters but by the new sense of possibility that it restores to the mended item, as perceived by, (to me, insensible) Cuban parameters. Mending makes possible, and is made possible regardless of skill and resources. It happens in spite of 'below par' competencies and improvised materials. Cuba's material conditions arguably make mending a necessity, a ubiquitous practice, but mending is not so much a skilled craft as a way of making do.¹⁸² In fact many repairs are so creative in their disregard for material and aesthetic convention that the common term is an 'invention'. Mending often happens by 'inventing' (*inventando*), which better translates as 'making it up'. Cuban menders have the response-ability to mend, but it wasn't an acceptable response to me because it fell short of my sensible hopes and desires.

To work out what is troubling me about the misfitting clothes, which misfit both my body and my expectations, I return to the idea of the sensible misfit. I have used this term to describe someone (or some thing) who doesn't fit properly into the sensible order. A mended sock, or a mended dress becomes a sensible misfit when it fails to uphold/meet proper sensible standards. For me, the mending interventions had disrupted the sensible integrity of some of the clothes. The fact that, three years later, I still decline from wearing the sensible misfits is a niggling reminder of how my expectations for mending still belong to the sensible order I am trying to break out of. There is a misfit between the material solution which is available and my sensory desire.

I find the glitchiness discomfoting, but equally disturbing is my insistence on 'high standards', when, I suspect, these sensible parameters are the result of having experienced too much properness and perfection in my life. My material preconceptions of an object are still dominated by the sensible aesthetic of productivism and neoliberal (quality) control. My idea of acceptability is tied up

¹⁸² Training in the repair and maintenance trades has diminished in Cuba since the revolution and, as in the UK and elsewhere, university education has been prioritised. Most menders and skilled tradesmen (I have yet to meet a tradeswoman) are self-taught.

with exploitative modes of material production and labour relations, and the standardisation and normativity of 'factory finish'. I am reminded of a reprimand I once received from by a 'Tudor' wardrobe mistress in an 'authenticity' inspection prior to a historical re-enactment. My woollen jacket was unacceptable as Tudor attire. I had executed it to sensible dressmaking standards with facing and neatly pressed seams. For the Tudor peasantry, pressing garments to perfection was an unavailable, insensible option, as I discovered when I mingled in the re-enactment with 'Tudor' others in crumpled jerkins and kirtles.

At this point I could open out the discussion to bring in Rancière's treatise on the politics of aesthetics (2004) in relation to abiotic Others. His argument concerns how aesthetics can perform politics and furthermore, most critically, how all politics, today in the post-political era, is performed in the aesthetic domain. This important treatise offers a compelling opportunity to develop this thread of my thinking but in the present study I shall only touch on the importance of the politics of aesthetics.¹⁸³ To summarise Rancière's thought, aesthetics is a mode of 'doing politics otherwise' (2011, 8) which suggests how the misfitting frocks have the potential to perform politics. The existence of a dress that looks or feels wrong is a political intervention in what is available to sense experience. If a sufficient body of sensible misfits becomes available to sense experience, ie if I and others deign to walk down the street in wonky seams and mismatching over stitching, there exists the possibility for sensible parameters to shift. If we apply Rancière's idea to the field of 'sustainable' fashion, for example, politics does not take place through policy shifts or industry regulations. Politics takes place when we wear im/possible, unthinkable clothes on our backs.

For this reason it is doubly important as ontoworker to refuse to dress according to sensible norms in the process of forging an alter-ontological mode of existence. But the sensible configurations which govern the clothes we see fit to wear are particularly stubborn to shift as clothing touches our skin and our sense of personhood in the most intimate of ways. As ontoworker I must feel comfortable and confident in my clothes, and if I don't, I must work out why. I want to learn to 'go with the mend' and let the material misfit shift my sensible compass. Imperfect alternatives such as DIY solutions and home-made inventions need to be made

¹⁸³ There is, in addition, a tension between the visual realm of aesthetics and Barad's (and Haraway's) troubling of optics as an unquestioned mode in which we believe the world is as it appears to us.

available to sense experience, as I found in the Tudor re-enactment, in order to seek acceptability. I think of moving to Cuba where perhaps my qualms over the sensible misfit dresses will be resolved.

My desire is to embrace the material misfits and the imperfection and live within planetary limits using what we have. Perfection is a dangerous myth and one of the destructive goals which propels the dominant order. Properness is a ruthless police strategy to arrest the possibility of a world fashioned otherwise. 'Imperfect' must become 'the new sensible'.¹⁸⁴ Imperfection must cease to be an excuse for staying with the sensible. The five-pin tailor, the novice, the time-poor and the iron-less seamstress with three shades of thread, and the dyer with homemade dye stuffs can, and most likely will, all lead to imperfect results. But, regardless of lack of skill, lack of tools, lack of resources, or lack of time to do a *proper* job, they are all able to respond to the material trouble. The ability to live in/with, and wilfully create, an indeterminately imperfect material world is a vital skill and a direct aim of this thesis. A sensible shift towards imperfection and indeterminacy is part of the greater project of piecing together a world otherwise. We can't know how things, a world, will turn out. The *still possible* world can't be anything but imperfect. It is the best *available* option, the best *possible* option with the skills, time and resources to hand.

PART 2

ESCAPING THE SENSIBLE

Moving to a vitalist paradise

13 June 2015

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN (Cuban immigration authorities)

I, Joanne Elizabeth Middleton, wish to apply for permanent Cuban residency ... I prefer to bring my daughter up in Cuba rather than in the UK as I consider the effects of the neoliberal economy of global capitalism in the UK, and particularly

¹⁸⁴ I later qualify, with Purcell (2014), following Rancière, that the sensible order can never be overcome by a new, alternative sensible order. The dominant order remains. The scope for political possibility lies in how much of the in/sensible alternatives are available to sense experience. Political revolution is only possible, according to these theorists, by keeping up a significant and ongoing alternative orders which exist in parallel / inside / on the margins of the dominant order, thus fatally compromising its effective power to dominate.

the neoliberalisation of the education and health system and the technology, media and consumer culture to be damaging on multiple counts ... I am keen to leave my native country and forge a future for myself and my family in Cuba because I share a deep affinity with some of the social and material aspects of the Cuban way of life. My doctoral research is concerned with repair and I have great respect for the fact that in Cuban culture repair is part of everyday life. I prefer to stay on in Cuba with its exemplary repair culture after I have finished writing about a thesis about it.

Yours sincerely

J Middleton (my translation from the Spanish)

I have made arrangements to take my plans for an alter-ontology a step further. I'm othering the living arrangements. I have become a permanent Cuban resident with state rations and free healthcare but while the legal residency process is complete, the ontological process is ongoing. The scale of such ontological change takes place over lifetimes and across generations, except in extreme circumstances like wars and revolutions, (or in Cuba's unique case, political embargo). As we saw in chapter 2, reconfiguring the feudalist field of perception into a new sensible order in which the capitalist economy could take hold and thrive was an undertaking that took centuries. Now I will focus on my ontological labours to redistribute the sensible in my own world of experience. I am slowly disentangling myself from the



Selfie at the hairdresser's, Central Havana, 2018.

capitalist economy's reaches and experimenting with becoming a non capitalist subject. I am living amidst repair, shortages and scavenging in crumbling central Havana, with a toddler to care for and a thesis to be written, so my own repairs and fuller non capitalist immersion (building social ties, making preserves etc.) are on hold. But through everyday intra-actions with the dominant material order in Cuba, I start to perceive some of the sensible parameters to which my being, doing and thinking is tied. The following texts concern moments of slippage and tension in my own sensible assumptions and frustration with the tenacity of sensible policing by others.

Is this all we need?

The first time I bought a sweet pastry from a street vendor in Havana I kept the wrapping. So extreme, I smiled in surprise. Much smaller than the cake, a scrap of recycled paper, perhaps 4cm wide. *Perhaps this is all I need.* But at the bakers there is no packaging at all. If I've forgotten a bag I carry a dozen loose biscuits home in my hands. I eat takeaway pizzas off a page from a school exercise book or, occasionally, handwritten medical records. To carry several pizzas at a time I have learnt to fold them in half and stack them, or roll them up like swiss rolls. A pizza



Tamales — corn wrapped in corn leaves and tied with strips of state yoghurt bags. Central Havana, 2016.

box, a rarity in any case, costs more than the pizza. At the theatre, (as at the botanical gardens, the zoo) the ticket is thumbnail-size and the only other paper consumed by the production of the event is a single A1 poster on an easel in the foyer with details of that evening's performance, penned by a sign writer. No programmes, flyers or other printed matter (and certainly no toilet paper in the toilets). In some instances a compere will come on stage to read out the programme, just as, once nightly, a TV announcer will read out the scheduling for the five Cuban channels for the rest of the evening. At the doctor's there is no surgical paper, and no sheets. Each patient takes their own sheet to lay on the bare aluminium examination bed, finds and sterilises their own jars for urine and stool samples. No printed matter here either, just an informative home-made wall display and artist's murals for children. My daughter's medical record is compiled on an A5 piece of kitchen paper. In spite of vital shortages the 24-hour free medical attention is better than the UK Health Service on a tiny fraction of the budget.¹⁸⁵ In material terms, to observe a Cuban hospital or health centre is to recognise what the real essentials are, reconfigure the sensible order of necessities - family GP without appointment a few blocks away, 24 hour drop-in GPs and chemists within walking distance, 24 hour children's hospitals within a few miles, prescription medicines a fraction of a dollar - once all the artificial necessities are stripped away. The cultural scene too is world class and affordable to all. Again and again I am reminded how much can be done with so little. I have a whole thesis of examples. And I recognise why I needed to move to Cuba. It is a vitalist's paradise. Matter matters here. Every scrap.

At the limits of matter

Cuba operates at the limits of matter.¹⁸⁶ There is so very little spare to be reused, the mending and the scavenging has been going on for generations. There is a missing geological record of an era in which little new matter entered and barely anything

¹⁸⁵ Cuban healthcare is far too big, and tangential a topic to tackle here, but important issues are dentistry and childbirth without anaesthetic, uncleaned, unattended hospital wards with no flushing toilets, the unavailability of certain medicines and medical supplies including, at the time of writing a long-term lack of the Cuban equivalent of paracetamol, Dipirona. There is flexibility in the system afforded by common practices such as buying the doctor lunch in return for treatment (seen as supplementing the doctor's income rather than corruption). Hospital patients rely on relatives to provide bedside care, often 24 hours and clean bedding and food.

¹⁸⁶ A separate study is required on the politico-material history of Cuba since the Revolution. Santiago Muiño (2015) addresses this in specific relation to sustainability. For material examples see the work of Ernesto Oroza, notably 'Architecture of Necessity' at ernestooroza.com. This vignette is a snapshot which unavoidably simplifies the lived reality of human material relations in Cuba and avoids the political impact of the embargo and the recent trade in imported goods. The ongoing situation is one of problematic shortages of some resources and a great indeterminacy of what is and will be available.



Disintegrating scouring pads from the UK laid out carefully to dry by cleaner Odalys, Playa, Havana, 2017.

was thrown away, (the Special Period, following the fall of the Soviet Bloc (Hernandez-Reguant (ed) 2010; Santiago Muiño 2015)), inflecting the Cuban Capitolocene (Moore 2016) with very otherly strata compared to the first world geology of material wrongs. The informal economy of wastepickers who clear the streets and trawl the bins to rematter discarded matter, ensure that the sedimental layer is wafer thin. On the surface, the material landscape is marked by the presence of all that lingers and the absence of that which doesn't — the 'lost' matter and that which is 'still here'. The matter that has worn out and run out did so long ago. It reveals what we in the first world barely ever get to see, or care to see — matter getting old, matter struggling, matter surprising us, matter keeping going, matter under duress, matter refusing to hide, refusing to give up like the cobweb-thin dishcloth that keeps going when there are far more holes than cloth. It's a landscape typified by skeletal metal framed chairs devoid of their original comfort and elegance, a landscape with nowhere soft to sit, but always somewhere to sit, even if the seat is the equally ubiquitous piece of concrete propped on a tree root - a place to eat a pizza in the street or to connect to the public wifi.

Plastic and metal live on as the ongoing materials which 'resolve' everyday life. Both materials are collected by wastepickers and melted down into new forms with home made moulds in a cottage recycling industry providing a range of basic



Clockwise from top left: The wastepickers who live opposite bring in an excavator to flatten aluminium cans several times a month; Repurposed food packaging — ‘Yes We Can’ garlic paste in a foil-lined juice pack, honey in a vodka bottle, and home made ‘butter’ in pharmaceutical foil wrapping; My first month’s dry goods rations — rice, brown sugar, white sugar, black beans, chicory coffee and soybean oil (other rations include 5 eggs and a box of matches per month, one bread roll per day, and spaghetti and salt every 2 or 3 months); Coconut cone wrapped in royal palm and banana leaves, Havana 2015.

household goods.¹⁸⁷ Metals are rusting and degraded, but just as robust, and forever coming back to life in new reconfigurations. Bent old nails are hammered straight over and over again and the most rusted, skeletal hulk of a car defies the thought of becoming scrap. If ever the car’s mechanical innards can be resolved, then the distressed metal needs but sandpaper, and any denomination or shade of paint. One day, it is hoped, the parts will be found or afforded to make it go again. The plastic of state-rationed yoghurt and powdered milk bags is washed and cut

¹⁸⁷ In ‘criollo’ manufacturing, recycled plastics and metal are resmelted in home made and state-run foundries to make basic household items and sold in a dedicated market, La Cueva, Havana, a material phenomenon requiring further study. Plastic waste is scarce enough to provoke the stealing of wheelie bins to melt them into clothes pegs for the black market.

carefully, into a small carrier bag, a planter for seedlings, into fine strips to make twine, into thick strips to make rope. Tin cans and plastic ice cream pots are used as serving vessels for street food, jelly, creme caramel, or butter. Beer bottles are cut down to make drinking glasses, and repeat motifs are painted on as adornment with 'invented' paint. 1.5l plastic bottles are the standard container for black market goods, from bleach, air freshener and paraffin to yoghurt and fruit juice. Many sellers demand an empty bottle in return. Despite all the sugar and the fruit, there is little culture of preserves because there are so few glass jars but there is a swift trade in homemade tomato puree sold in the never ending supply of Havana Club rum bottles.

Degradable, breakable and technically complex matter has fared badly, as missing furnishing fabrics, coffee cups and doorbells attain. No discarded wooden furniture is scavenge-able as the termites will have gone too far. And the concrete just keeps crumbling and collapsing, in the most tragic moments taking human life, and always being shovelled and bulldozed away.¹⁸⁸ All that is left is dust. Too much



The common sight of a recent partial building collapse, marked by the rubble piled in the street, El Vedado, Havana, 2017.

¹⁸⁸ Two of the victims of Hurricane Irma were due to a house collapse in my street (Francis 2017). 60% of Havana housing was in poor condition in 2010, with an average of three collapses per day (Santiago Muiño 2015, 271).

dust. '[I]t only takes a few years of absence of care and maintenance to collapse a city', says Dominguez Rubio of Detroit (2016, 81-2), and hurricanes and saltwater speed the process up. In the balmy aftermath, the materials, the energy and the will to repair, again and again, are hard to find. Living at the limits of matter has a human cost. The dust, for a start, has brought ill health to all of my family. And I am safe from the worst of the material trouble, in a house which, in the main, is robust enough for now.¹⁸⁹ How far should this ontoexperiment go? I am still enjoying substantial privileges as a UK citizen. I no longer sleep on a bed as hard and lumpy as Brighton beach and I enjoy the softness of pillows and organic toiletries from the UK. I wash my daughter's nappies in an automatic washing machine while it is a privilege in Cuba to be able to pay the installments for the parts to repair an old Soviet semi-automatic twin tub.



The fully automatic washing machine is installed in the covered patio, a rare luxury and huge privilege (at \$640 USD for this basic model), and one I can't do without, Playa, Havana, 2017.

Material anarchy

Mending paradise this isn't. For a start, there is barely anything to mend, and barely the materials to mend with. This is mending (and resolving) beyond the threshold of

¹⁸⁹ The ground floor of the house flooded to neck height in Hurricane Irma, further compromising the foundations.

sensible possibility. It involves a reconfiguring of limits around what is needed and how arrangements for a liveable world can 'work'. When mending is not possible, say, if a broken part is too expensive, too impossible to import, or too difficult to 'invent' with existing matter, or when an object mended multiple times finally fails, the result is a limiting of everyday possibility. It means washing that must now be done by hand, a room that can no longer be illuminated at night, a taxi without indicators, wipers, or door handles, a fridge downgraded into a cupboard, a mirror with but a shard of mirror left in it, buckets and hoses to move water which once flowed through pipes, yelling the name of the person you are visiting over and over again until they hear from a rear apartment and let you in, doors that open onto a precipice where a balcony once stood, or a house reduced to one habitable room. It means almost all of the children's toys at state nursery schools are made of papier maché by the nursery's own staff, including animals and role play scenarios such as toy kitchens, living rooms, hairdressers, tailors and cobblers.



A flat reinforced concrete roof is much prized for the possibility to build extra floors, Playa, Havana, 2017.

Possibilities in Cuba have been limited and reinvented over and over again. Skills, expectations and options have been lost, and gained. Everyday material existence is minimal, and is resolved with the bare minimum. Cuban everyday life materialises as full-on material anarchy, in dystopic but dynamic possibility. It is anarchic

because it uses what is *available*. It makes do with *what we have*, refusing even the memory of material convention. I make creme caramel in a rusty 1kg tuna can with the plastic packaging from a pack of meatballs as a cover and the wire stripped from inside a length of telephone cable to tie it together. I steam it in a pressure cooker with two dessertspoons¹⁹⁰ strategically placed to maintain the pressure. And I only make creme caramel because the option of buying it is *unavailable*, and because there are few other dessert options with the ingredients which are *available*.



Defiantly reconfigured pink car, Playa, Havana, 2018.

On my (infrequent) visits back to the UK there is the constant threat of being suffocated once more in the barrage of sensible slime. Buy two sensible creme caramels, get one sensible creme caramel free. However viscerally I try to live with matter, the sensible order threatens to overwhelm me in a sea of frivolities. I live in constant disagreement (Rancière 1999). I sense so many wrongs. All that excess packaging to strip off at the till so that I can carry goods and a child at once, more and more friends with a disposable cup in their hand, more junkmail on the mat.¹⁹¹ In Cuba there is no junk mail. In three years I have received no mail at all (and

¹⁹⁰ A tip I was given to 'hurricane-proof' the house was to wedge spoons in the doors and shutters to make them tight.

¹⁹¹ I have even received large, heavy packages of unsolicited hardware as junkmail via courier.

there is no mat). Utility bills are collected in person. The detailed receipt is smaller than a till receipt. All other business is conducted face to face. Most of the business of the capitalist sensible order is excluded from Cuba's sensible co-ordinates. House insurance, car insurance, life insurance, maintenance insurance, notifications to customers, annual reviews, bank statements, mortgage statements, loyalty statements, tax renewals, reminders, offers, points, air miles, and so much more. All of them policing the capitalist sensible order. Tying us in. Keeping us captive in the trap.

Deviance and danger



The condemned gas cooker and its substitute, Lancaster, UK, 2016.

I used to have a great gas cooker in the UK. It came with the house, circa 1960, powerful, lovely design. One of the knobs needed fixing and the whole spectrum of temperatures, from Gas Mark 1 to Gas Mark 10 were to be found, with care, between Gas Mark 1/4 and Gas Mark 1/2 on the dial. Like the three-legged chair, it gave the house 'character'. While I was in Cuba the neighbour smelled gas and the whole house was 'condemned'. The cooker got the blame. Of course, there was no possible thought of the cooker's repair. The sensible repair window for gas cookers is twelve years, after which time the parts are no longer made. But regardless of

that, UK gas engineers thought I was mad for even asking and none of them would go anywhere near the cooker, which by now, of course, was disconnected from the mains. Repair was an unsayable option. On the scale of risk, neoliberal or not, I admit gas is pretty high. (And my house, unfortunately, can't be a political haven for legally dead matter which is exempt from neoliberal safety legislation.) I do not dare to advance an absurdist posthuman argument which puts the value of a gas cooker on a par with human life but I would like to point out that a 50 year old gas cooker can be seen as a death trap just as naturally as it can be seen as an assemblage of repairable parts, especially a 1960s model which predates stringent obsolescence regimes. In Cuba I learnt from the cooker repair / salesmen — selling and fixing are inseparable parts of a single (male) trade — to buy an old cooker. The Soviet ones are best, because, if well maintained, they can keep going (ie being repaired) 'forever'. A fifty year old cooker doesn't come cheap in Cuba, repairability is a marketable value. Mine cost \$220, perhaps half the price of a basic new imported cooker,¹⁹² and came free with a five-minute roadside tutorial of how to fit it, and a small swatch of plastic (cut from any old flimsy plastic bag) that would make the seal to make it 'safe'. In the event, the mains gas pressure is so low that the oven is an irrelevance and most days there's only enough pressure to light two rings at once, making cooking slow and a pressure cooker essential. But I've got used to that now.

In/sensible devices

Back to the UK. 'The new tenant would like to install their electric cooker but there is no electric point...' I am informed. And then, 'The electrician has declined to install the tenant's cooker because it has been tampered with...' The fatal act of 'tampering' committed by an unknown insurgent had been to fit a plug onto the cable, providing material evidence that this cooker had at some point been plugged illegally into a socket rather being wired directly to the mains as 'the regs' dictate. To install the (newish, functioning) cooker would have required the electrician to *take off the plug*. IMPOSSIBLE. The very thought UNSAYABLE. '*Regs is regs.*' *ANOTHER COOKER IS CONDEMNED.* (The regs oblige it to stop being a cooker). A brand new cooker is bought, just like that. Buying a used cooker, it seems, is also an unsayable option. I listen to this nonsensical saga, recounted some time later by my father (who had paid for the new cooker) in tones of exasperation coming from

¹⁹² This pricing is typical of Cuban used goods which retain a high value, while imports cost considerably more than in the first world. The price difference with the West is most dramatic with cars. A typical pre-Revolution car is worth \$20,000, much more if in mint condition, and new imports start at \$100,000 due to high import tax.

the opposite end of the sensible spectrum to my own. “Who would *dream* of putting a plug on a cooker?”, “... *of course*, the electrician could do *nothing*” and the final assuager “I bought a new one *so you don’t need to worry*”. [I bang my head against the sensible wall of incommensurability].

Back to Cuba, land of no regs. There are three forms of plug sockets and any number of ‘invented’ ways to get electrical current to flow from A to B and back again. I’m used to that now, too. I recall my horror at first seeing that the technique for turning the light on in my first Cuban home was to join two live wires together that were hanging loose from a wall, bearing in mind this is a practice that is often done *in the dark and the wires hung beside a window without glass through which the rain (and sea spray) frequently blew*, (and this in a house built in 1924 designed with electrically operated automatic partition doors). Heating water to boil nappies or bathe my child, in my early days here, meant immersing a tin can with a homemade coil resistor into a 25 litre paint bucket. ‘Keep your flip flops on’ was as far as health and safety went. Our living conditions have improved vastly since but, as I write, the only relief from the summer heat is to live cheek by jowl with the fan. For the fan to reach, it is plugged into an ‘invented’ extension cable made by coiling bare wires round a two pin plug and, so long as I remember to unplug it



Heating water in a bucket with a homemade coil resistor in the bedroom, Central Havana, 2013.

when my daughter comes home, I don't 'see' the problem, even though the wires snake across the floor and the floor is mopped every day.

Im/proper conditions

Hi Jonnet,

Thank you for your email.

Let me give you my point of view:

I'm leaving the house not for pleasure. I'm leaving the house because it's functionality. It's not because is old or because I don't like the decoration of the house. When you are doing a doctorate you have a lot of work (as you know) and the last thing you want to feel is to get home and not being able to shower because the washing machine is on and shower water is cut (example)...

In accordance with UK Government (<https://www.gov.uk/renting-out-a-property/landlord-responsibilities>) the responsibilities of the landlord/landlady are the following:

You're normally responsible for repairs to:

- the structure of your property
- basins, sinks, baths and other sanitary fittings
- heating and hot water systems
- anything you damage through attempting repairs...¹⁹³

Dear tenants

Thanks for your letter. I am really sorry to hear you're still not happy in the house because of the maintenance problems and I totally understand your decision to move to somewhere with better conditions that fulfils your needs and where you are comfortable.

Thanks also for sharing my repair responsibilities as stipulated by the UK government. This is a really useful addition to my doctoral research. It is no irony that the thesis I am writing out in Cuba, and my original motive for being here, concerns matters of repair. While I am writing about repairs here, supposedly becoming an 'expert in repair', I am unable to help you with repairs there. Sweeter irony still is that the house you are renting off me in Lancaster offers such luxury, comfort and such a good state of repair compared to the conditions I and my family

¹⁹³ Note how repair is framed as a risky, improper activity that could get you into trouble.

are living in here in Havana. Yes, we do have a hot shower but it only runs hot when:

- a series of stop taps are moved to a certain position (which we then have to remember to move back to avoid the tank overflowing which causes ongoing structural damage to the concrete of our balcony - which might collapse - and losing all our water supply for the next day - and worse, losing the water destined for other residents who once threatened to call the police if our tank spilled over again [note - spilling tanks are a particular problem as it is hard to find the parts to repair the ball float mechanism])



The complex plumbing configuration works by opening and closing stop taps at strategic points of each day, Central Havana, 2016.

- *and* if we clean the shower head holes with a pin every *month* to stop the buildup of limescale and magnesium,
- *and* that there is enough water in our tanks to create pressure,
- *and* that there isn't a power cut in our block or someone working on the electrics in another part of our building who has turned the power off,
- *and* that our water tanks are replenished each day from the 'mother tank' on the roof which feeds the whole building and itself needs replenishing from the mains,
- *and* that the mother tank pump is operational to pump water to all the neighbours, some 26 homes and 2 guest houses,

- *and* that all the tubing which snakes irregularly across the roof from the mother tank to our home is maintained against the cumulative traumas of sunshine, hurricanes and sea spray.

Even when all these conditions are met we sometimes still have to resort to trial and error tactics of turning the shower off and on again and opening and closing taps to certain degrees to get the water to come warm. And our shower is the best on the market in Cuba and three separate plumbers have made huge improvements to the plumbing installation over the last twelve months making the house 'even less deathly and more family friendly'. Despite all of the above we rarely go without a hot shower more or less when we need one.

This is vastly improved on [previous methods of bathing such as] heating buckets of water with the homemade heating element, (which I refer to as the coil of death), especially when managing an energetic toddler around an iron bath and buckets of scalding water charged with electrical current. Which is in turn a significant, albeit more deathly, improvement on throwing a dirty cracked yoghurt pot of water over myself on a rough concrete floor in a stinking nook leading to a collapsed part of a building (while ill and pregnant). Which is still better than going for the best part of a year without a shower at all in the freezing, waterless conditions of the living accommodation adjacent to the cake shop in chapter 2. Billions of humans go without a shower, proper or otherwise, is what I'm trying to say.

[Post script, as I write this our tanks are bone dry, the mother tank has been supplying little or no water of late, so we wash with damp flannels with water my partner brings from work in a 5 litre bottle without a lid, sealed with a bit of plastic bag and packing tape.]

[Post script two weeks later - the antagonism of broken world living is taking its toll. Our tanks are still dry and we have survived for the last two weeks on the bare minimum of water. The objective of a hot shower has been diminished to the need for one more clean damp flannel. Repairs to the water pump have been short lived and we have learnt not to be optimistic when we hear water flowing again through the pipes. It is perhaps enough to wash up, mop the hospital chimney soot from the floor. Each resident paid \$2 to repair the water pump but water supplies are still erratic. We learn that after the passing away of the resident who used to turn the pump on daily this responsibility now lies with his alcoholic daughter-in-law. Too



Top to bottom: Smoke billows from the hospital incinerator chimney in the next block; Rubble from a building collapse forms an island when the street floods during heavy rain, Central Havana, 2016.

much rum and there is no water. Favours have been exhausted requesting buckets of water, me and my partner are irritable, his skin condition worsens without daily

bathing, no washing has hung from the balconies, and my daughter has spent the week off nursery school with diarrhoea. At night, while nosey residents aren't looking, my partner borrows a big bucket from our next door neighbour to fetch one load for us, one for him and his infirm mother. This is broken world living once the romance has waned. Broken world ontology means, for instance, that as I read about Serres' parasite, we all get worms.]

In sensible disagreement

Dear tenant (continued)

To make your final months more comfortable I suggest that with a little effort you can improve the conditions somewhat. Yes, you can change the temperature of the shower - the mixer tap doesn't work but if you twist it to the other extreme, the blue end, it will run cold and you can change the temperature that the hot water comes out at on the dial on the boiler in the kitchen downstairs. I normally have it on 42 in winter, 40 in summer and 46 for a bath. It is true that the shower goes cold if someone starts washing up or flushes the downstairs toilet. This is avoided if the person downstairs is attuned to the sound of the boiler firing up in the kitchen, and that they stop using the taps or wait to flush the toilet until they hear that the boiler has stopped firing and so the shower has finished. As well as the noise you can see smoke coming out of the chimney in the yard and, if you're in the yard you can smell a faint smell of gas fumes. This might not seem simple but once you are used to it you do it without thinking. The gas gets an annual check and was perfectly sound when I left. [The previous tenants had it far worse as the 1960s gas cooker was condemned and they were cut off from the mains. The current installation fully complies with regulations.] If you have reason to believe there is a safety problem please phone the gas engineer whose number is on the boiler and he will send someone round right away.

By 'broken furniture' I assume you are referring to the three-legged chair and the bed with a couple of missing slats, both of which are fully functioning if you maintain the relevant paint tins underneath as I left them, and I would suggest you keep the broken armchair in the corner of the room because it props itself up against the wall. Also, the collectible 1940's bed settee hasn't opened out properly into a bed since a previous tenant was a little careless and left it the worse for wear. The problem there is finding a careful carpenter interested in that sort of work.



My daughter plays under the three-legged chair, Lancaster, 2015.

Of course, tenants, I will edit out most of this letter before sending as it is not my place as landlady to (b)other you with my own troubles concerning the hegemonic order of matter, the sensible order of what works, what needs to work, how much it needs to work etc., nor how the 'cuts' we make between 'broken' and 'working' are performative of each of our own realities, nor the more practical issue that capitalist economics does not produce enough reparative labour, there will always be a shortage of people to fix things. [My parents have patiently chased up a series of workmen to do the maintenance work, but in vain]. But then, as a mending activist landlady, and you as Lancaster Environment Centre PhD students, perhaps this is precisely the time to approach you on matters of politics and broken ontologies, and time to remind myself that broken world thinking is so far away from hegemonic properness, the world in which things, systems and matter, work properly, where notions of 'proper' are rigidly policed. Hegemonic properness dictates buying a new proper chair, and that you tenants have proper chairs to sit on, so that you don't have to spare a thought for *how* you sit on the chair in order to feel safe. Proper chairs blazoned with proper kite marks, sitting tight inside regimes of control. Perhaps you, living the proper life, are precisely the people I need to approach, citizens with sensible expectations of a fully functioning capitalist economic system, citizens for whom everything needs to be seen to work, for

whom all the invisible workings which keep the capitalist order bouldering on, which make us believe that that economic system works, working for *us*, are maintained as invisible.

Of course, the wearisome (but far from exhaustive) list of conditions which must be met in order for me and my family to have a hot shower here in Havana is not so different to your own situation, except that the problems of having enough water or electric or gas are more economically and politically removed, and utility infrastructures in the capitalist order are maintained far better and far more invisibly so that your shower turns on and flows warm at your beckoning. In sensible capitalism a proper shower is *de rigueur* (Hand et al 2005), nipping downstairs wrapped in a towel to adjust a dial by a few degrees or obliging someone else to stop washing up for the duration are inconveniences many would consider unacceptable. The shower ceases to be a 'quick shower'. It is a bother. It has stopped working sensibly. It functions in broken relation, by bothering your housemate downstairs too.

I refuse to believe in that sensible order. And if my cooker, and my shower and my three-legged chair refuse to perform the sensible order, then I celebrate and sustain their illegal or improper existence. They are performing noncapitalist politics, in which what an objects should or might be able to do is all up for grabs. I am thinking with Woolgar and Lezuan's (2013) inspiring work on the wrongness of objects that don't do the proper thing. '[O]bjects are ... politics by other means' they say, ontological politics, that is (334). I refuse to throw out a pair of early twentieth century armchairs because one has an 'unmendable' missing leg. I refuse all the well meaning offers of my parents to replace these chairs with some 'very Jonnet' chairs from the Marks and Spencer sale, however much they agonise over losing out on a bargain. I refuse to intra-act with the noxious chemical regimes of furniture dowsed in PCBs to obey Health and Safety regimes. I refuse to give up on my three legged amputee. I refuse to accept the term 'unmendable'. I refuse to relinquish hope that one day someone, perhaps even myself, will be able to configure a prosthetic limb which forever does away with the empty paint tin regime for support.

I am not an eccentric subject promoting hobbling on in a three-legged world, gradually replacing our shapely limbs with unbecoming paint tins like an absurd Samuel Beckett tragedy. I am in limbo, in that place of transition between a sensible

order and an insensible one. I have rejected the logic and practices of productivism and while I readily accept new noncapitalist logics I am yet to fully embrace their enactment. I am in the process of becoming non-capitalist. I am reconfiguring this new sensible order slowly, making it possible, learning and performing new modes of being and making time for matter, waiting to shift from prioritising writing as my current form of being, doing and thinking otherwise, waiting for the time to tip up the wonky chair and start sensing the damage and to experiment to sense a solution. Perhaps an elegant fix, perhaps a Cuban-style robust bodge. But a sensible four legged chair nonetheless. A mended chair made possible.

I feel sorry for my shower system which just demands a little human sensory labour for it to function absolutely perfectly. It is not even broken. But hegemonic properness has provoked a sense of entitlement to the 'quick shower' that has made the good capitalist subject intolerant of anything less. Capitalism has created a set of expectations of properness that make all improper alternatives a 'sacrifice', an 'inconvenience' or a 'discomfort' if not utterly unacceptable or unsayable. The hegemonic sensible order has made the capitalist subject insensible to matter and material infrastructures. The sheer unacceptability of having to make an effort for matter, of doing the work of becoming sensible to the shower system, shows the sensible gulf between capitalist thinking and my own broken world ontology. This is what Woolgar and Lezuan (ibid.) term the 'political incommensurability' of troubling otherwise 'unproblematic' and 'ordinary' things.

I wonder, what can my broken world thinking amount to, besides a disgruntled tenant. How in practice can the broken world reveal itself? How can it possibly unsettle the sensible regime and readdress perceptions of social and material limits? Capitalist regimes have invented phoney human limits around matter and obscured genuine planetary ones. Broken world thinking is about how to start shifting these in/sensible limits. I'm still transitioning, trying to work it all out and make sense of/ in the chasm between worlds.

Vitalist dystopia

To whom it may concern (in the Cuban Immigration Department)

I write, three years on, now that I have worked my way through the romance of living in your country, to offer the following digested caveat to my request to remain here as an immigrant in a vitalist dystopia. Despite moving to your country as a material activist, I do not condone your politics of matter. I refuse to accept the

dominant material hegemony, even though, given the very real limits of freedom of speech,¹⁹⁴ and the indeterminate threats which can befall an activist and/or foreign resident in your territory,¹⁹⁵ I am still unsure what form(s) that refusal may take. I am disappointed that, despite your unique experience of agroecology, and in organising a country on a bare minimum of fossil fuel during the ‘Special Period’, your economic model is based on reverting to a petroleum-based society subsidised with extraction capitalism. You are becoming increasingly capitalist and careless with the material world, to the measure that the economy will allow,¹⁹⁶ and I am aware of the irony of moving to a country that is becoming capitalist in order to stop being capitalist myself. I accept that the vestiges of the Special Period’s fortuitous vitalist politics of matter are still readily apparent, still commonly practiced and still offer me much to learn from.¹⁹⁷ But this vitalist spirit is heading towards physical disappearance.¹⁹⁸ Cuba’s material revolutionary once turned capitalist-era golf courses into art schools. Almost sixty years on, the golf courses are being built again, but this time as beacons of sustainable tourism in the country’s rhetoric of sustainable development (which is based on Fidel Castro’s ‘Tarea Vida’, ‘*Life Task*’) and, while others around the globe struggle to counter the multinational tyranny of GMO, you have surreptitiously pioneered and implemented your own (El Mundo 2016). Meanwhile, in your education system my child is learning how to idolatrise revolutionary figures while all possibility to think revolutionary thoughts and perform revolutionary actions, material or otherwise, including preparing herself and her kin for material trouble we are already in, is methodically erased. I will stay in your country as a maroon (Harney and Moten 2013), in ongoing disagreement with your idea of what it means to live in and as revolution.

¹⁹⁴ Since writing, the Cuban state has criminalised non-state endorsed art and music (Weber 2018).

¹⁹⁵ The murky, largely undocumented risks include being summoned for questioning, detention, imprisonment, confiscation of property, including the family home, travel restrictions and immediate expulsion from the country, either without charge or on false charges.

¹⁹⁶ This is the convincing conclusion of a meticulous doctoral study (Santiago Muiño 2015). Cuba’s environmental record is no worse than it is as the country lacks the know-how and investment capacity to be more destructive. For extensive coverage consult the archives of ecological activist group El Guardabosques at elguardabosquescuba.wordpress.com.

¹⁹⁷ See the work of Ernesto Oroza (2009) and ernestooroza.com.

¹⁹⁸ Fidel Castro did not ‘die’. The event which was mourned in 2016 was his ‘physical disappearance’.

NATURECULTURE SHOCK



The new house in a green and secluded enclave, Playa, Havana, 2017.

Moving in with the critters

How, if we are to be audacious, might we try to exceed our own sensibility and go on forays into the insensible to gather sense around the insensible spaces between natures?

— KATHRYN YUSOFF, *Insensible Worlds*

I have moved in with the critters.¹⁹⁹ My new house is rife with more than human life. To escape a slow and dusty demise living with the indeterminate deathliness of the particulate matter of a Central Havana hospital chimney, on doctor's orders, I have sought refuge, and liveliness beyond expectation, in a leafy enclave of the city between a river and a cliff. The new place is a ramshackle wooden house with a

¹⁹⁹ This is a favourite term of Haraway's and one I use to separate the living from non-living earthly entities. Naturecultures is another now widely adopted term (2010).

large garden of useful plants and fruiting trees. Once I get the hang of it I will have a rich source of culinary and medical supplies. I am an urbanite who has dabbled in temperate gardening, to the extent a mobile existence permits. I'm expecting a steep learning curve in tropical permaculture but I'm not ready for the sudden and overwhelming immersion in a natureculture of a very unfamiliar kind.



The lounge as I get back into thesis writing after an extended hiatus, Playa, Havana, 2018.

On the first night the critters welcome me to *their* home by putting on a freak show. I suspect that the nonhuman residents sense we humans are new round here and come out in force, opportunistically, to see what we have to offer, and territorially, to claim their ground. The agential players leap, slither and swoop on to my sensible stage as an excess of nonhuman Otherness. Their performance features dystopian, grey plastic-looking crabs with electric blue eyes tap dancing on the concrete floor (these are the hacker crabs who later rearrange the aloes and pinch the best ones for their caves),²⁰⁰ headlight elator beetles lighting up like green LEDs which I am convinced are digital devices, ants trooping in triple-file along the indoor clothes line, cockroaches flying, bats flapping, and a supporting cast of Others; lizards, salamanders, moths, beetles, scorpions, snakes (from the politically strategic tunnel network at the end of the garden), spiders, red squirrels (escapees

²⁰⁰ On animal hackers, see Pritchard (2018).

from the city zoo), cats, rats, mice, toads and the newest invasive species, the giant African snails. Then there is the sheer volume of articulated traffic crawling in and out of plug holes and crevices, across floors and walls, centipedes in zigzags, millipedes in curves, not to mention the primordial soup-like substance which oozes out of the holes in the patio floor as an abyssal excess.

This is how I come to meet my repulsive relations of Otherness. This is an ontotale becoming a more than human horror story. *I am an ontoworker in natureculture shock*. It's a surprise denouement in an ongoing situated process of ontoexperiment which is edging ever further away from the safety of the sensible, and deep into the situated particulars of a tropical otherwise. Until now my ingenuous idea of home was as a part of the world that is *especially for me* and my *human* kin. But the document that grants me legal rights to this house is just something for termites to chew through. This will never be *my* house, just as the world never was and never will be *our* world. Even co-habitation (Haraway 2004) would be a generous way to describe our arrangements. I am squatting in a *much* more than human home, trying to learn with the critters and not incur their wrath. The precarious proximity of my incommensurate kin makes settling down together in a home sweet home arrangement unlikely. Yet settle down we must, however hard it is to live cheek by jowl with Otherly in-laws when I'm so used to having the place to myself.

It's especially testing because some of these critters can hurt me and my human kin, although, in the main, it is still far easier for us to hurt them. My everyday experience is a relentless battle with mosquitos and ants, of skin smarting from futile flagellation which mostly misses the nonhuman targets and, cruellest of all, after showering with the precise intent to seek relief from the discomfort of itches and stings, rubbing down with a towel seething with angered stinging ants. Without due care, some of these critters can kill us in the most matter of fact ways. I only have to take a bite of a fruit from the garden, or let a mosquito take a tiny bite of me. The killer is not the mosquito, nor the guava, nor the rat that bit or urinated on it first, but their microbial entanglements on a global stage. This is the world of more than human entanglement literally biting back.²⁰¹ I wonder if I/we can ever be careful enough.

²⁰¹ Barad (1998, 112) refers to how materialities 'kick back' which I paraphrase to fit my experience and to emphasise the embodied, entangled relation. A kick leaves a bruise or fracture, a bite may not be sensed to matter but can have more dangerous consequences.



Clockwise from top left: Taping the gaps in the ceiling to keep humans and critters apart; Ants swarm to any kitchen spills within minutes; Cockroaches killed or found dead during a two-hour period; A bloodthirsty mosquito intercepted on my leg, Playa, Havana, 2018.

I go all out for *human* self preservation to care for my beloved human kin. With brown sticky tape, I respond to the deeply disturbing more than human goings on in the pokey space between the flimsy bedroom ceiling and the shallow pitch roof. I tape over the gaps²⁰² in the fine ceiling boards so that unwanted critters and critter debris can't penetrate through to our beds below. Of particular concern are the stinging ants tumbling from nest to bed, asthma-inducing allergenic critter hair, lethal rat urine, and the unbearable scent of decomposing critters which are unretrievable by the turkey buzzard vultures and not yet consumed by more diminutive Others.²⁰³ (The showers of chick pea-sized lizard eggshells are fine). The sticky tape triage makes an agential cut between the critter haven overhead and the wishfully, over-optimistically, *no more than human* sleeping area below. Yet there are holes perforating the window mesh, holes peppering the 3mm plywood walls, holes puncturing the roof. It's open access for agile Others. Nevertheless, I tuck my daughter's mosquito net in tightly to create a 'safe' cocoon.

²⁰² This unintentionally replicates a tactic I first used in the cake shop where I taped up the counters full of mouldy cakes with sticking plaster to keep customers and spores apart, see chapter 2.

²⁰³ For dead rats, see Bennett (2010b).



Long sleeves, mosquito nets and fans mitigate the risk of mosquito-borne disease, Playa, Havana, 2017.

I need to tell this ontotale to offload the affective burden of my experience of nonhuman excess. So, on one level, it's an act of self care. On another level, it chases significant questions of why meeting more than human *living* relations in the flesh is so *disturbing*. I consider what, in fact, is being disturbed. The following is a diffractive reading of why this matters to a thesis otherwise bounded, with the agential cut I make towards mending, by human intra-actions in the world of *nonliving* Others. I draw on Kathryn Yusoff's (2013) work on insensible worlds²⁰⁴ to think through some of the questions which my natureculture shock throws up. These questions revolve around my agential inseparability from my more than human relations vis a vis my ability to attune to insensible parts of the world. Subsequently, Astrid Schrader's (2015) writing on 'abyssal intimacies' speaks to my questions around the incommensurability of risk when formerly insensible parts of the world bite back,²⁰⁵ and this spurs new readings of the ontotale, and my ontowork as a whole.

²⁰⁴ I read a pre-published proof of this paper in a reading group at Lancaster University with Kathryn and sensed it was a deeply political work but for a long time the full depth of her argument remained insensible to me. My natureculture shock, ie my opening to vulnerability, seems to have contributed significantly to doing 'the work of making sense' so that I can think with her account.

²⁰⁵ I thank Rebecca Ellis for sharing unpublished work which speaks profoundly to these concerns, and for her comments as I began to think with these ideas.

Disturbing (the) relations

It would seem as though humans live in another world, somehow altogether separate from the world that we actually inhabit.

— JODY A ROBERTS, *Reflections of an unrepentant plastiphobe*

It's remarkable that the lively Others with whom I share a planet have remained insensible to me for so long. My sensory talents have always been *towards* and *for* (Yusoff 2013) nonliving matter, as this thesis recognises. These particular critters, though, are so unknowable in their exoticism and risk, so numerous and diverse, and *so readily available to sense experience* that they have shattered the latent



Top to bottom: One of the 'burro' banana groves; The house seen from the garden, with bananas, guavas, papaya and sage, Playa, Havana 2018.

humanist notions of separability which linger in my bones (Barad 2007). I have started to sense the thickness of the entanglements in which I was always already a part. All my life I have been so safe, so separate, on the 'human-only' side of the Global North's human-made barriers of masonry, tarmac, metal, glass and chemicals that keep the nonhumans physically and/or sensorially at bay (as well as the climatic barriers which separated me from the added dangers which thrive in hot and humid climes). Separability has been my Western human(ist) privilege. These divisions have kept me physically and sensorially apart from my disturbing nonhuman relations *even when engaging intellectually with my entanglements in the more than human world*. Suddenly, tropical life forms that I have met only, if at all, in books and zoos are, literally, in my face, at touching distance, biting distance, stinging distance, stinking distance, tickling distance, killing distance. As the freaky species get overly personal and under my skin, my sudden newfound sensibility is more than a metaphor for understanding inseparability in more than human worlds.

In this thesis I haven't previously touched on the living parts of the more than human world. I've cut the living critters out of the action, not only to focus on sensing and mending the abiotic material world, but also because, until now, I hadn't sensed the biotic blighters biting back. They had been lurking in my sense experience in a shallow, oversimplified form, as a 'there-but-not-thereness' which overlooked the sheer depth of our entanglement. This is what Kathryn Yusoff refers to as 'that which we know, but do not know' (2013, 213), following Bataille's concept of nonknowledge. So, although they have been there all along, I bring them onstage now, briefly but significantly, to acknowledge this omission as a 'sensible blindspot' of mine, and below I use this example to discuss the dynamics of shifting sensible boundaries. Of course, we were always already entangled. We slosh around together in the a/biotic soup. I can't do much to pick and choose my kin (Butler, following Arendt, in Yusoff 2013). We are always already in the 'belly of the monster' (Haraway 1991c, 188). And, while I think, I must hastily revise my idea of being a human squatter in a more than human home because, as I should have been reminded from the abdominal pain and nausea I've been suffering while writing this, my body is also, always already, a home to whole other realms of biotic mobs.²⁰⁶ There be monsters in my belly. Critters 'interpenetrate one another, loop

²⁰⁶ I'm waiting to learn the name(s) of the species inside my gut which have been provoking discomfort for weeks, but the lab equipment for testing stool samples at the local clinic is under repair. At the same time, I am learning which plants in the garden can help keep intestines and parasites in healthy symbiosis.



My three-year-old daughter's responses to the sense events of our critter entanglements: 'Stool test No. 1 of 3' (left) and a sign for the door 'Mosquitos don't come inside' (right), Havana, 2017.

around and through one another, eat each other, get indigestion, and partially digest and partially assimilate one another' (Haraway 2017, M25). We know this well enough by now,²⁰⁷ but it is still so easy to forget. Yusoff writes of sense as a form of cohabitation and also, beyond that, of 'co-inhabitation' — as recognition of 'our mutual right to exist' (2013, 215).

A critical lesson of this ontotale is to recognise how sensible boundaries have kept me sensorially *apart* from my more undesirable nonhuman relations even when I think I am *thinking with* my entanglements in the more than human world. The question that arises is this: To what extent do intellectual acknowledgements of agential inseparability in more than human worlds exert an agency to shift sensible boundaries? That which I believe to be true and that which is available to my sense experience are not necessarily one and the same. What I learn during this ongoing project does not necessarily disturb the sensible parameters of my received thinking. My sensory knowing and intellectual knowing are out of sync, and that bugs me.

²⁰⁷ See, for example, Margaret McFall-Ngai, Scott Gilbert and Donna Haraway on symbiosis (in Tsing et al (eds) 2017), and more populist accounts such as Yong (2016).

Sense events

Insurrectional experiences have taught us how unimaginable things can very quickly enter into the field of possibilities.

— JACQUES RANCIÈRE, *Against an Ebbing Tide*

Astrid Schrader (2015) asks a similar set of questions in a paper which I shall briefly present.²⁰⁸ Her paper is stimulated by the unexpected emotive reactions of her students on reading together two texts on the aftermath of Chernobyl, one concerned with human victims of long-term radiation emissions (Petryna 2004), the other with deformed leaf bugs (Raffles 2010). Significantly for this study, she draws on Rancière's distribution of the sensible to understand the student reactions. Schrader recalls her students' inability to care for 'insignificant' leaf bugs, alongside, or on a par with, the human victims' suffering, *even when they could reason that they 'would have liked to'*, that is to say, even when they were able to express an understanding of more than human entanglements in the living world, or at least to regard the leaf bug as a useful oracle of harmful emissions to which humans are also prone. The suffering of the disfigured insects was, in the main, unavailable to sense experience.

Schrader points to the affective qualities of Raffles' experimental prose, together with artist Hesse-Honeger's moving watercolours of the deformed bugs on which the Raffles text is centered, as being capable of initiating a redistribution of the sensible. It could be added, as Schrader herself infers, that the very task of considering human trouble and bug trouble together itself provoked a case of natureculture shock. By the term natureculture shock, I suggest that a distribution of the sensible is taking place through a more than human case of culture shock. It is a sudden 'opening to become with those with whom we are not yet' (Haraway 2008, 93 in Schrader 668). To my understanding, Schrader's set texts and the subsequent class discussion combine to peel back one of the sensible layers, perhaps a weighty one, which until now has hidden the plight of bugs from sense experience. Suddenly, bugs have come to matter to (some of) the students, even though they don't matter as much as humans do (yet). The frontiers of matter have shifted (Papadopoulos 2014). A new part of the world is (t)here to care for (Schrader 2015).

²⁰⁸ I thank Blanca Callén for alerting me to this paper.

Moving in with the critters was a notable sensible event in my ongoing transition to alternative sensible coordinates which disrupted my own insensibility to my more than human entanglements. Sense-events (Yusoff 2013) such as this are forever taking place to shift the frontiers of matter. A popular recent example is the BBC series, *Blue Planet 2*²⁰⁹ which constituted a sensible disruption among viewers by reconfiguring human entanglements with plastics as sensible matter. This sensible event triggered a series of material responses, from a growing rejection of plastic by UK consumers to policy restrictions drawn up by the UK Conservative government. These actions can be critiqued as token gestures, easily co-opted by, or directly guided towards, neoliberal ends, but they may also signify a wider, ongoing sensible shift in the mattering of matter.

Blue Planet II's focus on plastic waste gave a glimpse of a part of the trouble previously unavailable to sense experience, but only a glimpse. Sensible shifts take place like waves, some large, some small, but rarely so overwhelming as to disrupt the dominant configurations which hold together sensible modes of perception. My experience of sensible disruption through the ongoing process of ontoexperiment is of one cataract operation after another, of suddenly seeing a part of the world clearly that was previously obscured by dense fog.²¹⁰ A series of these disruptions peels off layer after layer of the sensible facade. The first layer to go, in my case, was when I identified with Carol Becker's account of the 'neoliberal veil' (2002) [see chapter 3]. Now, a decade into a process of ontoexperiment, (taking the starting point as my clothing pledge of 2008), the sensible layers continue to blister in an ongoing erosion of givenness. I have seen enough givenness erode away by now to realise that I can never sit back and think that all the givenness of a world has already eroded. Givenness is a doing/undoing. There is always the surprise of the next unanticipated layer to give way.

²⁰⁹ Having not seen this series, I write based on media accounts, online activism and my mother's new relations with sea turtles and plastic straws.

²¹⁰ The fact that I was born with a visual impairment, and received bilateral cataract surgery shortly before embarking on this process of ontoexperiment is, to my mind, relevant to the path that this inquiry has taken. Post-operation I could see physical phenomena that I blatantly knew to exist; the colour of a person's eyes, the driver of a car, a block of flats at the end of the street, the hills in the mid-distance; although suddenly being able to see them was entirely unexpected. Previously, they had been 'there-but-not-there', unavailable to sense experience. In fact, and perhaps more important still, is not realising that I even had a visual impairment until shortly before the operations, even though I had to go to extremes to see things that others clearly had no problem seeing. I had normalised my visual experience as the only possible form of visual perception. See Barad (2007) on optics - the world is not as it appears.

In/sensible scholarship

In a critical reading of Schrader, givenness is not just for students to learn to get rid of, as the example may suggest. We all have a gap between knowing and sensing the trouble. We all have sensible layers to peel off, vulnerabilities and risks to assume. Is this part of my longstanding head scratching why, given all that radical scholars know, aren't more of us ditching, or radically reconfiguring, the day job?²¹¹

I want to better understand the dynamic arrangements of boundary (re)configuring at the sensible limits of political scholarship. Surely the trickle-down effect of knowledge dissemination is not enough, in which we 'get ideas out there' and expect others to be more response-able than ourselves. I sense that even the very thinking which troubles what is available to sense experience is itself subject to sensible limits which stifle disruptive thinking from materialising as disruptive being and doing. But not always, surely. While it is possible, and disarmingly common, to ring fence radical knowledge outside of the zone of concrete action, ('grabbing' the caffeine kicks and material sustenance to think radically insensible thoughts from sensible franchises, for instance), I also suspect that radical thinkings can escape the sensible order in the form of radical beings and doings. There is evidence of scholars who do so partially, as a group of climate scientists who don't fly attests (Kalmus 2017).²¹² My experience suggests that it is difficult, but not impossible, to perform radical knowledge *throughout* everyday experience and to live in and with the consequences of radical political entanglements. Harney and Moten (2013) present an important testament to (and incentive for) the possibility of radical refusal as academic practice.

This thesis is one attempt to rehearse the performance of political entanglements in the modest scenario of the everyday, albeit at the sacrifice of aborting all non-supervisory contact with the intellectual world. I think more of us need to ask unsettling questions about what our radical knowledge is *for*. 'What does it mean to be response-able to/in scholarly knowledge?' and 'What ontological moves might this response-ability demand? A refined iteration of my initial uncanny question would be: How can the radical entanglements acknowledged in scholarly thinking materialise in/as everyday experience? How do scholars writing at the threshold of neoliberal experience reconfigure sensible boundaries in the ongoing (un)doing of

²¹¹ This was my initial, and at the time only available and sayable, response to Yusoff's paper as I struggled through it with a highlighter pen for the reading group.

²¹² See noflyclimatesci.org.



Top to bottom: Doing reproductive labour in the patio; thinking, reading and writing at the dining table; noticing, caring and macheteing in the banana grove, Playa, Havana, 2018.

neoliberal lives? These questions are of singular importance to material activist scholarship, *which is nothing if it can't reconfigure material worlds*.

Michelle Murphy (2015) scratches at similar questions in her paper on unsettling care by concluding that the work now required of scholars demands:

The willingness to work through discomfort, worry, anger, pain, disconnection, and living in non-alignment, that is, the unhappy affects of staying in the trouble. Unsettling care invites reckoning with the histories and structures that unevenly dispossess, disappear, and disentangle, as much as those that award privilege, include, direct sympathies, and spark intimacies (Murphy (2015, 731).

Murphy is calling for critical scholarly engagement with a diffracted view of the trouble which goes well beyond the feel-good factor of care or repair discussed in chapter 4. But a more radical interpretation, which is what I hope she means, and how I hope her words are interpreted, is that we can't pretend to do rigorous scholarship which undoes humanist privilege and dominant configurations of global capitalism without actually feeling the trouble inside us. In other words, to stay in the trouble, we must inhabit it. An intensely poignant example of this is self-confessed plastiphobe and STS scholar, Jody A Roberts' account of the liveliness and deadliness of our entanglements in plastic. He recounts his experience of how, after an intensification of plastic avoidance during his wife's pregnancy for the health of their child, she gives birth to a baby daughter whose very survival depends on plastic-based medical infrastructure. Roberts' perceptions of his ability to control or separate himself from plastic relations are shattered. This entirely unanticipated intimacy with plastic is epitomised by the sight of his daughter with a plastic tube in her nostril wearing a sweatshirt saying 'FUTURE PLASTIPHOBIC' (Roberts 2013, 121).

Roberts calls for STS scholars to 'get closer to the discussions that lie beyond the facts and begin a conversation more deeply enmeshed in a politics of participation' (ibid. 122, see also Cohen and Galusky 2010). I intend my own account of ontowork to contribute to fleshing out the discomforting work of taking part in the trouble in a way that scholars stuck in the office can't begin to imagine. Experimentation in the everyday exercise of scholarly response-ability is, I maintain, one of the key contributions of this study. In the *Ontomanual* I have discussed the

affective trouble of fielding political commitments with Elizabeth Povinelli's thinking on will and endurance and later, to draw this chapter to a close, I hone in on *risk* as the bottom line of living in non-alignment.



Buckets filled on a water day in the patio, Playa, Havana, 2017.

Sensible dynamics

Thinking along the cusp of the insensible offers a way into an expanded realm of relationality that queries the exclusions that govern the sphere of intelligibility.

— KATHRYN YUSOFF, *Insensible Worlds*

A critical question I'm honing in on revolves around the *quality* of sensory perception. Put another way, I wonder how the degree to which, or the manner in which we sense a troubling phenomenon in turn permits that sensory knowledge to materialise as an ability to respond to the trouble sensed. Dovetailing with my earlier insistence (in the *Ontomanual*) that merely 'staying' with the trouble is not enough,²¹³ I collude with Schrader's response to Haraway's figure of staying with

²¹³ Haraway (2017) herself has said that sensing our symbiosis is just the start of staying with the trouble.

the trouble. Schrader lists three degrees of handling trouble; avoidance, staying with, and transforming the trouble (2015). Crucially, she makes plain, *all forms of response depend on the ability to sense the trouble in the first place*. ‘Becoming troubled is necessary before a transformation can occur’ (ibid., 684).

In my quest to understand how we might better perform response-ability, ie how we might get into ‘transformation mode’ with the trouble, rather than just hang out with it, I return to the mechanics of how, and when, we can, and cannot, sense a particular part of the trouble. For this I first present a rare elaboration on the dynamics of the distribution of the sensible by Rancière himself, which connects more closely to Barad’s boundary reconfigurings and agential cuts than I could have anticipated.

From one perspective, the forms of distribution of the sensible are like a datum, more or less accepted, more or less conscious – which forms and limits the capacities of perceiving and thinking. But on the one hand this datum defines a plurality of different articulations between its elements, a multiplicity of possibilities that combine together in different ways; on the other, it is constantly modified, for individuals and collectivities, either by singular sub-systems, or by events that, breaking the ordinary temporal logic, deploy other forms of possible experience, other possible ways of giving sense to these experiences. Insurrectional experiences have taught us how unimaginable things can very quickly enter into the field of possibilities (Rancière 2011, 242).

My current working hypothesis is a supplement to, and revision of, my earlier notion of the sensible sponge and the sensible misfit. I presented these figures (in chapter 3) as two particular modes in which a human subject can inhabit and disrupt the sensible order in a situated context. The figures help to think with the susceptibility or disposition of sensible subjects to either tow the sensible line or to step out of line. To revise this notion in accord with the dynamism of Barad’s agential realism (2007) and Haraway’s situated knowledge (1988), I now consider that any in/sensible (human) subject lives in arrangements of highly situated in/sensibilities, a solution which fits Rancière’s clarification of his theorem. The human inhabitants of the sensible order, including those in a bid to escape, and those who reside on or beyond its margins, all live in dynamic relation with their in/sensible

entanglements (Barad 2007). In any situated context, there are parts of the insensible world to which a human subject is potentially sensible.

I find Yusoff's (2013) idea attractive that the insensible has a pull, that we are driven by curiosity and desire to know more about the matter which we sense to have 'there-but-not-thereness'. I can even accept this idea as a driving force of this thesis process, following my identification, in the Ontomanual with Stephenson and Papadopoulos' (2006a) account of continuous experience. It is akin to Rancière's notion of the 'radically uncanny' which I identified previously as the hunch, the stench, the coincidence which alerts me to trouble in the air. I am being pulled in, and forever pulled along by that which is at the threshold of my knowledge (Povinelli 2012). But I do think a trigger (Rancière refers to 'insurrectional experiences' as evidence) is required to physically dart off and chase that curiosity. Without a trigger, it is possible to stay in limbo on the 'cusp of sensibility' (Yusoff 2013, 213) indefinitely, which I can corroborate with an embarrassment of examples (see, most notably, chapter 2). It is the series of ontoexperiments which keep triggering my movement along sense's knife-edge.

Ontowork leads me to an everyday interpretation of the dynamic processes of perception which cuts together the accounts of Rancière, Barad and Yusoff. I consider there are cracks in the sensible order to which a sensible subject can become particularly attuned in a situated context.²¹⁴ I call these 'sensible hotspots'. Inversely, the insensible parts which are most likely to remain insensible in a given context are what I call 'sensible blindspots'. For me, my relations with holey socks and other inorganic matter have constituted a sensible hotspot, and my relations with organic nonhuman matter have been, until now, a particular sensible blind spot of mine. In/sensible relations are always in dynamic reconfiguring. And it is precisely this dynamic reconfiguring that affords indeterminate, but very real possibilities for politics to happen when insensible matter becomes available to sense experience. As Yusoff argues, 'the insensible is a realm of possibility within the praxis of social and affective norms of sense that may release other modes of being into being' (2013, 208). This refiguring of sensible dynamics highlights human potential to perform response-ability to the more than human trouble, by transforming the trouble when parts of it start successively to bite back.

²¹⁴ John Holloway (2010) gives an account of the cracks in capitalism along these lines which fits with my thinking, and which inspired the initial phase of this research.



Left to right: Chopping 'burro' bananas into hands; A bumper papaya crop, Playa, Havana, 2018.

The crux of this inquiry, the sensible battleground, then, is the *process* of sensible shiftings, of sensible boundaries in motion. I ask Yusoff's question: How do I sense and make intelligible that which is beyond me (2013, 209)? The relevance of this ontotale is as an account of an experience of what shifts on stage in my sense experience.²¹⁵ The ontotale materialises in, and as part of the process of sensible shifting in how I 'inhabit and practice my relationalities' and how I 'choose to bring certain relations to the fore' (ibid.). It helps me to articulate a new set of questions around the dynamics of sensible shiftings by thinking with my own sensible blindspots and a disruptive sense-event in my experience. The questions I can now pose are activist questions of how to think with, and work with, sensible hotspots and blindspots as sites, or battlegrounds, which encourage or deter sensible events through which inorganic matter comes to matter. These are spaces, or more precisely in Barad's language, spacetimematterings (2010), of limits and possibilities, events which shift the limits of possibility for time, space and matter, the very factors which make mending in/possible.

A critical motive for mentioning my crittergeddon is in anticipation of a rush of possible sense-events to come. The tale is an early warning for the moment when our still largely insensible relations in the a/biotic world start to kick back and, with

²¹⁵ I stop short of accounting for what has stepped *off* stage, ie of addressing questions of exclusion in this new sensory panorama which Papadopoulos (2014) and Yusoff (2013) draw to attention.

climate disruption, when the distant troubles of hot and poor places hit Western backyards.²¹⁶ I write in anticipation of much more disturbing sense-events than those triggered by a representation of a troubled sea turtle in a plastified soup on a plasma screen (as in *Blue Planet II*), sense-events in which we finally sense the a/biotic trouble inside of us, and everywhere on the outside of us too. The disturbing moment in which we sense ‘arggggh, it’s got me!’ or more posthumanly, ‘we’re all fucked!’ is the moment we enter into ‘incarnate relation’ (Barad 2010, 265) with the trouble.

Abyssal intimacy

A more-than-human political moment is at once nightmare and awakening; horror and hope. It is not better, but certainly different as scarcely imagined impossibilities become possible.

— BOOTH AND WILLIAMS, *A more-than-human political moment*

To hone in on the dynamic sensory processes which take place at the threshold of im/possible limits, I bring in Schrader’s proposition of abyssal intimacy²¹⁷ as a thinking tool to ‘hold together impossible (aporetic) experiences’ (2015, 684). Her idea of abyssal thinking comes in direct response to Yusoff’s insensible worlds, and both think together with the work of Barad. Abyssal intimacy is a means of thinking with things that don’t exist in the sensible world but which happen nonetheless, as disturbances which materialise as sense experiences. It speaks particularly to the process of ontoexperiment in that it is what Schrader describes as ‘a new sensibility’, a distinct mode of sensing to that of embodied knowledges. This troubles notions I have been carrying about sense practices and how I make intelligible that which is beyond me, but appears as a possible opening towards understanding this new phase of ontological labour.

The genealogy of the ‘abyss’ concerns human - nonhuman relations. It is traced through Derrida back to Heidegger as ‘our scarcely conceivable, abysmal bodily kinship with the beast’ (Heidegger 2010, 230 in Schrader). In ‘The Animal that

²¹⁶ A compelling example is Pfeifer’s (2018) account of the tick-borne Lyme Disease, the ‘first epidemic of climate change’. Also, my experience of living in the tropics is a speculative fast forwarding of the experience of climate change in temperate zones like the UK.

²¹⁷ This is a concept I was drawn to several years before I was able to articulate why, and indeed I was warned for my lazy appropriation which was as an intuitive artist’s inspiration rather than a rigorous understanding of the term’s lineage or usage in literatures.

Therefore I Am,' Derrida thinks of abyssal limits as 'a multiplicity of organizations of relations between living and dead, relations of organizations or lack of organization' (2008: 31 in Schrader). Derrida's inclusion of relations 'living and dead' takes the concept beyond its Man - animal roots and supports my intention to bring the idea of abyssal intimacy into relation with the abiotic world. I want to think with human - inorganic relations as abyssal (re)encounters with the unfathomable abiotic underworld. I want to think of mending's possibility as a practice which emerges out of / inside of our abiotic abyssal intimacy with the impossible waste of our own creation and forgetting.

As an ontoworker, abyssal intimacy describes a sensibility I know (too) well, of sensing my vulnerability and risk in my relations with an unfathomable Other. I can now consider what is so disturbing about my example of biotic matter biting (me) back. I am deeply disturbed not just because of an 'affective response' which may render prior knowledge and values insecure' (Schrader 2015, 684) but also due to a sudden sense of my own vulnerability and mortality which had previously been hidden by my humanist privilege. A sense-event occurred when I stepped beyond the unimaginable bounds of humanist separability. Feeling vulnerable and at risk is precisely what brings insensible matter into relation (Yusoff 2013, 212). Being at/in risk of matter biting back is key to triggering human response-ability to transform the trouble that is a-biting.

In a nuanced reading, abyssal intimacy comes close to describing a mode of continuous experience (Stephenson and Papadopoulos 2006a, see *Ontomanual*) in more than human worlds. In particular, the notion of 'tarrying' (*ibid.*), which describes the delays in moving from the 'there-but-not-thereness' to the 'there', is accounted for by the 'unbridgeable, unfathomable distance' (Clark 2007, 1133 in Schrader 2015) of bringing into abyssal relation. Schrader invokes in abyssal intimacy a new mode of inhabiting human and more than human relationalities. 'Abyssal intimacy does not require recognition, but describes a creative engagement that relies on the withdrawal of the self, a passivity that enables an active listening, an opening to surprises' (Schrader 2015, 673). This withdrawal of the self speaks to troubles which I have described in the *Ontomanual* as my 'more than human undoing'. What is being undone are individualistic notions of self-sufficiency which cannot be maintained in abyssal relation (Yusoff 2013, 224, drawing on Jean-Luc Nancy 1997). Thinking continuous experience together with abyssal intimacy answers key questions that were brought up in the *ontomanual* about the (in)ability

to perform self care in and as part of the more than human world (Povinelli 2012) when thresholds of selfhood are fundamentally disturbed by radically asymmetric relations of indifference (Clark 2011).

I feel risk

Can there ever be care without risk and violence?

— ASTRID SCHRADER, *Abyssal Intimacies*

When I say I have been deeply disturbed, I mean I have been saturated by risk. I have been living in a degree of risk which was previously unthinkable.²¹⁸ I didn't anticipate that the process of ontoexperiment would lead me into a minefield of vulnerability. What started out as an individual(istic) artist's journey of (self) discovery, is culminating in an acute sensing of the risks I take on, and those to which I subject others, including my child. This is what it is 'to risk oneself (which is never one or self)' (Barad 2010, 264). I never expected ontowork to come to this, even though I had taken all the steps to get here (Papadopoulos et a 2008). My ontological labour to sense, to know and to respond to planetary material trouble has brought me to sense the trouble as inescapably proximate phenomena, however unknowable and incommensurate those phenomena may be, not just proximate to myself and the child I bore, but to all human kin across the planet, across planetary time, who live in material conditions which are similar, or worse than my own. (I imagine all the disturbing experiences which never materialise as/ in academic literature). Compared to my more troubled global kin, past, present and future, my privilege for staying out of the worst of the trouble is still immense. My vulnerability is tiny. I have the uneasy pleasure of being able to jump on a plane out of here back into the jaws of the sensible, where I can let my perception of material burden soak away in a nice hot bath. I am humbled by how hard I find it to embrace the risks that billions face as everyday events. I am woefully unprepared for the incommensurate wildness of how naturecultures can bite back.

²¹⁸ Adding to my sense of risk, although beyond the scope of this text, is the consecutive collapse of my safety nets and networks; being hospitalised with zika, Hurricane Irma's destruction of the security of my home in material and sensory terms, and becoming a single mother in Cuba. Readers familiar with the Cuban context will recognise that the situated risks are more complex than can be briefly expressed here. These risky developments are all very much part of the process of ontowork, part of the human cost or burden of seeking to live otherwise, as Povinelli (2012) has recognised in her observations of radical Others.



Top to bottom: A public health worker prepares a spray solution with a chemical powder and water, which is said to detract insects from walls and surfaces for up to three months; Spraying my workspace with the insect repellent, Playa, Havana, 2018.

To live in abyssal intimacy is to relinquish control of the nonhuman, abiotic Other. It is to say 'come on, bite me back'. But it is more. Schrader (2015) is pushing at the

possibility of entering into relations of ‘unlimited compassion’ and to recognise the ‘shared vulnerabilities’ of mortals. I can’t go that far, and I am not going to give myself a hard time for being a mortal wimp. I try instead to live as carefully as I possibly can with my relations, maintaining a ‘liveable’ degree of separation. I strive for liveability on both sides in orchestrating our together/apartness. I minimise our mutual vulnerability with tape, with soap and water, and with an increasing understanding of how to employ the garden’s natural resources. I squish and chemically blitz the critters less and less. The best I can aim at is, on the one hand, the material agility to keep up with the trouble, to travel along its threshold, and on the other hand, to live in agile relation with the more than human world.

There-but-not-thereness is a form of knowing outside of or beyond relation (Yusoff 2013), of not sensing one’s own risk and vulnerability to relate. To me, the critters are quite unmistakably ‘there’. I have entered into intimate relation with them by sensing the risks of their mingling in my most intimate places, my toothbrush, my pants, my duodena and inside the mosquito net. (In the first weeks the dawn slaughter of mosquitos inside the net left my hands red with me and my child’s blood). This intimacy has opened me up to my own risk and vulnerability in a way reading about and observing drawings of deformed leafbugs never can, however horrifically deformed they may be. I get closer to abyssal intimacy when the critters I co-habit with present deformities, (materialisations of the trouble), and closer still when they have the ability to create deformities in my offspring, as is the particularly disturbing ability of zika.

Abyssal intimacy is a mode of more than human relation that has become monstrous (Tsing et al (eds) 2017). In their two-part edited volume on monsters/ghosts Anna Tsing and co-writers describe how species become monsters when their entanglements become deadly, as is the case with the jellyfish which kill off marine diversity and turn oceans into ‘sloshing goo’ (M1). Mary Beth Pfeiffer (2018) presents a detailed study of how climate change has precipitately turned the tick into a monster, a mass killer of moose and an infector of humans with Lyme disease in epidemic proportions. Abyssal intimacy is about bringing monsters into relation, as I am doing with my most monstrous co-habitants, the mosquitos and the rats.

Of course, humans are the scariest monsters of all. In my monstrous relations it has been me doing most of the biting back. I want to stop being a monster, to stop



Working on the front porch during weekly house fumigations during the mosquito season, as the fumigator closes the door behind him, Playa, Havana, 2017. Photograph: Maurice Haedo.

acting monstrously with my ‘Lo Maté!’ (*‘I Killed It!’*) spray.²¹⁹ I want to sense yet more keenly the entanglements when I blitz a patch of kitchen worktop or the toilet seat. I don’t know where the deadliness of a quick chemical spritz might end, but for sure my monstrous powers go further than the unlucky stinging ants who are passing by.²²⁰ The key argument Anna Tsing and fellow thinkers present is that in sensing our monstrous entanglements, we must sense the generativity of both the danger and the liveliness as two sides of the risk (Swanson et al 2017).²²¹ I combine this idea with Puig de la Bellacasa’s call for ‘productive doings that support liveable relationalities’ (2011, 93) to shape my thinking of what a *possible* response to unfathomable trouble might be. My basic working thesis is to support the liveliness and suppress the deadliness in my relations wherever I can. As Haraway reminds us regarding our fiendishly complex decisions of what to kill, what to tolerate and what to encourage, ‘[w]ays of living and dying matter [...] we must give the best answers we come to know how to articulate, [...] articulating bodies to some

²¹⁹ The widely available insect repellent and DIY fumigation chemical produced and sold by the Cuban state.

²²⁰ The deadliness of the weekly house fumigation by the Cuban department for Public Health during the summer months is more unknowable still.

²²¹ Tsing’s (2015) thinking derives from her fascination with the liveliness of mushrooms which spring from the capitalist ruins.

bodies and not others, nourishing some worlds and not others, and bearing the mortal consequences (2008, 88).

Sensible questions

The starting question of Yusoff's paper is 'What is response?' This is a stark question for it seeks to strip away the givenness of how we think and do responsibility. Before the question of 'how' to respond, she asserts, we need to ask a sensible question (sensible in the standard sense, not the usage I have adopted for this thesis) - 'What is a response *for*?' For a response to perform planetary responsibility, it must do work *for* or *towards* a liveable otherwise, and not *towards* the deadly trouble.

Brown sticky tape, is a poor response to the trouble. The previous human residents scrunched newspaper into the holes, which is marginally poorer. But neither are sensible responses which make the trouble worse. Like mending, they are ever imperfect, stop-gap solutions to a small part of an incommensurate problem. And, as I explained in the Ontomanual, response-ability requires endure-ability — the ability to keep responding, and reconfiguring the response, over and over again, and in doing so, to keep going 'beyond ourselves' (Yusoff 2013, 210). Escaping the trouble, while living in its midst, requires constant imperfect reconfigurings, temporary escape moves, new layers of tape. This is an example of the constant escape strategy which I recognise, with Purcell's (2014b) reading of Deleuze and Guattari, as the way for practices of outside politics (Stephenson and Papadopoulos 2006b), to avoid evaporating into oblivion or slipping into co-option. To stay outside the dominant order requires living in ongoing escape, with material practices of mending as 'triage in dangerous times' (Haraway 2004, 3). The way to maintain an ability to respond to the trouble is to keep up a sheer refusal, a careful vigil for the sensible order catching up, and to live in agile manoeuvre (Purcell 2014b), to respond to new layers of trouble with fresh reconfigurings of everyday practices of material relations. It's not just about new layers of sticky tape, but new modes of 'inhabiting relationalities' between me and the disturbing Others overhead, and how we choose to bring certain relations to the fore (Yusoff 2013).

The impossible pledge

To scrutinise what my own performance of response-ability is *for* I note that my ontoexperiments have taken the form of a pledge, and that my ontowork is *for* the redemption of a series of pledges. In David Graeber's analysis (2011a), to redeem a pledge is to exert response-ability but, he says, no-one can tell me what I owe.

There is no real redemption to an incommensurate problem, the trouble is still there, I can't wipe the slate clean (391). I can shed my complicity in a social and economic system that exacerbates and obscures the trouble, but not the material debt itself. By Graeber's definition, a debt is an arrangement that can never be paid off (ibid.). Summarising his argument (68-9), we have always been in deadly relation with the planet. We have always demanded too much, be it of mammoths or of rare earth metals. In his opinion, any life that goes beyond sheer survival involves going into debt. Our material debt is a pre-capitalist, primordial debt²²² to which we owe the survival of our species. It is 'before and beyond' (Yusoff 2013) capitalism. The only difference is that now the debt has shot off on an exponential curve, creating the novelty of self extermination while we use up, contaminate and kill off nonhuman reserves.

What is more, I realise, on reading Graeber, that the very idea that we homo sapiens could ever pay off our debt to the rest of the planet implies an agential separability that we do not have. We cannot stand apart from, or be outside of the trouble. At the start of this thesis, in *Mending the Sensible*, my thinking around material debt framed the problem around an erroneous assumption of human entitlement to planetary resources, with the implication that we could, and should, try to repay this debt. I am mindful of the givenness of my Protestant upbringing in my response to the trouble and the fact that, besides a mortgage, I have always been careful to live debt-free. Our problem, that Graeber (2011a, 59) refers to as our 'guilt' - which shares an etymological root with the word 'debt', is in having thought ourselves separate to frame the trouble as an external debt in the first place. This is, rather, an internal, embodied debt which elsewhere I have termed living *in* and *as* the trouble. In our planetary entanglements in webs of life and death, we *are* the material debt. It is (in) us, we breathe it, swallow it, touch it and try to wash the dirt off with it. It bites back as allergies, cancers, endocrine disruptions as well as famines, wars, displaced populations, precarity and global unrest. We are paying the interest on the debt with our livelihoods, our health and our life.

The trouble is not the inevitable outcome of our sapien extinction, eternal we are not, but the deadly relations we sapiens will likely endure as our material debt bites us back. The problem this thesis alerts us to is our lack of sensory ability to grasp the

²²² The "primordial debt," writes British sociologist Geoffrey Ingham 'is that owed by the living to the continuity and durability of the society that secures their individual existence'. (in Graeber 2011a, 58)



The abundance of fruit in the garden, including a 'burro' banana bearing fruit (bottom left) and stored indoors and elevated to avoid vermin (bottom right), Playa, Havana, 2018.

'thereness' of the trouble, as well as our lack of material ability to mitigate or prepare for it. It is now too simplistic to call merely for a refusal of, and escape from capitalism. The ability to respond to the trouble depends on noticing (Tsing 2015), or sensing the 'thereness' of, all forms of deadly relation in our entanglements in naturecultures. Response-ability means being able to cut apart the deadly from the lively, to refuse to live in deadly relation and find everyday modes to reproduce liveability in order to learn, share and nurture lively relations in everyday materiality.

Risky regimes

You cannot enjoy the comfort of distance, but are obliged to endure the risk of constant touch.

— KATE RIGBY, *Dancing with disaster*

A vital follow-on question to 'What is response?' is 'What is risk?' or, more to the point, 'What is *being* at risk?' Surely we need to make risk a sensible question too (again, in Yusoff's sense). To feel at risk is to experience exposure to danger. Rancière makes clear that the sensible order 'can persuade people that they are frightened, then you can designate what threatens them' (Lie and Rancière 2006, np). It follows, then, that if the only dangers exposed to sense experience are sensible ones, operative configurations of risk are largely oblivious to the insensible risks which threaten planetary liveliness. Sensible risk aversion is predicated on averting the wrong set of risks. Operative frames of risk aversion protect us from the phoney and more minor risks, while externalising, offsetting and numbing us from from the more deadly planetary dangers. Ulrich Beck's (1992) theory of risk has it that the top sensible priority is to avoid and distribute risk, and to maintain states of ignorance around indeterminate and insensible risk. And so it is hard to tell a risk from a trap.

Sensible risks are taken deadly seriously: food beyond a best-before-date is thrown away, a party-goer avoids *being seen dead* in the same dress twice, children are not allowed to play outdoors, a broken device is discarded instead of being taken apart. Apart from wasting and contaminating exorbitantly, these sensible resolutions cancel out the possibility of sensing and learning — if food is fit to eat, how to transform an old dress, in and from the natural(cultural) environment, how gadgets work — how to be otherwise in the material world. They are mundane everyday



The kitchen, Playa, Havana, 2017.

practices which exacerbate deadly yet largely insensible planetary risks. But they are all easily justified by the standard phrase, *'it's not worth the risk'*. What risk is *that*? This is why we must ask the sensible question, what are we avoiding? Ridicule? Ostracism? A slight chance of diarrhoea? Feeling like a failure? Wasting our time? Being seen as mean? Sensible risks are largely uncontested and rigorously policed by what 'people' will think and by what regulatory bodies may do. Rancière's sensible police; Instagram, work colleagues, anxious parents, child protection services, the registered dealer; keep us in 'hegemonic stasis' (King 1994). The sensible risk of 'attempting to undertake repairs' is a misguided activity for an (untrained) UK landlady or landlord. Stronger still, *not even mending but touching* a miscreant electrical device is too risky for a (trained) UK electrician. If we examine the risk of an electric cooker with a non-regs plug as a sensible phenomenon, the risk is not so much the cooker's defiance of the normative safety regime (which is not firstly *for safety* but for the reproduction of neoliberal capitalist control regimes) but the travesty of the cooker's disposal because the registered electrician *'won't go anywhere near it'*. That is to say, those with the technical ability to maintain or repair electrical goods have lost the legal ability (and the will) to do so. Taking the plug off and wiring the cooker directly into the mains, if reported, would, in effect, cost the electrician his livelihood, (which, after all, is not



Top to bottom: The house before hurricane Irma; The house after hurricane Irma, surprisingly intact, Playa, Havana, 2017.

to fix things but to maintain the sensible business of planned obsolescence and regulated installation). The electrician's role²²³ is to leave the distribution of the sensible *untouched*. There then follows the deathly smooth cycle of magical spacetimeatterings (in which technologies magic away risk) which see to it that a brand new cooker is dropped off at your door the very next day, reinforced by the popular policing of everyday practices of consumerism and risk aversion which hammer home the fail-safe sensible mantra *there is no alternative*. What my father meant was; 'You don't need to worry. *We got rid of the risk.*'²²⁴

The underlying assumption is that risk is an externality to be managed, measured, minimised and removed. A risk is not to be lived in but escaped. Risk is what we get our bodies and our families the hell out of if we possibly can. Risk is a mode of everyday life we *won't go anywhere near*. Risk is a place we *won't be seen dead in*. *Because otherwise we sense our vulnerability*. Our problem, it seems, is that the trouble, the real risks that we are already vulnerable to, *insensibly*, are there-but-not-there. Every day, reports of deathly planetary entanglements enter into human cognition and yet we have immense difficulty in entering into incarnate relation with the trouble.²²⁵ Even in cases where major risks are known to exist, and disagreement can be heard, such as fracking and nuclear power, and even when the sensible fictions which frame these risky developments as '*minimising risks to the UK economy*' are considered as farce, the deadliness of these industries isn't plonked right '*there*' in our sense experience. Despite all the omens that we are going to get bitten back real hard, that '*so much more dying is coming*' (Ghosh 2016), we don't sense the risk within us. We don't sense how vulnerable we always already are.

High-risk ontology

This space of radical openness is a margin — a profound edge. Locating oneself there is difficult yet necessary, It is not a 'safe' place. One is always at risk.

— bell hooks, *Choosing the Margin*

²²³ To reiterate, for Rancière (2011), the sensible order governs the proper role and function of persons and things.

²²⁴ See Szasz (2009), cited in Roberts (2013) on 'shopping one's way to safety'.

²²⁵ In their work on necropolitics and environmentalism, Critical Art Ensemble (2018) argue how death remains unavailable to sense experience in the environmental struggle.

Risk is where I have arrived, risk is where and how I live now. In this thesis, risk is the bottom line. Ontowork has led me to Beck's (1992) conclusion that risk, specifically its aversion, has become *the* organising principle of the sensible order. So it is no coincidence that doing something risky is also how this PhD journey began. I started by risking 'everything' when I gave up a proper job. I placed a wager against sensible assumptions which warned me (policing my escape) that in no time I could end up depressed and on the dole. But instead, after some tarrying, I am able to write this precisely because I have opened myself to vulnerability and thus to new modes of making sense (Yusoff 2013, 212).

The question of which dangers are available to sense experience is of deep political importance. Risk aversion is a mark of privilege of those still able to make risk 'disappear' (Beck 1992). Risklessness is a myth. We are already living in risk, and how we live in that risk, how we bring insensible risk into relation, dictates how riskily we choose to live on. In protecting ourselves and our families according to sensible configurations of risk we are offsetting the insensible risk to Others (ibid.), sapiens present and future, and to indeterminate critters great and small, perhaps not so far away in space or time. Yusoff puts it like this: 'It is not so much that which is affirmed by bringing this or that relation to the fore, but what is denied when we act 'as if' this is all there is; as if there are no other worlds worlding away, insensible to our (scientifically extended) perceptual field' (2013, 215). We live as if there are no other risks to avoid, as if there is nothing to mend.

The sensible stops us mending the trouble. It stops us from even touching it. Why do we police health and safety regimes as if our lives depend on it, when we face an incommensurate number of unfathomably greater hazards than that of a noncompliant apparatus? Why do we live as if an abstract set of rules, 'the regs' do matter, but the matter essential to planetary life does not? We hold on to risk aversion so assiduously that it is perhaps the last sensible bastion to fall. The possibilities for living otherwise can't get past Health and Safety.²²⁶ Material disobedience can get no footing. Material anarchy is far, far away. How might I

²²⁶ I am reminded of Lancaster's co-housing project, (one of the UK's exemplary attempts at living ecologically otherwise), which rigidly polices the 4 colour/4 zone mop and bucket health and safety regime. Each mop and bucket is an overdesigned, time consuming and ineffective contraption of plastic, metal and textile moving parts. During a stay there, I despaired when it was our turn to mop, all the more so having recently returned from Cuba where all I need is a wooden broom handle with a wooden T-section at one end, an easily rinsable and dryable rectangular floor cloth and a criollo bucket, (a system which, on my first visit to Cuba, I found archaic).

suggest that a 'pre-health and safety era' three-legged chair is less deadly than a brand new, four-legged, flame-retardant toxic sponge?²²⁷ How can anyone maintain that mending is too risky to do? Our mending may not turn out well, but we need to sense it is worth the risk. We need to give it a go.

Making mending possible involves working out how to respond to the material world in lively ways, by learning how to draw out its liveability. And when we start to try to mend the material world as if matter really matters, as if our lives depend on it, we bring ourselves into relation with risk. Living in and as risk lies at the abyssal limits (Toadvine 2010) of human possibility. It is as far as I go, along the threshold of being, but beyond what I can possibly ask of anyone else. For humans of privilege to forsake a sense of safety is beyond the threshold of the thinkable and possible. It is perhaps even too much to ask of radical communities willing to populate worlds otherwise (Papadopoulos 2010c). While *I* might think that living *out of* (relation with) risk is a dangerous pretence, it's hard to invite others to leave a low-risk life and join me *in* risk. It is an abysmally inconvenient and unattractive idea. Zika deformities are not bungee jumping. Ontowork is not an adventure sport. *It is not for the kicks*. Bringing oneself into relation with monstrous matter means becoming vulnerable in lively and deadly relation.

Of my kin who still hold on to sensible lives, all I feel I can ask you is to consider the nature of the risks which guide everyday behaviour, and to think about the liveliness and deadliness of everyday actions which, as Roberts' example reminds us, can be lively and deadly at once. He says; 'we resist the simple dichotomies imposed on us. The plastics are not simply life saving or a threat: they are both. At the same time, my lack of knowledge is not a sign of deficit, but a sign of the shifting relationships of my life and world' (2013, 130). Against the charge of unknowability of the unfathomable depths of our entanglement he counters there is both the 'unknowable' and there is 'undone science'.

²²⁷ See Roberts' example of a mattress which contrasts the regulated (sensible) risk of falling asleep while smoking in bed with breathing in (insensible) potent endocrine disruptors offgassing through the night. He observes: 'Human health and environmental health are typically dealt with separately. We have different regulatory agencies in the United States for addressing these problems. We have different academic departments, journals and degrees. It would seem as though humans live in another world, somehow altogether separate from the world that we actually inhabit. Synthetic chemicals – plastic or not – bridge these worlds. What is out there is now in us (2013, 123). See also Liboiron (2016) on flame retardant toxicity.

A substantial part of my natureculture shock is not knowing what is deathly and what is lively in my new lifeworld, and this experience of indeterminacy is an experimental testbed for the planetary conundrum of how to possibly identify liveliness from deathliness so as to make agential cuts between life and death. Such vital but incommensurable questions beg in/sensible debates concerning which knowledges can be pursued and how much can really be known. A very careful labour of noticing (Tsing 2015) is required to distinguish which risks we should really be acting on as if our lives depended on it. Does an everyday action lean more towards deathliness or liveliness? The question of which doings ‘support livable relationalities’ (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2011, 93) is challenging to answer and even more so to act upon. By informing our decisions around liveliness and deathliness to perform response-ability to the trouble, our sensibility to risk is reconfigured, and the boundaries of risk change shape. Life becomes unfathomably riskier. Menaces to the ‘endurance of the world’ (Berlant 2016, 395) lie at every turn. So too, lively opportunities, and these are what we need to sense and live *for*.

The greater part of my natureculture shock, though, is that however much we might be able to minimise and arrest the deathliness, there is no pretence or hope of escape. The perception of living in/as deathliness is becoming the new reality of everyday life. Welcome to the new normal. And, evidently, it’s not merely the toxicities, the depletions and the extinctions biting us back, but also the experience of their messy sociopolitical consequences. This is the material reality from which response-ability must start. This is the abyssal physical world from which we must reconstitute more liveable alternatives. The trouble leaves no clean bite marks as it gets its teeth under our skin. It is sensed as the savage gnawing away of the givenness of the minimum requirements for a possible life. As I have already inferred with Papadopoulos (2010a) and will go on to conclude, the very abjection, the saturation, the incommensurability of sensing the trouble’s teeth in you, can work as a motivating force for response, a claim that Alexis Shotwell (2016) develops in depth in her timely study on collective activism and constitutive impurity in ethically compromised times.

Home, abyssal home

That which makes us comfortable reinforces the boundaries of the human, rather than exposing them.

— KATHRYN YUSOFF, *Insensible Worlds*

As recently as a couple of years ago, back in the sensible world, I still asked myself if a world outside of capitalism could exist. Now, as my outside politics materialises as experience, I'm writing from that unthinkable outside space, and I've started to make it home. I dis-identified with the world of neoliberal global capital. I refused to stay. I saw a possible opening and orchestrated my escape. I fled to an indeterminate destination. A *possible* place between the world I refused and an imperceptible alternative world which isn't ready yet. There is nowhere soft to sit, nothing tasty to eat²²⁸, no coolness in the air²²⁹, and few treats or friendly faces to help an ontoworker to unwind. As I knuckle down to making a malfunctioning world a home, I sweat copiously over Murphy's (2015) question, what is the work, or the generativity, of discomfort and unease? My situated labour materialises in Cuba, but the tangible, concrete world of DIY alter-ontology is nothing but a building site, wherever it takes place. The ontoworker dons a hard hat. The radical otherwise and its infrastructures (Berlant 2016) are under construction. It is never going to be comfortable, if by comfort we think of sprawling on a sensible (offgassing) sofa with screen-based entertainment and a 'well deserved' treat to eat or drink. As Puig de la Bellacasa asserts, 'feminist visions of care emphasize the ethico-political significance of doings of care that inhabit everyday life, not, as many wrongly imply, a separate 'cozy' realm where 'nice' relations can thrive ... Care is political, messy and dirty' (2015, 707).²³⁰ It is precisely an escape from the familiarity of sensible everyday life, a foregoing of the material trappings of our sense of human entitlement. It is an entering into, an imagining of, and a construction of unfamiliar territory. A new mode to live in a world.

In the inescapable inseparability of material-discursive worlds, uncanny coincidences ensue from the heightened sensibilities of ontological labour. The specific neck of the abyssal woods in which this ontoexperiment now materialises

²²⁸ Of all the day to day challenges in Cuba, one of the hardest for me is the dietary monotony of rice and beans, and the time and resourcefulness required to prepare healthy and tasty food. I have not found lentils for over a year, have spent months on end without flour, lemons are out of season for half of the year, there are no dried fruit or nuts except peanuts, and no oats or wholegrain foodstuffs whatsoever. I anticipate the day the potato ration arrives so excitedly that it has become the highlight of my year. I have queued for five hours for 8lbs of potato per family member. The season lasts three to four months.

²²⁹ At the time we moved in with the critters, electric fans were unavailable in the shops. In fact, throughout the hot summer months of 2017 both fans and fridges, new and second hand, were in extreme scarcity.

²³⁰ Murphy's (2015) account, which draws on Sara Ahmed's unsettling of affect, substantiates my rendering of the sensible order as a 'nice' and 'comfy' place.

is the site on which Havana's flagship Portland cement factory opened in 1901,²³¹ cement being both pollutant of, and building block for deadly/lively worlds to expand apace. It is uncanny that, without knowing it, I have come to live in and on the productivist ruins again, and once again I am negotiating deadly relations and lively ones.²³² My first task is pragmatic - to get to know what lives on, and what remains. Because memory, 'pattern[s] of sedimented enfoldings of iterative intra-activity - is written into the fabric of the world. The world 'holds' the memory of all traces' (Barad 2010, 261), and now they run through my fingers. Exuberant thickets of banana trees grow out of the rubble that still dominates the surface, but with their shallow root structures they are easily tilted by the anti-clockwise hurricane winds, which also leave the taller trees with amputated limbs. Almond, guava and avocado trees have shed leaves that have become compost. Seedlings shoot from beneath the heavily cropping mature trees, an excess of liveliness rooted in deathly remains.

'Could we ever grasp how much intimacy there is between life and death, between organic and inorganic matter?' Yusoff asks (2013, 224). Protected as best I can from the critters who bring discomfort and death, I crouch to touch the matter, the leaf mould, and find inorganic memories at every turn - textiles, metals and plastics, those which can't help but break down, and those which solidly refuse to. I am touched by the trouble, and I touch back (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, Barad 2012). I sift and sort through this fabric to care for this part of a world. I put the lively and the deadly into piles. A new world can be made out of the liveliness of this dying one. I make borders of lumps of concrete around the more fragile plants. I separate ceramic and glass for mosaic. I am modestly remattering, relaxing into shaping a lifeworld with what I have. My material-discursive performance of a world oscillates between stabs of mattering at a desk and stabs of mattering in the dirt. I cut my world together/apart with two rather lively sharpened machetes and a rather deadly MacBook Air.

An alternative world comes forth from the outpourings of excess (Grosz 2011) of the parts that have no part (Rancière 1999), the abyssal parts of the planet,

²³¹ Producing 50,000 tonnes per year. National production in 2017 was 1.5 million tonnes (Bustamante Molina 2018). As the most (or only) available and affordable option, concrete and cement are the materials in which Cubans build their world. Even kitchen cabinets, work surfaces, wardrobes and shower cubicles are fashioned out of concrete.

²³² Concrete is the 'most consumed product in the world after water' and in global industry, its carbon emissions are second only to steel (Harvey 2018).



Clockwise from top left: Another banana tree shoots up through the rubble; Ceramics separated for mosaics, Prickly pear cactus, guacamaya, sage and soursop; Non-standard hurricane shutters; Inorganics extracted from the garden; Inorganics littering the garden surface, Playa, Havana, 2017-2018

recalcitrant dead matter (Middleton 2012) and material burdens that linger in the flesh. This abyssal matter, these material traces of the trouble, are the raw materials we have to think with and to build with. This place is not yet a liveable world as we know it, but a shadow, a whisper, the dirt under my nails. *It's the world that materialises as we keep up its performance.* A world creeping into perception but which, for now, is still an abyss. It is in this abyssal space of potential that I am now marooned. I have achieved an incommensurate research outcome. *I have found home, abyssal home.*

So here I am, putting on an insensible performance in an insensible world. The place needs populating, and I bid you to join me and help furnish a world. I desperately need human kin to lend me a hand (and to sing and laugh and drink tea). I know I am a minute part of a bigger clan, but the nonhumans don't give a monkeys, nor does the rocky rubble, or the socks, and my escapee human kin are hard to find (Halberstam 2013). A huge omission in my ontowork strategy is that, in being so focused on material relations, I have neglected to make and maintain social ties with human kin.²³³ My self-induced solitude has been exacerbated by the demands of motherhood, and the isolation of Cuba, but the key factor has been the inherent individualism of PhD study. The thesis has policed my everyday life since the day it began and will continue to do so until the day it ends. It has policed my ability to sustain human relations which can exist free of its demands, and to find time for anything other than itself.

I have taken these demands seriously because this is a thesis *for* matter, but I realise that, while *I* am *for* matter, the thesis is *for* scholarship, it is *for* getting itself written and no more. And as it has generated knowledge, it has generated vulnerability and an anticipatory regime (Adams et al 2009) of the social and material infrastructures I desire to create. I have produced something approaching a proper doctoral thesis at risk to myself and loved ones in the hope of generating political movement in material worlds. But to live in risk and vulnerability, breaking so many old ties, you need a network of new ties. To build and live (and enjoy) a more than human life you need the company of a lot of great and humble humans. 'The social relations we create every day prefigure the world to come, not just in a metaphorical sense, but also quite literally: they truly are the emergence of that other world embodied in the constant motion and interaction of bodies' says Shukaitis (2009, 143). And yet my 'affective infrastructure' (Berlant 2016, 414) is negligible and my desire to do ontowork with others, to 'conven[e] a world conjointly (ibid, 395), remains in unresolved tension. I need to escape outside of scholarship to work this out.

²³³ Thanks to a comment by Laura Watts, I realise that in Cuba my kin are the neighbours who I have 'nothing' in common with, those who let my family sleep on their lounge floor during a hurricane, those who give me their last egg when eggs are 'lost' to make a birthday cake, those who come asking for a few leaves from the garden to cure a particular ailment - part of the extended web of 'amistades' (friendships) who help, threaten, take advantage, share, teach, gossip, deceive, sacrifice and protect in the compromised social ties of everyday life. In the UK, I turn instead to Google, Amazon and Airbnb, (or Ecosia, the organic co-operative shop and couchsurfing) for equivalent needs. I can tease out my kin online to have the sort of energising conversations I crave, (and in person, at the cost of a flight), but faced with real everyday struggles in material existence, the like-minded kin are likely to be busy and far away, what I think of, with Berlant, as a broken sociality (2016).

Of course, the social and the material need to go hand in hand. I say as much back in chapter 1. And yet I have persevered regardless on my own, knowing I need to join the many others who are otherwising to populate the otherwise together. Coping alone was never an aim, but it's a habit, and I am still undoing the givenness of self and self-sufficiency (Yusoff 2013). We need to become nonself-sufficient, however we might come to understand the term. I want us to find each other and lose ourselves in new worlds of liveability (Purcell 2016), where the noncapitalist, available options are sensed as sufficient, and in which selves are not selves anymore. How might we care for and connect together the sensible misfits, and build communities of those who live in refusal and escape (Shukaitis 2016)? How might we cut together those who are escaping from having been cut apart by the individualist tradition?

This project is entirely im/possible, and very real. It is not another story written in a comfy chair hugging an oversized coffee in the shelter of the sensible world. It is not a clear projection of words and rectangles on a clean white wall. Nothing is clear, and nothing is being represented at all. I am an ontoworker. My business is to reconfigure and to materialise, not to represent. This story is a material performance driven by physical acts of will. I can't tell you how this indeterminate world is taking shape. (Or when you might be able to take concrete steps to move in). But I do know that the sweating, the bucket-carrying, the rubble-shifting, the machete sharpening are for real. We don't need 'to know the positive content of an alternative form of social life before setting off on a journey,' says Povinelli (2011, 189). Slowly, these worlds will start to make sense (Purcell 2016), and until some perceptual structure emerges from the indeterminacy, I can sense the world exists in embodied form, as the dirt (which can kill me) under my fingernails, and the will to keep on.



The bathroom, Playa, Havana, 2018.

Trouble, everyday

The world articulates itself differently.

— KAREN BARAD, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*

Dawn. I reach out to touch the fluorescent glass tube of the bathroom light and keep turning it gently by a few degrees until I see a spark of light in the top left-hand corner. (There are no light switches. I turn the bulbs on by twisting them in and out of their fittings). A moment later the light comes on. I know the mains water has not yet come because it announces itself with a savage gurgling so I fetch a criollo²³⁴ plastic bucket of water that I three-quarter filled the day before from the patio. I leave it in the shower area which has been formed by building a low wall out of concrete across the middle of the bathroom. It is winter so I also fill a large criollo aluminium saucepan with water and, on the fourth criollo match, I successfully light the gas. The water heats quickly. The gas supply here is strong. With two charred hand-made pan holders I carefully carry the saucepan to the bathroom and add the steaming water to the bucket. The bottom inch is milky white

²³⁴ Of Cuban manufacture, particularly referring to cottage industries and recycled matter.

with magnesium and limescale deposits, as are the shower tiles. I stand in a large criollo plastic bowl and test the water temperature with my fingertips. I like it as warm as I can bear. I fill a flaking criollo plastic jug, inclining it gently to enjoy a slow, lush cascade. I soap up, rinse off and, to finish, tip the dregs of the bucket over me. I flush the soapy water down the unflushed toilet bowl with a gesture that makes a satisfying glug. I put on some overstretched underwear that I hacked back into shape with strong, impatient stitching and, to finish, opaque tights from the 1990s and a 1960s brown nylon petticoat dress which are holding up well although the lace needs a mend.

Every day, as ontoworker, I keep trying to respond to what matters in, and for, the ongoing everyday performance of the world (Barad 2007). Every day, I try to keep up with the trouble, and my ontowork feels like barely a response at all.

CONCLUSION

Ontocrisis

I have been chasing the scent of a problem that I have come to regard as an *ontological crisis* which, viewed from a sensible perspective, *does not exist*. By this I mean that while neoliberal capital continues to fuel the planet's escalating *material* predicament, it also bequeaths an insensible ontological condition that is locking us out of the ability to respond, at least not in any way that tackles the trouble's true proportions or, worse, which doesn't bolster the sensible regime. I started out by addressing the trouble as a material question, which it evidently is, but it's the ontological question, and our very insensibility to it, that has come to trouble me the most. A material trouble can not be addressed and a response can not materialise if the trouble, and possible modes of response, are not perceived to exist.

Despite growing public perception of the cracks, the sensible order of neoliberal capital still hangs together by the consensus that there is no wholesale alternative. This consensus, which we still perform and police habitually in our everyday lives, *even unwillingly when we see through the cracks, and when we beg to disagree*, keeps aborting the possibilities of alternative modes of being and ways to world a world. Worlds outside the sensible one may 'cease to unexist'. They are becoming palpable, but we need to slip out of deadly daily habits and make the alternatives materialise through everyday actions. The idea of neoliberal capital, like the idea of Fidel Castro, who 'physically disappeared' in 2016, doesn't need killing off per se, but the possibility of its 'physical disappearance' must be beyond doubt (Purcell 2009, Connolly 2013). We need to make neoliberal capitalism physically disappear from everyday life, and we can.

Here's one example of how the sensible sell has purchase on our lives: the case of organic waxed cotton food wrappers, and I choose a minor evil precisely to make my point. These wraps are *for* capital in ways which are beyond being simply *for* the consumerist economy and sensible narratives of 'green growth'. They reinforce humanist, individualist, ethical agendas that you deserve, and must have, this novel materialisation of a fashionable eco-imaginary. They unexist the possibility of cutting up an old dress or worn out sheet, melting a candle stump and making your own. They unexist the thought that there are alternative ways of storing food with

what you already have, damp newspaper for greens, any old clean cloth for cheese. They unexist the thought of what will become of all that nasty plastic thrown into the mythical land of away, or of the wisdom of making virgin cotton when we have mountains of old cotton of which we're struggling to get rid. And they make us *feel* like we are doing what is humanly possible. Our knowledge of the material trouble expands everyday, but like microplastics, the sensible seeps into almost everything we are and do. Its internal algorithms control our preferences and our needs. Our everyday lives and response mechanisms are sensible all over. The sensible order has our lifeworld rigged.²³⁵

The task of alter-ontologies (Papadopoulos 2010b) is to *undo givenness* not (only) in thinking (Barad 2007) but *as it materialises in everyday experience*, by reclaiming insensible realms of possibility as available, existing modes of response. For Rancière, the policing of the sensible order takes place as a 'distribution of what is given to our experience, of what we can do' (Lie and Rancière 2006). Alter-ontology is the cut that makes the alternatives exist. Disruption at this ontological level is constituted through the *everyday refusal of being, doing and thinking for neoliberal capital*, and the *everyday affirmation of being, doing and thinking for planetary liveability*. It is the materialisation of alternatives as concrete lifeworlds. It is the commitment to bypass and hack sensible logic in order to sense the worlds and possibilities that the sensible order unexists. It is the bringing into physical existence of the im/possible and the un/thinkable, the improper and the wrong, of the parts that don't count for capital. It is the configuring of a counter-logic in which what makes sense for neoliberal capital ceases to make any sense at all. It's about reconfiguring notions of what counts, what works, what is doable, bearable, mendable, and what, and when, is enough.

The conditions for escape into alter-ontology are vexed because the sensible stranglehold is the unavoidable point of departure and, by default, the sensible will compromise and confound every exit move. But sensible is where we must start from as sensible is who we are. It is as sensible people with sensible lives that we invite emergent sensitivities of an otherwise to resonate. As my ontoexperiments attest, in/sensible possibilities will emerge when a sensible thing is refused. This feeling for invisible exits and sneaking out through cracks is what the ontotales flesh out. With each refusal, a slither of sensible givenness can erode, and the next step

²³⁵ See Pignarre and Stengers (2011) *Capitalist Sorcery* on our 'vulnerability' to fall under the sensible spell of capitalism.

departs from a slightly less sensible place. An alternative sensed in the nether reaches of the there-but-not-there can creep into intimacy, it can seep into and become a world (Stewart 2010). Un/thinkable, im/possible things start to count, and to reproduce themselves in new everyday modes of life.

Of course, untold material disobedience is already going on,²³⁶ and ontological disturbance is reconfiguring what is possible, sayable, available to think with and, more generally, making alternatives cease to unexist. Since I started this thesis, mending has become 'a thing'. Mending is becoming sayable. Mending is starting to count. Menders are busy populating lifeworlds. 'Capitalism' has become inordinately more sayable as a dirty word, and 'anticapitalism' as a hopeful and practicable one. Alter-ontologies gather ground as modes of noncapitalism materialise through everyday experience. A world is being populated with billions of humble gestures. Armies of mended socks.

First responder

I tell this account of ontowork as a first responder to the scene of ontological crisis. There are onlookers standing around, but barely anyone jumping in. Few sensible folk volunteer, as I have, to let go of existing ways to world a world and to hold together a self. But more and more voices (Barad, Connolly 2013, Papadopoulos 2010b, Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, Purcell 2016, Shotwell 2016 and others) acknowledge the ontological labour required to respond to the material disorder.²³⁷ I believe I am trying to do what these scholars are calling for, and to do so more resolutely perhaps than even they themselves suggest, as a life role, as politics, with every breath. I have abandoned the safe and certain ground of knowable thinking, professional being and rigorous doing. I have put my self and loved ones at risk to keep struggling to understand why sensible modes of living are so intractable and so bent on ending life. I have foregone variety, luxury, immediacy, mobility, convenience, connectivity, knowability, familiarity, predictability, comfort, companionship, ease, social status, safety, speed and more to affirm a chance to

²³⁶ Consider, for example, Incredible Edible, started by Pamela Warhurst and Mary Clear in the north of England around the illegal practice of planting foodstuffs in public space. Planting edible food in un/thinkable places now makes a great deal of sense and has become a growing international movement (<https://www.incredibleedible.org.uk>).

²³⁷ Shotwell writes that '[a]lmost all the people I know who are doing activist work, effective or not, are trying to move beyond the epistemic and into the ontic—we are attempting to prefigure something' (Shotwell 2016, 196).

escape sensible givens, to erase my sensible self and pursue a political, improper life becoming otherwise.

As a first responder, I am a tiny human speck confronting a mammoth more than human task. This is illegitimate (un)scholarly triage for deathly times (Haraway 2004), and I am unapologetic for arriving unrehearsed and undisciplined, or for entering political terrain vulnerable and naive. In troubling the present condition as if our lives depend on it, my untethered experiments take me to unsettling destinations, and I/we are constantly coming undone. I perform ontowork with an unknowing integrity and incommensurate rigour which are resistant to representation, before and beyond the ethics and metrics of traditional scholarship. Response-ability is ontowork's rigour — deciding what really matters and learning how to respond. Ontoexperiments are both differential mattering practices to decide which matters are worth pursuing with rigour, and performative practices to engage with these matters (Barad 2007). In this way, ontowork follows an insensible discipline, determining for itself what is possible, what can be made to count, and what is good enough when scholarship puts planetary liveability over and above the humanist rules of disciplinary rigour. I and the thesis perform our alter-ontology as a prototype of scholarship which refuses to be *for* neoliberal capital and which affirms that alternative modes of scholarship can and do exist. It's an intense mode of commitment to enrol my self and my relations in an indeterminate process of becoming *for* more than human liveable worlds.

My account shares experiences which unexist in the scholarly canon, and I have had to learn to use sensible language to say in/sensible things. It has been an impossible labour to translate non-cognitive, non-verbal sensings into a written account that may be heard as argument and not as the mumbling of an undisciplined female complaint. I have been living painfully beyond the threshold of knowing how to say that which eludes me (Povinelli 2012), because I believe deeply that part of my role is to speak. An alter-ontology materialises as I write and, like the physical world I am building around me, it's a bare beginning. It vibrates with dissonance and resonance, as sensible force-fields are wrenched inside out. My hope is that these experiences do politics by materialising in everyday lives beyond my own.

There are other theses inside/outside this one and, to the best of my ability, I have tried to stay with the most constitutive and vital threads. Likewise, many alternative

possibilities exist to further conceptualise ontoexperiment and an inside/outside politics of matter beyond the thesis, obvious routes to follow being the trails of Derrida, Whitehead, Bataille and Deleuze and Guattari. Compelling theorists for reinforcing and reconfiguring my thinking, are Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2018) and Arturo Escobar's (2018) work on Southern epistemologies and ontologies. Together with the work of postcolonial and third world feminists, writers such as these are likely to clarify how to translate lessons from Cuba in and for the Global North.

Other 'theorists of possibility' (Roelvink 2015) provide abundant avenues for pursuing the thought of mending as an experimental ontology for alternative worlds, including: Roelvink and Gibson-Graham (2015) on the 'politics of the subject' for noncapitalist economies and possible, posthuman alternative worlds; Papadopoulos' (2018) technoscience project of experiment, alterontologies, and more-than-social movements; Shukaitis (2016) for how to collectivise ontoexperiment and for kin to find each other; Massumi's (2018) postcapitalist manifesto on the reconfiguring of value; Werrett's (in press) history of thrift and imperfection in material experiment; Shotwell (2016) on constitutive imperfection and impurity for the generative possibilities of abiotic, abyssal matter; and Eburne's (2018) 'outsider theory' on how outside politics takes place by taking seriously and following through on inappropriate/d ideas.

My greater concern now, though, is not to further the theory but to translate, share and collectivise the findings in the inside/outside world. Such a 'work of translation,' Rancière claims, shows how 'empirical stories and philosophical discourses translate each other' (2007, 280). Like Rancière, I want 'to produce a discourse that would be readable only for those who would make their own translation from the point of view of their own adventure' (ibid.) and I think of this, with Phelan, as translation into imperceptibility, so the ontoworker's song can avoid recapture and resonate loudly through the excess. The thinkers I have been thinking with need translation, for children, for activists, for all inappropriate/d others, and into alternative curricula and primers for posthuman everyday life.²³⁸ I want to help dissenting others to break with sensible ties, and for alter-ontologies to gain material ground and collective traction. My desire is to bring escapee kin into relation given that, as I discover in chapter 5, this is no adventure to experience alone, especially

²³⁸ As a start, I have turned Barad's (2015) brittle star into a bedtime story for my daughter.

knowing we are many, and that we are so much stronger when we find each other (Halberstam 2013). Noncapitalism requires that social ties are not only extensive, but flexible in the extreme, to a degree which operates on a common sense level in Cuba, but which is unrecognisable to most global Northerners. Working collectively requires agile give and take, mutual dependence and response, so that emergent everyday infrastructures can hold together when put under stress, and, crucially, so that convenient capital solutions are not resorted to as a 'safety net'.

The more than human 99.99%

The translation work I'm involved in is one which spans more than human communities (Papadopoulos 2014a, de Sousa Santos 2007). It means turning into speaking parts the 'noise' of holey socks, wrong cookers, improper showers, glitchy dresses and the talented critters, large and small, who steal the limelight in my natureculture shock. Along the course of this inquiry, I've looked for generative ways to think with the material force-field and give matter a voice, to reduce to the most practical terms the debate of how matter does politics in everyday life.²³⁹ The operative question is, given that the human ability to relate to matter has been severely compromised, how does matter bring *itself* into relation? I've considered material agency as a pulling (Bennett 2010), a luring (Yusoff 2013, from Whitehead), a spooking (Barad 2012), a tickling (Booth and Williams 2014), a kicking back, (Barad 1998) and a boomerang effect (Connolly 2013), alongside my own empirical findings that it can nag, unsettle, saturate and it most certainly can bite (back). Some matter, at least, has teeth.

Alter-ontologies emerge when humans start noticing, and responding to, their more than human kin, when the spotlights switch from self-obsessed anthropocentric human selves — a miniscule 0.01% of life on earth (Yinon et al 2018)) — to the massive more than human 99.99% (and that's just biomass, the incommensurate nonlife is on top of that). Alter-ontologies are the more than human occupy (Papadopoulos 2014b), reclaiming the 99.99%, living as if 99.99% of global biomass matters. Reclaiming is a vital aspect of the new social movements (Papadopoulos et al 2008, Papadopoulos 2010a). It is the work of bringing (back) into relation. Alter-ontologies take shape in and with in/sensible relations. The

²³⁹ Over the last decade, questions of material agency have risen to prominence across scholarly fields, including feminist science studies, political theory, philosophy, geography which this thesis has barely had chance to acknowledge (Alaimo and Hekman (eds) 2008; Braun and Whatmore (eds) 2010; Coole and Frost (eds) 2010; Dolphijn and van der Tuin (eds) 2012).

process cannot originate alone, as an individual(ist) journey towards a more than human destination, but is a collective becoming with more than human Others which are a ‘necessary ingredient of the experiment’ (Stengers 2010). They are necessary companions to leave the sensible ordering behind, as my own critical critter relations make clear. Stengers’ interest is in how nonhumans ‘force thinking’ (ibid.). My interest is in how they (also) force being and doing, in how nonhuman relations force alter-ontologies to emerge.

Talent Shows, Stagedives And Moshpits

Politics is when you create a kind of stage where you include your enemy.
— JACQUES RANCIÈRE, *The Politics of Aesthetics*

Concerning how matter performs politics, I have come to think that it is not just *how* it brings itself into relation, but also *when*. The nightly variety show that the critters put on in ‘my’ home has led me to believe, as Braun and Whatmore (2010) do, that ‘things are eventful’ (see also Connolly 2013 on the politics of events). And that, in turn, takes me back to Rancière’s idea that politics is performed by anyone (which I extend to any *thing*) who can take the stage.²⁴⁰ Booth and Williams have similarly enrolled Rancière’s idea of politics to think with ‘more-than-human happenings’ (2014, 190) in ways which reconfigure the talent of speech and what constitutes a stage. They cite Rancière’s own clarification that:

‘political dissensus is not the accomplishment of linguistic capacity. It is, first of all, the framing of the stage on which the argument may be heard as an argument’ (2003, 9 in Booth and Williams 2014).

In this scenario, the more than human actors reframe what the stage is. They dictate where and when the politics gets to happen. My critter co-habitants reclaim the house as a stage, teasing my humanist delusions of safety and separability through the ceiling’s gaps. Politics happens through our direct visual recognition, through our touch — trying to, and trying not to touch, and through the indeterminate excess of critter debris and stench. Matter has the world as its stage. Matter can bomb into sense experience in places and moments you’d never expect.

²⁴⁰ The ‘stage’ is a common figure in material politics. Puig de la Bellacasa (2001) cites Latour’s (2008) staging and restaging of the liveliness of things, and Henke (2000) and Graham and Thrift (2007) cite Goffman’s (1959) theory of ‘frontstaging’ and ‘backstaging’ of parts of the built environment when a thing breaks down.

Another reading is that my critter kin do politics through their 'stage presence'. We have been sharing a world always already but I don't notice until they give a commanding performance, one which commands my full attention, and which forces action as well as thought. It forces me to reconfigure my sense of self in relation to the performers, and forces upon me new modes of living in their/our world. In this reading, material politics takes place as a more than human talent show in which the successful contestants, those who get to do the politics, are the ones that make us sit up, the ones that go viral, the ones we will never forget.

My preferred figure to think with is more than human stagediving. Stagediving of the human kind happens when an anonymous element of the moshpit escapes its confines in an excess of high-spirited insurgence and bursts uninvited onto the stage. Sensible bouncers may be on guard to manage the human surplus but it frequently transpires that the excess part which has no part manages to stagedive back into the crowd, at which it dissolves back into its number. Everyone bears witness to the event.

With more than human stagediving, insensible matter of indeterminate origin and unknowable political consequence breaks onto the stage and has a political moment. Things which aren't supposed to come onstage, perhaps extraordinary, unimaginable things, adventitiously do so. In the more than human moshpit, we are all moshing together in energetic entanglement. It's 'a demonstration of the whole that we already are' (Booth and Williams 2014, 191). One of our number breaks ranks to give an improper, unscheduled performance when it has no business whatsoever in the limelight. Once the rogue element jumps onstage, it's impossible not to notice, even if the observers can't identify what it is or what it might do. The sensible police can't suppress it. We can't advert our gaze, we're glued to see what happens next. Will it lunge at me? At my loved ones? At my world? An indeterminate impact occurs. We may or may not be hit. Once the commotion has died down, no-one can pretend it hasn't happened, or guarantee that the aftermath leaves the everyday of moshpit life untouched. The uncontrollable flash of a material remainder lingers in retinas and flesh, an omen of surplus or wrong,²⁴¹ a sign that matter is perhaps not as dumb as we think.

²⁴¹ An interesting avenue to continue the idea of the sign of a wrong is Legacy Russell's (2012) glitch feminism.

The more than human moshpit is a violent world for humans to make a life in, punctuated by forceful clashes as material and sensory events collide. The 'noisy populace' of the more than human 99.99% is abuzz with dissonant feedback (Booth and Williams 2014). And everyday experience is reconfigured by the stagedivers' near misses and direct hits. When such more than human happenings *keep* happening they have a constitutive effect. The frontiers of matter become more boisterous, material trouble mushrooms into sense experience, material violence becomes more everyday. Political matter's 'eventfulness' translates into the ontological disturbance of everyday existence, as material *and* sensory events.

In violent conversation

So does the more than human stagediver have the talent to speak, to say a concrete thing? Throughout this thesis I've been trying to speak up for matter, but I sense increasingly that the material trouble is also speaking for itself. Such a conviction requires reconfiguring Rancière's own sensible parameters of who or what has the talent to speak, and what counts as speech. Booth and Williams (2014) explore this very question in relation to wildfires. Discussing 'Black Saturday', the most fatal day of the Australian wildfires in 2009 which claimed 173 lives, they argue that the fire articulates itself in ways which we can no longer pass off as noise. In their view, more than human speakers don't have to talk *articulately* to be heard to carry an argument, but *relationally*.

Reframing what counts as speech requires dropping the idea it's a human-only talent, as well as any imperialist fancies that Others might address us in our own tongue. For speech to count, to be heard as argument rather than noise, it must articulate a message that can be received and translated into, or that can force, thought. As Booth and Williams attest, it's not the mode of articulation *per se*, but our ability to relate to it which counts. The articulate speech of politics, then, is that which brings a listener into relation. The specific talent of the more than human orator is the ability to strike up a conversation.

To demonstrate how the more than human world is already in conversation with everyday humans in everyday life, (and not just with ontoworkers in ontoexperiment), I want to tie together these concluding thoughts with a powerful eye witness account, again of wildfires, but this time from California, 2017. The emotive piece, by environmental studies teacher, Christina Nichol (2018), sets forth eloquently the loquaciousness of the material trouble, and, besides giving a

pertinent record of a more than human political moment, it also substantiates the wider findings of my ontoexperiments — that entering into relation with more than human worlds forces alternative modes of being, doing and thought.

In parallel with my account, Nichol's story pivots on the frustrated will to perform response-ability to the planetary predicament. Willing herself and her students to respond in ways which don't echo her father's alienating narratives of climate change, she signs up for a pioneering environmental awareness course in an attempt, echoing my own experience, to do everything *humanly* possible to be able to respond to the *more than human* problem, which, she admits, amounts to very little. And then the wildfires of 2017 sweep through California *and* her human(ist) impasse, devastating the sensible mechanisms that held a world in place, reducing the sensible world of matter to a plane of ash.²⁴² Memories of the old mode of existence float back down to earth in parched scraps of text. New scripts emerge. New things make sense; not to eat gluten free or organic, she says, but simply to eat, and to share with those in need, not to rebuild the same house, but a new more ecological house, based on permaculture principles even, or in a tiny space.

Her account corroborates my own, of the *human* inability to self-mobilise until the trouble bites back, until we enter into relation with the *more than human* vulnerabilities and risks which sensible humanist mechanisms have unexisted. The trouble becomes more than fire, and more than climate change. More than human relations suddenly *cease to unexist*. Booth and Williams capture this point deftly.

'In the wildfires of Black Saturday the agency bound up within fire and survival emerged as something radically beyond humanistic reckoning. No longer was it possible to survive (let alone manage or fight) fire with "humanist delusions" (Franklin et al., 2006, p. 570) when over a period of 24 hours a world of more-than-human dimensions became apparent' (ibid. pp).

A significant detail is that, so it appears, the wildfires torched the humanist delusions of ecologists like Nichol, climate change denialists and all in between. This more than human happening is what Rancièrè scholar Davide Panagia terms the 'improper event of equality' (2009, 305). It forms the basis of what Rancièrè

²⁴² The photographs which accompany the article are as telling as the prose.

means by emancipation. It is the moment that posthuman politics takes place. '[C]riteria of distinction (like propriety, class, privilege, title, etc.) can no longer hold sway,' he says (ibid.). The line of separability between human and more than human is erased. The wildfire constitutes a 'theatre of visibility' for insensible more than human entanglements (ibid.). Everyone lands in the moshpit where the 'debate on sensible givens' (Rancière 2003, 2, cited in Booth and Williams 2014) and the rebuilding of lifeworlds ensues.

What happens next is the key for my argument, and it substantiates Rancière's claim that politics has taken place. The improper event of equality constitutes a sudden erasure of givenness and an obligation to live on in a reconfigured world with what is to hand. Everyday experience will veer back towards the sensible force-field, but not in totality. Some things have simply ceased to make sense, such as planting highly flammable eucalypts, or driving large cars and living in luxury homes. Significant decisions to become otherwise are made, like building a low impact home, and one decision can spark another, sidestepping sensible preferences in noncapitalist directions (Connolly 2013). The old sensible world, as it was, is not, and cannot be repaired. The material trouble mobilises the reconfiguring of self and world. Alter-ontologies can emerge from the ongoing conversation with more than human lifeworlds, extending the logic that neoliberal capital makes no sense *throughout* everyday life.

This thesis wants to initiate more than human conversations *before* a sobering stagedive from militant matter does the necessary introductions for us, as wildfire, critter co-habitation, or a plastiphobe's plastic-dependent newborn (Roberts 2013) clearly have. It's trying to make more than human relations palpable *without* prior need for a catastrophic material event. Evidently, this thesis isn't a conversation *about* the politics of matter. It's a stage on which to perform it. This is a conversation *between* me and a more than human lifeworld, speaking directly with you. Wildfire and climate change and disturbing critters and ghost taxis and inside-outside dresses and wrong cookers and improper showers and three-legged chairs and tiny pieces of paper and holey socks and ontoworkers — we all have the more than human talent to speak. This is our testament. Our political moment is happening.

The ontomanual opens with the epigraph: 'Her performance moves people. Her politics are truly effective' (Stephenson and Papadopoulos 2006b). Now, if our performance moves *you*, then, our politics *are* effective.

Getting over ourselves

Much of my own part of the performance lies in utterly undramatic acts like the daily bucket shower. I could paint a more sassy picture of the noncapitalist good life, as a buzzing affirmation of amazing becomings. But whatever form an alter-ontology takes, it's a mode of living with what there is, of needing no more, and unceremoniously getting over any lingering desire for a pushbutton power shower or whatever other mode of warm water delivery a sensible trigger demands. A bucket shower can also be understood as an 'improper event of equality'. Who am I to get a better shower than my global kin, or a better bucket, or less toxic water, in more plentiful supply? A bucket shower is not so much an ecological solution as an ontological one. It is a mode of resolving basic hygiene needs when a proper shower is unavailable. It is part of the experience of getting over myself, of getting over the compulsion for properness and the sense of entitlement to a world, of washing the sensible out of the self.

*If our aim is planetary liveability, we must start getting over ourselves.*²⁴³ We must affirm the 'absurdity' of our sense of disentanglement from more than human worlds (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, 2). We must stop obsessing with the trouble and start obsessing with ourselves (Purcell 2016). The trouble is reproduced in us. We perform it non-stop. The givenness materialises in our bodies and our everyday lives.

Mending the sensible means getting over our sensible selves, the over-consumerist, over-indulged, over-worked, over-tired, individualist, pernickety, fickle, superficial, impatient, demanding, intolerant, inattentive, enraged, time-poor, precious selves we have become in spite of ourselves, the selves which are unwittingly working to maintain deathly relations, the selves which weld us to a sensible life. This mode of response does not equate to the ways in which neoliberal mechanisms routinely shift the responsibility onto the individual to clean up sensible wrongs so that sensible worlds can carry on. It is, on the contrary, an affirmation that an individual *can* muster the response-ability to escape these self-serving mechanisms so that sensible worlds *cannot* carry on.

Getting over a sensible self means an ongoing disentangling of self from sensible givens, which materialises as an unravelling of the self. It is the experience of

²⁴³ See Grosz (2005a, 2011) on self-overcoming and becoming other, thinking with Bergson and Deleuze.

undoing and becoming undone (Grosz 2011). It can be deeply unsettling and disorientating but it is *not* 'letting a self go', not a lowering of standards, of ambition, of status. It is a reconfiguring of what standards, ambition, status and a 'good life' means, as well as questioning what we covet certain qualities *for*. Like motherhood, which has catalysed the un/doing of my ontoworking self, it is a fundamental realignment of the priorities that dominate the constitution of the self.²⁴⁴ Mending the sensible is about getting over the innocence of life before sensing our entanglements and response-abilities, (to a child, or to a more than human world) and losing ourselves in learning how to make new worlds to care for more than one self. The crux is to establish lifebuoys of affirmation (as a child is to a mother) so that when deeply engrained experiences or set of beliefs are let go of (a pre-maternal life; a sensible life), within the excruciating experience of becoming undone, there remains a solid and unquestionable presence of an affirmation of what we are *for* (a child; a liveable, noncapitalist life), which forces possible ways to become otherwise out of im/possible situations. Departing from this affirmation, *mending the sensible is the ongoing ontoexperiment to achieve material and sensory alignment between everyday experience and what we are for.*

It has taken seven summers to compile this text, seven increasingly hot summers in which the existence of climate crisis has expanded into sense perception but, in the main, incarnate relations with deathly capital are yet to be sensed. Being pragmatic, it will take generations to untie, and re-tie, the knots of the sensible noose, but the trouble won't wait. It's brewing magnitudes faster than we can adapt, and we'll become as vulnerable as a white snow hare in a brown place with no snow (Pfeiffer 2018). In the meantime, we await the trouble stuck in ontocrisis with the response button on 'snooze'. The present moment is lingering in the prequel to response, time only *for* a sensible agenda, eyes and fingers *for* a screen, half an eye on the trouble unfolding afar. Then, suddenly, out of the nonexistent nowhere, militant matter will stagedive our snoozetime and delete the comfort and safety of the humanist refuge we call a home.

We can never be properly prepared for matter's political moments. Matter's eventfulness will cut us together/apart. It will be our undoing and our redoing

²⁴⁴ The experience of motherhood is of deep significance to the outcome of my ontoexperiments, although I do not pursue this here. See Ruddick on the 'distinctive cognitive capacities, metaphysical attitudes, and conceptions of virtue' of the maternal (2009, 305), Liss (2009) on thinking (m)otherwise, and Baraitser (2009) on the radical potential of transformation that motherhood constitutes.

anew. We will find ourselves doing unthinkable things, sticking unrecognisable selves and worlds together, fashioning lifeworlds in brown sticky tape. We will commit acts of ontological impropriety, becoming other(ed) on an un/thinkable, im/possible scale. Material politics will force us to become Other. Militant matter will force other worlds to exist.

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