

Insensible worlds: postrelational ethics, indeterminacy and the (k)nots of relating

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Within the context of biodiversity loss, this paper asks the question: What *is* response? In asking how responsibility is raised as a sensible question, I argue there is a need to address the insensible, immaterial, and untimely, dimensions of matter and relations. I suggest that 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, and help us think *between natures* to promote a noncontemporaneous ethics of apprehension. Taking up Jean-Luc Nancy's concept of sense and specifically his ideas around the direction of sense, the insensible is argued as a realm of possibility within the praxis of social and affective norms of sense that may release other modes of being into being. In this sense, this is a paper about sense as matter forming, as cohabitation, and as an exclusionary tactic that bears upon the cohabitation of worlds. I argue that an 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 around such diffuse, recalcitrant and dislocated issues as biodiversity loss, new forms of biotechnological life and climate change. I conclude that if the insensible alerts us to the work of sense in securing the bringing into relation, its configurations, and its a priori orientations, then it also points towards modes of exclusion and forms of resistance in our thinking with nonhuman others that are before and beyond relationality.

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‘Responsibility is not an obligation that the subject chooses but rather an incarnate relation that precedes the intentionality of consciousness. Responsibility is not a calculation to be performed. It is a relation always already integral to the world’s ongoing intra-active becoming and not-becoming. It is an iterative (re)opening up to, an enabling of responsiveness. Not through the realisation of some existing possibility, but through the iterative reworking of im/possibility, an on-going rupture...’ (Barad 2010: 265).

‘as we can see by the etymology of the word *response*, it is given guarantee, a promise, an engagement. A given guarantee, a promise, an engaged *responsibility*. Someone is, first of all, less a being-present than an engaged presence—engaged perhaps first in nothing other than being-*here*, exposed *there*. In this sense, for example a mere rock “responds” just as much as a man named Peter: there is being exposed in a crowded world’ (Nancy 1997: 71).

Often, the question asked in the context of responsibility is, *how to respond?* Or, *how to say it?* (Harrison 2007) as action, representation or affirmation. But, before this *how* of social action or articulation there is another, interior question. A step before... What *is* response? And, what is this engaged presence already *toward* when it asks its question of *how* to respond? That is to ask, how is responsibility raised as a sensible question? What are the immaterial dimensions that travel along the ‘iterative (re)opening up to, an enabling of responsiveness’ (Barad 2010: 265)? How is this engaged presence already (pre)configured towards certain sensible resolutions of what is at stake? I ask this question specifically to speak to cohabitation with nonhuman others. And, I ask it as a political and ethical question about how to relate, to write, to sense, and to make intelligible that which is beyond me. That is, this question of response is directed towards biotic subjects¹ that are already exposed, but whose exposure will never be recognised as such, and who will disappear without perceptible trace (what is referred to in ecological literatures as “anonymous extinction”). In this sense, this is a paper about sense as matter forming, as cohabitation, and as an exclusionary tactic in a crowded world.

While the *making sensible* of biotic subjects is a basic tenant of conservation practices and taxonomic orders, every attempt to do so, simultaneously acknowledges the impossibility of such a project through the excess of “insensible subjects” that always await description, nomination or apprehension. In spite of, (and, perhaps, because of...) 250 years of taxonomic classification and

over 1.2 million species already catalogued, at the last estimated count, some 86% of the species on Earth and 91% in the Ocean (give or take 1.3 million) remain imperceptible (Mora et al. 2011). Of this great unknown, this insensible world, biodiversity loss names (for the most part) a surplus to intelligibility: a surplus of material and immaterial forces, and a surplus of insensible entities. This knowledge surplus of biotic worlds is not simply a problematic that marks ecology, but its overwhelming condition. If we accept the point that sense, and the insensible registers from which it becomes, is an activation in the exscription of entities—we must begin to think a politics or praxis of sense that is at once contemporaneous with the becoming of entities *and* simultaneously conscious of non-contemporaneity (the torques of temporality and indeterminacy).

The insensible (as it will be considered in this paper) can be thought of as a realm of possibility within the praxis of social and affective norms of sense, which govern the sphere of intelligibility in the making of biotic subjects. Within this field of imperceptibility, as the overwhelming condition of what biodiversity *is*, I want to explore the possibilities and quandaries of making a commitment to staving off biodiversity loss through the concept of the *insensible*. I will suggest that thinking along the edge of the insensible might offer a way into an expanded realm of relationality that queries the exclusions that govern the sphere of intelligibility, and might help us think *between natures* to promote a noncontemporaneous ethics of apprehension of the biotic world. This is, to take up the question of ‘enabling responsiveness’ (Barad 2010: 256) as an ethico-political question of sense. The argument to be made here is that the apprehension of nonhuman subjectivity, as a form of recognition and mode of materialization, needs to be radically reworked in relation to the temporal and immaterial dimensions of matter if we are to begin to understand how to be responsible to that which disappears without trace.

To put it another way: there exists an urgent need to find modes of recognition beyond “our” abilities to make nonhuman worlds intelligible if biodiversity loss is, for the most part, lost to sense (this is not just a problem of recalcitrance or immanence, but of a radical nonrelationality). This is difficult work, because it runs contrary to the project of intelligibility; a modality of thought that

moves against the priority of our senses to attempt to release other modalities of being that are not our own, and will never be fully sensible to us. The recognition of that which cannot, and will not, be brought to sense requires a response, then, that is not configured through a mode of auto-affectation, but a mode of relating that is indifferent to “us” and holds fast to that indifference. What is at stake, perhaps, in biodiversity loss is not a grand knowledge project of the biotic world, whose limits are configured around the accumulating potential of biological description, but a project that attempts to configure parallel universes of sense, which are in excess of knowledge, but nonetheless reside in and beyond the virtual recesses of those knowledge-forming practices.² Importantly, what is needed in apprehending biodiversity loss is a mode of recognition that does not try to resolve this quandary with the false equivalences of capital, such as “offsetting” and “ecosystem services” (Yusoff 2011b). The implication of a mode of thought that does not return to itself, and is never entirely confident of what it does and to whom, is the loosening of a notion of agency as the basis for social action without a parallel disavow of responsibility.

I want to take up Jean-Luc Nancy’s concept of sense and specifically his ideas around the direction of sense—it’s being *to-*wards something—to substantiate a concept of the *insensible*, which I argue might offer a way to think with imperceptible and mutable things. I proffer this concept in the context of a substantial body of (trans)disciplinary work that is in various ways concerned with relational ontologies and the knotty work of relations. While I recognise that the relational diagnostic has achieved much in bringing to the fore forms of intra-actions, specific interdependencies and obligation in nonhuman worlds and experimenting with forms of recognition and modes of inhabitation, it has often been characterised by the possibility and promise of relation, the productive ethic of a social bond that is often, by default, less concerned with what may be hidden within and by those relations (that which is nested in the knots of relating). An understanding of relationality as productive of entities or as “phenomena,” as Karen Barad has it (2007; 2010), has changed the way we think and configure those things (that are never autonomous) like subjects, objects, *relata* (which become in concert, never just *in* relation, but *with*³ and *of*

relations, bound together through the tying that co-constitutes lifeworlds). These forms of recognition and stress on intra-agency have been crucial in how we think practices of cohabitation in less deadly ways and specifically, what it means to be implicated in that production (for better or worse). Furthermore, it has importantly established how we might conceive of a world always, already under the conditions and obligations of cohabitation, *a priori* (Butler 2011).

Equally, these experiments and entanglements with nonhuman others have provided a much-needed riposte to the recognition of nonhumans in capitalist systems of valuation that prioritise modes of equivalence, exchangeability, atomisation, and flatten of forms of difference. As Felix Guattari suggests, capitalism is the ‘great reducer of ontological polyvocality’ (Guattari 1995: 29), against which a politics of new modes of valorisation, which do not treat all forms as equivalent, must be raised. Understandably, then, the ethical concern of much work on nonhumans has been to put into relation that which capitalist modes of valuation articulate as untied, unconnected and available for exploitation without recourse to responsibility. But, for all the valorisation of our intractable inheritances and knotted ties—of being in concert—there still remains questions about how we make these ties durable, about how these knots are held fast *beyond* ourselves. That is, how we think the time(s) of responsiveness. This *beyond* has two temporal qualities. Firstly, there is a question of *durability*; how to secure forms of recognition as lasting commitments and how to understand the durability of intra-actions beyond the intra-action itself (the insecticides that exceed their short life as bio-deterrent to persist within bodies of matter to continue to redirect the sense of organisms). There is no simple answer to what a properly posthumanist or *noncontemporaneous ethic* that promotes duration might look like, if duration is understood as being not about authority, but a commitment to taking sides (for the long haul). Nor, how such an ethic might deal with the outstanding torques of temporality and indeterminacy that make such commitments suspect. Guattari suggested the re-composition of a “progressive cartography” of an expanded ecological consciousness that should be more modest and more audacious: more modest, he says in renouncing the pretensions of durability and authority and more audacious in taking sides (Guattari 1995: 122).

With Guattari's caution in mind, and that of relational ontologists who suggest that nothing proceeds the relating, I want to propose that four modalities of duration⁴ might be at stake in thinking with insensible subjects that bear on our understanding of how sense prefigures time:

1. Duration, not as authority, nor homogeneity, but conceived as a system of 'heterogeneous valorisation' (Guattari 1995: 122) that makes an on-going commitment to enable responsiveness along the cuts of relation;
2. Duration, conceived of in terms of relations that both proceed and exceed *this* engagement or *that* thing. This concept of ethical duration is not to be conceived as one duration, which would imply, what Nancy calls the 'immobile duration' (Nancy 1997: 67) of time understood as being only for the one, but rather, modalities of duration for the more than one, which have differing durations and patterns of interference.
3. Duration, which acknowledges the anachronistic time of immaterial forces within material operations (Grosz 2010: 50)⁵
4. Duration, conceived as a foil to the operations of capital that rely on the non-contemporaneity of environments that absorb, sink, store, accumulate the material wastes of capital long after it has moved on to new markets. That is, understanding duration as a form of responsibility to the on-going material and immaterial re-combinations of matter that exceed social action.

Secondly, there is a question of *sense as a form of cohabitation*, which organises how recognition is cohered around immutable and insensible subjects/things (such as the unknown biotic subjects of biodiversity loss and new naturalism of biotechnology). Thinking sense as the opening of being *to* the world, being *toward*, brings us somehow to understanding modalities of orientation in relational geographies, that oscillate between that which is sensible to us (we know we are *for* certain forms of cohabitation because they are intelligible to us—the bird sings, we are *for* its singing) and that which is insensible to us (we know without knowing why that we are *for* that which we can hardly begin to understand—the life that haunts the liquid depths of the oceans). As we consider how to

negotiate “our” humanism and how other entities are disclosed through that understanding of being, it becomes useful to reflect on how orientation as “engaged presence” may privilege what is disclosed as important in our modes of valorisation, and that which is overlooked because it is nonrelational to “us” as a sense-event⁶ (and to acknowledge that not everything is given over to the event in the same way). This paradoxical capacity of the insensible is that it is both a mode of exclusion and a lure; it excites, pulls, troubles at our sensibility/sense-of-ability as well as limiting our comprehension and compassion for that which is outside of our sphere of experience.

The time(s) of responsibility

While the commitment to securing ties is already implied by the work of putting *into relation* that which seems untied or unconnected (i.e. the *gesture* of the tie), the formation of responsibility nonetheless remains to be thought as an on-going dimension and excess of those relationalities. Jacques Derrida suggests that, ‘which we are calling here *justice*, must carry beyond *present* life, life as *my* life or *our* life...*beyond therefore the living present in general*’ (Derrida 1994: xix). This call to justice, that must also be a call to be responsible beyond the present and presence (it must be non-contemporaneous with itself), is nonetheless marked by the interruption of *différance* in ways that become difficult to negotiate in the fields of practice, and in policy-based ecology and climate, for example, where attribution requires stabilized entities for contractual obligations to be raised or mitigation enabled. The irreconcilable indeterminacy that Derrida recognised, not only in the ‘modalized presents (past present, actual present: “now,” future present)’, but also in the future-to-come, as something that is going toward, but also proceeds, from the future; offers a practice of ‘iteration reworking’ (Barad 2010; 265) that is ‘a nonlinear enfolding of spacetimemattering...’ (Barad 2010: 244), but not contract as such. Instead, justice offers a site of constant work, overflowing contracts *per se* (Derrida 1994: xix). As Derrida suggests, ‘Without this *non-contemporaneity with itself of the living present*, without that which secretly unhinges it, without

this responsibility and this respect for justice concerning those who *are not there*, of those who are no longer or who are not yet present and living, what sense would there be to ask the question “where?” “where tomorrow?” “whither?” (Derrida 1994: xviii). That which ‘secretly unhinges’ the present might be considered as the impetus for justice, but specifically a justice that must push *beyond* in time and space, and ultimately, beyond any sensible relation to itself. For in justice, Derrida recognised, there must be a surplus.

In this turn to commitments and contracts, I am not just trying to acknowledge the postrelational problematic of what to do with the nonrelational—the unresponsive, dormant, latent, dead, inorganic, too slow, too fast, nonagential, nonthings—although this is surely part of the question, but the question of justice rebounds with the call to take sides and tie-in-sense to a discussion of how we orient ourselves towards the overlooked non-participative, untimely lifeworlds whose unbecoming is orchestrated, unwittingly, out of the corner of “our” eyes⁷, and of which “we” are unknowingly too often a part of and apart from. Understanding, along with Barad, responsibility as “incarnate relation”, before and beyond intentionality (and thus contract as such), I want to approach the question of how “responsiveness” is enabled by thinking about how nonsense (that which remains surplus to sense) agitates along the opening of the tie. And, to acknowledge that this opening is more often than not, opened because of vulnerability, and thus might need contracts and institutions built around that it to lessen that exposure (Butler 2011). What I want to do in this paper is to explore the possibilities and quandaries of making a commitment: how to come to a decision and to take sides. Both these questions I want to suggest can be explored through an engagement with, what I am calling, the *insensible*⁸. The insensible, I want to suggest, is the agitation, the provocation, the curiosity, the desire that draws out the work of intelligibility, that makes us practice politics as writing, thinking and practicing with others, in order to bring to sense that which we know, but do not know (it is understood as that which is not reducible to an external logic or inscription and is a form of knowledge, what Georges Bataille called “nonknowledge”). The insensible is neither sense nor nonsense, it is between, as agitator, contagion and never as presence

as such, only as force or motivation, which oscillates between the material and virtual, inhuman and human, organic and nonorganic, time and the untimely. Registering the work of the insensible might offer the possibility of thinking forms of cohabitation in a crowded world that imagine different kinds of ethical contracts which do not contradict the edict of indeterminacy (and its important ethical dimension in thinking with inheritance and obligation). Echoing Guattari's suggestion that, 'an ecology of the virtual is just as pressing as ecologies of the visible world' (Guattari 1995: 91), an understanding of the scope of the insensible dimensions of our material ecological arrangements is crucial if we are to create new practices of sensations and new sensibilities around such diffuse, recalcitrant and dislocated issues as biodiversity loss, new forms of biotechnological life and climate change. If we are to create new spheres of attention for new kinds of phenomena, then, I would argue, we need to understand something of how sense is enrolled into our habits of thought and theories of materiality.⁹

Furthermore, if we acknowledge, following Maurice Blanchot that we are 'tied to the future by a loyalty without reserve' (Blanchot 1997: 101), then it becomes incumbent upon us to understand something of how those ties are tied and how we might make these knots hold fast into futures yet to come. Clearly, there is no one decision that is made once and for all, no tie that can be held forever or can withstand 1,000 cuts or 400 blows, and no defining decidability that can consecrate the forms of practice that work to enrich those relations rather than enact parasitism on them. And, this is why much of the literature that invokes relationality is incompatible with rights-based thinking or contractual metaphors. And yet, there is a force at the heart of relational thinking that is insensible to us; it is this very force that propels forth with a call for justice, solidarity, and risks itself to make such obligations possible. It is also a force that intuits other possible worlds.

The work is, in a sense, this response, an 'engaged presence' (Nancy 1997: 71), that seeks to bring to the fore a consciousness of being tied through and by knots of relations. This propelling force is marked by two distinct indeterminacies¹⁰ that make the call to justice (that is response and responsibility) difficult: temporal indeterminacy and indeterminacy in the disclosure of entities.

Both these ontological disjunctures are problematic for both social theory and ecological practice, because there is a tendency for recognition to be conferred in relation to the exteriority of relations, but what is held in the interiority of these knotted relations, by their very indiscernibility, have remained, in part, insensible to us. This is not to set up a dialectical relation between internal and external visibilities or decidabilities, but rather to acknowledge there are more and less stable, material externalities that are shot through with internalities or depths that are hidden, latent and often unfathomable. That is, sense brings to the surface only part of the relation. Rather than think relationality in a restricted economy that holds relationality to “us”, in “our” time (Schrader 2010: 290), we might think what is needed in our accounts to think relationality in a general economy, which attempts, after Bataille (1988) and Elizabeth Grosz (1994; 1999), to account for how excess is configured within and beyond relations. I am mindful here of Nigel Clark’s caution against tying our political positions to our material ontologies and how this suture tends towards a limit in our accounts of the agency of the material world (that it only matters in so far as it matters to us, and thus the temporal horizon is foreshortened and ground flattened). And, yet, the politics of sense, of making sensible so that something can be brought to justice, is the very motivation or interest that is at stake in these discussions on relationality. In some ways we might look at this the other way round, how are the material ontologies on which we work eschewing their own internal call to justice, which launches them into the world as ideas that matter to our work? Somehow, if we might better understand the interiorities and exteriorities of the knots we tie, might their dynamic become more sensible to us and thus enable us to pass through particular configurations of the human to a more ethically enduring political and material philosophy?

Sense as cohabitation

Discussions on relational ethics in human-nonhuman worlds are shot through with questions of both inhabitation and time. There are questions around how we inhabit “our” relationalities, practice

them, bring them to the fore, frame others, take up politics, choose which relations matter, and how they matter (mattering is also a condition of what's observable in matter); as well as questions around how we hold onto a sense of the particularities of these differences and material specificities. Barad's concept of cutting together/apart (Barad 2010: 244) is an eloquent resolution of this problematic of how the "mutually exclusive" also, simultaneously, generate the "mutually excluded"; not as alterity, but as something that is held together through the cut itself. So, what does it mean to make cuts into biotic life? *To-cohabit* worlds means at some level to share a condition and a place, to literally *come inside* the cusp of a sharing (in so much, as we understand cohabitation as a mutuality of the right to inhabit); a cutting that in Barad's terms entails both a cutting towards and a cutting apart. But, who makes the cut is often the result of how things coincide in terms of an encounter or event (what we are towards), and this inadvertently relies upon a temporal or spatial coincidence in a crowded world. Are some-things/no-things cut out simply because they remain immaterial within our accounts of materiality? Or they have a latent determination? And if we think sense as a form of inhabitation—of mattering—how is that which is insensible flung away? Buried, absorbed, sunk? That is, does matter meet the cut in the same way? Co-inhabitation is literally what is at stake in so many of our ecological wars, and it is the impetus that pushes towards the consideration of a "living well" and "eating well" with nonhuman others (the explicit edict here is towards an inhabitation of a relation so that we might better cohabit worlds). But what happens to those that do not come inside along the sensual or temporal edge of our being? Those that are too resistant, too intimate or just too transgressive to comfortably cohabit with?

Both Isabelle Stengers and Nancy suggest a certain amount of patience is required (patience as a mode of becoming sensible to another's being), Stenger's suggests "slowing things down", being tactful, allowing new registers of sense to become sensible around new things and experiences. But, there is also a zone of nonrapport, noncoincidence, nonrecognition, cold interruption and refusal. How then do we then live side by side with the radical asymmetry (Clark 2011) of this nonrelation

without being offended by its indifference? It's dejection? And, even as we write towards what we are already towards, how do we not negate the work of sense in bringing us this way? We are already marked by a passive desire that has led us this way, through the material world to make objects/subjects/things that are arranged so that we can claim meaning and give sense to being towards something. And yet, the surplus to meaning that is biodiversity loss suggests that in a sense we need to become more attuned to *nothing*, rather than *something*, become better nihilists to escape our own nihilism.

While this zone of nonrapport maybe disinterest in us, in ecological terms, this processual ecology of the barely sensible crucially needs attention if we are to stem the violence of biodiversity loss, and even come to some comprehension of the phenomena of climate change and its radical unsettlement. To cohabit means at a basic level to recognise habitation rights of others, to allow the stranger the right to exist, and in doing so to reinforce our own right to exist as a right in parallel to the stranger. As Judith Butler articulates, following Hannah Arendt, we do not chose those who we inhabit the earth with and it is not our right to chose whose lives should be made liveable and whose should be made killable. Yet, while this cohabitation has been enunciated as a specifically human law, in all sorts of ways we acknowledge a much wider more-than-human community in our practices. These practices of wildlife conservation, protected spaces, animal bypasses, high rises for solitary bees, biodiversity action plans, insect hotels etc. which are not always subject to law (although there are laws that govern the sphere of sanctionable action against nonhumans), acknowledge, to greater or lesser extent, the rights of cohabitation through various contracts. But how is our recognition of the rights of cohabitation based on our sensibilities of those existences?

Clearly there are preferences that draw our desire, in the 'Big Like Us' (Hird 2010) categories of association, with vitality, creativity, faciality, form and participation colouring much of our decisions about who we chose to work with (theoretically or in practice), and what holds our interest long enough to bring some intelligibility to the relation by writing *to* (because writing about is always writing to-wards - an engaged presence). This partiality is configured in the genesis of

sense as much as it is in the development of concepts and it suggests a need to think against our sensibilities (individually and collectively) to understand the exclusions of sense and the possibilities for thinking the insensible as an expanded mode of worlding. In this sense, sense is a correlative of habit and training that is productive of concepts. How do these sensible choices, which are not even acknowledged as choices as such, but as inclinations, create another form of valorisation that orders materialities with ideal relations? Live matter over undisclosed matter, Peter over a rock. 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.

These other worlds that occasionally graze “ours”, perhaps do not leave anything so pronounced as a material trace (no empirical evidence), so are not spectral in the Derridean sense,¹¹ but are an insensible alterity. The sudden wind that brushes my cheek is but a graze of the sensational possibilities that are offered the insect on the wing. I am poor in so many worlds. Yet my choices, that are not always mine alone, bear on the possibilities of sense worlds beyond my own. Stengers suggests; ‘We do not know how a bat, armed with sonar, or a dog, capable of tracking by smell, perceive “their” world. We can only identify the features they discriminate, but we can only dream of the contrast between “that which” they perceive and what they are aware of. All we “know” is that their experience is, like ours, highly interpretative, and that, like ours, it has solved an extraordinary delicate problem: to give access, in a more or less reliable way, to what it is important to pay attention to’ (Stengers 2011: 338). The first step in ecological practice is to notice that which the insect pays attention to, and to think about how we might be discriminating against this worlding by the use of chlorinated pesticides that disrupt and debilitate the insect’s vitality and directionality, for example. The second step, which is the most difficult, yet in some ways, the most important is to dream the contrast between “that which” they perceive and what they are aware of. This second inhabitation demands our dreams be insensible to us (they are not about an extension of our sensibilities *per se*), as we try to stretch out and accompany the sense of another, even as it

becomes strange. Such thought experiments are necessary if we are to bring an imaginative conceptualisation to the insensible between natures whose worlds are invisibly sutured to ours through all sorts of biochemical interferences and material re-combinations, but which remain insensible to the priorities of our sensibilities.

The point is here, that many of our material re-combinations have consequences for biotic subjects that remain immaterial to our perception, because they produce material effects that are difficult to discern and have no obvious exteriority. This lack of exteriority is both a temporal and biological condition that is marked by various forms of bioaccumulation, chemical disruption, and toxicological inheritances in nonhuman bodies and environments. It is towards this expansion of modes and models of ontological intensity drawn by and to sense, that I want to think with the insensible, not in representational or linguistic terms, but as an orientation that potentially opens up fields of possibility to the practices of thought and cohabitation. Sense here is also a relay of responsiveness—it brings us towards certain things and not others. This configuration of the insensible can be understood as a condition of inhabitation that rebounds with the challenge of gathering sense around mutable things and insensible material arrangements, as well as acknowledging a more expanded general economy of sense that recognises the work of the insensible. The insensible, then, is the coming towards sense, both place and vector, the between.

What I am proposing here is that we shift our focus to think *between natures*, not just about more-than-human natures, or posthumanist, or material and virtual, or inhuman and organic, alive and dead natures, but rather that we begin to think the space between these sensible entities, as a spacing, where life and death are made possible (or not) and life and death are already drawn by what is inherited, what is claimed, where desire works, and inhabitations take place, and where there is already becoming towards entities (or not). The relation is contemporaneous with the being towards entity, the sense of being-toward others in general. So the “to” of being, is also a toward *some-thing* rather than no-thing, and in that *something* there is already an arrangement, there is already the desire for pattern, for form, and the possibility of something that might be brought to intelligibility.

Whitehead suggests; ‘When we ask ourselves any question we will usually find that we are assuming certain types of entities involved, that we are assuming certain modes of togetherness of these entities, and that we are even assuming certain widely spread generalities of pattern... But every abstraction neglects the influx of factors omitted into the factors retained’ (Whitehead 1938, 143). So, in this sense, sense is pre/configured with directionality, it wants and desires relations, intelligibility, rather than nothing at all and nonsense. What I take from Nancy is that sense is matter forming¹² itself, it makes things firm, it organises the possibility of identity, and thus becomes the very condition of the field in which worlds of sense are raised around vulnerable entities (or not). Thinking between natures maybe insensible as such, but it is crucial to how we might cohabit worlds in less deadly ways and crucial to understand something of the legacy and extended agency of our material intra-actions (and their immaterial dimensions). The importance of this indeterminate term “between” is its displacement of a subject that returns to itself. In this discontinuity the locus of self-presentation/presence is shifted, so that we must think in terms of the cusp of being.

Nancy suggests one of the mistakes we make is thinking the knot of relations as already tied, and in this presupposition we forget the work of tying sense into the knot itself. He asks, ‘How to think the tie as always still *to be tied*? How, that is, instead of conferring sense on the presupposed knot, to make the tying of the (k)not into sense itself’ (Nancy 1996: 103); as a form of sense practice. In this tying of the (k)not as sense itself, Nancy suggests that we must confront the presupposition of being tied and make it sensible itself (or inhabitable); that is, to inhabit the sensibility of these knotting relations, and hold these knots as a sense of the world for which we are responsible. Such an exposition of sense-making through the holding of relations is aptly (and explicitly) demonstrated in Donna Haraway’s work on the knotted game of cats cradle (Haraway 2011). If we pushed this idea of responsibility further, how might the tying of the (k)not into sense itself be continued to enable responsiveness? And, 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?¹³

Barad and Astrid Schrader have both made important steps in this direction; Barad in the naming of phenomena as ontologies that are in an on-going configuration of cutting together and apart, and Schrader in her concept of phantom ontologies in the “life” of toxicology.¹⁴ Both pay explicit attention to the work of time in being and give us a way to think in more complicated ways about ideas of inheritances, reproducibility, occurrence, presence, agency, and how these material iterations govern our conceptualisation and actualisation of knowledge in the enactment of boundaries (Barad 2003: 807). Where I would like to add to these steps, is to suggest that we not just suture sense into our ontological accounts as a differential, but that we look more closely at the zone of insensibility as a way to think the work of sense. In short, *to address the surplus that falls short of sense*. The ecological necessity of thinking beyond entities and shifting into a more processual understanding, that is evident in Barad’s neologism of intra-action (Barad 2007) is crucial if we are going to travel some way into thinking responsibility for the incalculable material inferences in other worlds of sense, such as the endocrine disrupting work of PCB’s (polychlorinated biphenyls) and POP’s (persistent organic pollutants) in the fatty tissue of seals to the shifting temperature zones on plant seasonality and insect intra-action. Ecologically, this insensibility might be thought as that which is carried forward without immediate disclosure, such as the body burden of contaminants and the slow work of immune suppressants that are a deadly inheritance across natures.

What remains as the task ahead is to recognise how this regime of the sensible declares only the exteriority of relations that are often grasped through the cutting of paths, the traversing of interests, and the grazing of affects. And, the interiority of relations, that which is hiding in relations, is just as binding, albeit, in its intimate alterity—this is the tie that is only disclosed through the force of the knot but remains insensible to exteriority or agential accountability. This insensible nature is that which *appropriates sense without being sensible to appropriation*. Bataille calls this insensibility, a form of animality which opens up a depth that I recognise as my own but is unfathomable to me, it opens up along the cut of the sensible a dimension of alterity and interiority

that is unbounded and yet binding.¹⁵ It is the tension that is tied through the knot, but is not disclosed through its knotting. This delicate yet strong insensibility at the heart of relations is a crucial dimension in how we are called to justice; it is the insistence that bids our relations into being (and to the world), the sense act that calls to the wandering labor of sense to make sense of the knots at the heart of things. The sensible matters in the ongoing materialisations of worlds, in so much as it directs interest, but cannot overcome in certain respects, its own interests. So one way of thinking the (k)not (and this is not necessarily how Nancy is thinking it), is to see it as a prohibition, a knot that must also be *not* for us, but given over to a being *for* the world that is not us. A knot that torques back on its own interests. There are several reasons for turning to the concept of the insensible at this moment in thinking the (post)relational, which I will elaborate on (as worlding, sense and ontology) before turning to a discussion on the dynamic of the insensible in the politics of knots, and what this might mean for ethico-politics.

Insensible ontologies

i. Sense as Worlding

“Worlding” in Haraway’s terms (Haraway 2008), and “Cosmopolitics” in Stenger’s (2010), has made an important contribution to how we think the politics and practices of being responsible and responsive. Both of these concepts gesture towards a way of thinking being as ethically analogous to “making”, “producing” or “practicing” the world, in which these creative iterative acts are something being does (including the politics of doing things differently). This strategy of worlding has often been taken up as a political practice that is oriented towards an accumulative doing and making, that entities come to, learn with other entities (often nonhumans) and decide upon ways of doing and making together that take account of difference. Yet, this form of making together sits uneasily with a concept of the indeterminacy of the entities that are always to-ward being an entity, so are not necessarily at liberty to make a decision in such a autonomous way.¹⁶ In the epigraph,

Nancy suggests that presence (or being) is already, always, “*engaged* presence” and this engagement is both a response to and responsibility for the sense of the world. Similarly, Barad suggests that responsibility is a relation that precedes the intentionality of consciousness and language as such. Nancy’s response is that, if there is sense, there is orientation towards something, there is being-*to-ward*. In this way, we might consider sense as a form of worlding, which, as Nancy argues, forms the world and configures our responsibility for it. Sense, in Nancy’s terms is not being, but the opening of being-toward-the-world: sense is the passage to presence. It is not, he says, to distain the category of truth, but to shift registers, so that being is thought as a *coming into* presence (Nancy 1997: 12); where sense is this movement or dynamic that brings to-wards.

In this sense, being, Nancy argues is not being the entity as such, but ‘being in the direction of the entity’, ‘being towards entities’ (Nancy 1997: 13). He says: ‘being is the sense of the entity, or, rather—and because there is not entity on one side and sense on the other—being is the structure, property and sense-event of the entity’ (Nancy 1997: 13). Being, in Nancy’s terms is already indeterminate, yet it is a structural indeterminacy that is the very thing that draws being *to-wards* others and the world. And thus this sense-event of being *toward* the entity and towards entities in general is what configures the productive relationality of worlding. Sense bears on the bringing to the fore of this relationality as a ‘tensor of multiplicity’ that propels ‘being-toward-more-than-one’ (Nancy 1997: 67). This tensor of sense is what Blanchot calls *absence sense*, where writing “forms” such sense. This is not sense conceived of as lack, latency or absence of sense, but something that is brought to the surface through thought, writing, and response to thought (see also Dewsbury 2003). Blanchot says: ‘To write is perhaps to bring to the surface something like absent sense, to receive the passive impulse that is not yet thought, being already the disaster of thought. Its patience’ (Blanchot 1986: 41). Being patient with the insensible is a mode of reception that questions how thought forms disclosures and enclosures, while all the time risking the failure of sense: nonsense. Like a less deadly version of photic zone fish that attract prey with their bioluminescent lures, what is disclosed as visible in the inky black night of the deep ocean is but half of the story. Nancy says,

‘Where thought uses itself to touch (to be touched by) that which is not for it a “content” but its *body*; the space of this extension and opening in which and as which it exscribes itself, that is, lets itself be transformed into the concreteness of *praxis* of sense’ (Nancy 1997: 10). Sense is part of how phenomena unfold and enclose. And, this raises the question of how sense secures the conditions of intelligibility by which we inhabit and cohabit this world. And, further, it raises the question of how unintelligibility emerges within this intelligibility to query the partialities of the sensible.

ii. Nancy’s *Sense of the World*

In his book *The Sense of the World*, Nancy asks the question, ‘How, then are we to understand thought as being, in its beginnings, a response?’ (Nancy 1997: 1) Nancy sets out to elaborate on this “thought as being” as a mode of thinking the world where sensibility constitutes the world through beings that respond to and are responsible for it (in the sense that the world that comes into being is *a priori* condition of thought). The sense that Nancy articulates is ‘sense as relation *to* or a *being-toward-something*, thus something evidently always being “some-*other*” or “something-*else*.” Thus, “being-*to-ward*-the world,” if it takes place (and it does take place), is caught up in sense well before all signification. If we are *toward* the world, if there is being-toward-the-world in general, that is, if there is world, there is sense.’(Nancy 1997: 7). Nancy goes on to suggest that ‘World means at least *being to* or *being-toward* [être-à]; it means rapport, relation, address, sending, donation, presentation *to*—if only of entities or existents *to* each other. We have known how to categorize being-*in*, being-*for*, being-*by*, but it still remains for us to think being-*to*, or the *to* of being, its ontologically wordly or worldwide trait... Thus, *world* is not merely the correlative of *sense*, it is structured as *sense*, and reciprocally, *sense* is structured as *world*’ (Nancy 1997: 8).

This being-*to* that Nancy suggests still remains to be thought is a located and locating sensibility; that which travels along the edge of being, it is not being, but the opening of being-toward-the-world, thus it is the very possibility of worlding. He says that ‘sense does not add itself to being,

does not supervene upon being, but it is the opening of its very supervenience, of being-toward-the-world' (Nancy 1997: 28). For Nancy, 'Worldliness does not merely succeed, it precedes as well. The world before humanity and beyond humanity is also *our* world, and we are also *toward* it' (Nancy 1997: 45). Thus this being towards, the *to* of being, that Nancy articulates, is necessarily both pre- and post-hominid, because it is already configured toward that which exceeds and precedes its own being and responsive to that transformative possibility. This *a priori* condition is response and the succession is responsibility. However, this directionality of sense is not causal, it is knotted.

Thus, Nancy suggests, "to transform" should mean, "to change the sense of sense," that is, to pass from having to being. Which means also that transformation is a *praxis*, not a *poiesis*, and action that effects the agents, not the work' (Nancy 1997: 9). Thus, Nancy's conception of sense is not as a configuration of the work *per se* (as in sometimes implicit in Jacques Rancière's deployment of sensibility in political aesthetics), but as a constitutive part of a relational praxis that transforms entities, agents or relata.¹⁷ In this way, Nancy's understanding of sense is not dissimilar, (as he acknowledges) from Deleuze and Guattari's concept of being as being-for-the-world or drawn *in* relation. Sense is the 'being-toward of being itself.' Nancy says, 'As attribute of the state of things, sense is outside of being, it is not of being, but *aliquid* that is appropriate to nonbeing' (Nancy 1997: 180). In Gilles Deleuze and Guattari's terms, this is nonhuman force. 'As expressed by the proposition, sense does not exist, but insists or subsists in the proposition... Sense is what forms and deploys itself on the surface. Even the border [between bodies and propositions] is not a separation but the element of an articulation such that sense presents itself at once as what happens to bodies and as what insists in propositions' (Nancy 1997: 180). This border, Nancy insists is always open and being configured by 'the questions of what desire knows how to do, of what it gives birth to...' (Nancy 1997: 180). It is to this sense of the world, and the open and heterogeneous possibilities of what sense can bring to the surface (driven, as it were, by insensible or nonhuman forces), that Nancy says we are responsible to. The world, he says, is our radical responsibility, but

this does not mean that we are responsible for everything and everyone, but that responsibility for the world is a proceeding ontological responsibility, not a moral problem, but an ontological configuration. As in *Being Singular Plural*, being is always “being-with”, and “I” is not prior to “we”; existence as it were, is co-existence, through mutual abandonment and exposure, rather than enclosure. If we accept the claim that response *to* the world is a proceeding ontological responsibility and this world is sense, we might query, after Guattari, how to think the concept of ontological intensities in order that we might come to an ethical decision in favour of ‘the richness of the possible’ (Guattari 1995: 29). Deciding in favour of heterogeneous worlds of sense, then, requires an understanding of the formation of sensibility.

iii. Sense as ontology

If sense is structured as ontology and thus is the condition of cohabitation, there is a need to look at how sense is configured in both ecological and social thought through the question of access. Nancy discusses Heidegger’s concept of the “stone without a world” to demonstrate how “access” predetermines Heidegger’s thinking, and he suggests this is a vulgarity, because it misunderstands how the stone is *being-between*, *being-against* and on the thresholds of access. Nancy rejects the idea that in order for there to be access there must be nonaccess, and in order for there to be sense there must be beyond-sense. He says:

‘Everything is betrayed by the expression “the earth is not *given* for the stone.” The *gift* is thought here only as a gift for, finalized and significant—and significant precisely of the *earth*, with all its connotations of support and, beyond this, of proximity, rootedness, habitation, and propriety. But what if the gift *for* [*don pour*] were taken wrongly for a “pure gift” [*don pur*]? What if in fact comprised an earlier, liberality, generosity—“spaciousness”—of the “gift”? What if the initial “gift”—a “gift” subtracted from “giving” itself insofar as the latter is taken to be intentional—would be more felicitously formulated like this: stone on earth, and earth as “route” (*via rupta*, rupture, fraying [*frayage*]—and also,

already, all the technē of circulation and exchange), as a route already distributing the earth into places, places already receiving the stone, in an indifferent mode, in the mode, to be sure, of the wound for the foot and the barrier for an insect or for a stream, but also in the mode of a mere occupied place on earth, of shadows casts, or of an ornamental cut incised in space, an unassignable gift, a gift lost as gift, a gift without corresponding desire, neither to be perceived nor to be received as “gift”?.... (Nancy 2007: 60-61)

In neglecting the unassignable gift, the gift lost as gift, do “we” shadow Heidegger in our humanistic priorities by concentrating on possibilities of a social bond over that which flings us away? This is not to accuse, but to recognise the difficulty of thinking, as it were, *against* ourselves, our desires and the ways in which rapport solicits our attention and campaigns on our senses. This is not just a question of representation, agency and forms of disclosure, but speaks to the decipherability of relations, to intentions around things—insensible curiosities—that are never indifferent or disinterested. We still have to find better ways of practicing and politicising models of contingency, mutability and indeterminacy, and taking notice of how we are drawn to notice. It is this priority of access and concentration on the “gifts” of relations (both good and bad, as friendly bacteria or life threatening virus) that have been prioritised in order to narrate a tale of relationality and demonstrate its ties. This might lead us to reflect on how relational geographies have a tendency to be configured around the event, the thing-in-relation, the something that is doing something (the disease, the companion, the experiment). In these experiments, there has been little place for the dark spaces of non-relation, which often become back-grounded or cut out of the scene, like intersideral spaces, because they are inert, yet form the sensible field from which relations are drawn. More importantly, perhaps, Nancy calls attention to the “spaciousness” of the gift itself. This is not just alterity, although sometimes it is, but it is a spacious alterity within the very phenomena that is “things-in-relation”. Rather, this is *between*, something that is postponed or survives in relations (in term of time and materiality). It is the postponement that holds us in grief and loss, the infinite finitude of the possible and the survival that is the ‘push to futurity’ (Grosz 2004: 38). Being

also becomes in ways it is insensible to, in terms of evolution and forms of inheritance that are social, biological and even geological (Grosz 2011). What is often brought to the fore are the exteriority of relations, those that provide varying degrees of access and agency, that make things, are creative, earth shattering, world turning, love inducing, that which makes our head turn. But what of the gifts¹⁸ without desire, without perception or reception, without a sensible trace that ‘touches on—with a passive transitivity’? (Nancy 2007: 61).

For Nancy, ‘The stone does not “have” any sense. But sense touches the stone: it even collides with it, and this is what we are doing here’ (Nancy 2007: 60-61). While Barad, Clark and Grosz have all, in different and important ways, elaborated on the imperative of, ‘allowing matter its due as an active participant in the worlds becoming’ (Barad 2007: 803).¹⁹ The next step might be to think how sense establishes itself in the place of being *towards* matters becoming, as both spaciousness and response, and as an immaterial force of mattering: *the nonrelational at the heart of relations*. What is important to these accounts is how “access” alone is a poor account of the material dimensions of matter and the possibilities of sense. If we only take notice of those things that we are implicated in we risk reducing the productivity of matter to a social bond.²⁰ And, by default this can lead to a failure to theorise the relation *between* natures, of organic and nonorganic, passive or recalcitrant materialities or overactive matter, risking a concentration on what Kant called “Rude Nature” (the nature that interrupts human plans). As Guattari exhorts, ‘It is less a questions of having access to novel cognitive spheres than of apprehending and creating, in pathic modes, mutant existential virtualities’ (Guattari 1992, 120).

It becomes difficult at this point to talk about the insensible, the *between natures*, because the nature under discussion is already mutating beyond the form of enunciation. The biodiversity that disappears without trace is such an unassignable gift. How to appropriate the configurations of the insensible to the sensible in the modelling of instruments of politics and policy while recognising that these will always be partial instruments working with other more mutable configurations? Nancy’s contribution to this discussion is to suggest that sense is not reduced to access or attribution

(contra Heidegger), but prefigured as possibility of worlding, so that we might take up the ‘wandering labor of sense’ (Nancy 1997: 116), acknowledge its tying force in how we take up responsibility. Yet, how might the insensible allow us to skim this edge of phenomena to look over the edge of the cut into the unfathomable dimensions of dark, dead or indeterminable between natures? It maybe that we need to think more-than-agency, more-than-life and more-than-presence, for this other-than, between-natures has a dissonance that suggests a move away from the self sufficiency of relata (an auto-affection of worlding). This insensibility goes towards sensibility, but also torques the knot in another direction that is indeterminate, exposed, beyond sensible; it is nonrelation, departure from our time, our selves and our space. Not opposite, nor negation, but already insensible within relations as an unfathomable interiority. It is a dream to the contrary, against self-sufficiency, towards others all the way to the earth, by way of routes, cuts, nicks, wounds, passages that turn the edge of sensation outwards, towards that which is insensible in the nonrelational heart of relations—an intimate alterity that speaks to the ethical spacing of noncoincidence, and is defined by temporal elisions, rather than human temporalities.

(K)nots of the insensible: making contracts of sense

Affirming relations, thinking with those affirmations as living, breathing collaborative entities has been argued, particularly by Haraway, as a form of *ethical contagion* that secures a more expansive field of ethical responsibility. Coupled with this idea of *contagion* there has been a hesitation or careful pause before the field of generalisation, or any move towards normative ethics. Instead, this work insists on the specificity of material ontological arrangements in which relata do not proceed their relating, and thus the lessons of *this* messy knot or *that* messy knot are not transferable, yet they might just inspire a politics of hope in other situations.²¹ The non-equivalence that Haraway, amongst others, insists upon is important, these are not object-lessons, because subject/object relations are productive of both and not attributes of either. Barad suggests that ‘Ethics is an integral

part of the diffraction (ongoing differentiating) patterns of worlding, not a superimposing of human values onto the ontology of the world (as if ‘fact’ and ‘value’ were radically other)’(Barad 2010: 265). Similarly, ethics might also be thought of as a world of sense in which there is not the sense on one hand and being on the other, rather a world *as* sense, in which being is the sense of the entity and its being towards. Just as Derrida argued that impossibility becomes the possibility of justice, because it calls attention to the noncoincidence with self, insensibility becomes the possibility of an ethics of sensibility, because it discloses the ‘wandering labor of sense’ (Nancy 1997: 116). Guattari too, speaks of the sensible as an “attractor” that installs itself within chaos (Guattari 1995: 17), but warns of the sensationalism or oversensibility (that is banal and infantile) of capitalism that masks new regimes of the sensible or flattens the multivocality and mutant possibilities of sense.²² There are two things to call attention to here; that sense is already tied into our knots of relations and thus it warrants attention, lest that sensibility be left to pass through the flattened machine of capital; and that confronting and accompanying forms of insensibility on their traversals opens up the possibility of bringing to sense that which is between natures (albeit indirectly). As we struggle to make sense of complex new biochemical material arrangements that elude disclosure in the form of entities or exteriority, new forms of sense must be generated to elaborate on unprecedented formations. As Guattari suggests, ‘Beyond the relations of actualised forces, virtual ecology will not simply attempt to preserve the endangered species of cultural life, but equally to engender conditions for the creation and development of unprecedented formations of subjectivity that have never been seen and never felt’ (Guattari 1995: 91). This is our task for the insensible subjects of biodiversity loss.

Conclusion: Forays into the insensible

This paper has drawn attention to the work of the insensible within/beyond a relational economy/ontology, and addressed the economies of productivity inherent in relational ethics. This step before responsibility is also a step before politics, it is about the spacing and spaciousness

within response that characterises phenomena, events and decisions. And, thus, it has an ethico-political dimension, but it is not immediately translatable into politics. What can be said, then, about coming to a decision? I have argued that if the insensible alerts us to the work of sense in securing the *bringing into* relation, its configurations, and its a priori orientations, then it also points towards modes of exclusion and forms of resistance in our thinking with nonhuman others. The work of the insensible highlights the conditions under which we make knowledge, how these are led by a number of forces that are directed towards certain resolutions of entities, of arrangements, of matter that are already *towards* the coherency of an event, as phenomenon, as writing, as sense work. Yet alongside this work there is also the need to pay attention to the insensible, ‘to accompany something invisible to its incalculable destination’ (Berger 2011: 19).

The insensible is ‘unbound binding’ (Nancy 1997: 13) that suggests we are always working under the condition of responsibility for the world (and for possible worlds) in our sense making. Nancy suggests an alternative economy of politics that thinks the politics of knots first and foremost as about the right to tie knots of sense. He says: ‘Politics would henceforth be neither a substance nor a form but, first of all, a gesture: the very gesture of the tying and enchainment of each to each, tying each time unicities (individuals, groups, nations or peoples) that have no unity other than the unity of the (k)not... this politics requires an entire ontology of being as tying, that is precisely perhaps this extremity where all ontology, as such, gets tied up with something other than itself’ (Nancy 1997: 112). Nancy argues that this politics of nonself-sufficiency requires the abandonment of all claims to self-sufficiency (which presents an interesting twist to the self-sufficiency arguments that abound in sustainability literatures), and instead suggests a politics of knots, which is also a politics of sense (that is existence). What the insensible brings forth is the tie itself—the very responsiveness that is already, always, *to-wards* the world. He says; ‘The (k)not: that which involves neither interiority nor exteriority but which, in being tied, ceaselessly makes the inside pass outside, each into (or by way of) the other, the outside inside, turning endlessly back on itself without returning *to* itself... The whole question is whether or not we can finally manage to think

the “contract”—the tying of the (k)not—according to a model other than the juricocommercial model (which in fact supposes the bond to have been already established, *already presupposed as its own subject*: this is the founding abyss or decisive aporia of the Social Contract.) To think the social bond according to another model or perhaps without a model. To think its act, establishment, and binding’ (Nancy 1997: 111). In this last statement of Nancy’s there is a glimpse of how contracts might be done differently, not as a contracts that presuppose the work of tying, but those that recognise the right to tie (k)nots of sense and labour under that responsibility as the very condition of response.

In paying attention to how sense is part of the tying of knots we might better accommodate the strange worlds *between natures* that elude sensible relations to promote a noncontemporaneous ethics of duration—a kind of affirmative action for the formless. This noncontemporaneous ethic needs to be excessive in two ways; in taking responsibility for the generation of virtual ecologies that exceed social encounters with matter, and often leave nothing so pronounced as an empirical trace; and excessive in its modes of valorisation of different temporalities and senses of being. The work of making sense is to hold together the disparate insensible experience, to bring them towards an intelligible relation, while simultaneously holding onto the understanding that this knowledge is always partial (as both limited and interested); thus the movement is a holding together of the sensibility of the insensible without wounding the disjointed impossibilities of ever inhabiting enough those differences (could we ever really grasp just *how* strange other lives are? Could we ever grasp how much the intimacy there is between life and death, between organic and inorganic matter?). In this sense we have to not just recognise, or bring to recognition the tie, but enact it without effacing the impossibility of this tying ever manifesting itself as a point of recognition for “us” (the prohibition of the (k)not). So, it is a joining that actually undoes the possibilities of our recognising ourselves in this contract (it gives up self-sufficiency to be for the world). In fact, this is a join that undermines the very humanism that is normally reinforced, because it passes through that humanism in both its interior and external relations to pull these relations into a strange territory. It

is a form of sacrifice of self on account of the other. It is the action of ‘rejoining without conjoined mate’ (Derrida, 1994: 35). There is something lonely, yet necessary, in this act of making relations. It allows time to become unhinged, imagination to travel beyond its immediate experience. It allows us to get over ourselves and seek out what is truly strange and wonderful in the cohabitation of worlds that we will never be at home in. What does it mean to allow oneself to inhabit that which is strange, non-intuitive, insensible—that which is remote from human comprehension or intelligibility—like phytoplankton, seeds, fungi, geological epochs, multi-celled organisms at the beginnings of time? This is not some micro/macro limit²³ experience at the chapel of extreme environmentalism, but a way to think about how that which makes us comfortable reinforces rather than exposing the boundaries of the human, how stretching out into the untimely, insensible spaces of many differently configured others is an experiment, practice and test against our sense of ourselves.

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¹ Subjectivity itself is a form of recognition and a mode of apprehension. I use the term “biotic subject” to signal a mode of subjectivity that is distributed across biota (see Yusoff 2011a).

² Grosz suggests that there is a ‘covered over debt’ in knowledge practices ‘to that which conditions and incites knowledge: the real, the outside, materiality, things, forces, events, that which pre-exists knowledge production...’ (Grosz 2010: 5) which needs to be acknowledged if new kinds of knowledge and different kinds of relations are to be developed.

³ ‘What this “and” and this “with” are about involves nothing less than the texture of the world, the world as the being-exposed-of-the-ones-to-the-others.... Being inscribes/excribes the one of/in the other as the unique being of everyone. All sense passes this way—and this is still saying too little: all of sense is along the edge of being “with”’ (Nancy 1997: 70).

⁴ For a reading of Bergsonian duration and its implications for thinking political and social life, see Grosz 2005.

⁵ Grosz argues that, ‘If we take materialism seriously, we are interested not only in material objects but also in material forces, which while they may be imperceptible in themselves, are discernable through their effects on objects’ (Grosz 2010: 50).

⁶ Nancy suggests that being towards entities, the being of being ‘phenomenalizes the phenomenon, substantifies substance, or eventualises the event’ (Nancy 1997: 13).

⁷ Bataille says that; ‘There is in understanding a blindspot: which is reminiscent of the structure of the eye. In understanding, as in the eye, one can only reveal it with difficulty. But whereas the blind spot of the eye is inconsequential, the nature of understanding demands that the blind spot within it be more meaningful than understanding itself... Action introduces the known (the manufactured); then understanding, which is linked to it, relates the non-manufactured, unknown elements, one after the other to the known. But desire, poetry, laughter, unceasingly cause life to slip in the opposite direction, moving from the known to the unknown... That non-knowledge still be knowledge. I would explore night! But no, it is night that explores me...’ (Bataille 1998: 110-111).

⁸ My turn to insensible natures is not a thinly disguised excursion into phenomenology or affect, but it is orientated towards a genealogy of thinking around the cusp of sensibility and knowledge, variously conceived as, excess and the unfinished system of nonknowledge by Bataille, in friendship with Blanchot's writing the limit, Nancy's birth to presence, Derrida's blind and angelic hauntologies, Deleuze and Guattari's virtual ecologies, Grosz's nicks of time, and Barad's quantum knife.

⁹ Sense has been subject to many a critique, and my aim here is not to defend the myriad manifestations of sense as theory and practice, rather to think with senses doppelganger, the genesis of the insensible, to open up some of the questions around relationality and the challenges that bringing the relational to the fore as ethical practice brings.

¹⁰ The indeterminacy I refer to here has the qualities of chance, as articulated by Grosz. She says, 'it is the *excess*, superfluity, of causes, the profusion of causes, which no longer produces singular or even complex effects but generates events, which have a temporal continuity quite separate from that of their "causes"' (Grosz 1999:4). It is this excess, as a superfluity of causes that have no temporal continuity, which I am trying to get at here. This excess might also be characterised as a radical openness of matter and biology (Grosz 2011) to the world, which gives itself to other unthinkable/unknowable material re-combinations that are in excess of any intentionality or agency, but which still entail responsibility. If we could become better at thinking this temporal dis/continuity of the excess of materiality that is in excess of casuality, we can, as it were begin to acknowledge responsibility for that which continues to exceed our agential intra-actions. This is what Barad calls, 'ghostly causality' (Barad 2010: 268). It is a problematic that environmental groups and protection agencies struggle with daily in the on-going battles for attribution that are made so difficult precisely because of this radical openness of matter and its temporal displacements and because of the retrospective nature of protection predicated on evidential traces.

¹¹ The ghost in Derrida's account has form, albeit one that is between life and death, even as it worries at these states. But what if there is no form, no entity as such to perform such a presence?

What if the killer infection that threatens beings is just part of the story and the other slow transformations of intra-action towards nonbeing that are presupposed in biodiversity loss? What if these things like mercury poisoning in the high arctic, simply shift sense and so shift being, without there being a discernable visible trace as such, how then are we to “account” for such insensible disruptors?

¹² Nancy says, ‘Sense, matter forming itself, from making itself firm: exaction and separation of a tact’ (Nancy 2007: 63).

¹³ What these forays might look like is an open question. Marine toxicologists Susan Shaw’s dove into Gulf of Mexico oil slick to highlight and halt the use of chemical dispersants might be an example of the powerful imaginative veracity of being towards that which we attempt to bring to sensibility. See her projects *Seals As Sentinels* and *Gulf EcoTox* (www.meriresearch.org) that work to bring to sense the material legacies of chemical contaminations that have expanded and deathly legacies that continue to determine sense beyond their immediate material use.

¹⁴ Schrader’s discussion of *Phantomontologies* (Schrader 2010) and synchronization is useful here in its development of the temporal configurations of intra-actions and demonstrating how responsibility varies with temporality in the epistemological construction of objects. Schrader suggests that ‘A ‘phantomatic ontology’ is closely allied with Derrida’s (1994) notion of hauntology, which describes the paradoxical existence of a specter as neither being nor non-being, neither present nor absent, neither of the ‘past’ nor of the ‘future’, but which affirms an indeterminate relationship between being and becoming and between ‘past’ and ‘future’ (Schrader 2010: 278).

¹⁵ ‘the unknown which we ourselves are, ipse infinitely fragile...’ (Bataille 1998: 208)

¹⁶ Part of how we are held towards another is because of the lure of this indeterminacy of how we might become other with another, and yet it is the very indeterminacy that is forsaken when we make the declaration that I have chosen this other, because it reinstates an autonomous “I” in place of a tie.

¹⁷ Similarly, Haraway suggests that we must think about symbiogenesis as a form of becoming-with in responsibility not autopoiesis (Haraway forthcoming).

¹⁸ For Derrida the question of the gift is inseparable from the question of justice. He says: ‘The question of justice, the one that always carries beyond the law, is no longer separated, in its necessity or in its aporias from the gift’ (Derrida 1994: 30).

¹⁹ Interestingly, in light of Barad’s project, Nancy suggests what needs to be thought is the ‘discreteness that one could call *quantum* discreteness, borrowing from physics the discreteness of material *quanta*, makes up the world as such, the “finite” world liable to sense’ (Nancy 2007: 62). He says, ‘Thus, no animalism—indeed, quite the contrary. Instead, a “quantum philosophy of nature” (or “atomistic” or “discrete” one) remains to be thought. For all the difference of the toward-itself, in accordance with which sense opens, is inscribed *along the edge of* the “in itself”. *Corpus*: all bodies, each outside the others, make up the inorganic body of sense’ (Nancy 2007: 60-61).

²⁰ The tendency to prioritise agency (*the who does what to who*) and to valorise that agency over other forms of recognition is understandable because of the collectives that this materiality gives rise to (ones that include rather than exclude the human).

²¹ While a local resolution might seem the right or only ethical solution it becomes difficult to ethically navigate phenomena like climate change and biodiversity loss without speaking in general terms. What I am suggesting here is that understanding how sense is sutured into phenomena offers a way to think the general through heterogeneous forms of valorization that neither detracts from the specificity of material intra-actions, but acknowledges the immaterial qualities that reside within those formations of materiality.

²² Guattari says: ‘the aesthetic paradigm—the creation and composition of mutant percepts and affects—has become the paradigm for every possible form of liberation’ (Guattari 1995: 91).

²³ The limit described here is rather a de/limit, something that segregates the realm of possibility.