

# Foucault Studies

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ISSN: 1832-5203

*Foucault Studies*, No. 20, pp. 122-141, December 2015

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## ARTICLE

### **Foucault's Fossils: Life Itself and the Return to Nature in Feminist Philosophy\***

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**ABSTRACT:** This essay asks about the return to nature and “life itself” in contemporary feminist philosophy and theory, from the new materialisms to feminist science studies to environmental ethics and critical animal studies. Unlike traditional naturalisms, the contemporary turn to nature is explicitly posthumanist. Shifting their focus away from anti-essentialist critiques of woman-as-nature, these new feminist philosophies of nature have turned toward nonhuman animals, the cosmos, the climate, and life itself as objects of ethical concern. Drawing on Foucault, the essay probes the ethical meanings of the term “life itself” invoked in many of these renaturalizing projects. Focusing especially on the archival matter that guides Foucault’s thinking, I suggest that we rethink “life itself” not as a transhistorical substance but as the unstable materiality of history. I then reframe Foucault’s archival, genealogical perspective through the lens of the Anthropocene and geological time. Reconceiving our archive as a fossil record, I suggest that Foucault has much to contribute to environmental challenges to human exceptionalism and the anthropogenic destruction of other species and ourselves.

**Keywords:** Foucault, fossils, Anthropocene, ethics, feminism, life

They discerned in fossils an inhuman art, metaphor along with materiality, intensification of the world’s truths, lithic conviviality.

—Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Tweet*

Over the past three decades, feminist philosophers have increasingly turned to the natural sciences to ask new questions about the body, materiality, nonhuman animals, affect, the biosphere, and the forces that animate the physical world. This renaturalizing trend has dramatically shifted the broader landscape of feminist theoretical inquiry away from social constructionism, subjectivity, and epistemology toward ontological and metaphysical concerns about nature, the form/matter

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\* Thanks are due to the University of Minnesota Press for their permission to publish this essay, which is forthcoming in *Anthropocene Feminism*, 2016.

relation, the limits of the human, and the question of life itself. Elizabeth Grosz writes, in her most recent book: “we need a humanities in which the human is no longer the norm, rule, or object, but instead life itself, in its open multiplicity, comes to provide the object of analysis.”<sup>1</sup> Her comment reflects larger interdisciplinary initiatives over the past three decades to link humanistic inquiry with the natural sciences and, especially, the health sciences. These efforts have materialized in the form of bioethics centers, joint faculty positions in health and humanities, and a proliferation of workshops, institutes, and research incentives designed to integrate what C.P. Snow once called the “two cultures.”<sup>2</sup>

In the context of the Anthropocene, the conception of the human as a geomorphic force, and the possible mass extinction of multiple forms of life, what are we to make of these posthumanist configurations? More specifically, what happens when we bring a Foucauldian genealogical lens to feminist renaturalization as life philosophy? And what are we to make of the explicitly ethical claims that are grounded in the feminist return to life? If, as Grosz puts it, renaturalization means that we need an “ethics internal to life itself,” how can we avoid the dangers of a biopolitics in which, as Foucault puts it, “the life of the species is wagered on its own political strategies”<sup>3</sup> If we agree with Foucault that modern biopower is characterized by “the entry of life into history” and the bringing of life and its mechanisms “into the realm of explicit calculations,”<sup>4</sup> how are we to assess both the value and the danger of the contemporary feminist investment in that life?

Importantly, the new feminist ethics of life is not confined to renaturalizing thinkers. Indeed, the most influential feminist philosopher of *denaturalization*, Judith Butler, increasingly relies on life as an anchor for the ethical theory she develops in her later work. Both Grosz and Butler—a renaturalizer and a denaturalizer—stake their ethical claims on life itself. But is the vital matter of *life itself* a given? Or might “life itself,” like “sex itself,” be what Foucault calls an “artificial unity,” a fictive ensemble that emerges in our own time as a speculative ideal, “a causal principle, an omnipresent meaning, a secret to be discovered everywhere”<sup>5</sup> When Jane Bennett writes at the end of *Vibrant Matter*, “I believe in one matter-energy, the maker of things seen and unseen,” ought we to wonder about such vitalist creeds for would-be materialists?<sup>6</sup>

I will argue in this essay that “life itself” is a problem of our time and, specifically, of our anthropogenic age: like sex in Foucault, life is “an especially dense transfer point of power”<sup>7</sup> that emerges at a particular historical moment, the contemporary moment of our biopolitical present.

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Becoming Undone: Darwinian Reflections on Life, Politics, and Art* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 16.

<sup>2</sup> C. P. Snow, *The Two Cultures* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality Volume One: An Introduction*, translated by Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1978), 143.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.

<sup>6</sup> Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 122.

<sup>7</sup> Foucault, *Sexuality Volume One*, 103.

Beginning with life as a problem of our time, I explore how a genealogical approach to life itself can open up new questions about the celebration of life in contemporary feminist renaturalizing philosophies. In doing so, I insist on the importance of the epistemic conditions for the possibility of what Foucault calls games of truth. Theorists like Grosz assert that it is time to turn away from epistemological questions. I want to make a counter-claim: that to repudiate epistemology, and to call for a new metaphysics and a new ontology of life itself, as Grosz does, evades the paradox of what Foucault calls in *The Order of Things* the historical *a priori*: that we are both bound and unbound by the temporal contingencies through which epistemes emerge and topple.<sup>8</sup> Focusing specifically on Foucault's description of fossils and monsters in the Classical Age, I hope to sharpen our sense of the geomorphic aporias that mark today's Anthropocenic discourse, the most acute of which is the emergence of "life itself" in the midst of what many are calling the Sixth Extinction.<sup>9</sup>

Ultimately, the stakes of my project are ethical. How do we approach the question of ethics in the Anthropocene? My analysis proceeds in three parts. First, I offer a brief overview of the renaturalizing move in feminist philosophy, with a particular focus on the work of Elizabeth Grosz. Second, I examine Butler's work as the Foucauldian, denaturalizing foil for the new feminist return to nature in order to show that feminist renaturalizers and denaturalizers alike make ethical appeals in the name of life itself. Third, I turn to Foucault to show how genealogy and the historical *a priori* give us a method and a concept for engaging life as historically contingent. In that turn, I suggest that the genealogical problematization of life we find in Foucault offers a nonvitalist alternative to life philosophy's vitalization of matter. I will argue that asking about the question of ethics in the Anthropocene means problematizing "life itself" as the metaphysical ground of our ethics. Foucault's historically contingent, emergent conception of life forces us to engage with the materiality of the traces of the past through which we construct our present understanding of ourselves, not only as individual disciplinary subjects but, more urgently, in our massification as population and even as a geomorphic force. Those traces include not only the archive of human lives struck down by power, but also the fossilized traces of nonhuman lives, what Quentin Meillassoux calls the philosophical problem of "ancestrality."<sup>10</sup> This archival fossil-

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<sup>8</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Random House, 1970), 157.

<sup>9</sup> For an overview see Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* (New York: Holt, 2014). Kolbert reports current extinction rates as much as forty-five thousand times higher than background rates (for amphibians) (Ibid., 17). The result will be the possible extinction of half of all extant species by 2050 (Ibid., 167). For a philosophical exploration of Anthropocene extinction see Claire Colebrook, *The Death of the Posthuman: Essays on Extinction; Volume One* (Open Humanities Press, 2014) and *Sex After Life: Essays on Extinction; Volume Two* (Open Humanities Press, 2014).

<sup>10</sup> Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, translated by Ray Brassier (London: Bloomsbury, 2008), 26.

ization of matter opens the recoiling movement of ethics as a question.<sup>11</sup> The fractured ground of such a question acquires material form in the figure of the fossil. I read that figure not as the trace of life but as the mark of absence and death: as nature's archive, the fossil record is an archive of extinction.

### **Feminist Renaturalization**

The renaturalizing move in contemporary feminist philosophy reflects a broader shift away from feminism's decades-old engagement with questions of epistemology and subjectivity, from standpoint epistemologies to postmodern feminisms of various kinds. The rise of animal studies, posthumanism, critical science and technology studies, object-oriented ontology, and affect theory marks a displacement if not outright rejection of both the sociological foundationalism of standpoint theory and the psycholinguistic antifoundationalism of feminist post-structuralism. As part of this larger shift, feminist renaturalization has mounted an important challenge to the denaturalizing moves that dominated feminist thought in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The philosophical reprivileging of nature and the biosphere has produced new ways of imagining life, from innovative scientific and phenomenological accounts of corporeality to trans-species political theories to new cosmologies of space and time.

To be sure, the contemporary feminist return to nature is not a return to the kinds of naturalist ontologies that have traditionally been used to justify gender inequality, the marginalization of sexual deviants, or the perpetuation of European colonial conquest and white racial privilege. Today's feminist renaturalization projects challenge those ontologies along with the culture-nature, mind-body dualisms that support them. They tend to rethink binarism itself, reconceptualizing human agency as part of nature or matter rather than in opposition to it. Shifting their focus away from anti-essentialist critiques of woman-as-nature, renaturalizers have turned toward animals, the cosmos, subatomic particles and waves, the brain, and the energetic pulse of biological life as objects of feminist concern.

A few salient examples serve to delineate the contours of the renaturalizing move in feminist philosophy. In her influential *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, the theoretical physicist Karen Barad offers an agential realist account of an intra-active matter where meaning and mattering are inextricably connected.<sup>12</sup> New attunements to intra-active matter in all its complexity allow us, Barad says, to "hear nature speak" in the entangled webs of what she calls spacetime-matterings.<sup>13</sup> Stacy Alaimo picks up on Barad to explore what she calls "trans-corporeality": the "contact zone between human corporeality and more-than-human nature."<sup>14</sup> Along similar lines, the Spinozist

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<sup>11</sup> Charles Scott, *The Question of Ethics: Nietzsche, Foucault, Heidegger* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

<sup>12</sup> Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007),

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 382.

<sup>14</sup> Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 2.

philosopher Hasana Sharp elaborates what she calls a “philanthropic posthumanism” for a “new universal,” a vital, flourishing assemblage of humans, animals, rocks, and trees whose unity as nature is derived from Spinoza’s geometric account of the universe as substance and modes.<sup>15</sup> Finally, in her later work Elizabeth Grosz develops a Darwinian understanding of nature as dynamic and self-differentiating to articulate what she calls in *Time Travels* “a more politicized, radical, and far-reaching feminist understanding of matter, nature, biology, time and becoming—objects and concepts usually considered outside the direct focus of feminist analysis.”<sup>16</sup>

There are obviously important differences among these thinkers, and I do not mean to efface those distinctions: each has her own particular set of methodological and conceptual tools for redressing what they view as a dominant anti-naturalism in feminist theory. These examples are offered as broad brush strokes to sketch out a renaturalizing scene. Most crucially, I want to focus on how the feminist return to nature presents itself, on empirical grounds, not only as a more complete and more accurate description of the world than that provided by social constructionists, but also as more ethically and politically promising. Karen Barad, for example, devotes the final chapter of her book to questions about our accountability to matter’s intra-action; she ends with an ethical call for greater responsibility in our relation to the complexity of matter.<sup>17</sup> Stacy Alaimo concludes her book, *Bodily Natures*, with the call for “an ethics that is not circumscribed by the human but is instead accountable to a material world that is never merely an external place but always the very substance of our selves and others.”<sup>18</sup> Hasana Sharp steers her Spinozist posthumanism toward an ethological ethics that can promote the flourishing of all beings in the biosphere through the cultivation of joyful affects. And in *Becoming Undone*, Grosz expounds on the value of the language of the bees as an “insect ethics”<sup>19</sup> internal to life itself.

Grosz’s reflections on life in particular have generated a burgeoning field of exciting and innovative feminist work. Under the banner of new materialisms, feminist science studies, or feminist renaturalization, these contemporary feminist returns to nature provide an important corrective to previous repudiations of scientific data in feminist constructivisms of various kinds. But what are we to make of the posthumanist disregard for the contingent epistemic frames that situate claims about nature and life itself? “Linked to the preeminence of the subject and of concepts of subjectivity,” Grosz complains, “is the privileging of the epistemological (questions of discourse, knowledge, truth, and scientificity) over the ontological (questions of the real, of matter, of force, or energy).”<sup>20</sup> Rejecting feminist theory’s longstanding obsession with subjectivity and epistemology, Grosz turns toward ontology and even metaphysics as the philosophical ground

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<sup>15</sup> Hasana Sharp, *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 219.

<sup>16</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 32.

<sup>17</sup> Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 361.

<sup>18</sup> Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*, 158.

<sup>19</sup> Grosz, *Becoming Undone*, 22.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

for her new materialism. "Feminist theory," she writes, "needs to welcome again what epistemologies have left out: the relentless force of the real, a new metaphysics."<sup>21</sup>

From a Foucauldian perspective, Grosz's metaphysical claims presuppose a Darwinian naturalism whose epistemic ground is *specifically* Victorian and therefore historically contingent rather than self-evidently true in all times and places. Indeed, Grosz's Darwinian life is the one "We Others, Victorians," as Foucault calls us, take to be the truth of nature.<sup>22</sup> To be sure, Grosz departs from traditional Darwinian humanisms: as a posthumanist, she sees Darwin as a bridge between the "determinism" of "classical science" and "the place of *indetermination* that has been so central to the contemporary, postmodern forms of the humanities."<sup>23</sup> Reading Darwin as "the most original thinker of the link between difference and becoming, between matter and its elaboration as life, between the past and the future,"<sup>24</sup> Grosz finds in Darwin an antifoundationalist critique of essentialism and teleology.

Importantly, Grosz highlights sexual difference as central to a Darwinian understanding of life itself. In *Time Travels* she argues that the three evolutionary principles—individual variation, the proliferation of species, and natural selection—provide an explanation of the "dynamism, growth, and transformability of living systems, the impulse toward a future that is unknown in, and uncontained by, the present and its history."<sup>25</sup> Grosz focuses on the third principle—natural selection—to bring out the crucial role of sexual selection as a sub-branch of natural selection. She then rereads Darwinian sexual selection through the Irigarayan lens of sexual difference. Darwin, Grosz argues, confirms "the Irigarayan postulation of the irreducibility, indeed, ineliminability, of sexual difference."<sup>26</sup> Thus sexualization—as Darwinian sexual selection, as Irigarayan sexual difference—constitutes the mechanism of deviation through which other differences are produced. As Grosz explains, sexual selection aesthetically "deviates" natural selection's principle of preservation to form what she calls "an ingenious [Darwinian] temporal machine for the production of the new."<sup>27</sup> Crucially, this ingenious machine produces, in Grosz's view, an ontological equivalence between sexuation and "life itself." Refracting sexual selection through an Irigarayan lens, Grosz thus reclaims sexual difference as "one of the ontological characteristics of life itself, not merely a detail, a feature that will pass. [...] Sexual difference," Grosz asserts, "is an ineliminable characteristic of life."<sup>28</sup>

In her most recent book, *Becoming Undone*, Grosz expands the Irigarayan-Darwinian frame of *Time Travels* to include the life-affirming philosophies of Deleuze, Bergson, and Simondon. Drawing on Bergson in particular, Grosz describes life as a "fundamental continuum," a "move-

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Foucault, *Sexuality Volume One*, Part I.

<sup>23</sup> Grosz, *Time Travels*, 32.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 31.

ment of differentiation that elaborates a multiplicity of things according to a unity of impulse or force."<sup>29</sup> Expounding on this Bergsonian conception of life as *élan vital*, Grosz articulates an "ontology of becoming" to be found in the dynamism of things: an "affirmation of the vibratory continuity of the material universe as a whole."<sup>30</sup> This continuity is not only spatial but also temporal. As Grosz puts it: "life [...] becomes something other than its (species or individual) past while retaining a certain continuity with it."<sup>31</sup> The resulting "symbiosis" between living life and nonliving matter occurs because life contains "virtualities" within itself. As Grosz puts it: "life carries becoming as its core. It is because life is parasitic on matter that life carries within itself the whole that matter expresses."<sup>32</sup>

In *Becoming Undone*, Grosz incorporates sexuality into the same ontological frame that equates sexual difference with life itself. Gayness or straightness, Grosz argues, "is not produced from causes [...], nor is it the consequence of a free choice." Rather, it is "the enactment of a freedom," the expression of sexuality as "an open invention."<sup>33</sup> This understanding of sexuality as a self-differentiating force coextensive with life itself has political implications. As Grosz explains, the political problem for sexual beings who have been oppressed or excluded by our sexual order is not the juridical achievement of more recognition, more rights, or more voice; rather, it becomes "how to enable more action, more making and doing, more difference."<sup>34</sup>

Grosz further argues that in order to facilitate this sexual *élan vital* of freedom or open invention feminist theory needs to renaturalize itself: it "needs to turn, or perhaps return, to questions of the real [...], questions of the nature and forces of the real, the nature and forces of the world, cosmological forces as well as historical ones."<sup>35</sup> That nod to history notwithstanding, Grosz's arguments are largely transhistorical. Decrying the shortcomings of a feminism obsessed with epistemological questions, Grosz's renaturalizing appeal is a call for a return to metaphysics. Grosz frames this metaphysical turn, like the return to nature, as a return to the new: "a new metaphysics."<sup>36</sup> Again, Grosz finds her most consistent feminist support for this turn in the "new metaphysics" of Luce Irigaray, where she finds "a new account of the forces of the real and the irreducibility of a real that is fundamentally dynamic."<sup>37</sup> For Grosz, that Irigarayan dynamism is driven by the division of being into "two irreducibly different types."<sup>38</sup> "Nature itself," she as-

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<sup>29</sup> Grosz, *Becoming Undone*, 46.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 100. While I agree with Grosz that Irigaray is elaborating a new ontology, I disagree that this elaboration is "a new metaphysics," as Grosz claims. Irigaray's explicit indebtedness to Heidegger's dissolution of the metaphysical foundations of ontology is at odds with Grosz's claim.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

serts, “takes on the form of [a] two[ness]”<sup>39</sup> that transcends historical contingency: “whatever historical circumstances are conceivable,” Grosz asserts, “there is no overcoming of sexual difference.”<sup>40</sup> “The future,” she continues, “will always contain and express sexual difference.”<sup>41</sup> Indeed, “sexual difference” is “the very measure of creativity itself.”<sup>42</sup> Without sexual difference there would only be “sameness, monosexuality, hermaphroditism, the endless structured (bacterial or microbial) reproduction of the same. [...] Without sexual difference, there could be no life as we know it,”<sup>43</sup> “no life on earth.”<sup>44</sup> Thus Grosz extracts sexual difference from the epistemic conditions of possibility that allow it to appear as a positivity out of what Foucault calls the contingent site, the “mute ground”<sup>45</sup> or “background”<sup>46</sup> of our knowledge. So doing, she transforms what Irigaray calls “sexual difference” as a problem of “our time” into a transhistorical substance called “life itself.”<sup>47</sup>

### **Butler’s Ethical Turn to Life**

Contemporary feminist philosophers of life often present Judith Butler as the denaturalizing foil to feminist renaturalization. Karen Barad, for example, praises Butler for performatively disrupting feminist social constructionism’s unacknowledged conception of sex as a blank, mute, corporeal substance onto which culture makes its mark as gender. But ultimately she finds fault in Butler’s insistence on a discursive materiality that cannot account for the nondiscursive aspects of matter. In linking what she views as Butler’s flawed humanism to a “failure to theorize the relationship between discursive and nondiscursive practices,”<sup>48</sup> Barad articulates a common renaturalizing critique of Butler.

Like Barad, Sharp is critical of the anthropocentric humanism undergirding Butler’s work, particularly in its ethical phase. Sharp is especially wary of the death-driven, mournful ethics of sad passions Butler derives from her Hegelian spin on Spinoza. Contra Butler’s somewhat heretical Spinozism, Sharp argues for a feminist politics of renaturalization that “begins with the denial of human exceptionalism.”<sup>49</sup> Contrasting her own Spinozist “posthumanist view of agency”<sup>50</sup> with Butler’s subjectivist, “antinatural concept of the human,”<sup>51</sup> Sharp affirms the value of a “vi-

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>45</sup> Foucault, *Order of Things*, xvii.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>47</sup> Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, translated by Carolyn Burke and Gillian Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 3.

<sup>48</sup> Barad, *Meeting the Universe*, 63.

<sup>49</sup> Sharp, *Spinoza*, 121.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

talistic" metaphysics—the "conative striving" of "living organisms" as "a desire for life"<sup>52</sup> that exists whether we recognize it or not—as an ethical and political alternative to Butler's melancholy Hegelian project "of perpetual dissatisfaction."<sup>53</sup>

Although Grosz is less concerned than Barad or Sharp with Butler's anthropocentrism, her critiques of Butler are similar in their focus on the problem of Butler's discursive conception of matter. For Grosz, Butler represents "an entire tradition of 'postmodern,' 'constructivist,' or 'performative' feminism in devaluing matter, or in transforming it from noun ('matter') to verb ('mattering') and in the process desubstantializing it."<sup>54</sup> According to Grosz, in Butler "the body itself dissolves, the real always displaces itself by being written on, and matter disappears in the process of mattering, of being valued."<sup>55</sup> And while Grosz applauds Butler's attention to the question of value, she contends that "the process of mattering cannot be cut off from *what matter it is*," namely "biological or organic matter."<sup>56</sup> Most important, Grosz grounds her renaturalizing critique of Butler in an ethical claim. Grosz argues that because nature, and not culture alone, is "continually subjected to transformation, to becoming, to unfolding over time, ethics would itself dictate that the natural be owed the debt of culture's emergence, insofar as it is precisely the open-ended incompleteness of nature itself that induces the cultural as its complexification and supplement."<sup>57</sup>

Despite their differences, these renaturalizing critiques of Butler all challenge Butler's *discursive* repudiation of what Grosz describes as "what matter is": "biological or organic matter," or "life itself." And indeed, in defending the materiality of the bodies she invoked in *Gender Trouble*, in *Bodies That Matter* Butler ultimately reinscribes corporeal matter as discursively produced. As Butler puts it, matter is "a process of materialization that stabilizes over time,"<sup>58</sup> where materialization is defined as "a forcible reiteration of norms."<sup>59</sup> Not surprisingly, most of Butler's readers have regarded this reiterative, normalizing linkage between matter and intelligibility as an "anti-naturalistic" account of matter. As Pheng Cheah puts it, Butler's synthesis of Foucault and psychoanalysis ends up conflating "an ontogenetic condition of possibility with an empirical cause" to produce a conception of matter as an epistemic object that is always in quotation marks.<sup>60</sup>

However, in Butler's later work, beginning in the late 1990s, those quotation marks give way to a conception of life that seems to evade discourse and legibility. What is this life of *The Psychic Life of Power*, *Precarious Life*, *Undoing Gender*, *Frames of War*, *Parting Ways*, and *Senses of the Subject*? Like Grosz, Butler tends to use the irreducible terms life or life itself to refer to something

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>54</sup> Grosz, *Time Travels*, 78.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>58</sup> Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 9.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>60</sup> Pheng Cheah, "Mattering," *Diacritics*, vol. 26, no. 1 (Spring 1996), 115.

that is nondiscursive: an irrepressible force that cannot be contained within meaning's frames. Importantly, Butler's turn to ethics corresponds with her turn to life: life's inherent capacity to contest intelligibility or meaning seems to be one of its key ethical features. In *The Psychic Life of Power*, for example, Butler poses "the ethical as a question" about "life."<sup>61</sup> Here life appears as an enigmatic, psychoanalytically inflected energy, "drive," *Trieb*,<sup>62</sup> or instinct that turns back on itself, tropologically, to produce self-consciousness, conscience, and the psyche according to Hegelian, Nietzschean, and Freudian logics. Loosely aligning the Hegelian body with Nietzschean will and Freudian instinct, Butler suggests that there is something irrepressible about this bodily, instinctive drive or "life."<sup>63</sup>

In *Precarious Life*, life emerges again as a force that is not only insistent and irrepressible but also precarious. In Grosz we saw an ontological equivalence between sexuation and life, and in early Butler we saw the matter of sex as "a regulatory ideal whose materialization is compelled," "an ideal construct which is forcibly materialized through time."<sup>64</sup> But in her turn to ethics, Butler displaces her early ontological questions about sex, gender, and sexuality in favor of a Levinasian pre-ontological ethics of the face that values the vulnerability of nondiscursive human life. To be sure, life's pre-ontological status as human vulnerability differentiates Butler's humanist ethics of life from posthumanist feminist ethics. But it is also worth remembering that Butler's Levinasian humanism is not the same as traditional humanisms: following Levinas, Butler asserts the importance of human relations even as she destabilizes ontological or metaphysical assumptions about human nature. For Butler as for Levinas, there's a rift at the origin of the human, and that rift is ethical. This hardly makes Butler a posthumanist, despite her assertion in *Frames of War* that there is "no firm way to distinguish in absolute terms the *bios* of the animal from the *bios* of the human animal."<sup>65</sup> As the title of her book *Frames of War* suggests, Butler continues to insist throughout her work on the inextricable relation between specifically *human* epistemic frames and questions of ontology and ethics. "There is no life and no death," she writes, "without a relation to some frame."<sup>66</sup> "A life," she insists, "has to be intelligible *as a life*, has to conform to certain conceptions of what life is, in order to become recognizable."<sup>67</sup> By contrast, Sharp and Grosz assert that life exists whether we recognize it or not.

Despite this key difference between Butler's new humanism and renaturalizing posthumanisms, I want to focus on the fact that both camps invoke life to anchor their ethical claims. As Butler puts it in *Precarious Life*: "To respond to the face, to understand its meaning, means to be awake to what is precarious in another life or, rather, the precariousness of life itself."<sup>68</sup> And even

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<sup>61</sup> Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 65.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>64</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 1.

<sup>65</sup> Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009), 19.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), 134.

though, in *Frames of War*, she hedges on the term “life itself,” invoking biopolitics and various critiques of vitalism, she continues to link the precariousness of life to something that exceeds the epistemic frame: “precariousness itself,” she writes, “cannot be properly *recognized*.”<sup>69</sup> According to Butler it is precisely that which exceeds recognition in precariousness that “imposes certain kinds of ethical obligations on and among the living.”<sup>70</sup> Importantly, the precarious life Butler invokes here is explicitly linked to what she calls life’s precarity: life’s social and political conditioning. So if, in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Butler harnessed her ethics of the other to a Spinozist desire to persist that “is,” she writes, “life itself,”<sup>71</sup> in *Frames of War* she rethinks the term “life itself” to include sociality as life’s condition. In doing so she differentiates her conception of life from Spinoza’s *conatus*, which she says “can be and is undercut” by our boundedness to others.<sup>72</sup> Thus she argues in *Frames of War* that if all lives are precarious, life’s conditions make some lives more precarious than others. Precarity—the politically induced, differential condition of certain populations to injury, violence, and death—comes to qualify the precariousness of life itself to which it is nonetheless inextricably connected. In *Parting Ways*, Butler concretizes this ethics of obligation to a precarious other as an ethics of dispersion by considering the precarity of Jewish and Palestinian lives. Such obligation, she writes, constitutes “the condition of a politics of diasporic life.”<sup>73</sup> Finally, in her most recent book, *Senses of the Subject*, Butler explores the Hegelian understanding that “love must be living to be love,” even if it turns out that “life itself can never be contained or exhausted by love.”<sup>74</sup> Even in the grief that follows death there is “something enlivening,” the “rustling” movement of “infinity,” “evanescent and alive.”<sup>75</sup>

As this trajectory suggests, Butler’s insistence on the epistemic and sociopolitical frames out of which life emerges ultimately make her conception of life somewhat different from those of the renaturalizers. And yet, the Levinasian, pre-ontological, consistently “ecstatic”<sup>76</sup> frame of her ethics of the other requires that Butler implicitly ground her claims in an excess, an ineffable alterity, what Foucault calls in *History of Sexuality Volume One* the “something else and something more”<sup>77</sup> that is sex. While Butler articulates that something else and something more as precarious life, Foucault calls that life “‘sex’ itself”:<sup>78</sup> “a causal principle”<sup>79</sup> whose “agency”<sup>80</sup> is not “autono-

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<sup>69</sup> Butler, *Frames*, 13.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>71</sup> Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 44.

<sup>72</sup> Butler, *Frames*, 30. For an extended version of this argument see Butler’s “Spinoza’s *Ethics* under Pressure,” in Judith Butler, *Senses of the Subject* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 63-89.

<sup>73</sup> Judith Butler, *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 31.

<sup>74</sup> Butler, “Hegel’s Early Love,” in Butler, *Senses of the Subject*, 100.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 110-11.

<sup>76</sup> Butler, *Parting Ways*, 12.

<sup>77</sup> Foucault, *Sexuality Volume One*, 153.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

mous”<sup>81</sup> but, rather, “an imaginary point [...] that each individual has to pass in order to have access to his own intelligibility.”<sup>82</sup> What was once “madness” is now “our intelligibility;”<sup>83</sup> what was once perceived “as an obscure and nameless urge” now gives us “our identity” and “the plenitude of our body”<sup>84</sup> through the distributional, calculative, statistical rationality that characterizes biopower. Many have asked why, in her turn to ethics, Butler turns away from the questions about gender and sexuality that dominated her early work. I want to suggest that in her ethical turn, Butler resignifies sex as life. Genealogy exposes the grid of sexuality that incites, intensifies, and proliferates Butlerian sex as life itself: the precarious life that Butler places at the heart of her ethics.

### Fossil and Archive

Foucault’s genealogical approach to biopower, or power over life, brings a genealogical lens to the feminist ethics of life itself in both its renaturalizing and denaturalizing dimensions. Foucault famously argues in *The Order of Things* that life itself was invented in the nineteenth century. If biology was unknown in the eighteenth century, he writes, “there was a very simple reason for it: that life itself did not exist. All that existed was living beings.”<sup>85</sup> According to Foucault, with the nineteenth-century invention of history, historicity was introduced into nature. The historicity of nature differentiates the mode of being of the modern period from the tabulated, “vegetal values”<sup>86</sup> of the Classical Age by making the animal being’s privileged form.<sup>87</sup> In modernity, being “maintains its existence on the frontiers of life and death”<sup>88</sup> in the form of the animal. Historicity introduces life as the “sovereign vanishing point”<sup>89</sup> that replaces the royal sovereign of the previous episteme. This shift is reflected in the rise of biology: the *bio-logos* or science of life whose focus is the developmental organism with its hidden structures, buried organs, invisible functions, “and that distant force, at the foundation of its being, which keeps it alive.”<sup>90</sup> With life comes death, as Foucault puts it: “the animal appears as the bearer of that death to which it is, at the same time, subjected; it contains a perpetual devouring of life by life [...]. Life has left the tabulated space of order and become wild once more.”<sup>91</sup> Life becomes “the root of all existence” and the

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<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> Foucault, *Order of Things*, 127-128.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 277. I have modified the translation of “valeurs végétales” in the French original from “vegetable values” in the published English translation to “vegetal values.” For the French original see Michel Foucault, *Les Mots et les choses: Une archéologie des sciences humaines* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), 289.

<sup>87</sup> Foucault, *Order of Things*, 277.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

“non-living, nature in its inert form” becomes “merely spent life.”<sup>92</sup> “The experience of life is thus posited as the most general law of beings; the revelation of that primitive force on the basis of which they are; it functions as an untamed ontology,” and “this ontology discloses not so much what gives beings their foundation as what bears them for an instant towards a precarious form and yet is already secretly sapping them from within in order to destroy them.”<sup>93</sup> Crucially, life takes on a central role in the rise of the human sciences over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: The invention of life and the invention of the human go hand in hand. As Foucault puts it, before the nineteenth century “man did not exist (any more than life).”<sup>94</sup>

In the 1970s, Foucault reworks this archeological understanding of life and the discourse of the human sciences through genealogies of sexuality in *Abnormal* and *History of Sexuality Volume One*. Here life emerges as sexual instinct: the “dark shimmer of sex”<sup>95</sup> or “fragment of darkness that we carry within us.”<sup>96</sup> Bringing together *eros* and *thanatos*, modern power-knowledge transforms the concept of an instinct of life into a drive toward death in a “Faustian pact” that “exchange[s] life in its entirety for sex itself.”<sup>97</sup> Picking up on the logic of a “continuous gradation”<sup>98</sup> that *Discipline and Punish* describes as a “great carceral network,”<sup>99</sup> *History of Sexuality Volume One* rearticulates that network as a biopolitical dispositif of power-knowledge-*pleasure* that, in the late nineteenth century, sexualizes existence as life itself. Pleasure transforms and intensifies the dispositif that, earlier in the century, had invented life as natural, biological, and reproductive. As “the economic principle intrinsic to sexual instinct,”<sup>100</sup> pleasure uncouples sexual instinct from fertilization<sup>101</sup> and unhitches sexuality from the procreative kinship system Foucault calls “alliance.”<sup>102</sup> Pleasure makes sexual instinct dynamic, self-differentiating, “an open invention,”<sup>103</sup> as Grosz might put it. Importantly, pleasure-driven sexual instinct “overflows its natural end” — heterosexual copulation — “and it does so naturally.”<sup>104</sup> It therefore becomes “natural for instinct to be abnormal.”<sup>105</sup> In Foucault’s rendering, the natural deviation that Grosz celebrates in Darwin describes the sexological dispositif of proliferating perversions that incite and implant bourgeois sexuality as life itself. Finally, this pleasure-driven expansion of a gradational ontology of sexual

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<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 278.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 344.

<sup>95</sup> Foucault, *Sexuality Volume One*, 157.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>98</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: Birth of the Prison*, translated by Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1977), 299.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 298.

<sup>100</sup> Michel Foucault, *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1974-1975*, translated by Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2003), 286.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 286-287.

<sup>102</sup> Foucault, *Sexuality Volume One*, 106-108.

<sup>103</sup> Grosz, *Becoming Undone*, 73.

<sup>104</sup> Foucault, *Abnormal*, 278.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 280.

deviation is intensified by the “interplay of truth and sex.”<sup>106</sup> The economy of pleasure that defines life as sexual instinct reproduces itself through the invention and intensification of a new pleasure: a “pleasure in the truth of pleasure,”<sup>107</sup> the “pleasure of analysis”<sup>108</sup> that is “immanent in this will to knowledge.”<sup>109</sup>

Importantly, Foucault further explains in *Abnormal* that this new logic of sexual instinct as the deviant nature of life itself *depathologizes* the abnormal. Although many thinkers have conflated Foucault with Canguilhem’s analysis of the normal and the pathological, Foucault departs from Canguilhem by demonstrating a modern shift away from the pathologization of the abnormal.<sup>110</sup> Foucault argues that the invention of sexual instinct and the naturalization of perversion gives rise to psychiatry as “a medicine that purely and simply dispenses with the pathological.”<sup>111</sup> This allows psychiatry to become “a medically qualified power that brings under its control a domain of objects that are defined as not being pathological processes.”<sup>112</sup> It is the “depathologization” of naturally deviant sexual instinct that allows for the “generalization of psychiatric power;”<sup>113</sup> concomitantly, biomedicine expands and intensifies the points of access through which it orders both individuals and populations, shifting its target from mere disease—the pathological—to public health and nonpathological forms of life.<sup>114</sup> This shift is crucial to the logic of biopower and its modes for ordering and intensifying life itself through the measurement, monitoring, and control of populations. The biopolitical norm is internally derived from populations to produce a calculus of distribution that plots variation or deviance as a function not of an externally imposed ideal, but as a function of their actual occurrence. This statistical logic of the norm as normal curve reduces the social world with its leaky, dying bodies “to the objective figure of the line, the curve, the histogram’s alleged indifference, the purity of number.”<sup>115</sup> In the “statistical panopticism”<sup>116</sup> of this scalar method, we as living social beings come to understand ourselves through the “detour” of a “numerical amalgamation of all—a ligature so ontologically alien to the social world that it fails to qualify as a relation at all.”<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Foucault, *Sexuality Volume One*, 57.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>110</sup> For a more detailed account of the important differences between Foucault and Canguilhem in the context of sexuality and biopower see Mary Beth Mader, *Sleights of Reason: Norm, Bisexuality, Development* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2011), 62-65.

<sup>111</sup> Foucault, *Abnormal*, 308.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 309.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> For an example of how biopolitical health projects and neoliberalism work together by targeting women through reproductives, see Ladelle McWhorter, “Darwin’s Invisible Hand: Feminism, Reproductives, and Foucault’s Analysis of Neoliberalism,” *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 48, *Spindel Supplement* (2010), 43-63.

<sup>115</sup> Mader, *Sleights of Reason*, 65.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

Life itself, then, is the biopolitical product of this shift from disciplinary power-knowledge into an ever-expanding grid of regulatory power-knowledge-pleasure. Like sex itself, the “imaginary element”<sup>118</sup> that is life itself is increasingly constituted by the statistical tracking and manipulation of populations “as something desirable.”<sup>119</sup> And again, as Foucault puts it with regard to sex, “it is this desirability” of life “that attaches each one of us to the injunction to know it, to reveal its law and its power.”<sup>120</sup>

Foucault’s description of the sexualized life of biopower is echoed in Grosz’s description of life itself as a vital force at the heart of a new metaphysics and a new feminist ethics of sexual difference. But in Foucault’s description of biopower, life is massified as population through a technology of statistics that redistributes life around a norm within a field of gradation. This stochastic, normalizing, massifying technology intensifies life on every scale, from its aggregation as population to the microscopic scale of cells and genomes.<sup>121</sup> Foucault shows how that intensification operates through the interplay of truth and pleasure, and how the will to knowledge that drives the disciplinary desire for individual identity and intelligibility also participates in a sexualizing feedback loop of power-knowledge-pleasure whose regulatory pole is the ordering norm of the indifferent histogram.

How, then, might Foucault’s genealogical perspective on life itself help us to rethink the return to nature in contemporary feminist thought? Contra the renaturalizers’ transhistorical conceptions of life itself, Foucault offers an unstable, contingent conception of life that remains bound to the disintegrating forces of temporal change. Specifically, in Foucault, the evidentiary matter that grounds our belief in something called life itself is, by definition, fragmented, incomplete, and shifting. In bringing our attention to the rift-restoring matter of time’s traces, Foucault allows us to rethink life not as a timeless metaphysical substance whose features are derived from modern biology, but as a strange, nonhuman writing we might read and “think differently”<sup>122</sup> in shifting interplays of space and time. That rereading involves not structuralism’s linguistic abstractions, as so many of Foucault critics have claimed. As a genealogical epistemology and method, reading and thinking differently requires contact with the materiality of the past. “My object,” Foucault says, “is not language [*le langage*] but the archive.”<sup>123</sup> It is this Foucauldian archival approach to rethinking the material traces of absence or death that can break open the metaphysical frame of life itself that characterizes some feminist renaturalization projects. Specifically, if, as

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<sup>118</sup> Foucault, *Sexuality Volume One*, 156.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 156-157.

<sup>121</sup> Nikolas Rose, *The Politics of Life Itself: Biomedicine, Power, and Subjectivity in the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

<sup>122</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume Two: The Use of Pleasure*, translated by Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1985), 9. Foucault’s writes that his aim is to “free thought from what it silently thinks, and so enable it to think differently.” Rethinking “life itself” can be seen as contributing to that aim.

<sup>123</sup> Michel Foucault, “On the Ways of Writing History,” in James D. Faubion (ed.), *Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984, Volume Two: Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology* (New York: New Press, 1998), 293.

Foucault argues in *The Order of Things*, the spatial ruptures of eighteenth-century European thought transformed natural history into the historicity of nature and, with it, the possibility of life itself, the spatial continuity that defines our contemporary age might be ruptured through a radical rethinking of nature's archives of absence: the fossil record.

To be sure, an obvious posthumanist objection to this turn to the archive for histories of the present that rupture our anthropogenic frame will be that Foucault's archives track human discourse rather than the nondiscursive, nonhuman matter of nature. Does my attempt to trouble the epistemic presuppositions of a concept of life itself rely on a specifically discursive archive, thereby landing me back in our episteme's humanist trap? Or, alternatively, might it be possible to rethink Foucault's archival method as the contact of thinking with a discourse that is other-than-human and other-than-life? Might we reconceive the archive of our histories of the present as a fossilized nature that suspends the human and the life itself to which it is bound? Might we, in other words, rethink the Anthropocene and paleontology through the lens of the Foucauldian archive? Might that suspension of the human and life itself return the fossil to the monstrosity out of which it was extracted?

*The Order of Things* offers clues for this suspension. In "Monsters and Fossils," at the heart of *The Order of Things*, the fossil emerges against the "background noise" that is "the endless murmur of nature."<sup>124</sup> Like a form from sediment once covered by oceans, Foucault's fossil becomes a figure for the emergence of intelligibility out of the undifferentiated murmur of unintelligibility. *The Order of Things* describes those frames of intelligibility as the epistemic conditions that give rise to the human sciences in the modern age.

But what happens when we read *The Order of Things* through the lens of monstrosity touched by the fossil? What happens when we reread reason's order through the disordering lens of unreason? If the fossil figures the emergence of intelligibility out of unintelligibility's murmur, what happens when we reread paleontology as mad? Let me explain these admittedly bizarre questions by briefly linking *The Order of Things* to Foucault's 1961 book *History of Madness*, a link Foucault himself makes in the preface to *The Order of Things*, where he writes: "the present study is, in a sense, an echo of [...] a history of madness."<sup>125</sup> Can we, reading backwards and remembering *History of Madness*, rehear its story about the emergence of the Western subject as an echo of life's emergence in *The Order of Things*? In that hearing, might we also rehear *Madness's* archive as a monstrous echo of the nonhuman fossil record we find in *The Order of Things*?

These questions point to the reverberating repetitions through which Foucault's first book, *History of Madness*, is inverted as the scientific order of the human sciences in *The Order of Things* five years later, in 1966. Importantly for my aim to destabilize the humanist presuppositions that subtend standard conceptions of the archive, I want to highlight here the repeated figure-ground structure that *The Order of Things* and *History of Madness* share. Just as fossils emerge from the

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<sup>124</sup> Foucault, *Order of Things*, 155.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, xxiv; *emphasis added*.

murmuring “background noise”<sup>126</sup> of monstrosity in *The Order of Things*, so too in *History of Madness* positivities emerge from the murmuring “background noise” of unreason.<sup>127</sup> Like the books and documents Foucault encounters in his visits to the archives of madness, so too these fossil forms bear traces of creatures “who,” retrospectively, we understand to have “lived and died.”<sup>128</sup> Humanist historians will decipher the archival traces of madness for a positivist project of knowing. So too with the “inhuman art”<sup>129</sup> of the fossil record: scientists will read “thousands of forms”<sup>130</sup> through a humanizing lens that translates the imprint of fragments of petrified bone, ammonite, plant matter, and shell as scenes from deep time.<sup>131</sup>

Rereading the fossil record through the lens of *History of Madness* interrupts that human rhythm of reconstituted life in a syncopated relation to the archive of madness. Just as the archive of madness tells the story of the rational subject’s emergence through the objectification of madness, so too the fossil record tells the story of the emergence of life itself through the objectification of monstrosity in the fossil. Fossils may feel familiar to us in our Victorian thinking—Darwin devoted many pages to them in *On the Origin of Species*<sup>132</sup>—but Foucault makes the fossil strange by rendering it as “the privileged locus of a resemblance”<sup>133</sup> out of sync with the time of its appearance. This out of syncness helps us to see it as monstrous, as deeply strange, within the epistemic frame of our own space-time. Like the madman and the poet whose logic of similitude places them “on the outer edge of our culture,”<sup>134</sup> Foucault’s fossil fractures the now in which lives are made intelligible as biological life. Specifically, as the material record of catastrophic extinction, in Foucault’s hands fossils become the strange time-twisting mirrors of “the ends of man,” of the face dissolving at the edge of the sea, of life’s demise in an anthropogenic age. In that sense we might read this “lithic conviviality”<sup>135</sup> as a mad paleontology, a “speech after death,”<sup>136</sup> to use Foucault’s words: the proleptic traces of our own extinction.

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<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>127</sup> Michel Foucault, *History of Madness*, translated by Jonathan Murphy and Jean Khalifa (London: Routledge, 2006), xxxii.

<sup>128</sup> Michel Foucault, “Lives of Infamous Men,” in James D. Faubion (ed.), *Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984, Volume Three: Power* (New York: New Press, 2000), 157.

<sup>129</sup> Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome (@jeffreycjcohen), “[...] but they discerned in fossils an inhuman art, metaphor along w materiality, intensification of the world’s truths, lithic conviviality,” (12 September 2013, 5:28 a.m., Tweet).

<sup>130</sup> Foucault, *Order of Things*, 156.

<sup>131</sup> See Martin J.S. Rudwick, *Scenes from Deep Time: Early Pictorial Representations of the Prehistoric World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

<sup>132</sup> See especially Charles Darwin, “[Chapter Nine] On the Imperfection of the Geological Record” and “[Chapter 10] On the Geological Succession of Organic Beings” in Gillian Beer (ed.), *On the Origin of Species* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>133</sup> Foucault, *Order of Things*, 156.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>135</sup> Cohen, Tweet.

<sup>136</sup> Michel Foucault, *Speech Begins After Death*, translated by Robert Bononno (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2013).

In this picture, nature reappears not as a unified substance that contains and propogates life itself, but as an abyssal murmur which, like the murmur in *History of Madness*, can only be heard as what Foucault calls “a dull sound from beneath history.”<sup>137</sup> As other-than-human forms of “speech after death,” Foucault’s fossils expose what Foucault calls “the exotic charm of another system of thought” and “the limitation of our own.”<sup>138</sup> From the middle of *The Order of Things*, fossils emerge as if from the ocean floor in the shape of “ear, or skull, or sexual parts, like so many plaster statues, fashioned one day and dropped the next,”<sup>139</sup> as the cast-off parts of a human; the logic of resemblance peculiar to the fossil recasts those human parts as sea shell, bird, or worm. Rather than indicating the evolutionary triumph of life in man, Foucault’s rendering of this part-animal, part-mineral, fragmented evidence of the spatial disruption of temporal continuity returns evolutionary human parts to another space-time as other-than-human characters in a taxonomic table we cannot fully know. In that return, the background monstrosity of temporal continuity out of which the fossil forms as spatial disruption becomes another kind of nature. Rendered strange as the monstrous materialization of the untimely, Foucault’s fossil becomes a haunting figure; like a ghost, it marks what Foucault calls “that uncertain frontier region where one does not know whether one ought to speak of life or not.”<sup>140</sup> Thus Foucault leaves us to read the fossil in a dislocated space-time, where the fossil lingers as a strange remnant of something we call life within a frame where that something can no longer be thought.

In its echoing relation to *History of Madness*, the fossil record thus undoes subjectivity and life itself at the site of humanism’s heart: the archive. Showing the way, in his 1977 essay, “Lives of Infamous Men,” Foucault returns to those archives—Charenton, Bicêtre, Salpêtrière—out of which he wrote *History of Madness* in the late 1950s. Like “Monster and Fossil,” “Lives of Infamous Men” describes the Classical episteme, and like “Monster and Fossil” it traces the emergence of form as the appearance of lives out of a murmuring, monstrous background. If fossilized nonhuman lives appear as stone, Foucault’s infamous human lives appear as ashes or dried plants and flowers organized in an herbarium as an “anthology of existences.”<sup>141</sup> And just as fossils appear as pictorial poems in the sedimented archive of nature, so too archival “poem-lives”<sup>142</sup> appear in asylum registers and police reports to mark the passage of beings: sodomite monks and feeble-minded usurers. Further, Foucault tells us, their matter matters: unlike literary characters, he says, these beings “lived and died,”<sup>143</sup> appearing to him only in their death, as a fossil would, in the form of petrified insect, fish, or worm. To be sure, unlike the fossil, the poem-life appears to us because of an encounter with power which, in striking down a life and turning it to ashes, makes it emerge, like a flash, out of the anonymous murmur of beings who pass without a trace.

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<sup>137</sup> Foucault, *History of Madness*, xxxi.

<sup>138</sup> Foucault, *Order of Things*, xv.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>141</sup> Foucault, “Lives,” 157.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

Foucault's conception of lives in his 1977 essay thus reflects his shift, since *The Order of Things* where the fossil appears, to a focus on knowing as it is traversed by power. But if we read the fossil in the 1966 text retrospectively, through the lens of "Lives of Infamous Men" and biopower, we can see quite clearly that to "animate" the fragmented remains of the past—the fossilized lives in the archive of nonhuman nature, the poem-lives in the police archive of the human—is to create a biopolitical continuity called "life itself" that fills in the gaps of a discontinuous matter with a transhistorical substance. Indeed, Darwin himself worried about how the "imperfection" of the fossil record destabilized the foundations of his evolutionary theory of life. So too with the archive: in Foucault's hands, the poem-lives of madness emerge, like fossils, as the aphoristic remnants—or are they figures of the future?—of an inhuman, monstrous world.

Foucault's genealogical approach to life thus suggests that the return to nature in some contemporary feminist philosophy skirts the danger of universalizing the historically contingent frames of our present world as a new metaphysics of life; in so doing, this new metaphysics draws on assumptions that in fact bind life itself to the human, even as it makes posthumanist claims. We need to take seriously that famous image of the face dissolving at the edge of the sea that closes *The Order of Things*. As Foucault puts it in *Speech After Death*: "I'm speaking over the corpse of others."<sup>144</sup>

Confronted with corpses, positivist historians and biologists alike flirt with fantasies of resuscitation, as in the recent *New York Times Magazine* report on Ben Novak's Revive and Restore de-extinction project, a paleogenomic quest to use DNA manipulation to bring back from extinction everything from the passenger pigeon to the woolly mammoth to the Tasmanian tiger.<sup>145</sup> This is what Foucault calls in "Lives of Infamous Men" "the dream to reconstitute [the] intensity [of those lives] in an analysis."<sup>146</sup> Is the paleogeneticist's dream also the dream of the feminist life philosopher: to resuscitate the dead fossil within the continuum of biopower, to chase the "good feelings of bio-energy,"<sup>147</sup> as Foucault puts it in *History of Sexuality Volume One*? And isn't this dream of giving life precisely the dream Foucault describes in *History of Sexuality Volume One* as the *ars erotica* of our *scientia sexualis*, where the greatest pleasure is "pleasure in the truth of pleasure"<sup>148</sup> to be wrought from "a great archive of pleasures"?<sup>149</sup> Foucault diagnoses that pleasure as the force of intensification that motivates sexual subjects to play our games of truth in biopower. But in his genealogical thinking he also enjoins us to problematize life itself along with the humanist subject spawned in its wake. In so doing, he offers us an ethics of something other than life—something other than human—that wanders not from death to life but from death to truth and from truth to

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<sup>144</sup> Foucault, *Speech*, 40.

<sup>145</sup> See Nathaniel Rich, "The New Origin of the Species," *New York Times Magazine* (March 2, 2014), 24-31; 48-49.

<sup>146</sup> Foucault, "Lives," 238.

<sup>147</sup> Foucault, *Sexuality Volume One*, 71.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

death. Foucault's archive, like the fossil in *The Order of Things*, is the "matière" or "stuff" that grounds Foucault's ethical thinking.<sup>150</sup>

That ground is, paradoxically, ungrounding. It breaks our frame: this is what Foucault means by a history of the present. How can we write those monstrous histories of the present in the Anthropocene? Can feminism articulate an ethics that takes seriously the dissolution of the human and life itself that Foucault presents to us: as corpse, as monster, as fossil? What kind of monstrous ethics would that be? Remembering these questions, let me conclude with a quote from James Baldwin who, in his 1985 essay "Here Be Dragons," transformed a mythic vision of the human past into the reality of a precarious and violent present:

Ancient maps of the world—when the world was flat—inform us [...] HERE BE DRAGONS. Dragons may not have been there then, but they are certainly here now, breathing fire, belching smoke.<sup>151</sup>

The mad logic of resemblance of a fossil record that proleptically tracks life's extinction ruptures the grids that make us—and life itself—intelligible. The fossil is an inhuman art, a lithic conviviality, an intensification of the monstrosity of the world's truths. Here Be Dragons: Those truths hover, like monsters on old maps, in the murmuring background of an Anthropocene feminism that, to quote Foucault, "ought to make us wonder today."<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> In this sense we might say, as Foucault does in a different context, that the archive is the ground for thinking "the freedom of the subject and its relationship to others—which constitutes the very stuff [matière] of ethics" (Michel Foucault, "The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom," in Paul Rabinow (ed.), *Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984; Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth* (New York: New Press, 1997), 300).

<sup>151</sup> James Baldwin, "Here Be Dragons," in *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction, 1948-1985* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), 679.

<sup>152</sup> Foucault, *Sexuality Volume One*, 159.