LANDSCAPES, TASKSCAPES, DEATHSCAPES: TOWARDS A FILTHY MATERIALITY OF LACANIAN NEGATIVITY

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The death drive is to be situated in the historical domain . . . . it may itself be grasped in a fundamental act of memorization. [ . . . ]

And the things he forgets . . . are those things in connection with which everything is arranged so that he doesn’t think about them, i.e., stench and corruption that always yawn like an abyss. For life after all is rottenness.

—Jacques Lacan

Reminiscences are powerful, eminently relational registers of what was. They are also methods of summoning—one could even say, conjuring—various slices of temporality that have become entangled in layers of sedimentation. Spaces are always charged with reminiscences, although we use this word in a sense far different from the conventional one. For example, to reminisce, in our sense of the word, is to indulge in the recollection of material spillages and filthy events. Indeed, there is always an element of spoilation in recollection. Such spoilation (“impurity”), as Georges Bataille has noted, is charged with a “sovereign magic,” irreducible to human presence. One has only to consider fifth-order parasites chewing away upon the insides of their hosts, for instance, to realize the inherent, inhuman agency of nature’s “impurity.”

Similarly, in the view of actor-network-theory (ANT), no “actant” (human or otherwise) forms a privileged locus of activity; no single actor may be defined as constituting the sole source of material agency. Moreover, there is no single form of recollection that has precedence in relation to other modes of memory. According to ANT, all “entities” contribute—in a singular fashion—to the maintenance and proliferation of “networks.” In fact, it could be argued that “we” ourselves, so to speak, are but relational registers of reminiscence, local noises that have become time-invariant.

“Within material semiotics,” as John Law and Annemarie Mol have pointed out, “an entity counts as an actor if it makes a perceptible difference.”

4 An actant may be said “to act”—i.e., to exert agency upon the nodes of a network—if it makes a difference: if it enacts either itself or others. Thus, “entities,” as Law and Mol further elaborate, “give each other being [. . .] they enact each other.”

To be, according to ANT, is to enact others. Without such movement(s), without imprinting upon others “our own” performativities, we could not “be” in any meaningful sense of the word.

And yet, it is the Other that gives us being; without alterity there can be no identity at all. That which we regard as “the physical” is merely a set of relationalities that draws its “being” from its relations. Graham Harman has noted that Bruno Latour’s ontology—and by extension the ontology expounded by ANT, in general—is eminently relational.

5 However much we may wish to cleanly and clearly identify “the agent” in itself, if we subtract its filthy relationalities, so to speak, there is hardly anything left in the wake of such (a) subtraction(s). Consider, then, as a case in point, this first-hand account of a clash between Gandhian protesters and riot police:

I heard the sickening whack of the clubs on unprotected skulls. The waiting crowd of marchers groaned and sucked in their breath in sympathetic pain at every blow. Those


struck down fell sprawling, unconscious or writhing with fractured skulls or broken shoulders. . . . The survivors, without breaking ranks, silently and doggedly marched on until struck down. Although everyone knew that within a few minutes they would be beaten down, perhaps killed, I could detect no signs of wavering or fear. They marched silently, with heads up, without the encouragement of music or cheering or any possibility that they might escape serious injury or death.

According to Catherine Bell, this clash is best understood as a “ritualized confrontation between two value systems” (R 163). Thus, on one hand, State violence, with its apparently reckless disregard for human life, tramples upon dignity and human rights, as nonviolent protesters are clobbered by riot police. While, on the other hand, through the very weakness of their exposed bodies—i.e., through the “sickening whack of clubs on unprotected skulls”—, the moral superiority of Gandhi’s movement is demonstrated. So far so good, but Bell’s analysis immediately provokes another question: Why simply restrict the gambit of agency to two, rival “value systems”?

For ANT, there’s much more at stake here. Although, it should be emphasized right away that our example above, at least on the surface, seems to constitute a rather anthropocentric view, which goes against the goals of ANT. Indeed, Sarah Whatmore has equated ANT with “a refusal to equate agency (the capacity to act or have effects) with intentionality.” Moreover, Fitzsimmons and Goodman have noted that even purportedly “non-anthropocentric” social theories often maintain such dualities as the human/nonhuman divide, thereby unwittingly remaining trapped in dialectical thinking. I would argue, however, that it is precisely by utilizing such hybrid networks, as evinced by our example above, that we may perhaps transcend such dualistic social ontologies. Thus rather than choosing a completely “non-human” network, composed entirely of agents beyond the realm of human sociability, it is a far more radical gesture, I think, to draw on a hybrid archive in a way that is, as I hope to demonstrate here, more rigorously non-anthropocentric.

Let us enumerate, then, the various “actants” involved in this “network.” In our example above, we find: sickening whacks; groans; sucks of breath; pain; blows; fractured and unprotected skulls; clubs; music; marchers; police; encouragements; and, last but not least, silence. These are all, we might say, evental moments. Even the “absence of fear,” as noted by the witness above, is an object, an evental moment that must be considered objective in its own right. From whence does “agency” originate here? Which actant is the “source” of agency? The very question is irrelevant, at least from our archival viewpoint, for the more salient question is: What is happening? Music sounds

in the distance, while the crowds march on in silence, only to be beaten on their heads by clubs. These are all singular events, multiple aspects of a singular happening: multiplicities in movement. But we could also add to this description a wide variety of other “actants” ignored by the first-hand witness above, such as the insects and worms crushed under foot by the seemingly peaceful protesters, the singing of birds, the traversal of the Indian sky by clouds, or, alternately, the blue of that very sky. Each “landscape,” we might say, is more than the sum of activities occurring in that particular slice of spatio-temporality. Thus Tim Ingold has introduced the notion of “taskscape” into social theory to designate precisely such “an array of related activities.” As opposed to “astronomical time,” the taskscape exhibits a temporality that is “essentially social” (TL 159). And since social temporality is fundamentally heterogenous and manifests itself in the mode of the multiple, the social time of the taskscape is best understood as a radical immanence of interrelated webs of heterological activities.

“Heterology,” as Alan Stoekl reminds us, “is the science of the force, the energy, that cannot be appropriated by science (or by an organized lawful society, organized under the heading of science or religion): an energy that cannot be given meaning by a higher principle.” For Bataille, more specifically, heterology is any activity that breaks open bodily integrity. The heterological gesture of vomiting, for example, breaks open the border separating an individual from its environment. Such openness is a process of “dirtying” one’s surroundings. Following Stoekl and Bataille, we may regard every “landscape” as a heterology of divergent taskscapes. Thus, the “landscape” in our example above—i.e., that of twentieth-century India—is one where multiple taskscapes meet: the club collides with the vulnerable exposed skull, forcing itself onto the materiality of bone, cracking it open. Although a power-based perspective would most likely represent this clash in terms of political movements, pragmatic interests, and goals, the materiality-based approach proposed here would seek to highlight the interconnections between various materially-embedded temporalities. As Ingold notes: “the temporality of the taskscape [. . . ] lies not in any particular rhythm, but in the network of interrelationships between the multiple rhythms of which the taskscape is itself constituted” (TL 160). In this way, taskscapes are both archives of value and alternative valuations. The meeting of club and skull takes place in the same “landscape” as the meeting of music and birdsongs, while the sun shines indifferently upon the entire scene. And among Gandhi’s loyal followers, whom, one would assume, should be fearful for their lives, all that is “heard” is a solemn silence.

Such “taskscapes,” needless to say, often come into conflict with one another. A recent example of this is the “human-sheep” conflict around so-called “Foot-and-Mouth disease.” In fact, according to Law and Mol, this conflict revolved around “sheep multiple: more than one but less

than many” (AE 66). The reason for such a seemingly bizarre and counterintuitive assertion is that “sheep,” in the context of the Foot-and-Mouth outbreak of March 2001, entered into at least five different archives: (1) “the veterinary sheep”; (2) “the epidemiological sheep”; (3) “the economic sheep”; (4) “the farming sheep”; and (5) “the sheep acting” (AE 59-66). As Law and Mol point out, the “sheep acting” was perceived as dirtying human activity with its unruly behavior and its resistance to vaccination. Indeed, in each of the five “sheep” taskscapes described above, different layers of interpretation and agency are assumed to be in operation. And yet, it is not the role of social scientists to locate agency at any one level, as Law and Mol argue, but rather to build a complex image of what is actually happening in a particular network. The question of whether the sheep “themselves” exhibit “agency” is particularly noteworthy, as Law and Mol note, because this question dovetails with the supposed ability of sheep to “display” the symptoms of infection:

Sheep [. . . ] may either display symptoms or hide the virus without showing it. But when farmers and vets want to act in their turn, they need the sheep to collaborate. If farmers and vets want to try to not miss the signs of the disease the sheep needs to open its mouth. So when they act themselves, again they do not act alone. (AE 67)

When grabbed by either veterinarians or farmers, the sheep tend to avoid contact, putting up stubborn resistance (AE 67). Thus, an important characteristic of actants is the level of resistance displayed when coming into contact with others actants. Resistance, according to this view, would be a measure of a particular agent’s relevance. In the context of Foot-and-Mouth disease, whether the sheep opens its mouth or not becomes a key issue. The “resistance” of this nonhuman animal, therefore, achieves a significance that would otherwise be overlooked by the farmer, or, for that matter, anyone else. It is only when several different modes of epistemology and archiving intersect in one particular landscape—i.e., diseased Cumbria 2001—that the sheep’s mouth attains such a central importance, perhaps second only to the actual (or suspected) presence of the pathogens themselves, arguably the primary “actants” in this diseased-livestock network (AE 67).

Recognition entails, by necessity, identification errors. Likewise, reminiscences are never entirely trustworthy; there are always elements that are erroneously included within a given taskscape, movements and actions that should not be performed, but nevertheless are eventuated. The strength of a particular actant, in ANT ontology, is never an inherent, substantial essence, but a function of an actant’s alliances: “an object is neither a substance nor an essence, but an actor trying to adjust or inflict its forces” (Harman, PN 15). Power, therefore, is directly proportional to the amount of “alliances” an actant is capable of building, or, alternately, the amount of relations and forces it is capable of bringing into motion. A “sheep” that is suspected of having contracted Foot-and-Mouth disease, in fact, comprises a locus of multiple networks of value-creation and destruction. Not only that, but as Law and Mol have pointed out, such intersectionalities of multiple taskscapes often result in seemingly perverse inversions of value. Thus, in the context of Foot-and-Mouth disease:
Laughtered sheep were paid for whilst, given market conditions, those not slaughtered represented a considerable financial liability. If the sheep was enacted as an economic entity then slaughter was often a good. (AE 63)

In other words, due to economic pressures, the immediate destruction of sheep proved to be more economically viable than their maintenance. One can easily detect here a certain speculative element. When various taskscapes intersect, “life itself,” so to speak, can become a burden, a filthy excess that must be destroyed. And, in order to protect the viability of other lives, certain scapegoats are found, and duly gotten rid of.

Buddhist artistic meditations on “death” have emphasized a similar interconnection between accumulation and negativity. The more life one lives, the more flesh one accumulates, the more must be given back to entropy. In one Buddhist painting, for example, we note the following “landscape”: a grove of pine trees (symbolizing winter); a corpse filled with gas; lotus flowers; “skeletal fragments lying amidst mugwort”; all overlooked by “a large silver moon.” In such meditational paintings, oozing, rotting bodies express the fact of impermanence. Thus the representation of abject female corpses, as Gail Chin implies, allows for the constant reiteration of the ever-present possibility of death and its filth (decomposition). And yet, for certain non-human animals, we can assume, such

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oozing, rotting bodies represent a source of nutrients, a fragrant invitation to dine upon the remnants of human endeavors. Indeed, each phenomenon, once it enters the intersection of multiple taskscapes, becomes like a thing squeezed between multiple powers and agencies. No single actant holds the key to the entirety of a network. Simply put, according to ANT ontology, “nothing can be reduced to anything else” (Harman, PN 17). The labor of one particular member of a network is irreducible to that of another. Behind place-making and place-characters, there are “patterns of dwelling activities,” laboring multiplicities, not only of people, but of nonhumans as well.  

Thus “more-than-human sociology” must recognize that “agency” is distributed. Or as Ollie Pyyhtinen writes: “things . . . have independent lives irrespective of us.”

But what happens when “actants” meet? To utilize Bell’s expression, such meetings are often of the “deadly earnest kind” and constitute a “ritualized confrontation” (R 163). Existents encounter and enact one another. Geographies, in the plural, are always hybrid geographies, places of both

strength and vulnerability. In our example of the Gandhian protesters above, for instance, the strength of silence is juxtaposed with the vulnerability of flesh and the weakness of cracked, broken skulls. From moment to moment, actants are confronted with rival taskscapes. Even seemingly stable, apparently artificial networks such as electrical grids are, in actuality, volatile assemblages prone to inoperativity and chaos. Jane Bennett “archives” the various components of the North American power grid in characteristically lively fashion:

The electrical grid is a volatile mix of coal, sweat, electromagnetic fields, computer programs, electron streams, profit motives, heat, lifestyles, nuclear fuel, plastic, fantasies of mastery, static, legislation, water, economic theory, wire, and wood—to name just some of the actants.

Any method of archiving can only name “some of the actants.” The process of archiving is never complete, for epistemology, however open it is to difference, can never integrate the entirety of difference into its fold. Differences elude epistemic integration. The world is far too “dirty,” so to speak, for any kind of homogeneous categorization. Thus, a key aspect of “more-than-human sociology” would be a recognition of the finitude of knowledge and knowledge-production, as well as the existential finitude of knowledge-producers. Although we believe ourselves to be giving adequate accounts of agency, the very ambition to give a totalizing account is already a sign of hubris. Just as the (in)operativity of an electrical grid eludes our intentionality, so other nonhuman forms of agency—even, at times, “our own” acts—go radically beyond our intentions. “Humans” are always engaged in “an intricate dance with nonhumans, with the urgings, tendencies, and pressures of other bodies, including air masses, minerals, micro-organisms, and for some people, the forces of fate, divine will, or karma” (Bennett, AA 454). It may seem odd, at first blush, to read of “karma” in a sociological text relating to the 2003 North American energy blackout. But it is only our sense of exceptionalism, and nothing else, which leads us to believe that we have attained ultimate knowledge of agency and causality. Rather than localizing efficacy in a single, (over)privileged node of a network, ANT disperses agency. For Bennett, a “distributive notion of agency” focuses on the “cascade of becomings” (AA 457). Such a notion of “distributive agency,” however, does not entail a complete rejection of intentionality, i.e., the abandonment of psychological factors in social analysis. Rather, one must attend to the “cascade of effects” that “form grooves and follow patterns” (Bennett, AA 457). Thus, for Gandhian protesters, even a “music” that fails to materialize—i.e., a lack of encouraging songs—can become an “object” of significance in forming the resoluteness of a march.

At this juncture, it might seem strange to bring a thinker such as Jacques Lacan into the picture. Whereas Lacan is often held to be an “anti-realist,” Tom Eyers has persuasively argued for a “Lacanian materialism.” I, too, would argue for the integration of a Lacanian perspective into materiality studies, albeit in a roundabout way, namely, through the notion of the “death drive.” Specifically, in his seminars of 1959-1960, entitled “The Ethics of Psychoanalysis,” Lacan addresses several key points of his psychoanalytic philosophy, including death and the limits of desire. For Lacan, every enjoyment—every form of jouissance—is equated with a circuitous, self-referential transgression, a movement of radical immanence:

If the paths to jouissance have something in them that dies out, that tends to make them impassable, prohibition, if I may say so, becomes its all-terrain vehicle, its half-track truck, that gets it out of the circuitous routes that lead man back in a roundabout way toward the rut of a short and well-trodden satisfaction. (Lacan, EP 177)

The Lacanian Real, we might say, presents a limit to the mutuality and community of actants (Eyers, LM 163). This is the point where a “community” of actants reaches its limit. Either the cattle graze, or the bear feeds. However transparent they are as events, existents are nevertheless also dependent upon methods of hiding, of camouflage, tactics of subterfuge. Satisfaction is a rut, a hole that cannot give limitless affordances. Indeed, Lacan equates enjoyment with death in his example of an evil moral agent who chooses to “spend the night” with a woman, even though he will surely face the death penalty as a result of this illicit union (EP 189). “Jouissance,” states Lacan, “implies precisely the acceptance of death” (EP 189). Morality itself is radically altered when agents come to accept—or even embrace—their own undoing. Those who choose peaceful resistance, as in the example of Gandhi’s followers, embrace their own undoing. In such instances, a landscape is home to not only a taskscape of peaceful resistance, but also to a jouissance that gives habitation to the uninhabitability of a “deathscape.” Not surprisingly, Lacan has explicitly equated the “death of God” with absolute absence, the emptiness of all signifiers: “if there is nothing more than a lack, the Other is wanting, and the signifier is that of his death” (EP 193). It is perhaps because of such esoteric, hyperbolic statements that Lacan has faced criticism. There are many different layers of reality, and surely one cannot, in all seriousness, proclaim all things as empty! But is this really Lacan’s point here? We must note the conditional “if” at the beginning of this sentence: “If there is nothing more than a lack.” Lacan is not saying that there is nothing outside of lack, but merely that certain circumstances may pertain when there is no thing apart from absence.

The term “deathscape” may be of help here in deciphering the ramifications of Lacan’s discourse on death and negativity. From a materality perspective, there are indeed states of materialized absence, i.e., places pervaded by absence. The word “deathscape” was first discussed in

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a rigorous fashion by Lily Kong and coined by Katy Hartig and Kevin Dunn to describe roadside memorials. According to a recent if somewhat broad definition: deathscapes “invoke both the places associated with death and for the dead.” These slices of spatio-temporality are not, however, restricted to areas of overcoded negativity. Rather, they are inherently ambiguous. Like taskscapes, deathscapes are also characterized by intersectionality: “deathscapes . . . intersect and interact with other moments and topographies, including those of sovereignty (sovereignty-scapes), memory (memory-scapes) and work, life and beauty (landscapes)” (I 5). One could even say that landscapes, taskscapes and deathscapes form inseparable relationalities, chiasms that resist clear-cut scissions and separations. Likewise, Eyers locates in Lacan’s contribution to materiality studies a notion of “intransigence” (LM 165). Actants are intransigent in relation to others. The ultimate intransigence —i.e., the Real that resists access and endless interpenetration—is, of course, “death itself.” After all, for Lacan, jouissance is problematic precisely because it is characterized by “inaccessibility, obscurity and opacity” (EP 209). But, some might say, these are already characteristics of real, existing objects. Every presence is limited, finite. Or, in Harman’s words, “something will always be sheltered in reserve” (PN 197). And yet, Lacanian negativity, as exemplified by the Freudian notion of the “death drive,” is also “situated”:

The death drive is to be situated in the historical domain; it is articulated at a level that can only be defined as a function of the signifying chain, that is to say, insofar as a reference point, that is a reference point of order, can be situated relative to the functioning of nature. (Lacan, EP 211)

Annihilation is not an abstract, universal condition, but a process that is embedded into the environment, coded into presence itself, so to speak. It is also intimately connected to memory and memorization (Lacan, EP 211). A landscape that gives habitation to a deathscape “cognizes” that it has become a place of negativity. Any artist who has painted mortifying scenes, any photographer who has photographed cemeteries, understands that a landscape can become pregnant with death.

This “death,” however, does not belong to all actants equally. Whereas humans rot in the charnel-ground, other creatures thrive. In his reading of Antigone, Lacan implies the possibility of such an inversion of death, i.e., a rendering meaningless of the very dualism of “life”/“death.” In tragedy, he notes, we are confronted with “a life that is about to turn into certain death, a death lived by anticipation, a death that crosses over into the sphere of life, a life that moves into the realm of death” (EP 248). Death is the very limit of Being and, as such, the carpentry of all existents.

(Lacan, EP 248). The “deathscape” is there, we might say, written into both “landscape” and
“taskscape.” Dramatic destiny is always situated “on the boundary between life and death, the
boundary of the still living corpse” (Lacan, EP 268). Negativity, then, cannot be separated from
manifestation, for it is the limit, the very ground of “actants.” Actualizing itself, the deathscape
is the ex nihilo that forms the endpoint of action and agency (Lacan, EP 260). Any account of
social agency therefore should integrate this (Lacanian) perspective of negativity into its analysis.