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Food Ontology and Distribution: Ethical Perception and the Food Object

Siobhan M. Watters
The University of Western Ontario

Supervisor
Dr. Regna Darnell
The University of Western Ontario

Graduate Program in Theory and Criticism
A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Master of Arts
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FOOD ONTOLOGY AND DISTRIBUTION:
ETHICAL PERCEPTION AND THE FOOD OBJECT

(Thesis format: Monograph)

by

Siobhan Mildred Watters

Graduate Program in Theory and Criticism

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

The School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
The University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario, Canada

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Abstract

In predominantly service and information-based economies, the pivotal role food plays in the maintenance of life has arguably become neglected as an object of ethical and political contemplation. We often fail to realize that the incarceration of food by the commodity form degrades the food object itself as well as guaranteeing continued dependency on the wage. In a generalized commodity society, labour power is the only thing a person has to sell in order to buy her bread. This leaves us vulnerable in the event of an environmental crisis because we do not have direct access to food sources.

The capitalist mode of distribution forms the limits of possibility for humans and other beings. This thesis argues that, without direct access to the means of subsistence, the subject is limited in her movement and interactions with others, except where the universal equivalent grants her access to go.

Keywords

Food, wage, commodity, ethics, distribution, Paul Virilio, Karl Marx, Peter Kropotkin, Bruno Latour, phenomenology.

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Introduction

This is a both a humanist and nonhuman study of the human relationship to food. To complete this study, I must approach the subject from several viewpoints, and I nest these viewpoints under the headings of ontology and distribution.

I am a humanist in that I am first concerned with the human relation to food. But I must interrogate this relationship in its binary form if I am to have any success in developing an ethical stance on the primacy of food. What we have is a Cartesian, anthropocentric category of ‘human’ and whatever stands against it as ‘food.’ I became curious about this being¹ of food and also its epistemological significance, because they are materially intertwined. What falls into this category is both broad and heterogeneous. Of course the need for nutrition or metabolic fuel is shared among nonhumans as well, but sustenance for humans—our understanding of its production, its properties, its necessity—is not a factor of knowledge alone. This is an ontology because the objects subject to human epistemology are modified using this knowledge; their being, temporality, or substance is altered, as is true of the bodies of cows, chickens, and genetically modified seeds used in industrial agriculture and food production. What we need to recognize is that the human also alters with these ontological and physiological shifts in the matter we eat.

Since I have outed myself as a humanist, it should come as no surprise that I engage the category of the human. However, I do endeavour to take an ontological view of the human that includes other beings in its being—Jane Bennett’s vibrant materialism (2010) and Latour’s actor-network theory (1999; 2005) contribute significantly to this discussion. Ontologies often form hierarchies, and the human has typically held a high place in those systems; actor-network theory, which is Bennett’s starting point as well as Latour’s, levels the ground of understanding, so that we see nonhuman actants standing side by side with the human, affecting and affected by actants in multiple directions. The animal we call human, and the contingent body to

¹ My use of the term ‘being’ contains within it both the sense of a static and self-identical object, as ontologies can render things in the world to be, as well as those attributes and potencies of things (animate or not) that are not available to the human sense and that are inevitably lost from the concepts prescribed to them.

which we give that name, owes its being equally to all the nonhuman beings with which it relates—as a lake’s edge necessarily becomes the margins of both the water and concept it contains. In particular, I refer to nonhuman bodies that work within the human to make it move, think, and create: food occupies as significant a role in the reproduction of bodies as is often given to sexual reproduction alone. The work the body does from the moment it takes in food continues hours and days afterwards. The temporality of this process grounds our being as much as our phenomenological experience of horizons and the life-constituting light.

Transactions of one body with another continue ceaselessly. However, this reading can take an altogether tractionless view, offering little in the way of potential application. I do not go as far as to dissolve the beings into one another, so that we can no longer see the inequities that do exist between humans and other humans, and between humans and nonhumans; this would not be an ethical position. In this, I hope to avoid incurring a similar critique often stated about actor-network theory, that its attempt to level the ground of being (or becoming) effaces the world of structures that maintain dominant and exploitative relations, such as the wage relationship.

* * *

When it comes to thinking through a politics or an ethics of food, certain questions are irrelevant because the methods and scale of production have become unintelligible on a human level; it has become inhuman. It was Marx who first said that capital’s complete disregard for needs makes it an inhuman power ([1927] 1987:125). Phenomenologist Paul Virilio and the ‘social ecologist’ Murray Bookchin suggest that the human is not only inconsequential to capital, save where its labour power produces surplus value, but is becoming insubstantial as well. With a loss of proportion (Virilio 2008a) and of ‘human scale’ (Bookchin 1986), how we tend to describe the human as one being among others is either now no longer true (and probably never was), or significantly altered by the developments of global capitalist production. Even if my aim seems anthropocentric, I am interrogating a system that cares not for the human, nor the physical matter the human needs to reproduce itself. I also speak of capital in a total sense because it is useful for discussing the kind of

ethics that I outline here in its relationship to food. After all, Marx's *Capital* is written primarily from the perspective of this nonhuman other, capital, describing the world of humans and objects and their social relationships as an unconscious means to its ends. Peter Kropotkin criticizes the tendency to read economic conditions from this point of view:

If you open the works of an economist you will find that he begins with PRODUCTION, the analysis of means employed nowadays for the creation of wealth; division of labour, manufacture, machinery, accumulation of capital. From Adam Smith to Marx, all have proceeded along these lines. Only in the latter parts of their books do they treat of CONSUMPTION, that is to say, of the means necessary to satisfy the needs of individuals. ([1892] 2007:201)

However, this 'backwards' reading is deliberate on Marx's part, as he engages in an immanent critique of the political economy that precedes him. It is only when he tells the tale of capital's development that we understand how unethical the wage paradigm is, that with the loss of common land (primitive accumulation), the human also lost its autonomy and ethical potential. Human needs are not the starting point of capital, though the human is the principal subject of the labour process.²

It is no surprise that one of the first economists, the Physiocrat Francois de Quesnay,³ modeled his perfect economy on the efficient and unheeded circulation of the human body. He was a physician before a state economist, interested particularly in the blood circulatory system (Bragg et al. 2013). The body, however, is not without its weakness; nor are the elements of capitalist production immune to breakdown. Still, from the point of view of capital, the ideal is the machine without an off switch, which runs consistently without event. While Quesnay was interested in setting up an economic program that would bring France back from the depression of its imperial contraction (having lost its war with Britain on several fronts) (Bragg et al. 2013), the impetus to make the process more efficient, in order to amass wealth, has led to the privileging of the machinery's health over the human.

² The Capitalist conception of labour "bear[s] the unmistakable stamp of belonging to a social formation in which the process of production has mastery over man, instead of the opposite" ([1867] 1976:174-5).

³ Quesnay is known for positioning agriculture and the land as the eminent means to wealth for the state (1756). He advocated for food production to be directed primarily to the domestic market, where the most primordial need and the absence of competition would keep the country and sovereign economically secure (Quesnay 1756).

The Cartesian mentality that has allowed our soil and nutritional sources to be treated as universal, profit-yielding *stuff*, has seen the human disappear into a machine as one use-value among others, unable to move freely without access to a wage. We may believe we make choices with the purchases we make, but that vision is complicated. Consider how labeling can obscure more than it reveals about the products we eat, as I will discuss with reference to the horsemeat scandal in Europe, but also how the ingredients that are in many food commodities were added because they were found to be profitable, not because of need. As Kropotkin suggests, in the management of economies, the needs of production outweigh the needs of individual consumption. As a result, we have had little choice about the composition of our food for decades.

When advancements in agricultural techniques resulted in record yields of corn (Hauter 2012:34,157), corn became a near-universal commodity for production. Corn (historically, a general term for all grains) has long been appreciated for its convertibility and as an input in the production of commodities. Adam Smith noted that commodities “frequently contain the price of a great quantity of rude produce...corn, which could with difficulty be carried abroad in its own shape, is in this manner virtually exported in that of the complete manufacture” ([1776] 1986:506). Not only is corn a product for direct human consumption,⁴ it has also become a prolific source of feed in industrial meat production; a filler and preservative for processed food products; and is more and more produced for biofuels. With so many applications, corn’s ubiquity in the marketplace and production can be explained as socially necessary,⁵ but also particularly convenient in its abundance for multiplying the points of exchange as a substrate for value,⁶ i.e., as various commodities (Marx [1867] 1976:293). It is a commodity crop, like wheat or soybeans, overproduced to provide a cheap input for several sectors of industry. When we are

⁴ I.e., in the sphere of consumption (individual).

⁵ The act of exchange, according to Marx, validates the abstraction of labour as value ([1867] 1976:150-1). By extension, the concrete labour, and all the unethical forms that may take, is validated as well. We unknowingly validate the exploitation of workers, the method of extraction of raw materials, however those materials are used in production, and how the products are distributed to consumer marketplaces.

⁶ ‘Value’ is one of the most ambiguous terms I use here, perhaps only surpassed by ‘being.’ In this passage and in most instances, I refer to value as per Marx’s labour theory of value, i.e., the self-valorization of value.

advertised ‘grain-fed’ beef (or chicken, and now fish), we are presented with an attribute of current food products as if it is a virtue in itself. Corn feed was imposed on animals that do not naturally digest the substance in order to produce mass amounts of meat commodities (Hauter 2012:157). It is one of countless examples of tastes we are led to believe we have formed on our own when, really, we are responding to a new, value-producing⁷ technique of which we were not conscious.

When it comes to the capitalist mode of production, I agree with Marshall McLuhan that the medium is the *massage*;⁸ the physical changes that occur in the development of industrial techniques introduce new modes of symbolic and physiological consumption, a tangible pressure experienced by bodies in both the realm of individual consumption and productive consumption.⁹ The way we are massaged into rationalizing our modes of production and consumption, Virilio says, is a matter of repetition.

[T]his recurrence of events—these proofs—are the basis of a reason that sees that which repeats as truth. The narrative material can only function by being repeated one hundred times. Through repetition, it eliminates chance and makes the Reason in these stories a war machine that deploys its forces by multiplying them. (Virilio [1977] 2006:91).

This describes aptly the model of production itself—rationalized, efficient, and rote—implying need of something because it is routinely produced. It also characterizes how the mode of production is validated by consumers who knowingly buy what is marketed to them as necessary and yet unknowingly and collectively justify the means used to produce that particular commodity. And what is not repeated for us, amid all the claims of a product’s necessity, is that the ‘value-added’ techniques used in its production are developed merely as a means of accumulating surplus value.

The impetus to produce mass quantities of standardized, hyper-processed food products also drives down the value of labour power all along the production and supply chain. The labour power of the traditional, small-scale farmer has exponentially

⁷ ‘Value,’ here and in the context of ‘value-added’ does not refer to Marx’s definition of the term. It is rather a general term used by economists.

⁸ “All media work us over completely...they leave no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered. The medium is the massage. Any understanding of social and cultural change is impossible without a knowledge of the way media work as environments” (McLuhan [1967] 2001:26)

⁹ I.e., the consumption of use-values as raw materials in production.

decreased in price (Hauter 2012:33). Family farms are disappearing into industrial farming operations, with farmers forced into franchise-type relationships with national global conglomerates. In this vertically integrated industry, value accumulates at the top and for a few, while very little value and great risk is distributed to farmers and workers alike (Hauter 2012; Schlosser 2005). The demand for efficient mass production has put slaughterhouse workers under unbelievable mental and bodily stress with the acceleration of production lines. Their working life is passed in repetitive, acute motions that leave them prone to injury and even death (working with sharp blades,¹⁰ fast moving equipment, and toxic substances), but also without the ability to act in any true sense of the word. The *repetition* of the high-risk environment in which these people work is hardly *rational* at all, that is, from an ethical point of view.

The effects of capital operate through material infrastructures—from the topographies of supply chains to the nonreproductive genetically modified seeds of Monsanto (Hauter 2012:253)—and while this refers to a distribution of the means of production and commodities, it also forms limits of possibility for humans and other beings. I will not be the first to view the human as so much material running through a machine—images of Pink Floyd’s *The Wall* and those evoked by Allen Ginsberg’s Moloch in *Howl*¹¹ come to mind—but the metaphor is less representative and more reality when we take the actor-network approach to the human and its food under

¹⁰ “[T]he rate of these cumulative trauma injuries in the meatpacking industry is far higher than the rate in any other American industry. It is roughly thirty-three times higher than the national average... Many slaughterhouse workers make a knife cut every two or three seconds, which adds up to about 10,000 cuts in an eight-hour shift” (Schlosser 2005:173).

¹¹ “What sphinx of cement and aluminum bashed open their skulls and ate up their brains and imagination? Moloch! Solitude! Filth! Ugliness! Ashcans and unobtainable dollars! Children screaming under the stairways! Boys sobbing in armies! Old men weeping in the parks! Moloch! Moloch! Nightmare of Moloch! Moloch the loveless! Mental Moloch! Moloch the heavy judger of men! Moloch the incomprehensible prison! Moloch the crossbone soulless jail-house and Congress of sorrows! Moloch whose buildings are judgment! Moloch the vast stone of war! Moloch the stunned governments! Moloch whose mind is pure machinery! Moloch whose blood is running money! Moloch whose fingers are ten armies! Moloch whose breast is a cannibal dynamo! Moloch whose ear is a smoking tomb! Moloch whose eyes are a thousand blind windows! Moloch whose skyscrapers stand in the long streets like endless Jehovahs! Moloch whose factories dream and croak in the fog! Moloch whose smokestacks and antennae crown the cities! Moloch whose love is endless oil and stone! Moloch whose soul is electricity and banks! Moloch whose poverty is the specter of genius! Moloch whose fate is a cloud of sexless hydrogen! Moloch whose name is the Mind! Moloch in whom I sit lonely! Moloch in whom I dream Angels! Crazy in Moloch! Cocksucker in Moloch! Lacklove and manless in Moloch!” (Ginsberg [1955] 1984)

capital. This is where my determinism lies. Latour (2005:207) uses the metaphor of computer ‘plug-ins’ to describe how possibilities of being are distributed to actants in their movement among and through other actants. I take this, but also Latour’s own focus on the hardware of social events, i.e., bodies that have been programmed and that run subprograms and program other bodies (1999:209), as support for a reading of capital as a very real machine and humans as its unconscious linkages.¹²

Without the ability for people or workers to act contingently, outside of the bottom line, capital is poised to circulate and accumulate most efficiently. I connect the events culminating in this lack of autonomy, which I equate to a lack of ethics, to the *dis-ability* of people to seek their own subsistence directly.¹³ In short, I refer to primitive accumulation (Marx [1867] 1976). The loss of common land became the means to limit or quell resistance to the totalizing regime of property and wage dominance. Hunger could now be held over every person’s head.

It was poverty that created the first capitalist; because, before accumulating ‘surplus value,’ of which we hear so much, men had to be sufficiently destitute to consent to sell their labour, so as not to die of hunger. (Kropotkin [1892] 2007:198)

It may not seem correct to say there is a direct relationship between, on one side, an inability to seek out or produce food directly, and a lack of ethics on the other. But you would think differently if I said that the wage labourer lacks the means of self-production. Without access to the means of production for the most necessary items for a worker’s reproduction, her survival, the subject is far more limited in her movement and the way she interacts with others in the system, except where the universal equivalent grants her access to go. In this way, both the human and her food sources fall under an ‘inhuman’ and also unethical power.

¹² This is a play on Marx’s description of humans as the conscious linkages of capital’s machinery ([1939] 1973:692), though he opens up the question of just how conscious the human is in his discussion of the commodity fetish ([1867] 1976:92).

¹³ Also consider the correlation of the de-skilling of workers with the increase of automation in the workplace (fast food restaurants are particularly known for this trend), but also the loss of traditional skills employed in the subsistence of humans and their homes, e.g., gardening, cooking, basic maintenance.

Were we to regain some autonomy within this generalized commodity society,¹⁴ we would be freer to form an entirely different perception of the objects we take for our food. We require a new relationship to our needs and how we fulfill them.

Perception is something I am concerned with, because the way in which this system is experienced tells us something about the ethics we lack. Phenomenology, in a sense, is a call to our limits. Virilio, and Martin Heidegger before him, fear what we have lost in the movement of projection—our telluric limits have been tested, penetrated, and disregarded. Phenomena such as acceleration (Virilio [1977] 2006; [1995] 2008b) and enframing (Heidegger [1954] 2008b) have created a world that seeks to float away from the mysterious earth that grounds it, and has left the human divested of its horizons. The image of Icarus leaving his ground and in flight is, in this sense, a posthuman vision. I have found it illuminating to read about other orders of being, pre- or noncapitalist, that maintain an arguably more ethical or ecological bond with nonhumans because the ground is primary to the human's existence. David Graeber's discussion of the place of food in the historical Maori gift economy reveals a more 'lateral' hierarchy than a generalized commodity society exhibits, because it includes the land and natural systems, though they are often represented by deterministic powers like gods. The hierarchy forms the totality in which the subject reproduces herself. In the example of the Maori, but likewise capitalism, one's perception of self and purpose is part of this totality, which is reproduced daily through social behaviours and cultural techniques.

In the totality of capital, the system and its subject are reproduced through exchange. Some totalities constitute a more ethical relationship between humans and nonhumans, but all operate through certain opacity. Maurice Godelier describes the opacity of social reproduction within so-called gift economies in *The Enigma of the Gift* (1999), but the description is also consistent with the opacity of the commodity fetish—where a supersensuous relationship among all commodities obscures the concrete reality of their production. The commodity fetish is helped along by the

¹⁴ Generalized commodity society is an abstract concept; no pure, entirely generalized commodity society exists. The greater amount of objects produced for exchange value—the more elements of life that fall under the commodity form—the closer it is to Marx's concept of the generalized commodity society.

subsequent opacity created by the distances and automation of production that food objects undergo. This obscuration belies our unfree existence under the commodity form—which even our bodily capacity takes on—but also the spectacular form,¹⁵ which further impedes our ethical perception and movement in the world.

The need for food is one principle that grounds an ethical community, for who can be free that cannot eat, and who can be ethical that must first address the pain of hunger? We must ask the larger question of where to locate an ethics in a system that sees the world only for exchange-value? If an ethics is not possible under capital, when or where is an ethics possible? I argue that these moments can best be glimpsed in times of rupture, for example, in the wake of natural disaster.

* * *

The incarceration of food by the commodity form guarantees our continued dependency on the wage. “For turn where he [sic] will, he can find no better conditions. Everything has become private property, and he must accept, or die of hunger” (Kropotkin [1892] 2007:60). In a generalized commodity society, labour power is the only thing we have to sell in order to buy our bread. Labour power—the metabolic capacity to labour¹⁶—is but one commodity among others. If there is no market for an individual’s labour, then she loses the ability to command other commodities, putting her at the mercy of state or charitable redistribution, if those mechanisms even exist. Rather, as Kropotkin states, welfare institutions are an effect and aspect of life under capital, encompassing “the idea of ‘wounding first and healing afterwards’!” ([1892] 2007:199). Likewise, Amartya Sen describes “social security provisions” as “essentially supplementations of the processes of market exchange and production” (1982:6).

The generalized commodity society is one where all necessities of life are subsumed under the commodity form. Harry Cleaver states further that “the

¹⁵ This will be elaborated on in chapter 1 in terms of Guy Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle* ([1967] 2008).

¹⁶ I collapse physical and mental capacity to labour into this one category, for any form of work requires the energy gained through the metabolism of nutritional sources, including knowledge work. Peter Khaitovich, primary author of the study “Metabolic changes in schizophrenia and human brain evolution,” has noted that “[o]ur brains are unique among all species in their enormous metabolic demand” (BioMed Central 2008).

generalized imposition of the commodity-form has meant that forced work has become the fundamental means of organizing society—of social control” (2000:82). In noncapitalist societies or mixed economies, the trade of labour power for a wage is not ubiquitous, nor the only means of meeting one’s needs; subsistence farming may still exist, for example. Where the market subsumes subsistence economies, people lose the securities of land and traditional social techniques and become vulnerable to the fluctuation of neoliberalizing economic policy and commodity prices, especially when the price of labour power falls below its value.¹⁷ A certain technological bias also mediates between the (newly minted) wage worker and the satisfaction of their needs. Regardless if the food a farm labourer produces is socially necessary—or immediately necessary for the person cultivating it—if it can be produced efficiently, consistently, and in great numbers, the need of the food itself does not determine how it is produced. Chemical agents, antibiotics, unsanitary and dangerous work conditions are forgone conclusions in a branch of production whose internal impetus is to drive consumption for the sake of exchange. When we are chided for purchasing industrially produced meats or GMO fruit, it is an illusory critique that forgets that we are driven to exchange for all necessities in life and that the wage form precludes the vast majority of people from making ethical decisions about what food they eat, and a great deal otherwise.

Because we do not own the means of food production, and because we must maintain our bodies in times of social and economic upheaval, Kropotkin saw the ‘conquest of bread’ as the first step of any revolutionary moment: “the Revolution could not triumph unless those who fought on its side were fed” ([1892] 2007:70). In the absence of sustained militant resistance to capital in North America, ecological disasters offer an indirect perspective on how the initial revolutionary moment could manifest and be maintained. I have turned to anarchist theory because it bears with it a language that best captures what we lack as workers under capital: the ability to self-organize and self-manage (Bookchin [1972] 1975; 1986), which are capacities we

¹⁷ “The ultimate or minimum limit of the value of labour-power is formed by the value of the commodities which have to be supplied every day to the bearer of labour-power, the man, so that he can renew his life-process” (Marx [1867] 1976:276). The price of labour power does not always keep abreast with the fluctuation of food process, leaving the wage worker unable to purchase necessities.

require to be ethical. We also lack the means to self-reproduce both our metabolic and ethical potential because of the inequitable distribution of the means of production, but also because we are subject to a system that conditions the way we form relationships with other bodies. Emotions and behaviours are regulated in and outside of the workplace to ensure the constant circulation of capital. I will discuss this in chapter 1 in relation to Virilio's concept of the ethics of perception.

While Kropotkin first gave me the ethical frame with which to pursue the topic of food distribution, the direction of this project was also inspired by Virilio's assertion that "ecological defense"—and by extension, disaster—are "the last truly political stakes of civilian populations" ([1978] 1990:91). Events such as hurricanes and earthquakes may afford moments of popular resistance and ecological defense, because without them, we have not the means to even recognize or address our plight.¹⁸ "The time of the intellectual having influence is over. Who has an influence? It is the climate" (Virilio 2008a:66). Natural disasters can foreground for us the inhuman scale at which food distribution operates and its extreme centralization, setting us up for a greater catastrophe owing to the inability for individuals to engage the system on a human level. By taking up food distribution in crisis, I do not emphasize a particular aspect of distribution, but rather focus on the culmination of consequences of our present model of distributed food production. As Virilio ([2005] 2011) asserts, the accident reveals the substance, and such events tell us that a crisis has been in the making all along.

When Thomas Hobbes (1651) proposed the ideal form of the state as a massive body, with a central figure (the sovereign) as the head and source of authority, he could not predict that the distribution of commodities would take on a similar, centralized form; the meatpacking industry is particularly illustrative of this (Hauter 2012; Schlosser 2005). In the case of the American food market, as Evan Fraser and Andrew Rimas (2010) describe it, Hobbes' image of the Leviathan seems complete, with the circulation of food energies coursing to and from central locations (like California)—vital organs—to the cities that do the walking and talking of the nation.

¹⁸ Following the 2011 Japanese tsunami and the subsequent radiation leak at the Fukushima Nuclear Power Plant, many other nations around the world were forced to consider their own nuclear power programs (for example, see McVeigh 2011).

But in this (lack of) distribution of nutritional sources across North America, the potential for disaster is manifold. Should one vital organ fail, due to drought or an earthquake, the whole body will suffer.

We experienced the threat of this very recently in the summer of 2012, when drought affected crop yields across North America, particularly corn and subsequently livestock production. After six months of record warm temperatures, by July 2012, over 1,300 counties in 31 U.S. States had been labeled disaster areas (Schwartz 2012). On the other hand, we are seeing disaster crop up with the mass deaths of honeybees, a primary pollinator in agriculture, whose population has been devastated with the introduction of insecticides, chemical fertilizers, and genetically modified seeds. Certain strains of genetically modified seeds, while more resistant to drought and bearing higher yields, present a danger because they cannot reproduce and can destroy the reproductive capacities of other seeds if the strains are mixed (Dowty and Wallace 2010:61). “What is ‘incapable’ or, at any rate, *incapacitated*, is the environment and its properties” (Virilio [1995] 2008b:128). We run the risk of compromising the ability to meet our basic needs. Built environments in the food industry foster the potential for foodborne illness, as well as our inability to ward off illness, through the application of antibiotics in large quantities to the animals we eat. In *Fast Food Nation*, Eric Schlosser tells us that “[a] single fast food hamburger now contains meat from dozens or even hundreds of different cattle” (2002:204). The flesh of one sick animal, or its waste, can travel far and wide because of the nature of industrial food production.

Today large slaughterhouses and grinders dominate the nationwide production of ground beef. A modern processing plant can produce 800,000 pounds of hamburger a day, meat that will be shipped throughout the United States. A single animal infected with *E. coli* O157:H7 can contaminate 32,000 pounds of that ground beef. (Schlosser 2002:204)

These conditions are the making of the sort of ‘global accidents’ that Virilio ([2005] 2011) predicts will be our constant companion in the 21st century. According to Virilio, and as I will discuss, our ability to comprehend the scale of these operations and their vulnerabilities is incapacitated.

I begin chapter 1 with a look at the European horsemeat scandal of spring 2013, an event that encompasses several of the issues pursued in chapters 1 and 2. Primarily, it introduces the problems of scale and visibility that we face with the vastness of our global food distribution system, and the current methods of food production. Virilio and Bookchin form the theoretical basis of a study of the human in its relationship to the immense scale of food distribution networks, while Virilio provides the concepts I use to discuss the violence done to bodies (human and nonhuman) with the imposition of the commodity form. To facilitate this line of reasoning, I speak of food as it figures into Marx's concept of use-value—which is the material form of the commodity. In chapter 1, I also introduce Bennett's vibrant materiality and Latour's actor-network theory (ANT). Their alternative, posthuman methods of engaging the object offers us a more ethical way of viewing food, one less prone to imposing on objects the way that the commodity form is imposed on nonhumans in production and also humans, in the form of labour power. Finally, I tie the preceding arguments to the crisis of perception that the intervention of technologies in communication and commodity production creates in the human, and argue that we are significantly limited in our ethical potential as a result. I employ Virilio and Heidegger's phenomenology in this task, as well as Guy Debord's theory of the spectacle.

In chapter 2, I revisit ANT in a more focused discussion of the capitalist mode of production, but more specifically, the capitalist mode of distribution. Beginning with the historical events Marx describes as capital's primitive accumulation, I discuss the incongruity of ethical potential and the wage paradigm, arguing that wage dependency precludes ethical potential between humans and toward nonhumans. To illustrate the sort of ethics we lack under the wage paradigm, I appeal to Mikhail Bakhtin's ([1919] 1990; [1986] 1999) concepts of dialogism and answerability as a foil for the more categorical ways humans engage one another. The proceeding ANT-Marxism dialogue interrogates the seeming discrepancies between Latour's method and Marx's categories, but finds that their definitions of the social and even the fetish can be resolved in Latour's description of the social durability of objects. Whereas

Latour may wish to decentralize the human, and divest the social of its ideological descriptions, ANT is still amenable to the task of describing the inequities perpetuated in the capitalist mode of production if one focuses on its material infrastructure. The focus on objects culminates in a discussion of the fetish in its precapitalist, spectacular, and technological incarnations.

The first two chapters of this thesis describe our current dilemma under capital—without access to our food sources, without real autonomy, and thus, without real ethical potential. Chapter 3 offers a somewhat dismal solution, if indeed, that was my intent. Having no other place to look for a substantial opportunity to resist and even destabilize capital's grip on our food sources, I instead posit the natural disaster as a moment of rude awakening. As Virilio suggests (2008a), the climate may be the only force left to truly spur people into pursuit of a different mode of social relation or, at least, to the realization that we have been operating too long under the coercion of an inhuman power. The efforts of former Occupy activists to help survivors, distribute food and necessities, and organize volunteers after Hurricane Sandy offers a rare vision of what alternative relations and potential for resistance may form in the wake of crisis, whether of capital or the climate. If I am at all successful in my proof of this, it is owed wholly to Katherine Ramos, the media contact for Occupy New Jersey who described the operations of Occupy Sandy to me in detail. If I am not successful, it is owed wholly to my inability to capture what seems to me a rare show of what I imagine true ethical potential to be.

Chapter 1: Ethical Perception and the Food Object

1.1 Introduction

What does it mean when you put your trust, not only in a company that promises to produce what it says it produces, but also the material you put in your mouth...and it betrays you? Consider the recent horsemeat scandal in Europe, where nearly 200 beef products sold in the market were found to contain horsemeat, a ratio of 1 in 20 products (Voice of America 2013).¹⁹ The European Commissioner for Health and Consumer Policy, Tonio Borg, called the scandal a case of “fraud against the consumer” (Voice of America 2013). The cognitive dissonance in this case was far more unsettling than the more suspect claims to wholesomeness on grocery store packaging. The package read BEEF, but the body ate horse. The body likely only knew it for its different fat or caloric content. The mind, on the other hand, was misled. The shock stemmed not only from this feeling of betrayal, but the knowledge for some that what they were ingesting was not food as they define it. Horses occupy that liminal category of food, like dogs or cats: a companion and useful beast of burden, but also considered food in countries like France and Switzerland (Recknagel 2013). Even though Canadians may not identify themselves as horse-eaters, over 100,000 horses are slaughtered for meat in Canada, predominantly for consumption in Europe (Cameron 2010). The global scale of food production breaks down cultural barriers like this all the time,²⁰ sometimes unintentionally, as in the case of the

¹⁹ “What began as a product recall 33 days ago when equine DNA was found in value Tesco and Iceland beef burgers has become an international scandal that has led to allegations of criminal activity and exposed the mind-boggling complexity of our food supply chain...What the current situation has exposed is that supermarket suppliers use a vast network of secondary suppliers to source their meat. Some of these are ‘official’ and audited by supermarkets while some are not. For example, Findus, whose frozen lasagnas were withdrawn from shelves after some were found to contain 100pc horsemeat, was supplied the products by French company Comigel. However, Comigel said it ordered the meat from a separate supplier called Spanghero via one of its subsidiaries in Luxemburg. Spanghero said it got the meat from a Romanian supplier. The lasagna ‘food trail’ includes other suppliers or agents in Cyprus and Holland. Findus and Spanghero are preparing to take legal action against people further down the supply chain” (Hall 2013).

²⁰ The uniform taste of McDonald’s fries was sacred enough to the company that they would mislead vegetarian eaters in North America for years, stating that their product was cooked in vegetable oil, when it, in fact, included natural beef flavour (Schlosser 2005:297).

numerous grocery stores that carried compromised beef products without knowing their actual contents.

When grocery stores consider their bottom line, they know that a constant supply of staples is needed. For one, they know that consistency and constancy give the shopper the sort of security a fully stocked grocery store represents. It also means that no one walks away empty-handed—whether because of failed crops, or even in the off-season—and no opportunity for revenue is missed. For someone along the way from producer to retailer, it was worth mislabeling horsemeat as beef in order to meet the high demand from corporate grocers.²¹

The food industry has long known that processed meat is susceptible to fraud. While it is relatively easy to verify whole cuts of meat taken from a carcass, this is not the case for the bits left behind. These are gathered up and shipped out to thousands of outlets for processing into lower-value products. (The Financial Times 2013, February 15)

Labeling in more than one way is less about epistemology than it is spectacle, especially when you can only take for granted what is listed and shown on the packaging—unable to squeeze or smell the object—it exists as a call. Not a call to care,²² but a call to purchase. And what about products that do not pass into consumer markets, that are not perused, but rather shipped en masse to school and prison populations (Schlosser 2005:219)? The ethical concern of hungry children and the knowledge that full bellies improve focus and learning makes the provision of school lunch programs an easy policy decision (Bennett 2010:41). Food is not only a horizon of cultural interaction, but forms a ground for being. Insecurity or lack in this regard can mean a deficient body, in both symbolic and real terms; hunger is an experience of the real²³ as well as the proximity of need to all of us. Both Kropotkin ([1902]

²¹ “A hard-hitting report by MPs on Thursday said that the scale of contamination in the supermarket meat supply chain was “breath-taking”. The cross-party Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee said that consumers had been “cynically and systematically duped”, as “elements in the food chain” had pursued profits by substituting beef for cheaper horsemeat” (Hall 2013)

²² A discussion of the concept of ‘care’ will follow in this chapter.

²³ This is a reference to the Lacanian categories: the real, symbolic, and imaginary. I do not use ‘the real’ in Lacan’s precise meaning, but do suggest that the relationship of food to the body is one that exists within and outside of the symbolic. “The real refers not only to the unencompassable outside but also to the unknowable inside, the ineffability of the body” (Boothby 1996:347).

2006:159)²⁴ and Marx ([1867] 1976:358-9)²⁵ trace a historical thread that sees the production of food for human consumption pass from the jurisdiction of moral codes, where the responsibility for making unadulterated and quality products fell on the producer, to the jurisdiction of capital's value, where the quality of a food product matters little so long as it reaps value in exchange.²⁶ The school lunch program starts from the principal of need, exactly what Kropotkin believes all human endeavour should be grounded in, but a different principle drives the production of food itself. For years, there was no oversight of American school lunch programs, until hundreds of children fell ill and it was learned that children were receiving the lowest grade meat the industry produced.²⁷

To illustrate how something as important as a child's health could be compromised so, let me discuss briefly food as a use-value, and the concept of use-value in Marx's theory of capital.

The product—the property of the capitalist—is a use-value, as yarn, for example, or boots. But although boots are, to some extent, the basis of social progress, and our capitalist is decidedly in favour of progress, he does not manufacture boots for their own sake. Use-value is not [the thing desired for its own sake] in the production of commodities. Use-values are produced by capitalists only because and in so far as they are the material substratum of exchange value, are the bearers of exchange-value...[The capitalist's] aim is to produce not only a use-value, but value; and not just value, but also surplus value. (Marx [1867] 1976:293)

As Marx describes in the first volume of *Capital*, use-value exists as a medium for the accumulation of surplus value. The particular qualities of a use-value or its production

²⁴ “An idea of ‘justice’ to the community, of ‘right’ towards both producer and consumer which would seem so extravagant now, penetrated production and exchange... Wood, leather or thread which are used by the artisan must be ‘right’; bread must be baked ‘in justice,’ and so on... the medieval artisan did not produce for an unknown buyer, or to throw his goods into an unknown market... Production being thus a social duty, placed under the control of the whole amitas, manual labour could not fall into the degraded condition which it occupies now” (Kropotkin [1902] 2006:159)

²⁵ Marx describes the adulteration of bread with ‘baker's stuff,’ i.e., powdered aluminum, as well as the adulteration of other food products, such as, sugar, butter, and milk.

²⁶ “Exchange value could arise only as a representative of use value, but the victory it eventually won with its own weapons created the conditions for its own autonomous power. By mobilizing all human use value and monopolizing its fulfillment, exchange value ultimately succeeded in controlling use” (Debord [1967] 2008:31).

²⁷ It was not until the 2000-2001 school year that the USDA mandated testing for meat intended for distribution to school lunches (Schlosser 2005:218). Even then, George W. Bush made an effort to halt testing for *Salmonella*, but consumer outrage forced the Secretary of Agriculture to reverse the decision (Schlosser 2005:277).

are never an ethical concern, as with the example of school lunches. Use-value bears with it connotations of utility and need, but today, use-values beget use-values, bearing commodities of no seeming use, and feeding no body. The abundance of cash corn crops is one example of this, especially when grown to create high-fructose corn syrup (HFCS), which now accounts for 5% of energy intake among Americans. The United States Department of Agriculture estimates that Americans eat over 44 pounds of HFCS every year (McGuire and Beerman 2011:127), contributing to what is often called an obesity epidemic.

Food is a particular use-value, like labour-power. All categories of food imply within them their use; corn, seed, fruit, dairy are particular aspects of the universal notion of 'food.' You can also bring the idea of food and 'fuel' together, for they are not mutually exclusive categories; indeed, food, could be considered a particular aspect of fuel. These are epistemic categorizations, which are ontologically anthropocentric. The being of food, and the knowledge produced to characterize what is and is not edible, refers to the human. That is why we can have aisle upon aisle of food in a grocery store, but only one section for pet food, which is consequently comprised of rather homogeneous and uniform 'varieties.' The qualification of 'cat' and 'dog' on product labels means that the broader category of food belongs to the human.

In *The Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith's description of food shows that the means of subsistence are the first utility of all beings, and the first use-value of humans. In a sense, it is use-value *as such*. First, he states "food seems to be the only produce of land which always and necessarily affords some rent to the landlord" ([1776] 1986:266). Food is the object against which all other use-values are defined; once hunger is satisfied, the hide of an animal, for instance, stands out in relief as useful, but its utility follows on the necessity of food.

In one state...there is always a superabundance of these materials, which are frequently...of little or no value. In the other there is often a scarcity, which necessarily augments their value. In the one state a great part of them is thrown away as useless. (Smith [1776] 1986:266).

In this, I see a landscape that at first appears only as that which bodies move over, in which the shelter of branches and outcroppings is sought, and nourishment is eked out.

The first ‘object’ was food—the aim of pre-ontological intention—daily demanded by the body, unlike the intent to reproduce sexually.²⁸ The other objects on the horizon can only be viewed thus with a change in perception—an increasing objectification of matter according to discovered attributes.²⁹ The superabundance of ‘valueless’ matter is indicative of a time before we experienced the proliferation of use-values that fill our markets as commodities. Use-values beget use-values, but only food made that unique human capacity of labour-power possible.

Use-values are both the means and ends of the labour process, according to Marx: “The labour process...is purposeful activity aimed at the production of use-values. It is an appropriation of what exists in nature for the requirements of man. It is the universal condition for the metabolic interaction between man and nature” ([1867] 1976:290). The assumption that Locke holds that “every man has a ‘property’ in his own ‘person’...[that t]he ‘labour’ of his body and the ‘work’ of his hands, we may say, are properly his” ([1689] 1967:116), is for me thrown into question by our acknowledgement of the capacities created for us through food, for which many beings labour in one way or another. Both Marx and Smith give nature its due, acknowledging that we “employ in the process many means of production which are provided directly by nature and do not represent any combination of natural substances with human labour” (Marx [1867] 1976:290), and that it “is the work of nature which remains after deducting or compensating everything which can be regarded as the work of men” (Smith [1776] 1986:463). Marx states further that “Labour-power itself is, above all else, the material of nature transposed into a human organism” ([1867] 1976:323fn). However the material of nature is “without value in itself” ([1867]

²⁸ Certainly, food and reproduction are linked in mother’s milk. If reproduction is primary, food belongs to this category as the reproductive material of metabolic energy.

²⁹ According to Marx, the outcome of this objectification is the estrangement of human labour in the form of commodities: “The worker can create nothing without *nature*, without the *sensuous external world*. It is the material on which his labour is manifested, in which it is active, from which and by means of which it produces...the more the worker by his labour *appropriates* the external world, sensuous nature, the more he deprives himself of the *means of life* in the double respect: first, that the sensuous external world more and more ceases to be an object belonging to his labour—to be his labour’s *means of life*; and secondly, that it more and more ceases to be *means of life* in the immediate sense, means for the physical subsistence of the worker;” furthermore, with “the *increasing value* of the world of things proceeds the direct proportion the *devaluation* of the world of men. Labour produces not only commodities: it produces the worker as a *commodity*—and does so in the proportion in which it produces commodities generally” ([1927] 1987:72,71).

1976:323); the metabolic potential of consumable matter is not a contributing factor to value in the capitalist mode of production though the potential for man to labour is. It is food's reproductive relationship to labour, the only value producing activity identified under both Marx and Smith's systems, that makes it virtually present in all things.

Use-value is a misnomer that implies there is value in utility, when really value is only realized in the circulation of commodities, and capital cares not for which commodities are useful or necessary, only that someone will buy them. Though the worker is an embodied subject, the body is left out of any calculation of value, for labour time in the abstract is the only measure of value in capitalist social relations. The body is merely a substrate for labour power, as any use-value is the substrate for exchange-value (Marx [1867] 1976:293), and therefore its care occurs in a separate realm, the sphere of direct or individual consumption. Though capital may drive consumption, the act of individual consumption falls outside of its purview, which means that there need be no ethical consideration of what is produced as a container for value. Whole foods and wholly adulterated foods can only appear as quantitatively different in the eyes of capital, with no consideration given to quality at all.

Because of its pivotal role in the maintenance of life, it is critical that we view food not as one commodity among others, and food production not as one industry among others, but as foundational in the social order.

What follows is a description of the body as viewed by capital, as a use-value (section 1.2). I start here to emphasize the similar way in which the inhuman system of capital sees both the human and nonhuman body as material from which to extract value (through the application of human labour). It is necessary to interrogate the commodity relationship in order to see how it mediates and precludes a directly ethical relationship between, say, a human and its potential food sources. This discussion is permeated with references to actor-network theory (ANT) and phenomenology, as both systems of thought hold promise for shifts in the subject/object thinking that capital has internalized and made into a singular, commodifying force (section 1.3).

Virilio would argue that this shift would really be a move back to a more ethical perspective that has been compromised by the introduction of accelerated and automated technologies, which have distorted reality and our ability to act politically and ethically in the world (section 1.4)

1.2 Food and Bodies Under Capital

The pivotal role food plays in the maintenance of life—what Virilio ([1977] 2006) would call our ‘metabolic power’—has arguably become neglected as an object of ethical and political contemplation. Here, I am thinking especially of predominantly service- and information-based economies where the phenomenon of fast-and-fantastic food is lived out most intensely. I glean the concept of metabolic power from Virilio’s differentiation between the metabolic vehicle (the human) ([1995] 2008b:52) and motor technologies that have accelerated the movement of humans over time and space. Metabolic power means simply the potential of the body itself—its force, movement, and intellectual potential—developed through the metabolism of nutritional sources. It is the power behind labour power, and is the reason why minimum wages reflect only what the labourer needs to reproduce that power, which is accomplished mainly through eating and sleeping (shelter). What I want to imply with a concept like ‘metabolic power’ or ‘metabolic potential’ is something far less instrumental than what is implied by ‘metabolic vehicle,’ especially as Virilio describes it here:

Animal, territorial, vegetable bodies, bodies without will, bodies not yet born become technical bodies or technological objects. Here is true social domination, the bestiary of engines...The body is an empty house through which pass disquieting tenants...But more than houses, these bodies are metabolic vehicles. ([1977] 2006:108)

Under capital, the body is such a vehicle whose metabolic capacity only belongs to it inasmuch as it can be sold. This subject/object division allows us to believe we are not selling our whole selves as a commodity, but rather some inessential, alienable part of ourselves. The experiences that ‘pass through’ the body as sensory perceptions

(including the severe feeling of hunger) are dismissed as having no affect, as if the body bears no trace or mark of the passing.

The animal body in meat production is certainly denied its own ability to register affect; it has also undergone a change in ontological status (Latour 1999:122). Where once a farmer may have named a prized heifer and cared for its health as an end in itself, now, all factory-farmed cattle enter life destined to be ‘beef,’ and any traces of the horrible lives they live are, fingers-crossed, washed away in the ammonia baths that baptize them for human consumption (Avila 2012). Even for the human, the body is sacrificed, or indeed motivated and possessed by a capitalist rationale that drives it to work for the creation of surplus value, to facilitate the accumulation of value. Eric Schlosser (2005) and Wynonah Hauter (2012) both describe the horrendous working conditions of slaughterhouse employees, who work on increasingly faster (dis)assembly lines with sharp implements, and those that clean processing plants, climbing inside dangerous machines and using harmful chemicals. Fingers, limbs, and lives have been lost. Schlosser interviewed one Monfort Beef slaughterhouse worker who endured a severe back injury and surgery, chemical burns, broken bones, and a heart attack while in Montfort’s employ, only to be fired while recovering from heart surgery. After being lauded for working through injury after injury, Kenny Dobbins learned just how disposable he and his body were: “They used me to the point where I had no body parts left to give...Then they just tossed me in the trash can” (Schlosser 2005:190).

In itself the body does not register as anything but a container for labour power, and capital is indifferent to whose body is used up in the labour process. This is true of all use-values in production. The world body has been increasingly penetrated and manipulated to modify the productive capacities of the soil to suit capital accumulation. Marx describes this approach to the earth in the 1844 economic manuscripts:

No longer does the worker insert a modified natural thing [*Naturgegenstand*] as middle link between the object [*Objekt*] and himself; rather, he inserts the process of nature, transformed into an industrial process, as a means between himself and inorganic nature, mastering it. ([1939] 1973:705)

Our knowledge of food production and animal biology has allowed humans to alter the internal mechanisms of seeds, for instance, in ways that can compromise the ability for vegetal life to reproduce. This is because industry considers capital first, not needs—not how soil or seeds will reproduce itself, but how it will support the creation of surplus value.

The moral of history, also to be deduced from other observations concerning agriculture, is that the capitalist system works against a rational agriculture, or that a rational agriculture is incompatible with the capitalist system (although the latter promotes technical improvements in agriculture), and needs either the hand of the small farmer living by his own labour or the control of associated producers. (Marx [1894] 1981:216)

The power has indeed gone to ‘associated producers’—the oligarchy of food producers and manufacture that set the bottom line for industrial agriculture.

If we limit the discussion of metabolic necessity to its mechanical implications, we may very well reproduce this concept of the body as mere container, with food only taking up temporary residence in our body as a ‘disquieting tenant.’ From this point of view, food remains a quantitative object, calculated in calories and grams of protein. From this point of view, food is fuel, but I agree with Bookchin that a conceptual reduction of substances to a thermodynamic process contributes little to a political or ethical question:

The word ‘energy’...becomes the solvent by which richly qualitative distinctions are reduced to the gray, undifferentiated substrate for a crude psychic, physical, and ‘ecological’ cybernetics—the ebb and flow, the blockage and release of quantified power. ([1974] 1986:87)

Indeed, definitions of poverty are modeled on quantitative assumptions about the command of food, rather than the qualitative experience of wellbeing (Sen 1982:8, 24), which would also account for cultural tastes without treating them as extravagances (e.g., in times of famine).³⁰ I argue that we must take a

³⁰ In *Poverty and Famines* (1982), Amartya Sen criticizes definitions of poverty and deprivation that are considered “independent of ‘feelings of deprivation’”. Material objects cannot be evaluated in this context without reference to how people view them...they must have an implicit role in the selection of ‘attributes’” (1982:16). This is a statement that refers to the *experience* of poverty; it is a phenomenological statement. Sen distinguishes between the characteristics of food commodities that the body requires and the commodities that people choose to fulfill those nutritional requirements. “Wheat, rice, potatoes, etc., are commodities, while calories, protein, vitamins, etc., are characteristics of these commodities that the consumers seek. If each characteristic could be obtained from only one

phenomenological approach to the body and its sustenance, because the extent to which we are ill- or well-fed, to which our bodies can metabolize some foods and not others, not to mention our pleasure or displeasure of food, bears significantly on how we experience and how we act. At least Virilio's notion of 'disquieting tenants' suggests that food can be disruptive as much as reparative to the body, a point which begs of us to ask the inevitable question of agency. Not only am I suggesting that food plays a role in the agency of the bodies it constitutes, but that food also acts as an agent in its own right. For elaboration on the point, I turn to Jane Bennett (2010), whose aim is to foreground the vibrancy of materials often taken to be inert and lacking any potency with respect to human lives.

In *Vibrant Matter*, Bennett's intent is to mark "the moment of independence (from subjectivity) possessed by things" (2010:3). Subjectivity, however, is not simply projected on food objects; it permeates and interacts with the material's vibrancy through the imposition of the commodity form. The commodity fetish is supersensuous (see section 2.2) but the emphasis on exchange value impacts how use-values are produced, shaped, and how they appear, since such things can multiply the points of exchange in a supply chain. Bennett claims to shift from a perspective of "epistemology to that of ontology" (2010:3) but these realms do not lie separate, especially in the case of adulterated food forms, where human knowledge of nutrition, and also, physical consumption patterns, give way to ontological distinction and change. Our knowledge of the cow and its ability to digest corn, as opposed to its natural diet of grasses,³¹ has imposed itself physically on the body of the cow. Its

commodity and no others, then it would be easy to translate the characteristics needs into commodity needs... While calories are necessary for survival, neither wheat nor rice is" (1982:24). Sen observes how, in times of crisis, relief policy often accounts only for 'characteristics needs' and not of the cultural group's view of their commodity needs (1982:24). This was the case during the 2002 famine in South Africa, where several countries who refused aid in the form of GMO wheat were criticized for not accepting what was given (Dowty and Wallace 2010). However this decision was not a matter of taste, but a matter of food sovereignty, as Zambia and Zimbabwe viewed the introduction of GMO seeds into their ecosystem as a greater threat than the famine on the horizon (Dowty and Wallace 2010:61).

³¹ The ruminant is not as much of a 'generalist' in its diet as the human. "The generalist strategy is, in effect, an investment in the likelihood that a particular dietary item will not always be abundant and it trades the specialist ability that enables that item to be digested with the highest efficiency for a 'generalist' ability to digest a range of items with a somewhat lower efficiency" (Lentle and Janssen 2011:4).

being as food has completely altered its being as cow, a process in which epistemology is certainly implicated.

Food provides a great deal of “evidence of our own constitution as vital materiality” (Bennett 2010:10). The breakdown between the human body’s exterior and interior is pronounced in the digestive process where vital materialities considered both foreign and domestic to the body interact to make the body able. “This out-side can operate at a distance from our bodies or it can operate as a foreign power internal to them, as when we feel the discomfort of nonidentity” (Bennett 2010:17), for example, when we become ill from *Salmonella* or another contaminant that is not represented visibly in a food product or on packaging. I can subscribe to Bennett’s vital materialism because I, too, “favo[r] physiological over moral description” of phenomena (2010:12). Kropotkin also takes this approach in his suggested ethics, called ‘social physiology.’

Might it not be that production, having lost sight of the *needs* of man, has strayed in absolutely wrong direction, and that its organization is at fault? And as we can prove that such is the case, let us reorganize production so as to really satisfy all needs. The only way that would allow of Political Economy becoming a science--the Science of Social Physiology. ([1892] 2007:203)

Bennett wants “to raise the status of the materiality of which we are composed” (2010:12), and as far as the human is concerned, Kropotkin insists on raising the status of physiological need. If the “ethical aim [is] to distribute value³² more generously to bodies as such” (Bennett 2010:13) it follows that feeding bodies equitably and giving nutritional sources greater attention would begin to balance the disproportionate metabolic potential among humans. Bennett proposes, likewise, an ethics that addresses nonhuman bodies and acknowledges “human participation in a shared, vital materiality” that does not only serve the human (2010:14). The human has mutual interests with many nonhuman systems in which it participates. There already exists a mutual extension of properties between ‘us’ and ‘them’—perhaps even a mutual aid, the common factor of evolution Kropotkin argues is present in human and other

³² Bennett’s use of ‘value’ here would refer to a more general sense of intrinsic value, an appreciation of essence, perhaps.

natures.³³ Approaching bodies from this perspective, says Bennett, is “the starting point of ethics” (2010:14).

There is a determinism in my analysis, in that I work from the perspective of the already distributed, *what is granted*, in the way Bennett uses Latour’s definition of actant. She explains “[a]ctants...is Bruno Latour’s term for a source of action; an actant can be a human or not... something that acts or to which activity is *granted* by others” (2010:9; emphasis mine). Human labour alone, which even the act of eating is considered to be by Locke,³⁴ cannot account for the distribution of embodied potential created through metabolism. “An actant never really acts alone. Its efficacy or agency always depends on the collaboration, cooperation, or interactive interference of many bodies and forces” (Bennett 2010:21). Bennett frees matter from its subservience to human labour as the formative essence of all creation. Instead of a formative power detachable from matter—something that comes from outside the object—“artisans ([and] mechanics, cooks, builders, cleaners, and anyone else intimate with things) encounter a creative materiality with incipient tendencies” (Bennett 2010:56). Heidegger’s sense of art and *techné* is similar in that the artist or craftsperson brings out the existing properties of an object, but it is not because the artist is the formative power ([1938] 2008a:143). In fact, almost consistent with Latour’s argument, the object and the process of craft forms the artist. Latour speaks in similar terms when he describes the actor-network that was Louis Pasteur and his bacterial cultures (1999:60). In these terms, the body is the food it metabolizes; it shares vital materiality with other bodies.

³³ “Mutual Aid and Mutual Support” is “a feature of the greatest importance for the maintenance of life the preservation of each species, and its further evolution” (Kropotkin [1902] 2006:vii)

³⁴ “He that is nourished by the acorns he picked up under an oak, or the apples he gathered from the trees in the wood, has certainly appropriated them to himself. Nobody can deny but the nourishment is his. I ask, then, when did they begin to be his? when he digested? or when he ate? or when he boiled? or when he brought them home? or when he picked them up? And it is plain, if the first gathering made them not his, nothing else could. That labour put a distinction between them and common” (Locke [1689] 1967:116). The act of gathering is the labour that makes food the property of the individual.

1.3 Actor-Network Theory and Phenomenology

Bennett describes an episode in which a collection of ‘stuff,’ a candy wrapper and other detritus, which she encountered on the street “commanded attention in its own right...it issued a call” (2010:4). The stuff Bennett observes “provoked affects in [her]” (2010:4). Here, we are reminded of the phenomenological notion of attention and the call of care. Latour, too, discusses concern in a way that is reminiscent of Heidegger’s notion of ‘care,’ the horizon of being that is explored in *Being and Time* ([1927] 2010), despite the former’s overt criticism of phenomenology for resting its sights too firmly on human experience and agency (Latour 2005:61).³⁵ Matters of concern is Latour’s formulation, a movement away from an understanding of reality as ‘matters of fact,’ which are those objects that ‘remain silent’ for we do not expect them to say anything other than the truth that empiricism has prescribed to them (2005:114). “If there is something unattainable, it is the dream of treating nature as a homogenous unity in order to unify the different views the sciences have of it” (Latour 1999:10). Too often, Latour says, have we taken the human and its psychology to be the shifting, changing force on this planet, while rocks, the seas, animal behaviour—all else follows set rules discovered and proven through scientific observation.³⁶

Care, concern, thought, and anxiety are all etymologically linked in the German term for care, *sorge*, with which Heidegger frames his ontology.³⁷ If an object is a matter of concern, it is because our lives intersect with it, because it carries on transactions with us, and we with it. The drive to make those matters of concern into matters of fact is an effect of the destining that Heidegger calls *Gestell* or ‘enframing’ ([1954] 2008b:324). Heidegger’s concepts of enframing and *Bestand* (standing

³⁵ “Phenomenology deals only with the world-for-a-human-consciousness. It will teach us a lot about how we never distance ourselves from what we see...how we are always immersed in the world’s rich and lived texture, but, alas, this knowledge will be of no use in accounting for how things really are, since we will never be able to escape from the narrow focus of human intentionality” (Latour 1999:9).

³⁶ “[U]nable to imagine a metaphysics in which there would be other real agencies than those with intentional humans, or worse, they oppose human action with the mere ‘material effect’ of natural objects which, as they say, have ‘no agency’ but only ‘behavior’” (Latour 2005:61)

³⁷ One must return to the Greek origin of the word, as Heidegger does, to find its varied meaning. φροντίς can mean ‘care,’ ‘thought,’ and ‘attention’ (“φροντίς”).

reserve) describe the human effort to contain those silent agencies³⁸ that both grant the human its ability to act (for example, the standing reserve of protein options on our supermarket shelves, and in their previous incarnation, the hundreds of thousands of cattle in an industrial feed lot), but also, disrupt human structures, as with natural disasters. Epistemology, too, is implicated in the phenomenon of *Bestand*: knowledge of the processes of nature are transformed into industrial processes (Marx [1939] 1973:705), to increase the constancy and efficiency with which matter is worked up into standing reserve. While the drive of enframing may begin with the same will to truth that reveals knowledge, its destiny is to conceal truth and also annihilate matters of concern with its imposition of fact.

While Heidegger does not grant *Dasein*³⁹ to nonhuman objects, he does recognize a mysterious, thought-resistant earth that grounds and, at times, undoes our human worlds, in the form of *Ereignis* (event). “Earth, irreducibly spontaneous, is effortless and untiring. Upon the earth and in it, historical man grounds his dwelling in the world” (Heidegger [1938] 2008a:171). The mysterious earth will disrupt the effects of enframing and frustrate paradigms of organization, as in natural disaster, but also at a personal level. When objects (the earth) assert themselves in unexpected ways, our understanding of the object must be negotiated—this gives rise to thought, or anxiety, which are both experiences of care. When something like Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE; also known as mad cow disease) asserts itself, the anxiety that follows reveals that humans do not form their own ground and that other materialities are far more significant to the constitution of the real and symbolic body than initially thought. In the case of BSE, the accident reveals the substance,⁴⁰ i.e., the silent agencies of the food we eat and the irrationality of its production, here, the unsanitary conditions in which massive numbers of cows are kept and the

³⁸ “To be accounted for, objects have to enter into accounts. If no trace is produced, they offer no information to the observer and will have no visible effect on other agents. They remain silent and are no longer actors: they remain, literally, unaccountable. Although the situation is the same for groups and agencies—no trial, no account, no information—it is clearly more difficult for objects, since carrying their effects while becoming silent is what they are so good at” (Latour 2005:79).

³⁹ A being that thinks its own being and recognizes its being-in-the-world.

⁴⁰ “And, so, if for Aristotle some little time ago and for us today, *the accident reveals the substance*, this is in fact because WHAT CROPS UP (*accidens*) is a sort of analysis, a technoanalysis of WHAT IS BENEATH ANY KNOWLEDGE (*substare*)” (Virilio [2005] 2011:10).

contaminated feed they may eat. Rather than building the body as food is supposed to do, the offending protein in contaminated beef destroys the brain.⁴¹

If there is one thing of which we may be certain...we will live tomorrow in imbroglios of science, techniques, and society even more tightly linked than those of yesterday—as the mad cow affair has demonstrated so clearly to European beefeaters. (Latour 1999:200)

As I will discuss in relation to an ethics of perception, there are effects of capital that obscure the ‘imbroglios’ we are folded into, leaving us prone to greater crises than an original event initiates.

1.4 Food and an Ethics of Perception

Food and its place in daily life is one more essential element of life that has been relegated to a partial category of existence under capital, and with it, its central community-building function is eroded. The term ‘partial’ is important here, as Guy Debord uses it in *Society of the Spectacle* ([1967] 2008) to describe the fragmentation of the human and of human life into commodities and, particularly, images.⁴² Rather than seeing all elements of life linked together, we are forced to think through the commodity form, whose diversity of appearances becomes the substitute for robust and free relationships between individuals,⁴³ and completely obscures the material relationships between the people who produce and consume food commodities.

Though food is one of the first necessities of life, as a commodity, it is equally exchangeable on the market for any other object, and so can be undermined in its necessity by demand for other use-values, for instance, when corn is produced for

⁴¹ BSE has been linked to the neurodegenerative Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (vCJD). The United States Centre for Disease Control and Prevention describes the disease as “rapidly progressive and always fatal” (2012).

⁴² Thesis 2: “The images detached from every aspect of life fuse in a common stream in which the unity of this life can no longer be reestablished. Reality considered partially unfolds, in its own general unity, as a pseudo-world apart, an object of mere contemplation. The specialization of images of the world is completed in the world of the autonomous image, where the liar has lied to himself. The spectacle in general, as the concrete inversion of life, is the autonomous movement of the non-living” (Debord [1967] 2008:23).

⁴³ Thesis 29: “The origin of the spectacle lies in the world’s loss of unity, and its massive expansion in the modern period demonstrates how total this loss has been...Spectators are linked only by a one-way relationship to the very centre that maintains their isolation from one another. The spectacle thus unites what is separate, but it unites it only in its separateness” (Debord [1967] 2008:22).

biofuels rather than global grain stores (Burnett-Nichols 2011). Commodities like corn are often overproduced in order to provide massive amounts of inputs required by food manufacturers, while driving down the prices that the growers receive for their product. “Growers of most crops have affiliations with a packer/shipper—a company that arranges harvesting, prepares the crops to sell, and markets it... Each service provided to the grower diminishes the final price they receive” (Hauter 2012:86). As Marx predicted would happen, agriculture is now “merely a branch of industry, and is entirely dominated by capital” ([1939] 1973:107). Wal-Mart, the leader in American grocery sales, imposes standards on growers and manufacturers top-down to create as uniform and predictable a product as possible (Hauter 2012:70),⁴⁴ which means predictable profits. In *Fast Food Nation*, Eric Schlosser (2005) tells a similar story of McDonald’s impact on the nature of potato and meat production; as a top customer for both products, the corporation has far more power over producers than the average consumer. According to Wynonah Hauter, “Americans spend 90 percent of their food budgets on processed food—those foods manufactured and sold in a box, bag, can, or carton” (2012:66). With the demand for standardized products and, likewise, the proliferation of pre-packaged, no-cook meals—the choice par excellence for the atomized individual under capital—comes a fixation on the look and deliverable form of food over its nutritional and metabolic essence. The horsemeat in Tesco spaghetti bolognese was invisible, omitted from the representation of ingredients on its packaging as well in the product itself (*Figure 1*). Through appearances, the effects of the spectacle reach inside the body as well as out.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ “Wal-Mart demands volume. It sells an incredible amount of each food product, much more demand than a small or medium-size producer could ever hope to meet on its own. For instance, Wal-Mart buys one billion pounds of beef each year. For a company obsessed with increasing efficiencies in its supply chain it makes considerably more sense for it to get this meat from a few large meatpackers;” suppliers to the United States’ number one grocery retailer “cannot choose to forgo any demands that are made upon them” (Hauter 2012:71).

⁴⁵ These are also the affects of capital; according to Debord, “The spectacle is capital accumulated to the point that it become images” ([1967] 2008:22).



Figure 1. Packages of Tesco's Everyday Value spaghetti bolognese was found to contain up to 100% horsemeat.

Photo: *The Guardian* (UK)

Maurice Merleau-Ponty ([1948] 2009) reminds us that objects are not “simply neutral” ([1948] 2009:48); we attach meaning to those things or attributes that we have previously experienced. And yet, as will be discussed more concretely as we progress, objects that we are distanced from but which are still necessary can be neutralized (or, indeed, covered over) by distance. Because food operates on the real of our bodies, our relationship with it “is not a distant one: [it] speaks to our body and the way we live” (Merleau-Ponty [1948] 2009:48), but as Latour (2005:114) suggests, this communication is often silent or goes unheard. The trace of the real constituted by the movement of food in our bodies, and over landscapes (distribution), also forms the social (see section 2.3). Sensuously and socially, our relationship with food is mediated by technologies that direct attention away from tangibility to a virtuality, in a manner that supports Debord’s reading of the present moment as dominated by the spectacle. As Virilio argues, these interventions in our perception have consequences for the ethical autonomy of the human.

In *Grey Ecology*, Virilio gives us a new term with which to think ontologically. He says,

What we call real-time leads to the space-time continuum suffering a temporal contraction which reduces to nothing or practically nothing the vastness of the world...Great or weak, this vastness constitutes the power of Being. And now I'll give you a very clear example: to be a man is to measure basically between one and two meters. If a man measures 20 meters in height, it is not a man. This is unthinkable. Today, everything is like this. It is amazing to what degree proportions have disappeared from the modern world. (2008a:27-8)

'Proportion' is the concept to which I draw your attention, for Virilio tells us that what we know to be human is a matter of proportion: "There is no object without proportions. There is no man without dimensions" (2008a:27). The scale of the world, which once gave us a relative perspective and horizon from which to draw meaning and orientation, has been effaced by instantaneous communication and accelerated mobility; we are "suffering a temporal contraction which reduces to a notion or practically nothing the vastness of the world" (Virilio 2008a:27). Without a horizon, the human has no sense of its relative position to other humans or nonhumans, and this has devastating effects for political and ethical agency. "[W]ithout a true spatial position...the remote interaction of a being at once absent and acting (teleacting) redefines the very notion of being there" (Virilio [1995] 2008b:131). Invoking the phenomenological category of *Dasein* (the 'being there'), Virilio fears we will lose the *da*—the perspective—to our *sein*—being—which means that what has defined the human is also lost. In fact, Virilio believes we have suffered a "perceptual disorder" ([1995] 2008b:91) and that this should be addressed by an "ethics of contemporary perspective" ([1995] 2008b:90).

Similar to Virilio, Bookchin says that what is human is a matter of scale. 'Human,' referring to its ancient Greek application, "means scaled to human dimension" ([1974] 1986:102). He suggests that the systems under which humans are subject are already nonhuman—beyond the human scale: "Clearly a habitat that is largely incomprehensible to the humans who inhabit it would be regarded as inhuman"

and, therefore, unjust ([1974] 1986:104).⁴⁶ Our sense of humanity has, according to Bookchin, lost its “ethical dimension” ([1974] 1986:104). Bookchin is clear that “dimensions are no more substitutes for values than the technical origins of a particular thing” ([1974] 1986:100). In other words, neither small-scale nor large-scale are virtues in themselves. Likewise, Bookchin argues that even if the technical origin of a thing is human, it does not then mean that all things are ‘human’ ([1974] 1986:99); human-made objects and structures can be unethical in their application, even inhumane for the humans that subsequently engage them. As I discussed in the introduction, Marx called capital ‘inhuman,’ and yet, it is a product of human, social development, albeit metabolized from nonhuman matter.

A division between the human and nonhumans, which are viewed as “pure objects lacking in all human attributes,” has led us to devalue the matter that grounds humans and all existence (Merleau-Ponty [1948] 2008:51). To develop a more ethical relationship to our food sources, the human can no longer be the only subject against which all else stands in relief. Rather, to feed back into an ethical standpoint, it must belong as a significant reference point among many others. Bookchin says that any description of a human habitat

must include the political infrastructure, institutions, interpersonal relations, and guiding values that justify the use of the word ‘human.’ In the absence of these political, institutional, psychological, and moral elements, the description becomes a mere inventory of things and structures, an *artifactual aggregate* that may secure the individuals self-preservation and creature comforts, but explains nothing about the development of his selfhood and moral outlook. (1986:106; emphasis mine)

We could think of this artifactual aggregate in terms of the spectacle, the accumulation of images that mediate our social reality, but belies the human separation for which the images are merely a mask (Debord [1967] 2008:12). The conditions that make the dominance of the spectacle possible are described by Virilio: “so-called ‘real’ moment[s]” have detached themselves from the “here and now,

⁴⁶ “A ‘big’ community may be more efficient for economic or military purposes, but it would not be ethical. Its citizens would be incapable of making decisions of profound social importance and thereby fail to realize their distinctive human capacities for rational social judgment” (Bookchin [1974] 1986:103).

[opting] for an electronic dazzlement...whereby the image prevails over the thing it is an image of” ([1995] 2008b:14,19). We are captivated by the “motorization of appearances” and an “opto-electronic fetishism” (Virilio [1995] 2008b:96,90). What we see is a collection of images that represent the collection of commodities that mediate social life and are complicit in our separation and alienation from one another (Debord [1967] 2008:12). Bookchin’s ‘artifactual aggregate’ is a representation of the human world that is divested of human-human relations, merely held together by lists of things—or a procession of images, in the case of Tumblr or Instagram feeds (*Figure 2*). As much as we must reevaluate our relations to nonhumans, Bookchin argues that it is unethical to completely jettison the human from those relations.



Figure 2. Instagram images of food are an apt example of the spectacle as coextensive with the commodity fetish. The image is taken to capture the appearance of the food. All evidence of labour and production is absent from the image.

Photo: Raul Mandru

For food as with humans, “[p]roportions are the limit of Being” (Virilio 2008a:34). Certainly, in a hierarchy of being, beings of lesser proportion have occupied inferior positions relative to beings of larger proportion. Perhaps the power of viruses, imperceptible to the human eye, contributed to a change in such thinking. These are the nonidentities that have undermined our epistemological strivings

through time. Food objects also need to be of a certain ‘portion’ to be manageable by the human hand and mouth, and so the cow as category, gives way to ‘beef,’ and then to ‘steak’ or ‘ground’ or whatever more individual a portion is desired by the consumer.⁴⁷ The proportions imposed upon a food object mediate between the thing that it was (still undoubtedly a use-value in the productive consumption process) and the thing it is intended to be.⁴⁸ These ontological distinctions commit a violence “that no longer comes from direct confrontation and bloodshed, but rather from the unequal properties of bodies” (Virilio [1977] 2006:62). Under capital, there is both unequal metabolic potential of human bodies, and a disproportionate care given to nonhuman objects. In some cases, nonhuman objects command more care than humans, in the case of technological infrastructure; whatever increases production and efficiency in industry is adopted at the expense of meaningful work or human work altogether. Bloodshed may still occur in exploitative workplaces, certainly it does in the form of injuries resulting from unsafe and unsanitary labour practices, but it is more frequently visited on nonhuman animals by both human and mechanical hands. The imposition of the commodity form on matter is an even more sinister violence visited on nonhuman animals, because it is a protracted phenomenon spanning their entire lifecycle, as in the case of the industrially produced chicken.

The demand that corporate interests make on food production, in order to move as much volume and tally as much profit as possible is one reason why chickens “have been bred to grow increasingly large breasts and convert feed ‘efficiently’ into flesh during the six weeks they live” (Hauter 2012:192). Chickens are to be of “uniform size and shape [to] facilitate processing, allowing slaughter lines to move quickly, thus reducing costs” (Hauter 2012:193) and ensuring a continual and standard supply of

⁴⁷ These interventions also redefine the human in its relation to food. As Marx shows, different modes of production form new needs and ‘tastes’: “the hunger gratified by cooked meat eaten with a knife and fork is a different hunger from that which bolts down raw meat with the aid of hand, nail, and tooth” ([1939] 1973:92). Here, hunger is the horizon of being, but how one eats also contributes to an ontological shift in the human. I do not claim these distinctions to be valid, for I read most descriptions of refinement, in manner of production or consumption, as determined by some necessity or an emergent innovation that is not a virtue in itself.

⁴⁸ Schlosser is particularly interesting on this point, for instance, in his description of how the introduction of McDonald’s chicken nugget in 1983 initiated a general movement away from the production of whole chickens directly for consumption, to portions: “today about 90 percent of the chicken sold in the United States has been cut into pieces, cutlets, or nuggets” (2005:140).

products to store shelves. The average consumer purchasing a chicken at Wal-Mart does not see the consequences of those demands, the impact on the body they will now eat—though their own body may register it in quiet ways that have graver effects than can initially be felt. For instance, we cannot identify any bacteria remaining on chicken from the production process, but we inevitably purchase it along with whatever is listed on the label. Besides the cramped and unsanitary conditions in which the chickens live their short lives, their bodily form is penetrated by the conditions of their accelerated production: “they grow so fast that their size does not keep pace with their hearts or lungs, causing heart attacks and other health effects” (Hauter 2012:206). Hauter quotes Roberta Cook, an agricultural economist, who contextualizes the demand for ceaseless production in terms of scale; the great proportions needed to satisfy the wants of corporate food interests trumps and manipulates the proportions of the objects that cumulatively form the procession of commodities in circulation: “Scale is increasingly important... Large retail and food-service buyers demand year round supply” (2012:86). But the scale is incomprehensible to most and, therefore, difficult to draw our attention to.

This is an aspect of the magnitude of poverty that Virilio says results from the pollution of distances.

Virilio calls us to more ecological thinking, but it must be an ecology concerned with the “pollution of distances that organize our relationships with others, and also with the world of sense experience” ([1995] 2008b:59). He calls this a ‘grey ecology’ (2008a). With this concept, Virilio endeavours to take up what traditional ‘green’ ecological stances have neglected: “the man-machine dialogue, the close correlation between different regimes of perception and the collective practices of communication and telecommunication” ([1995] 2008b:23). In paying heed to the pollution of substances alone (as in ‘green’ ecology), we overlook the technological fetish that further mediates and mystifies our social relations (see section 2.5). In other words, the pollution of distances contributes to the opacity of logistical topographies that maintain an inequitable distribution of the means of production among bodies (Hornborg 2013:4). Virilio describes the magnitude of poverty as the twin phenomenon of the pollution of distances. Our lack of ethics is but one, though a

significant form of poverty the human experiences as a result of the capitalist mode of production, for our virtual connection has left us disabled and impoverished of embodied interactions.

According to Virilio, we are immersed in a paradigm of instantaneity, which arguably, even our food consumption has taken on.

The real-time interface then once and for all replaces the interval that once constituted and organized the history and geography of human societies, winding up in a true culture of the paradox in which everything arrives not only without needing physically to move from one place to another but, more particularly, without having to leave. ([1995] 2008b:19)

Despite food production's total resistance to the real-time phenomenon, belonging to the realm of duration and still requiring a rootedness antithetical to instantaneity, the supermarket is yet a world of instant gratification which belies the social relationships that are represented by the products on its shelves. "With the instantaneous transmission revolution, it is now 'departure' that gets wiped out and 'arrival' that gets promoted" (Virilio [1995] 2008b:56). 'Made in' labels do little to tell us truly how that cut of beef or avocado came to be, and then came to be in close proximity to us; the land, the workers, the place of departure for these objects are insignificant so long as they arrive.

In *Reassembling the Social*, Latour reduces the common use of the word 'social' to an immaterial, non-description of phenomena—an ether that he wishes to disperse (2005:47)⁴⁹—but Virilio may contend that we live this ethereality through the screen, which allows us to reach into impenetrable and untraversable spaces and emerge with identifiable objects. We may understand this nondensity in the way Foucault defines simulacra, as described by Bennett: the "thicker and slower compound bodies of objects" are not available to our senses; we deal only with "surface and no depth" (2010:57). Hence the human need for technological prosthesis to see and dig deeper into objects and the ground, whereas the device's findings will still be projected onto a surface. With this focus on surfaces, we can begin to see both where the tangibility of proportion—or its loss—is significant to the food object. If we react to surfaces, but are increasingly mediated by screens and large distribution

⁴⁹ More on this in section 2.3.

networks, then there is so little of the original nutritional source remaining to call our senses, to call our care. The spectacle operates through these same ‘surfaces and no depth.’

We have come to collapse distance through the screen, allowing us to ‘consume’ the world from a single point.

Here, once again, the precise question of the topology of technologies is posed. I mean the mutation in the celebrated ‘law of proximity’ or, if you prefer, the law of least effort or least action to reduce, to eliminate the range of action to the point of introducing a machine, a tool of instantaneous communication. (Virilio [1995] 2008b:51)

Big box retailers also welcome us to a single point of consumption for all needs, which obscures the total surface of food production—its total effects. If ever a time comes when food does not arrive on our supermarket shelves, if the distance between us and our food sources is felt, the magnitude of poverty can be revealed along with it.⁵⁰ But those objects that lie closest to us and even share immediate moments with our body, as food objects do, have lost their ethical immediacy. Virilio, quoting Paul Valery, hints that this loss of ethics has occurred because of a loss of bodily self: “The individual of the scientific age is losing his capacity to experience himself as a *centre of energy*” ([1995] 2008b:109). In effect, we all sit at the site of an impending crisis, one of capital’s contradictions: the effacement of matter and the very ground that reproduces labour power and the complete neglect of the body by capital, when it yet requires the body in order to extract surplus labour time, that is, surplus value.

Our detachment from the body is a moralized detachment from matter we can no longer afford to pursue.

By, as it were, distilling Nature into its material properties alone, uncontaminated by symbolic meanings or social relations, modernists have been freed to manipulate it in ways unthinkable in non-modern contexts. Objectivism, thus suggests a kind of moral or emotional dissociation from the part of reality classified as object. (Hornborg 2013:5)

The objectification of our own matter-source means the human does not see itself in the earth, and where it does see the earth in itself, it is as the maligned limit of human

⁵⁰ I discuss this further in chapter 3.

perfection. Latour ascribes this division to the primacy of sight in sensuous experience:

Descartes's mind requires artificial life-support to be viable. Only a mind put in the strangest position, looking at a world from the inside out and linked to the outside by nothing but the tenuous connection of the gaze, will throb in the constant fear of losing reality. (Latour 1999:4)

Virilio fears that this loss has already come to pass. The alienation of sight from all other senses has left the human without reference points; there is no relative point of view that allows the individual to gauge and engage other human, animal, or vegetal beings ethically. Our trained incapacity to acknowledge our own bodies has the twin effect of not registering the experience of other bodies.

“The paradoxes of acceleration are indeed numerous and disconcerting...the foremost among them: getting closer to the ‘distant’ takes you away proportionally from the ‘near’ (and dear)” (Virilio [1995] 2008b:20). The consequence where ethics is concerned is caused by this “mutation in the reality principle whereby the *automatic* nature of representation means perception is standardized” (Virilio [1995] 2008b:45); if perception is standardized, so is human reaction. “[W]e live in the beginnings of a paradoxical miniaturization of action, which others prefer to baptize automation” (Virilio [1977] 2006:156). In the machine of capital, automatic movement and reaction are both consistent with smooth production,⁵¹ and incongruous with ethical autonomy. Indeed, Virilio fears we are “about to lose our status as *eyewitness* of tangible reality, once and for all, to the benefit of technical substitutes” ([1995] 2008b:91). Describing the implications of ‘technical substitutes’ for agency, Alf Hornborg's states that “[e]very ‘technological’ solution is ultimately a social relation in the sense that it will have implications for the societal distribution of the burden of problem-solving” (2013:12) or, in other words, the societal distribution of potential (see section 2.4). As I will discuss in chapter 3, the distribution of the burden of problem-solving in times of disaster foregrounds our inability to fend for survival on a local level, as well as the

⁵¹ “The worker’s activity, reduced to a mere abstraction of activity is determined and regulated on all sides by the movement of the machinery, and not the opposite. The science which compels the inanimate limbs of the machinery, by their construction, to act purposefully, as an automaton, does not exist in the worker’s consciousness, but rather acts upon him through the machine as an alien power of the machine itself” (Marx [1939] 1973:693).

organizational biases that can lead to distribution breakdown in relief efforts (see section 3.4). At this time, I will discuss what this distribution of agency means with respect to food production.

Under the auspices of automation, the factory worker cannot be considered an agent. In the slaughterhouses of large, vertically integrated meatpacking companies, workers are only given time to disassemble carcass after carcass, tens of which have passed a worker's hands since I began this sentence. In the case of poultry production, "[l]ine speeds have increased dramatically from 143 birds a minute a decade ago to 190 today" (Hauter 2012:204). The worker's autonomy is utterly reduced; her agency suspended as she runs her knife over and over through animal's bodies. The 'miniaturization of action' that Virilio describes characterizes the micro-movements performed by slaughterhouse workers, while the decreasing oversight of global industrial operations is characterized by the removal of 'eyewitnesses' from slaughterhouse floors. Hauter explains how industrial food interests work to limit the oversight of their production lines by the USDA, "because if they saw contamination, they could stop the line and thereby cut industry profits" (2012:120). Yet again, capital's needs overshadow the needs of workers and the human, generally speaking.⁵²

Hornborg states that "the pivotal evaluative moment has been shifted from the local to the global level" (2013:14). But at this level, it is difficult to track the origins of our food ('departure is wiped out'), which is exactly the problem the European Union faced when it discovered horsemeat in five percent of its beef products (Voice of America 2013). The scale of production and distribution made investigating the source of the 'contamination' extremely challenging, while the proportions in which meat is produced—disassembled and ground up, distributed, and reassembled from thousands of animals—allowed the horsemeat to mingle with beef unnoticed (The Financial Times 2013, Feb. 19). Only DNA testing could sort one being from the other.⁵³

⁵² At the time of this writing, there was even less oversight of food production in the United States, as the government shutdown meant that inspections were not carried out across state lines, even in the case of a concurrent outbreak of *Salmonella* poisoning spanning 18 states (McKenna 2013).

⁵³ "Visibility is fundamental from the beginning of the supply chain through to the end consumer...Successfully managing a complex supply chain requires clear vision with supporting strategy and supply chain software. In multi-tier supply chains, such as food processing, the application

1.5 Conclusion

Proportions may once have belonged to an order that ordered the human but technical power has allowed the human to blow matter out of proportion, and masticate it. Proportions, rather than offering a glimpse of an attribute proper to an object, becomes a product of the commodity form.⁵⁴ Interestingly, Virilio describes the same constriction imposed on matter in the production of commodities as now being mapped onto human consciousness:

After the *design of the object* and the serial aesthetic of industrial production and mass consumerism, it looks as though we are now going to see in the postindustrial era some sort of *design of moral standards*, an ocular reflex training regime...the standardization of perception. ([1995] 2008b:94).

Virilio sees our living reactions coming under regulation and restrictions consistent with the capitalist mode of production, especially in automated production lines. Items of necessity, such as our nutritional sources, are moved through “global space...tightly integrated with an infrastructure of software” (Bratton 2006:9), not according to an ethos of meeting the needs of people, but the ethos of dependability, i.e., the just-in-time universe. We must operate according to the same ethos: “individual social action becomes more logistical,” begotten by a “structural form of agency in [a] (pre-formatted) landscape of proximate and immediate contact” (Bratton 2006:17). Our actions and reactions become standard so that the bonds characterized by this mode of production may be reproduced. Conversely, it is only “through the accident, the realization of imminent, irreducible risk that logistics hopes to contain, and not through control, that the strongest bonds of the *polis* are formed” (Bratton 2006:8). As Benjamin Bratton suggests in the introduction to Virilio’s *Speed and Politics*, the bonds of an ethical *polis* can only be formed in times of rupture, when the unexpected can no longer be contained by the logistical management of bodies. I will revisit this

of new cloud-based computer technologies becomes critical to effective process monitoring” - Tim Payne, VP Supply Chain Research at Gartner (The Financial Times 2013, February 19).

⁵⁴ Disproportion is the mark of capital’s accumulation of surplus value at the expense of the worker, who does not receive value in proportion to the labour time she has spent in production. “Wages... imply by their very nature that the worker will always provide a certain quantity of unpaid labour” (Marx [1967] 1976:769).

notion in chapter 3, in which I discuss Occupy Sandy's endeavour to use the infrastructure of online retail platforms and logistical applications for a mutual aid scenario.

Chapter 2: Food and Ethics in Distribution

2.1 Introduction

Jane Bennett states that “[a] theory of distributive agency... does not posit a subject as the cause of an effect. There are instead always a swarm of vitalities at play” (2010:31). Similarly, a distributed ethics could not posit the human subject as the principle cause of an ethical action.

Distributed ethics should not be confused with a distribution of ethics. Though ethics is certainly a process of reflection and engagement, my use of the past tense implies a level of determinism to the ethics we practice—or cannot practice—that is connected to the distribution of means. What is distributed materially forms part of the ground of possibility for ethics, both for individuals and collectives. For example, people who lack the exchange entitlements to secure adequate food for themselves are precluded from the ethical possibility of feeding other bodies and cannot engage in social techniques of bonding through the provision of food (Sen 1982:17).⁵⁵ The same distribution would govern individuals who cannot spare change for the person who asks for it, for their ability to command food commodities goes no further than their own subsistence.⁵⁶ This is true of many minimum wage workers, whose income (meant to reflect the means necessary to reproduce the worker) is insufficient, therefore qualifying them for social assistance.⁵⁷

In this way, the worker cannot be reproduced as a sociable being, for their sociality is limited to the workplace where they eke out existence for the home and dependents that their income barely keeps up. Freedom beyond that sphere is figured

⁵⁵ “In addition to nutrition-giving characteristics, bread possesses other characteristics as well, e.g., helping get-togethers over food and drinks, meeting the demands of social conventions or festivities. For a given person at a particular point in time, having more bread increases, up to a point, the person’s ability to function in these way” (Sen 1999:17). Further, “the possession of food gives the owner access to the properties of the food, which can be used to satisfy hunger, to yield nutrition, to give eating pleasure and to provide support for social meetings” (Sen 1999:6).

⁵⁶ The irony of the use of the term liberal in the context of neoliberal economic policy, is that more and more people are placed in precarious subsistence-level situations, disallowing them any liberality, which in its earliest connotations, meant the ability to give generously (“liberal, adj. and n.” 2013).

⁵⁷ See Susan Berfield’s (2013) article in *Businessweek*: “Fast-Food Wages Come With a \$7 Billion Side of Public Assistance.”

in dollar terms and often so is the ability to be ethical. Of course, you may tell me that there are other ways of being ethical that do not involve money; indeed it has been suggested that residents of low-income neighbourhoods are typically more empathetic than wealthy individuals, for they are “encourage[d]...to lean on others, ask for help when needed, and to offer help in return” (Harris 2011). In other words, mutual aid is practiced out of necessity; it is a matter of survival, as Kropotkin argues ([1902] 2006). And yet, autonomous, ethical action requires a time and attention (care) (see section 1.3) not often available to those whose contingent needs trump all appeals to universal goodness and solidarity.

Food is implicated in this distributed ethics, as sites of low-income employ and consumption are often those benefitting from the inhuman supply chain of industrial agriculture—fast food restaurants principal among them. The number of Americans enrolled in public assistance programs while also holding jobs is highest in the restaurant and food service industry, followed by agricultural workers (Berfield 2013). Primary agriculture as a share of gross domestic product (GDP) is decreasing in traditional agricultural nations, such as India (from 14.6% in 2009-10, to 13.7% in 2013),⁵⁸ while the share remains very low in nations like Canada (1.7%)⁵⁹ and the United States (1.1%).⁶⁰ Vandana Shiva observes that the economic measure GDP “is dissociated from real value” and that “economic growth hides the poverty it creates through the destruction of nature, which in turn leads to communities lacking the capacity to provide for themselves” (2013). This is the crisis I earlier described in relation to capital’s effacement of the ground of our subsistence (section 1.4), and I agree with Shiva’s critique of categorical definitions of prosperity. The statistics provided are indexical of how little such a life-sustaining branch of production factors into the bigger economic picture, which is a picture of capital’s accumulation, not human wellbeing.

It is not exactly that we have lost sight of the importance of food, but that sites of food production are appropriated under a system that enframes them only as value-supporting material—not body-sustaining, nor body-bonding material.

⁵⁸ Press Trust of India (2013, March 15).

⁵⁹ Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada (2013, May 22).

⁶⁰ Central Intelligence Agency (2012).

With the setting free of a part of the agricultural population, therefore, their former means of nourishment were also set free. They were now transformed into material elements of variable capital. The peasant, expropriated and cast adrift, must buy their value in the form of wages, from his new master, the industrial capitalist. That which holds good of the means of subsistence holds with the raw materials of industry dependent upon home agriculture. They were transformed into an element of constant capital. (Marx [1867] 1976:909)

A version of this appropriation is occurring now as food producing corporations seek out cheap land and labour in regions whose own social relations are remade in the image of capital.⁶¹ Amartya Sen (1982) describes what occurs when formerly subsistence communities come under the pressures of the market. Where the producer has no market for her products, and where food must be procured from other markets—without the mediation of money—she has no exchange entitlement, and she cannot eat. Furthermore, where the land is taken away from native production for the production of foreign export, those without a product of their own or land to produce their sustenance have only their labour power to sell, becoming precariously posed between survival and starvation.

The organization of the capitalist process of production, once fully developed, breaks down all resistance. The constant generation of a relative surplus-population keeps the law of supply and demand of labour, and therefore wages, within narrow limits that correspond to capital's valorization requirements. The silent compulsion of economic relations sets the seal on the domination of the capitalist over the worker. Direct extra-economic force is still of course used, but only in exceptional cases. In the ordinary run of things, the worker can be left to the 'natural laws of production,' i.e., it is possible to rely on his dependence on capital, which springs from the conditions of production themselves, and is guaranteed in perpetuity by them. (Marx [1867] 1976:899)

⁶¹ "The extraction of value from the global South and, in particular, the implementation of restructuring programs at the hands of the IMF and the World Bank, have had the effect of 'reconditioning' the terrain represented by these countries for an expansion of advanced capitalism" (Sassen 2010:27). Agrifood multinationals use a strategy of cost-reduction called 'low-cost country sourcing' (LCCS), "the activity of procuring goods or services from countries having lower labour and production costs" ("Global sourcing" 2013). "The extent of land acquisitions in the global South by multinational corporations (MNCs) and governments of rich countries over the last few years marks a new phase [of primitive accumulation.] It is not the first time in modern times: this is a recurrent dynamic which tends to be part of imperial realignments. China's acquiring of mines in Africa is linked to its rise as a global power... Rather than imperial grab, the mechanism is foreign direct investment (among others)" (Sassen 2010:30).

The wage is the primary mechanism by which capital claims its subjects. The debt structure of industrial agriculture, however, represents another, one that puts all the financial burden and risk on farmers, while profits flow up to the big manufacturers and merchants.

Seeking a greater distribution of care, and the ability to act out that care, forces us to confront the inaccessible source or overall logic of the capitalist mode of distribution. Anselm Jappe tells us that commodity societies create subjects “totally identical” to themselves (2013:4), forming an ‘internal image’ within the subject consistent with capital, a concept I borrow from Marx. He states that consumption “*ideally posits* the object of production as an internal image, as a need, as drive and as purpose” and that production “for its part, correspondingly furnishes the material and the object for consumption” (Marx [1939] 1973:92). The worker, compelled to sell her labour power in order to purchase objects of consumption as commodities, is internally structured according to the wage paradigm: production “not only creates an object for the subject, but also a subject for the object” (Marx [1939] 1973:92). Without the division of labour and the mediation of the wage, there would be no such subject. This relationship is maintained “as a circular production of social reality involving individuals and structures that for the most part takes place by means of unconscious processes” (Jappe 2013:5). Evoking a similar sense of the worker’s internal image or drive, Murray Bookchin says that the worker is filled with a ‘factory essence’ ([1972] 1975), which relates to my discussion of the subject of capital as part of both a metaphorical and material machine (sections 2.4 and 2.5). As discussed in chapter 1, the worker is increasingly conditioned towards automated, repetitive action. The contradiction of capital is that its ‘totally identical’ subject is housed in a body that resists automation and is prone to ‘human error.’ Then again, it is the body’s frailty, its need for the means of subsistence, that forces the subject to move through capital’s infrastructure of self-valorization, repeatedly constituting capital through the extraction of her surplus labour and participation in exchange.

* * *

There are bodily potentials that contribute to the ends of capital—its accumulation—and those that disrupt it. The ability to self-organize and freely associate are anarchic to the capital accumulation machine, and both of these qualities of life are related to ethics. To contextualize ethics from the perspective of *what is distributed*, I refer to Marx’s two definitions of distribution (section 2.2) and the material objects that sustain capital’s dominance over life (section 2.4). I will bring Marx and Latour together to further develop this argument, an idea inspired by Bennett, particularly their conflicting and corresponding views on what constitutes the social (section 2.3). Because in order to be ethical, one must be granted at least the autonomy to see a body as it needs be seen, not as capital sees it, which is as a use-value or nothing at all. Capitalism does not grant us the ability to form ethical relations thus. I attribute this to an emphasis on categorical ethics over contingent ethics, defined here borrowing terms from Mikhail Bakhtin’s moral and literary philosophy (section 2.4). Finally, I will continue to explore the effects of the commodity and technological fetish on the human, using Maurice Godelier’s description of opacity to underline how we come to be determined by modes of social production (section 2.5). Both Godelier’s and David Graeber’s discussion of mystification in gift economies sets the capitalist mode of production and the commodity fetish in relief, suggesting that we may not be able to escape fetishized social orders, though we may seek more ethical ones.

2.2 Marx’s Concept of Distribution

The capitalist mode of production has posited for itself a subject, the wage labourer; this subject is not ethical, unless it is satisfying an ‘ethics’ that sees surplus value reproduced and expanded. The human reproduced within this totality of social relations reproduces these same social relations, though they are distributed and ordained by a nonhuman, unethical system. When Marx says that the amount and form in which food is accessed describes the subject position —“the slave, the serf and the wage labourer all receive a quantity of food which makes it possible for them to exist as slaves, as serfs, as wage labourers” ([1939] 1973:87)—it is a physiological need

and a social fact that ties the body to the wage form. Marx says, however, that the “quota of social production...is determined by other laws than [those] of the slave’s[, serf’s, and wage labourer’s]” ([1939] 1973:87), laws that do not stand on the premise of human need.

Distribution has a general sense in Marx’s theory of the capitalist mode of production that goes beyond conventional understanding of the word, though he defines it first in its common meaning: “Distribution determines the relation in which products fall to individuals” ([1939] 1973:89). I concern myself with the distribution of food commodities or nutritional sources to individuals. This is “distribution as distribution of products” (Marx [1939] 1973:99). But another moment of distribution occurs which “is itself a moment of production,” and that is “the distribution of the instruments of production...which is a further specification of the same relation, the distribution of the members of society among the different kinds of production” (Marx [1939] 1973:99,96).⁶² This brings us closer to an understanding of a distributed ethics. Under capital, we operate as agents subsumed under a system that does not distribute the capacities to engage one another ethically; in its subsuming power, it increasingly alienates necessity and mutuality from their contingent forms. The relations comprising and created by the distribution of the means and agents of production are such that the resultant subjectivities cannot practice an ethics in direct or immediate ways; I pursue this argument later with reference to Bakhtin’s dialogism (see section 2.4).

Ethical practice requires an autonomy not possible under capital. With only money as its prime directive, the subject produced in the capitalist mode of production is not a free, nor ethical subject; it is rather the alienated subject. Marx defines the animal in relation to the human thus: “[the animal] produces only under the dominion of immediate physical need, while man produces even when he is free from physical need and only truly produces in freedom therefrom” (Marx [1927] 1987:77). The wage form, however, “degrad[es] spontaneous activity, free activity, to a means, estranged labour makes man’s species life a means to physical existence” (Marx [1927] 1987:77). In other words, man lives yet as an animal, and not even that: “None of his

⁶² I.e., the division of labour.

senses exist any longer, and not only in its human fashion, but in an inhuman fashion, and therefore not even in an animal fashion” (Marx [1927] 1987:117).

Now that I have premised our ability to be ethical on the mode of social production we inhabit, I need to address that which maintains our disability in this regard. Primitive accumulation contributed to the human’s and nonhuman’s subsumption under the commodity form. Now the commodity fetish governs the reproduction of systems of domination that separate us from our life sources, primarily through the mediation of the universal equivalent, but other forms of mediation as well. As I have alluded to earlier, the distance and technological mediation between humans and their food sources is complicit in the persistence of our fetishized social relations. It is important to interrogate the significance of both the concepts of ‘social’ and ‘fetish,’ as they mean different things in Marx’s categories of capital than in other hermeneutic systems. I must concern myself with the question of how to think through Latour’s meaning of the social in comparison with Marx’s definition, which Latour nonetheless urges us to do. We must pursue the controversies and disputes between systems to trace the network of relations constituting the reality of any moment (Latour 2005:23).⁶³

2.3 The Social

Marx states in *Capital, Vol. I* that “the relations connecting the labour of one individual with that of the rest appear, not as direct social relations between individuals at work, but as...material relations between persons and social relations between things” ([1867] 1976:166). The value of commodities is a social phenomenon; it is by virtue of the abstraction of all forms of labour as general human labour, measured in time, that commodities can be equivocated as values and exchanged with one another. “Only with the equation of the commodities as values does an abstraction from the particularity of the labour that produces them actually

⁶³ “The best solution is to trace connections between the controversies themselves rather than try to decide how to settle any given controversy” (Latour 2005:23).

occur, and it only counts as value-forming ‘abstract’ labour” (Heinrich 2012:48).⁶⁴ The concrete or “the specific social character of each producer's labour does not show” (Marx [1867] 1976:165). Because value is a social characteristic, it is supersensible, but it nevertheless appears as a tangible characteristic of the thing. During the moment of exchange we can only perceive the sensuous object, i.e., the commodity’s use-value. Due to the commodity fetish, however, we mistake value in its price-form (\$5.99 for frozen pizza) as intrinsic to the use-value, but value does not issue from a commodity’s ‘natural’ form. It comes into being through the act of exchange. “To be a commodity, to therefore have an exchange-value in addition to a use-value, is not a ‘natural’ property of things, but rather a ‘social’ one” (Heinrich 2012:40). It is only the use-value of another commodity (or all other commodities) that the value of the object presents to us.

It may be useful to illustrate how the fetish works between people, in contrast to how the fetish works between things (i.e. between commodities). You and your best friend are related, at least you are every time you share space, speech, touch: every time you reproduce the understanding of your relationship through actions. Perhaps your friend is moving away, but you intend to maintain the friendship with as much devotion as the distance allows—obviously according to new temporal considerations and the like. So you give her a token of your friendship, an artifact that carries with it the meaning that you once more frequently expressed in tangible proximity. This material object, which your friend can touch, speak to, and see, has this supersensuous aspect. The gift’s ‘value’ as a substitute and claim to fidelity is, like exchange-value, something external to the natural form of the gift. However, the fetish object between friends signifies a bond, while the commodity fetish establishes only a fleeting relation between two commodities. In commodity exchange, individuals meet and leave as atomized strangers.

For capital, exchange value forms the relations of society. At the (super)market commodities come into contact, the terminal point in a supply chain; brought together through a series of abstractions. “Accordingly, it is exchange that consummates the

⁶⁴ John Milios helpfully qualifies abstract labour as ‘capitalist labour,’ i.e., “labour which is performed under capitalist conditions, within the framework of the capitalist mode of production” (2002:5).

abstraction that underlies abstract labour” (Heinrich 2012:48). These abstractions also efface history or responsibility from the commodity, which, in my illustration, are attributes endowed in the gift object. Value is the form of labour in the capitalist mode of production, and no other quality but quantity factors into how that value is constituted. That is why it is futile to speak about value in terms of the phenomenological aesthetic—human or otherwise—ways we know and experience the validity of interpersonal bonds, joy, satisfaction, etc., because value is an “object, external to the eye and all human matter” (Marx [1867] 1976:165). It sits alongside all of these things and moments that we ‘value,’ but it is the only value that capital concerns itself with and which Marx refers to in his system of terms. The exchange relationship is not of one body to another—not of the humans or even the objects directly to each other—but one abstraction to another.

Latour’s project in *Reassembling the Social* (2005) renegotiates what is meant by ‘social,’ a term he argues has become an empty signifier projected on all phenomena, the answer to every question that is really no answer at all. Latour frequently refers to this ubiquitous, yet intangible guarantor of human phenomena as an ‘ether.’ Latour is critical particularly of the tendency to think of the ‘social’ as a human thing, rather than a movement or relation of things. Objects, structures, social groups, and inert prescriptions of what society *is* do not comprise the social; it is rather only changes in relation or perspective that give us a view on the associations to which those objects, structures, and groups belong.

It is only a movement that can be seized indirectly when there is a slight change in one older association mutating into a slightly newer or different one. Far from a stable and sure thing, it is no more than an occasional spark generated by the shift, the shock, the slight displacement of other non-social phenomena. (Latour 2005:36)

Latour puts it even more definitively when he states that the “[s]ocial is nowhere, in particular as a thing among other things but may circulate everywhere as a movement connecting non-social things” (Latour 2005:107). The social is the movement of these objects to and through one another. This is the only way Latour can reinstate this concept in his form of analysis. Objects, even humans, are not social in themselves; all the ways in which they relate to one another, is social. It is based on this understanding

of social that we can entertain a reading of Marx and Latour in which they support each other. In order to proceed, however, I first introduce some terms of Latour's that lend further elaboration to his understanding of how relations form between actants, and which I apply to the human-food relation. I then turn to a juxtaposition of Marx and Latour centered on a discussion of distributed ethics.

We see where Bennett takes direction from Latour, in their shared assertion that 'nonhuman' and 'nonsocial' objects need to be given central importance in social and political theory. "Do they mediate our actions? No they are us" (Latour 1999:214). We must "exten(d) politics everywhere," to nonhuman objects, and account for the "the multiplicity of agencies" that afford or limit political resistance (Latour 2005:251,260). The question and necessity of food access remains complicit in the majority of political struggles, even if it is the silent impetus in agitating for something like a wage increase. For this reason, food objects must be appreciated for their potency with respect to our bodies, as well as the part they play in forming relations between bodies of various materials in local and global distributions. Latour warns against maintaining the local/global binary, instead locating analysis at the many transactions and traces that form the networks that afford actors their agencies. However, with the present scales of food distribution networks, food objects are exactly those beings that move from locality to locality on a planetary scale. The food object would not be able to act on the body were it not for the many 'mediators' which have brought it across time and space, penetrating or covering its flesh, affording or limiting its shape, before it is ever introduced to the human digestive tract.

Latour defines mediators as something apart from and far more potent than intermediaries, which merely "transport meaning or force without transformation: defining its inputs is enough to define its outputs" (2005:39). The food commodity in production would ideally fit this definition of intermediary. As input, food matter undergoing machine processing should present no obstacle to the machine, and the output should fit the uniform and packaged shape predetermined for its natural commodity form. Mediators, on the other hand, "transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry" and "[t]heir input is never a good predictor of their output" (2005:39). In agriculture, various

environmental mediators can undo all expectations with respect to yield and the natural form of the commodity itself, with repercussions extending from the physical food object, to the commodity markets that register its price, and to the human that consumes it. In my previous example, the machine is only an intermediary as long as it runs smoothly and consistently; and yet, nutrition is depleted from fresh food objects that enter production as input, meaning there is transformation, translation, and distortion in the output as happens, for example, through freeze-drying.

Mediators may form “relations of such a sort that they make others do unexpected things” (Latour 2005:59). Food objects destined for human consumption may often appear to act only as intermediaries when a body’s digestive tract is functioning regularly and efficiently, but if containing allergens or microbes not tolerated by an individual’s system, for instance, gluten or *E. coli*, they can certainly produce ‘unexpected,’ adverse reaction in the food’s consumer. “The effectivity of foodstuff varies from body to body” (Bennett, 2010, p. 44), which is a point shared by Sen in his discussion of functionings.⁶⁵ Likewise, someone who has recently discovered their gluten intolerance and removed it from their diet may experience a great deal less discomfort in their lives, and find herself able to form new relations where they could not before. Indeed, significant mediation goes on between nutritional sources and the human body, producing many forms of potential for the food’s consumer, including potential harm. No matter how silent these transformations, they deserve our attention. We must endeavour to interrogate these objects; we must “make them talk” (Latour 2005:79). It is often the most silent properties—the elements of food that producers do not acknowledge or want consumers to think about—that do the most damage.

Most harrowing is when a bacterium or some form of contaminant mediate the production process. This can occur with feces that is not completely washed off cattle carcasses before they enter the slaughterhouse, contributing to breakouts of *E. coli* and mad cow disease. As I discussed in chapter 1, industrial agriculture and meat interests

⁶⁵ “‘Functionings’ . . . what the person succeeds in doing with the commodities and characteristics at his or her command. . . . A functioning is an achievement of a person” (Sen 1999:6). Also, the “conversion of commodity-characteristics into personal achievements of functionings depends on a variety of factors—personal and social. . . . metabolic rates. . . . activity levels. . . . access to medical services. . . .” (Sen 1999:17)

have lobbied successfully for years to limit the oversight of their production lines by government inspectors (Hauter 2012:120-134). The reason given is that inspections slow the line down, and therefore, decrease profits. The rhetoric has also deemed efforts to regulate the meat industries as ‘job-killing’ (Hauter 2012:138). One can add these anti-inspection lobbying activities to the network of affects causing some of recent history’s most tragic food-related outbreaks. The distributed network of global food production allows such mediation to occur, and yet, its ability to conceal the production process from the point of view of consumers, hints at the permeability of Latour’s concepts. For instance, he describes an intermediary in terms of a black box: “For all practical purposes, an intermediary can be taken not only as a black box, but also as a black box counting for one, even if it is internally made of many parts” (Latour 2005:39). Of course, when accidents happen, it is the black box that reveals the silent causes of an event. The perspective of what simply intermediates and what mediates food objects and the human in the food production process will shift depending on what effects are registered in the food and the body that consumes it. Intermediaries may quickly be cast as mediators, especially when the outcome is wide-scale contamination or death.

2.4 Distributed Ethics

What is of concern is an ethical matter. I will argue as I proceed that what is of concern is a matter of distribution, but in order to do so, I must make a move highly discouraged by Latour and speak in terms of a totality: the capitalist mode of production. Latour holds that a system without movement is not social at all, and so resists the sort of totalizing descriptions of capitalism that qualify its existence without interrogating the object-relations and –movements that constitute its material force. Latour and Marx are, in fact, in agreement that the social is about relations⁶⁶—capitalism is a social relationship mediated by things, commodities. Likewise, for Latour, “the social circulates and is visible only when it shines through the

⁶⁶ Soderberg and Netzen also observe that the focus on relations connects ANT and Hegelian Marxism (2010:104).

concatenations of mediators” (2005:136). Furthermore, Marx states that capitalism exists only in circulation and can be traced through moments of exchange: it “can only be grasped as a movement, and not as a static thing” ([1885] 1978:185).

Latour’s approach potentially peers beyond the commodity fetish to see what consumers theoretically do not: the infinitesimal mediators (and intermediaries) that bring food, clothing, and other commodities to store shelves, or our front doors. Latour wants to dispel the ‘ether’ of society that has become the meaningless backdrop to all events, preferring us to see not only the labour relations that enabled you to purchase a salmon steak at the shop down the street, but all of the relations, human and nonhuman, formed in the progress of its production and circulation (transport). ANT also takes a historical perspective of events that sees long-term effects developing out of collectives of actants—ones we can find legitimately life threatening, in the case of soil depletion and the bacterial resistance to antibiotics used in meat production.⁶⁷ Taking the ANT view may offer us a more ethical perspective of our relations to nonhuman objects, but its political potential is not as fecund as Latour suggests. He says, “an actor-network is what is made to act by a large star-shaped web of mediators flowing in and out of it. It is made to exist by its many ties: attachments are first, actors are second” (Latour 2005:217). Further, he states that the more ties we reveal, the greater is our freedom: “As to emancipation, it does not mean ‘freed from bonds’ but well-attached” (Latour 2005:218). However, one particular tie that binds nevertheless presents the most limiting relation among humans: the wage relation. If we believe Debord to be correct about the spectacle’s dominance over life, individuals perceive themselves to be ethereally bound by images⁶⁸ as well as commodities, and I am not as certain as Latour that demystifying those bonds is enough to emancipate the exploited worker.

Bennett says Spinoza, as I have observed of Latour, believes that the “more kinds of bodies with which a body can affiliate, the better” (2010:23). Anarchism

⁶⁷ Antibiotics are used in increasing amounts in meat processing, owing to the cramped living conditions, persistence of animal waste, and hastily processed carcasses of animals in slaughterhouses. For years, public interest groups have worked to stop or decrease the amount of antibiotics used in food production because of the resistances developing in the bacteria we are vulnerable to, rendering the antibiotics developed to treat human illness useless (Hauter 2012:142).

⁶⁸ “Reality considered partially unfolds, in its own general unity, as a pseudo-world apart, an object of mere contemplation” (Debord [1967] 2008:23).

strives for these freedoms in the form of self-organization and self-management—as does a contingent ethics that works to address problems with respect to other bodies immediately affected by it, with respect to needs, not categorical imperatives. The atomized wage worker cannot make these associations freely, often only through the mediation of money. If the distributed ethics is such that free association and contingency are undermined by other mediators, a contingent ethics cannot exist.⁶⁹

I imagine a contingent ethics operating as follows, for which it is useful to draw on some of the language of Bakhtin. I would call a contingent ethics dialogical, and see it as antithetical to economic, or for that matter, biopolitical categories that treat bodies according to generalizations and assumptions. We live in a generalized commodity society; every time we purchase a product, we validate the abstraction of labour that went into its manufacture, as well as reproducing the mode of production. In a sense, it has become socially valid to consider the value of money over all other values as the means and guarantor of all social relations. The dialogical⁷⁰ must deal with the body on the horizon that calls for care (attention, thought), while the categorical⁷¹ can project on that body, or render it unworthy of thought. In other words, the dialogical engages, while the categorical intercedes. The categorical is linked with Bakhtin’s notion of *alibi* ([1986]⁷² 1999:42),⁷³ and the intercession of

⁶⁹ “It is not hard to understand the attraction of ontological assertions about plurality and contingency in a time marked by an ascending, perpetual innovation economy. Its effects are manifest from a life-world continuously punctuated by creative destruction and precarious labour demand (Kawashima, 2005). If preferred, the same thing can be approached from the angle of traditional sociology. Zygmunt Bauman has made similar observations about what he calls ‘liquid modernity’...All of them attempt to develop an updated social theory at a point in time when Marx’s famous prophecy ‘all that is solid melts into air’ has just about come true” (Soderberg and Netzen108).

⁷⁰ “Dialogism begins by visualizing existence as an event, the event of being responsible for (and to) the particular situation existence assumes as it unfolds in the unique (and constantly changing) place I occupy in it” (Holquist 2005:46).

⁷¹ My use of the term ‘categorical’ is meant to evoke Immanuel Kant’s categorical imperative, a logic that appeals to the *a priori*. However, the categorical and its rationalism are based on a repetition of maxims (see discussion of repetition in chapter 1) that does not account for the contingency of events. Holquist explains that “most emphatically unlike Kant, dialogism makes a radical commitment to the historical particularity of any act of perception as it is actually experienced by living persons from their unique place in existence. Thus, in addition to, and more important than, the general, repeatable aspects of perception to which Kant gives exclusive attention, dialogism argues that there is an unrepeatable—read, historical— dimension that Kant’s abstraction omits” (2005:145).

⁷² Please note that a great deal of Bakhtin’s work was published posthumously. The texts I cite were authored by Bakhtin between 1919-1924.

⁷³ “I can ignore my self-activity and live by my passivity alone. I can try to prove my *alibi* in Being, I can pretend to be someone I am not. I can abdicate from obligative (ought-to-be) uniqueness. An

money acts as everyone's alibi when it comes to addressing the direct need of another body. Under capitalism, we have validated (unaware, as we live under the fetish) the universal equivalent as the means of access to survival for most beings, and so my own need for money—to get a coffee to wake myself up, to buy nice clothes to fit in with the organizational aesthetic, and to pass by other needing bodies without concern as I make my way to work—my own survival, takes precedence over the survival of others. The commodity's intervention into these relations shows how the fetish operates even outside of the market.

The gift which once symbolized an alliance between men akin to the blood tie is slowly turned into a mess of barter and finally into a commodity, the germ of the modern bourgeois bargain. Justice emerges from the corpse of freedom to guard the exchange relationship—whether of goods or morality—as the exact principle of equality in all things. Now the weak are 'equal' to strong, the poor to the wealthy, the infirm to the healthy in all ways but their weakness, poverty, and infirmity. In essence, justice replaces freedom's norm of an equality with and inequality of equals. As Horkheimer and Adorno observe: 'Before, the fetishes were subject to the law of equivalence. Now equivalence itself has become a fetish...'
(Bookchin [1974] 1986:65)

The worker under capital is doubly free: free to sell her labour, and free from the means of production (Marx [1867] 1976:272). The equality Bookchin speaks of in the categorization of poor, wealthy, etc., is the mark of a system predicated on this notion of freedom—everyone shares equally in the freedom of being commodity-owners, but some commodity-owners are freer than others.

I have introduced a conception of freedom predicated on commodity ownership: the perverted freedom of the wage worker under capital. In the 1844 economic manuscripts, Marx points to the

intrinsic connection between private property, greed, the separation of labor, capital and landed property; the connection of exchange and competition, of value and the devaluation of man, of monopoly and competition, etc. – the connection between this whole estrangement and the money system. ([1927] 1987:70)

answerable act or deed is precisely the act which is performed on the basis of an acknowledgement of my obligative (ought-to-be) uniqueness...It is only my non-alibi in Being that transforms an empty possibility into an actual answerable act or deed" (Bakhtin [1986] 1999:42).

Ethics requires another sort of autonomy than the wage paradigm allows. And yet, can one discuss the notion of freedom without reverting to an alienating sense of property? Properties and attributes are both spontaneous knowledges we keep, but when taken as fact, or internalized by industrial processes, they can obscure or even obliterate other aspects of the thing. Speaking of what is ‘proper’ to a thing, is speaking of belonging, belonging to. But perhaps thinking of the body as in the care of someone (our own, as well as other bodies), is not to speak of property, and the perversion comes with the idea that everything I touch turns to mine, as Locke argues ([1689] 1967:117). The humanist in Marx says that the human does not live, currently, cared for in body or spirit, because it is alienated from its being. Theoretically, this human could experience a full and rewarding sense of her environment and fellows, and could be free to pursue her own human nature, while acting in accordance with the nature(s) around her. Only she cannot; she cannot even see or eat as this human. Her senses are limited because of the wage.

In *Capital, Vol. 1*, Marx describes capital’s neglect of moral and physiological needs in the context of the industrial revolution and the working class struggles to have them recognized. Physiological concerns were addressed by the shortening of the workday to ten hours, for example, and with mandatory lunch breaks shared concurrently with all workers. But these are also considerations for the sensuous, interpersonal experience of the labourer, not merely the body in isolation. An ethics of food distribution that only accounts for the physiological forgets that the experience of food is world-forming, is part of human need. Hunger works on both the physiological and phenomenological level; suffering is an experience that cannot be linked to bodily fatigue alone, when those that hunger are aware that economic conditions and private property intervene between themselves and their object.

The sense caught up in a crude practical need has only a restricted sense. For the starving man, it is not the human form of food that exists, but only its abstract being as food; it could just as well be there in its crudest form, and it would be impossible to say wherein the feeding-activity differs from that of animals. (Marx [1927] 1987:109)

In other words, the starving man lives a phenomenologically deficient life.

The popular slogan of communism is ‘from each according to their ability, to each according to their need.’ Likewise, Kropotkin says that we must develop a ‘social physiology’ to adequately address need. One would think he speaks of the ‘rich’ or ‘sensuous need’ that Marx differentiates from ‘vulgar need’ in the *1844 Manuscripts* ([1927] 1987:111). Marx opens a door to phenomenology when he likewise states that sensuousness “must be the basis of all science. Only when it proceeds from sense-perception, the twofold form both of sensuous consciousness and of sensuousness need—that is, only when science proceeds from nature—is it true science” ([1927] 1987:111). Freedom is fulfilling our senses, not merely satisfying base needs.

Latour argues that agentic capacities are formed through the “plug-ins” afforded to us by our environment and other actants (2005:207).⁷⁴ It is an interesting analogy that brings agency to the ground level so that access to certain abilities appears to be granted not by birth or genetics, but through discrete transactions and accumulations; this also describes a distribution, *what is distributed*. Of course, there is no mention of how such plug-ins may be purchased by some and not others. When so many human agencies are dependent on the money form, it seems we are nonetheless guided by a force of the kind that Latour does not want to interrogate.

Consider the example set for us in Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables* (1862). The protagonist Jean Valjean is arrested and imprisoned as an adolescent for stealing a loaf of bread for his sister’s hungry children. Metabolic need and its satisfaction are two moments that are theoretically not at all mediated, not by sensual, material structures, except by physical forces such as gravity, and the physiological processes of digestion. In the purely metabolic realm, where bodies continuously metabolize one another (I intend this as a literal description), obstacles exist as properties of the necessary object that resist the efforts of the subject (of the need). These properties could be the rough, bitter-tasting rind of an orange, or the tougher outsides of pineapples and coconuts; they could be the instincts that have developed to keep the necessary object out of a predator’s grasp, for example, a field mouse trained to survive in relation to an owl’s food regime. There is also the distance and topology that comes between the subject and its object. Between Valjean and the bread his sister’s children need to survive is money. Latour could not state that

⁷⁴ Latour calls plug-ins “subject-carrying” or “psycho-morph mediators” (2005:214).

this was true of the moment Valjean confronted the bread in the shop window. He might say that the lock on the shop door is the present absence of all representatives of a law stating that money must intercede between the boy and the bread, no matter what the need (Latour 1999:189). But the absence of money is an effect of many configurations of bodies and forces, which is nonetheless an abstraction standing between base need and its satisfaction. Without work, without pay, there is nothing but charity that will deliver what is necessary to the body that needs it. I have not even begun to read this text using a horizontal, actor-network view of the narrative events, or its moral implications. I do not know what moral governs the story, whether the crime was done to Valjean, or to the bakery owner; but I do know that an ethics of need does not operate in the system described, and is still hard to locate in our world today.

Ethics is not a plug-in readily accessed in a social relation mediated by the wage form. While other relations may be possible and small movements can shift the foundations of capital, there persists a paradigm where certain agencies are entirely inaccessible, unless through exchange entitlements (Sen 1982).⁷⁵ As I argued at the outset of this discussion, the wage form only grants agency in the form of purchasing power. Sen describes the precarious situation thus: the “labourer paid in money terms will have to depend on the exchange entitlement of his money wage...a fixed money wage may offer no security at all in a situation of sharply varying food prices” (1982:5). If the human actant cannot even connect with a food source, having not enough or no access to money, consider how severely their ability to form other bonds is impacted. There is simply no consideration of the mediation of money in Latour’s flat ontology, though it could be described in his preferred terms.

Hornborg argues that Latour’s analysis of technological systems misses the opportunity of revealing the “exploitative social relations embodied in artefacts” (2013:8). Likewise, Soderberg and Netzen highlight the “one common objection against ANT, namely, that its rejection of structure has left a blind spot when it comes to explaining stability over time. Of particular concern is the failure of ANT to give an account of the stability of power structures” (2010:105). Though Latour does not

⁷⁵ A “labourer paid in money terms will have to depend on the exchange entitlement of his money wage...a fixed money wage may offer no security at all in a situation of sharply varying food prices” (Sen 1982:5).

dedicate his analyses to the “inequalities of economy, technology, and environment” (Hornborg 2013:2), he does describe material infrastructure in terms of their programmability, much like the persistence state of data on our hard drives, and the subsequent durability of social techniques through material objects. Latour’s concept of circulating reference fits aptly with value, for it is proof of the concept of reference as it “applies to the stability of a movement through many different implements and mediations” (1999:148), for example, when value appears as money. Moreover, Latour is not even as vehemently opposed to seeing things from a totalizing perspective as critics assume. He says, “th[e] ban on master narratives is never very effective... This is why against the ban on master narratives, I cling to the right to tell a ‘servant’ narrative” (Latour 1999: 212). Furthermore, supporting a reading of capital as one more actor-network among others, Latour once “asserted that his method could be used for analyzing the same topics otherwise spoken of with macro-sociological terminology. He argued that there are no limits to how far the local network can be stretched” (Soderberg and Netzen 2010:100fn).

As previously stated, capitalism is both a process and a relation; it is never a static thing, though it may seem to hover as ethereally over us as the idea of society has done. Where we can absolve the concept of capital of its ideological ethereality is by tracing its power to moments of exchange and the material structures that facilitate and maintain its accumulation. As Latour states, “[n]onhumans stabilize social negotiations. Nonhumans are at once pliable and durable; they can be shaped very quickly but, once shaped, last far longer than the interactions that fabricated them” (1999:210). Though he has yet to develop the metaphor of plug-ins in *Pandora’s Hope*, it is where Latour describes most eloquently how mediating objects can limit our access to such opportunities of being as the plug-ins represent.

Purposeful action and intentionality may not be properties of humans either. They are the properties of institutions, of apparatuses... Only corporate bodies [what we and our artifacts have become. *We are an object-institution*] are able to absorb the proliferation of mediators, to regulate their expression, to redistribute skills, to force boxes to blacken and close. Objects that exist simply as objects, detached from collective life, are unknown, buried in the ground. (Latour 1999:192-3; emphasis mine)

Moreover, Latour describes the potentially depoliticizing force of large structures as well as the role they play in black boxing social relations, which is particularly relevant to the capitalist mode of production. The commodity fetish is itself a form of black boxing. Here, Latour explains further how object-institutions operate:

Think of technology as congealed labor. Consider the very notion of investment: a regular course of action is suspended, a detour is initiated via several types of actants, and the return is a fresh hybrid that carries past acts into the present and permits its many investors to disappear while also remaining present. Such detours subvert the order of time and space—in a minute I may mobilize forces set into motion hundreds or millions of years ago in faraway places. The relative shapes of actants and their ontological status may be completely reshuffled—techniques are shape-changers... The relative ordering of presence and absence is redistributed—we hourly encounter hundreds, even thousands, of absent makers who are remote in time and space yet simultaneously active and present. And through such detours, finally, the political order is subverted, since I rely on many delegated actions that themselves make me do things on behalf of others who are no longer here, the course of whose existence I cannot even retrace. (Latour 1999:189)

Determination is a material, not ideological or providential matter, in this respect. We are entrenched in a distributed network of capitalist infrastructure and a system precluding certain autonomies, which can be traced back to the process of primitive accumulation. “The structure [*Gliederung*] of distribution is completely determined by the structure of production” (Marx [1939] 1973:95). In the capitalist mode of production, the wage worker is only distributed the value of her own metabolic reproduction, but often not even that (fast food workers; Hauter 2012:35).⁷⁶ “*Distribution* steps between the producers and the products, hence between production and consumption, to determine in accordance with social laws what the producer’s share will be in the world of products” (Marx [1939] 1973:94). The law of value is that labour time determines value, i.e., it is its measure. The value of labour-power is

⁷⁶ “It should be no surprise that, considering the history of farm policy, that farmers are blamed for the subsidy system—rather than the architects of the broken food system. Subsidies are an easy target, whereas understanding the cause of the dysfunctional system—a combination of deregulation and the dismantling of complex farm policies—is complicated... Ozer, with the National Family Farm Coalition, says: ‘Unfortunately, it is widely believed that the biggest problem with the food system is subsidies, and that farmers are greedy. Blaming a system that is rigged to keep them overproducing and dependent on Monsanto and DuPont for overpriced and dangerous chemicals and seeds is unfair and counterproductive. Subsidies are a symptom of a broken system—not the cause’” (Hauter 2012:35).

determined by the bundle of commodities that the worker needs to reproduce herself. These commodities' value, in turn, is determined by the labour time objectified in them. Value thus intervenes in the distribution of products; anyone, be they worker or capitalist, must be in possession of a commodity of equivalent value to buy the means of subsistence. In the case of the worker, the wage intervenes in the distribution of products, and revenue in the case of the capitalist.

From the perspective of what is distributed, considering all the different, particular examples of distributions, the share in the world of products allotted to the wage worker is not universal and may in fact be very limited. As Sen has argued, it is not necessarily the availability of food that is hindered in a time of famine, but the accessibility to food in the form of money (1982:8). The two moments of distribution between the worker's wage, and the share of products that the worker can purchase with that wage, are misaligned. When Marx says that the "individual produces an object and, by consuming it, returns to himself, but returns as a productive and self-reproducing individual" (1983:94), it is in reference to a general, circular view of production and consumption. It does not consider the discrepancy between particular moments of production where the individual's self-production is deferred because of the latency between the loan of labour power and its repayment in the form of wages, nor the discrepancy between the worker's wage and the prices of the commodities she needs to reproduce herself.

To see how a system like capitalism is materially entrenched, one need only look to the crystallization of money as the universal equivalent and independent form of value. Indeed, money is probably the most recognizable medium of capital; it is the appearance of value in a concrete form, embodying the 'real abstraction' of labour validated in exchange. Capitalism, however, is an 'object-institution' (Latour 1999:192-3), a machine composed of many moving parts. The infrastructures of capital are constituted in fields, factories, distribution warehouses, systems of transportation, and retail stores. These supply chains range the earth, creating topologies through which bodies must maneuver (Virilio [1995] 2008b:51) in order to receive their share of value or products. These chains are being developed by conglomerates of financial, logistical, and industrial agricultural interests

in order to supply retail chains. Larger firms have access to the capital necessary for investing in the facilities, equipment...including massive warehouses located at airports or transportation hubs... These suppliers procure year-round produce by having relationships with foreign companies and can ship directly to the retail chains' distribution warehouse. (Hauter 2012:86)

The vertical integration of industrial agricultural companies sweep large swaths of land, buildings and machinery, and millions of people into the singular pursuit of accumulating value.

Supply chains represent capital's material form on a macro scale, while the seed is an example of capitalist infrastructure on a micro scale.⁷⁷ Monsanto's terminator seed, in particular, is the sort of object that allows inequitable, profit-driven relationships to persist. Due to patent laws, even saving seeds has become an illegal activity as the perversion of property further accumulates the ground of metabolic reproduction (Hauter 2012:248). Hybridized seeds can

have a serious limitation: their own dependents (i.e., the seeds produced when two high-yielding hybrids pair up) are thin, low-yielding duds. There's no point in saving seeds to plant for the next season...Farmers must, therefore, buy new seeds from the seed companies every year. (Fraser and Rimas 2010:27)

The rise of farmer suicide rates in recent years belies the insidious nature of the debt relationship between farmers and companies like Monsanto. The Centre for Human Rights and Global Justice at NYU's School of Law reports that an estimated quarter of a million farmers have killed themselves in India since 1995, statistics that do not often count the suicides of women farmers who do not own titles to land (2011:1). In the same time period, suicides among American ranchers and farmers has risen to three times the national average (Schlosser 2006:146).

2.5 The Fetish and Social Reproduction

I have described how structures and things preserve the movement of capitalist social relations. 'Transactions' is a general term Latour uses to describe the exchange

⁷⁷ Marx says the seed is an element of circulating capital ([1885] 1978:280).

or interaction of bodies; transactions compose the hyphenated relations of ‘actor-networks’ (2005:180). And yet, the concept is apt for describing the subprogramming of commodities, through the price form, and through abstraction; for it is through monetary transactions that we reproduce capitalism and are reprogrammed in its image. The fetish of commodities, but also other objects, run ‘subprograms’ that elicit certain behaviours in us and program us for future transactions.⁷⁸ This is true of the overall network of capitalist infrastructure which divides bodies and abilities through the division of labour and distribution of the means of production. Maurice Godelier (1999) observes how the sort of mystification that prescribes the unconscious social validation and reproduction of capitalism is not isolated to capitalist economies alone. In gift economies such as the Maori or Kwakiutl, a motivating ‘impersonal’ or nonhuman power underlies the reproduction of the social order.⁷⁹

Things therefore do not move about of their own accord; they are always set in motion by human will, but this will is itself driven by underlying forces, involuntary and impersonal necessities which are *constantly acting* on an individual, on those who make decisions as well as on those who obey them: through the actions of individuals and groups, it is the social relations which are reproduced and once more linked together, it is the whole society which is re-created and re-creates itself, and this occurs *whatever form or degree of awareness the actors may have individually and/or collectively of these necessities*. (Godelier 1999:102)

As I now discuss, groups such as the historical Maori placed agency in nonhuman beings, such as gods, but also used gift objects to materially and symbolically bond the wider society to a single system of relation. When describing the supersensuous relation of things-to-thing, and thing-to-humans, Marx uses religious language and imagery because the worker is embroiled in an order beholden to a determining power, not unlike a god, though we rarely name it. Technology plays a significant role in this mystification, as argued by Hornborg (2013), because it is seen as benign and visible in its mechanisms, while in fact, it is often black boxed into obscurity. In this way, the

⁷⁸ First mentioned in the introduction, this is another computing metaphor that Latour uses to describe human-nonhuman interactions (1999:209).

⁷⁹ The author acknowledges that the sources from which the gift economy analysis is derived uses ethnographic material from early and mid-twentieth century fieldwork and does not represent the cited cultures as they currently operate. I cite Maurice Godelier, David Graeber, and Lewis Hyde, all of whom refer to the ethnographic works of Marcel Mauss and Bronislaw Malinowski.

fetish of the commodity is more complete in its mystification for all the *materiality* we lay claim to in our rational understanding of economics.

In the gift economy, a human or social quality is projected onto material objects.

Instead of merely acting by means of the objects they give, [people] appear to be acted upon by the objects they give or receive, to be subservient to their will and to their movements... Objects are transformed into subjects and subjects into objects. No longer is it (only) humans who act on each other, interact with each other, by means of things, it is now the things and their in-dwelling spirits which act on each other through human agency. (Godelier 1999:106)

The gift object forms social bonds, as commodities have become the material linkages between people, except that people remain atomized outside of the capitalist exchange relationship. The ‘in-dwelling’ spirit of the durable gift object, rather than being seen as a projection, can be thought of as a subprogram, in the way I described the motivating force of the commodity fetish. Like the gift you give to help to sustain a long-distance friendship, the *mwali* (bead bracelets) of the historical Trobriand society or the copper figures in the historical Kwakiutl potlatch made social relations endure beyond the traces of immediate interaction. The importance of the durable object is that one can “send it as far as possible and to allow it to circulate as long as possible, so that it... becomes charged with more and more life and ‘value’ as it picks up all the gifts and all the debts it has engendered or cancelled by its circulation” (Godelier 1999:92).

Needs and what is valued do not necessarily coalesce, even where food production forms the principal industry of an economy. Locke states that “[t]he greatest part of things really useful to the life of man... are generally things of short duration, such as—if they are not consumed by use—will decay and perish of themselves” ([1689] 1967:124). Conversely, in Maori culture, for instance, food occupies the lowest position of a system that values durable, alienable objects, and finally, durable, inalienable objects above all else. Likewise, David Graeber observes that

in Gawa or the Trobriands, there is very clearly a rank of hierarchy of types of goods, and it does indeed correspond to an item’s capacity to

retain history: perishable and generic substances like food are at the bottom, and unique imperishable valuables at the top. (2001:44)

but in the same passage he also notes that “giving food creates alliances that one can then activate so as to act on increasingly higher levels of exchange. (2001:44). Food is useful, here, but its necessity appears inversely related to its utility.

Latour offers us an interesting description of how bonds were formed in societies without significant mediation of objects, by way of his and Shirley Strum’s study of the social practices of baboons (cited in 2005:194). The grooming and physical immediacy of baboon sociality are the primary means by which these animals institute and maintain their society. In other words, these moments of physical contact reproduce the social order in a manner similar to how Godelier describes social reproduction.

What is produced or reproduced through the establishment of these personal bonds is all or part of the social relations which constitute the foundations of the society and which endow it with a certain overall logic that is also the source of the social identity of the member groups and individuals. (1999:102)

The baboons must continually practice techniques of physical bonding in order to sustain their society. Humans, on the other hand, have introduced other means of maintaining social relations with contingent others, past and present; these objects and structures begin to secure bonds longer and across spaces insurmountable by the individual human. The copper object exchanged in potlatch ceremonies is part of the social complex that keeps the Kwakiutl society in motion, and allows it to increase in measures not possible without the projection of meaning onto durable objects.

Even though hierarchical in nature (Graeber 2001:34,44), gift economies offer a perspective beneficial to ethical, ecological thinking because the human is decentralized and other beings or communal entities are placed above it. Food may not be privileged with respect to the human, in the example of the Maori, but food sources are. The historical Maori maintained the same gift exchange system with their gods as they did with one another, creating cosmic reciprocity that stands in stark contrast to

our current, one-sided extraction from the land (Graeber 2001; Hyde 1983).⁸⁰ By sanctifying the ground of the gods—the forest god, in particular—the Maori did not extract from the land beyond their needs.

Circularity is preserved in both the feigned antagonism of the Maori to land and in the gift exchange, which is carried out between humans, but also between humans and nature. Though food occupies a low position with respect to the hierarchy of things among the Maori, its primordial necessity inflects the discourse and ritual of the people.⁸¹ Graeber's description of the Maori ritual of *whangai hau* opens up an understanding of a cosmic order that, though seemingly violent in manner, maintains a reciprocal relationship with nature. Human food, especially cooked food, bears little *tapu*⁸² (roughly, is not sacrosanct) and is therefore the most profane of substances, while the forest and their attendant *mauri* (which are worshipped in the form of large, durable totems) are 'heavily *tapu*'d,' and therefore, sacred and forbidden. This means

⁸⁰ I speak of this circularity because as long as humans feel a part of it, and not managers external to the process, we are less prone to exploitative behaviour. This is Lewis Hyde's assertion in *The Gift: The Imaginary and Erotic Life of Property* (1983). He says, referring to the respect paid to salmon by the Pacific Coast tribes who subsist on it, that "where we have established such a relationship, we tend to respond to nature as part of ourselves, not as a stranger or alien available for exploitation. Gift exchange brings with it, therefore, a built-in check upon the destruction of its objects; with it we will not destroy nature's renewable wealth except where we consciously destroy ourselves" (1983:27). Preservation is not necessarily the mark of every gift-exchanging society; destruction is an element of the potlatch of Pacific Northwest Coast indigenous traditions.

⁸¹ Though the giving of food is not symbolically central to the gift-giving ceremony, it is nevertheless part of the bond formed in gift-giving, through feasts and food distribution, and the bond maintained in societies organized around kinship structures, which see continual supplies of food circulating between kin (Godelier 1999:42). Though gift-giving may produce grand subject identities for the givers and receivers—extending their bodily reach beyond its spatial and temporal limitations (Graeber 2001:165)—it also contributes to the reproduction of society as a whole (in total prestation), and this is likewise accomplished through the distribution of food. However, rather than taking a horizontal view of the systems at play, the focus that anthropologists like Godelier give to highly valued, durable objects in gift economies marginalizes the essential role that food plays in the production of the people and their culture, in effect, uncritically reproducing the value hierarchies espoused by the cultures under analysis. In gift exchange, "power resides in the fact that the thing or person is not alienated when given. It constitutes to form part of the realities that constitute the identity, the being, the inalienable essence of a human group, of a 'moral person'" (Godelier 1999:45). What is missing here is the acknowledgement that the moral person produced by gift economies (generally speaking) is simultaneously involved in the metabolic maintenance of her people and land. Graeber says, "it makes one wonder whether what one is dealing with in historic times is a ritual system originally based on keeping a cosmic balance among sources of food, now transformed into something different" (2001:205). One of the most mystified elements of a gift-giving society is indeed this form of reproduction through food distribution, which sustains the society as much as the symbolic exchanges that are made salient in ritual.

⁸² The word 'taboo' is derivative of this Polynesian term.

that, in order to appropriate the resources of the forest, the Maori must transgress its *tapu*. Graeber describes the ritual, called *whangai hau* (feeding the *hau*), as follows:

Forests were heavily *tapu*'d during most of the year, during the period when the gods were present doing their productive work, filling the trees with birds, plants, and wildlife. Cooked food, for example, must never be brought into such a place. In order to harvest what they have produced and reduce it to human food—to move from the moment of divine generation to that of human appropriation—it is necessary to remove [the forest's] *tapu*...by placing cooked food in the mouth of an image or tossing cut hair at a sea monster, one was ostensibly making a gesture of appropriation but really attempting to destroy its strength and subordinate it to humans. (2001:181-2)

I do not suggest that by feeding the *hau*, reciprocation is accomplished, though symbolically it may represent a sort of 'dust to dust' relationship—cooked food brought back to its place of original generation. Rather, by preserving a distance between the human and the forest, the forest itself is preserved. This is achieved both with the cyclical, seasonal division of hunting times, and also in that the forest itself is considered the source of life, and so is respected as inalienable, inappropriable ground. In extending the gift exchange to nonhuman entities, the Maori, in effect, were more aligned with the sort of open systems thinking that would support ethical engagement with the environment, while under present capitalist pressure, countries like Bolivia have had to make nature a person, similar to how corporations are represented as persons before the law, in order for its life-sustaining capacities to be recognized (Vidal 2011).

Perhaps the most significant difference between a hierarchy of value in gift economy and the capitalist mode of production is the former's lateral movement. Hierarchies are not so much about ontological distinction as about relation. The totality of these relations speaks to a single ontology. Every particular in the hierarchy contains all other elements of the system, because it holds its place only in relation to the system. When something subverts the hierarchy, it reveals its heterogeneity from the hierarchy; its exclusion from the other ontological relations makes it an event, one that requires a redefinition of the system. When natural disaster strikes in a noncapitalist culture, the hierarchy is invoked because the gods and their mysterious natures are part of the system. However, these events exist outside of the closed

system of capitalism, which is why crises prevail in their wake. Even now, as Hornborg observes, “people who are intimately engaged in gaining their subsistence from local ecosystems continue to approach their nonhuman environments through what is now being called a ‘relational’ stance” (2013:5). This stance is encompassed in the lateral nature of the cosmological hierarchy of the Maori, whereas in the generalized commodity society, the dominant relation among humans is value, which has no real connection to the bodies through which it moves. Hornborg goes on to say,

[t]here is a crucial difference between representing relations between people as if they were relations to things (capitalist fetishism), and experiencing relations to things as if they were relations to people (animism and pre-modern forms of fetishism). (2013:9)

Interestingly, he notes that “the latter [is] a condition of phenomenological resonance” (2013:9), whereas, the sensuous relationship of humans to their surroundings, their food sources, is lost in a system so quantified and abstract as capitalism.

The reciprocal nature of the gift economies just described is an aspect of capital as well, as we reproduce the conditions of our own alienation. Capitalism has turned the historical conditions of its development—the estrangement of human labour into objects, primitive accumulation, and wage slavery—into the reproductive material of its autonomous and determining movement.⁸³ Marx tells us, “that though private property appears to be the reason, the cause of alienated labor, it is rather its consequence, just as the gods are originally not the cause but the effect of man’s intellectual confusion. Later this relationship becomes reciprocal” (Marx [1927] 1987:81). Godelier suggests that an opacity governs this reciprocity between subject and structure, though, again, it may seem that the economic quantifications imposed on us now accord better with reality than some supernatural being. Supply and demand is the economist’s guarantor and god, but its infallibility is undermined all the time by global economic policies that favour accumulation over the subsistence of people and by the inequitable distribution of the means of production. The equivalence of commodities through price is one example of how the material relations of capital are made opaque.

⁸³ Capitalism exists by virtue of “the structure and relations of production of all the vanished social formations out of whose ruins and elements it built itself up, whose partly still unconquered remains are carried along within it” (Marx [1939] 1973:105).

Opacity, says Godelier, is a mark of the gift society, where “social relationships become constructed in such a way that the opacity necessary for them to exist and to reproduce is produced at the same time” (1999:136). Because of the opaque nature of the overall social order, “[i]ndividuals are not conscious of projecting and reifying the realities that are part of their own social being” (Godelier 1999:169). Likewise, Marx says that “the final result of the process of social production always appears as the society itself, i.e., the human being itself in its social relations...its only subjects are the individuals, but individuals in mutual relationships, which they equally reproduce and produce anew” ([1939] 1973:712). However, under the commodity fetish, the human is isolated even in these mutual relationships.

In commodity exchange it’s as if the buyer and the seller were both in plastic bags; there’s none of the contact of a gift exchange. There is neither motion nor emotion because the whole point is to keep the balance, to make sure the exchange itself doesn’t consume anything or involve one person with another. (Hyde 1983:10)

The isolation of persons in exchange is related to the division of labour, which logically had to exist as a precondition for the abstraction of labour time into its social character as value (Marx [1939] 1973:103-5). Money is the ‘external expression’ of abstract labour, an independent form of value that mediates human relations (Marx [1867] 1976:181). Capitalist relations are preserved externally in objects like money and, on a larger scale, in the form of infrastructures like supply chains. Capitalism operates through these networks of human-nonhuman relations, which I referred to in the introduction to this chapter as the ‘capital accumulation machine.’ The machine is not only a metaphor for capital; the introduction of machinery into the production process is described by Marx as “the historical reshaping of the traditional, inherited means of labour into a form adequate to capital” ([1939] 1973:694). Indeed, machines enable capitalists to produce more use-values in shorter time periods, extracting even more surplus labour time from workers, and accumulating more value in exchange.

In one of his earliest writings, Bakhtin defines a machine in terms that could be applied to capitalism as a mechanical whole, especially in the opaque or ‘alien’ way in which its constituents relate.

A whole is called ‘mechanical’ when its constituent elements are united only in space and time and by some external connection and are not imbued with the internal unity of meaning. The parts of such a whole are contiguous and touch each other, but in themselves they remain alien to each other. The three domains of human culture—science, art, and life—gain unity in the individual person who integrates them into his own unity. This union, however, may become mechanical, external. (Bakhtin [1977-1979] 1990:1)

The unity between humans has become external in more than one sense. Capitalism is a social relation, but it is externalized in money. Likewise, with respect to the machine, “the *means of labour*, as a physical thing, loses its direct form, becomes *fixed capital*, and confronts the worker physically as *capital*” (Marx [1939] 1973:695). The machine is complicit in maintaining the opacity of capital relations, as the human becomes subject to the autonomous movement of machines and matter in production.

In no way does the machine appear as the individual worker’s means of labour. Its distinguishing characteristic is not in the least, as with the means of labour, to transmit the worker’s activity to the object; this activity, rather, is posited in such a way that it merely transmits the machine’s work, the machine’s action on to the raw material—supervises it and guards it against interruptions. ([1939] 1973:692)

As we mistake value as something intrinsic to the commodity, so the machine is considered to be the “force of production itself” ([1939] 1973:694). Marx says,

The worker’s activity, reduced to a mere abstraction of activity is determined and regulated on all sides by the movement of the machinery, and not the opposite. The science which compels the inanimate limbs of the machinery, by their construction, to act purposefully, as an automaton, does not exist in the worker’s consciousness, but rather acts upon him through the machine as an alien power of the machine itself ([1939] 1973:693).

This description is reminiscent of the crisis of perspective Virilio sought to foreground in *Grey Ecology* (2008a), and which is summed up perfectly in the image of the slaughterhouse worker (see section 1.4). The appropriative nature of capital, entrenched first in the separation of the human from the ground that feeds it, reaches its apex in the machine that internalizes human labour and divests the worker of agency.

Similar to previous descriptions of both the gift and commodity fetishes, technological fetishism is one where “inanimate things [are] attributed with autonomous productivity or even agency” but the technological fetish “obscur[es] their own foundation in asymmetric global relations of exchange” (Hornborg 2013:3). It is not enough to say that one nation has developed a freer and more robust society because of the development of time and energy-saving technologies. Industrial agriculture benefits from these global asymmetries. Corporations such as the food processing giant, Cargill, actively seek out and establish their operations in developing nations where land and labour may be purchased at low cost, regardless of the political climate or the labour practices of their middle men (Rainforest Action Network 2013). In the case of food manufacture in North America, the machines or technologies of overproduction have simply replaced and devalued the work of agricultural labour. The opacity of these relationships is made even greater because we are subject to the commodity fetish in its incarnation as spectacle.

Hornborg places technological fetishism in a list following money and commodities. I am reminded of the work of Mark Worrell on Debord’s spectacle. Worrell argues that Debord extends the logical development of value forms outlined by Marx—“accidental, expanded, general, and money”—to include the spectacular form. “The logic of spectacle is to transform everyday reality into the fiction of the perpetual and never-ending moment of exchange—to preserve the exchange experience beyond exchange” (Worrell 2009:np). The machine is also enlisted in the spectacle, smoothing and accelerating the way of exchange, projecting the imagery that sustains human separation and masks its participation in the annihilation of tangible bonds. Consider, again, the case of the horsemeat scandal in Europe. The pulverizing mechanisms of meat processing allowed horsemeat to easily masquerade as beef, while the European Union’s protracted supply chain obscured the country and production facility of origin. Further manufacturing processes, like the addition of packaging that definitively advertised the contents as ‘beef,’ added insult to spectacular injury. The irony is in our assumption that the scandal is a mark of human folly, attributable to individual greed or ignorance. The scandal truly lies in our continued disavowal of the inequities concretised and reproduced by the topologies of

capital. While certain individuals may be at fault for introducing horsemeat into beef products, so too are the social relations under which so cheap and indiscernible a product can be produced, packaged, and sold to consumers, who themselves are left with little choice as to what they subsist on.

2.6 Conclusion

The foregoing discussion has perhaps amounted to no more than a description of the human's powerlessness under capital, in terms of ethics and resistance. If the system precedes and determines our behaviour, how can we see an ethics gain greater hold as a given practice? I admit to having no clear answer, but do see potential for the formation of new perspectives in the event of a rupture, which can effectively intervene in what is otherwise too passive an existence. Virilio compares human passivity to the experience of an Alzheimer's patient:

Unconscious, subject to irreversible memory lapses and to spatial and temporal disorientation, he *ceases to exist in the here and now*, only occasionally to wake up completely out of sync with his environment, no matter how hard nursing staff may try to offer a few spatiotemporal pointers in the patient's brief periods of alertness to...maintain some connection with his body, some relationship with those around him. ([1995] 2008b:112)⁸⁴

Only something literally groundbreaking can shake us to our bodily senses and awaken a sense of bodily need. "The Earth teaches us a lot more about ourselves than all the books in the world, *because it resists us*. Man only finds himself when he measures himself against an obstacle" (Virilio [1995] 2008b:118). In the next chapter, I turn to such a groundbreaking event in the form of 2012's Hurricane Sandy, and outline some of the lessons we have to learn from the Occupy Sandy relief effort. In Earth's resistance, we may find ways to resist capital ourselves and usher in new forms of distribution, perhaps even a distributed ethics.

⁸⁴ In a personal experience with Alzheimer's, I observed that the removal of the person from their home and familiar contexts accelerates the memory loss and despondency of the patient.

Chapter 3: Mutual Aid and Distribution in Occupy Sandy

3.1 Introduction

The distributed network of capitalist relations leaves individuals divided by the wage and without access to the means of production, and thus, without the capacity to act ethically and autonomously. This network distributes value to many individuals, inequitable though it may be. In the event of a crisis, in areas where value cannot easily circulate, the distributed network reveals the magnitude of poverty in the capitalist mode of production.⁸⁵ Food that could only be accessed with money earned as a wage is now likely inaccessible and lies at a greater distance away than any individual could travel to reach it. Communities bonded by abstractions find themselves helpless without skills or traditions to bridge the divisions that capital creates in order to flow more easily through and among us. As Peter Kropotkin observed over a century ago, our communities have become “loose aggregations of individuals, connected by no particular bonds, bound to appeal to the Government each time that they feel a common need” ([1902] 2006:187). In our mediated existence, individuals simply do not have the wherewithal to face crises and must rely wholly on external, national institutions for aid, unless there already exists a community infrastructure that the crisis activates. Arguably, this is what occurred among a network of activist organizers, first mobilized by 2011’s Occupy Wall Street movement, who became part of the Hurricane Sandy recovery effort in late October, 2012. Occupy Sandy, as the volunteers came to be called, formed one of the strongest and far-reaching responses to the devastation of Sandy, earning a reputation comparable if not better than national organizations like the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the Red Cross. Occupy Sandy’s efforts have aimed, in part, to ensure that communities are not doubly devastated: first by disaster, and second, for lacking a local infrastructure of skills and materials. In other words, in

⁸⁵ See discussion of ‘magnitude of poverty’ in section 1.4.

the wake of a hurricane, Occupy Sandy has begun to establish a distributed network of community relations.⁸⁶

Literature on revolutionary responses to natural disasters is scarce. A single-line reference in John Walton and David Seddon's *Free Markets and Food Riots* (1989), however, alludes to a possible example in the 1985 Mexico City earthquake. The earthquake came on the heels of an economic crisis in Mexico driven by the austerity conditions imposed on the country by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Walton and Seddon observed that "[d]espite the dismal economic record" in Mexico, "popular protest was episodic and easily controlled by the state until natural disaster...provided moments of opportunity (1989:124). This led me to a brief, but informative text by Harry Cleaver called "The Uses of an Earthquake" (2005).

Cleaver argues that environmental disasters offer unique possibilities of intervention for people oppressed by the state and exploited by capital, because the flows of domination are rendered temporarily immobile. Residents of the Tepito neighbourhood mobilized amidst the temporary disruption to government bureaucracy, including the destruction of buildings containing legal paperwork.⁸⁷ In particular, the Mexico City earthquake afforded residents the ability to pressure the government to seize thousands of apartments neglected by landlords and sell them to the tenants.

When landlords and lawyers arrived on the scene the very day of the quake, the people in the community quickly realized that the greatest threat to them would come from these owners trying to take advantage of the situation by tearing down their homes and rebuilding more expensive, higher rent properties from which the former tenants would be excluded...Anticipating such actions, thousands of tenants organized themselves and marched on the presidential palace demanding government expropriation of the damaged properties and their eventual sale to their current tenants. By taking the initiative while the government was still paralysed, they successfully forced the seizure of some 7,000 properties. (Cleaver 2005)

⁸⁶ As in the previous chapter, the tense pertaining to distribution is important. For the temporality of when a distribution occurs matters, especially if distribution ceases in moments of crisis. What remains in place is what has already been distributed.

⁸⁷ While capital's domination exists in the circulation and accumulation of money (and other material forms), a government's power exists in the circulation and preservation of documents, for example, contracts, censuses, and other biopolitical instruments.

We see in Cleaver's description the opportunity that crises often afford for greater exploitation of vulnerable people, which may have happened in Mexico City had capital been left to pick up the pieces. However, there already existed a distributed network of community relations among the Tepito people that held fast in the face of disaster and spurred them to action.

Not only did "the earthquake caus[e] a breakdown in both the administrative capacities and the authority of the government... the ability of people to organize themselves [also] grew out of a long history of autonomous struggle" (Cleaver 2005). According to Cleaver, this established history of autonomy in the Tepito neighbourhood "allowed the people of Tepito to move quickly and effectively to help themselves in an emergency and to deal with a much more inefficient, partially paralyzed government" (2005). Cleaver is not being paranoid when he tells us to heed the example of the Tepito residents; he is not drawing our attention to the increased threat of environmental crises, or telling us to stock up on resources. He is pointing to the difference it makes when a community has developed autonomous means of organization and response.

For those of us outside of Mexico, the people of Tepito have an important lesson to teach, not only about the uses of an earthquake, but about the use of crisis more generally... We should always be ready to take advantage of any crack or rupture in the structure of power which confine us. (Cleaver 2005)

But being ready requires some sort of framework or point of reference from which to build on that initial advantage, as the Tepito people had developed after decades of self-organization. For Occupy Sandy, that framework is being developed now with a view to the future, and its first principal is mutual aid.

* * *

Direct action is Bookchin's program towards self-management. He argues that it is only in local, spontaneous movements that the human claims autonomy and stands a chance of introducing more ethical forms of organization into the milieu. Bookchin says that the revolutionary's goal must be to "concretise the management of the collectivity as an authentic mode of self-management" ([1972] 1975) or, in my own

words, rebuild the social infrastructure to allow or operate through self-management. Capitalism operates through dependency on the wage and the state, at a scale that moves and separates production across vast spaces so that no one person can access what they need without significant mediation. The only way to manage (or reproduce) the self is through the commodity form. Mutual aid, on the other hand, is essentially a direct action that is hindered by capital, though it has in other times been ‘concretised’ in the social techniques of community, for instance, in village assemblies (Kropotkin [1902] 2006).⁸⁸

A term like direct action may seem to preclude mystification, but I argue that the ideal of self-management would still operate under some sort of fetish. While the commodity fetish is the lived subjugation of individuals to the commodity, mystifications, in and of themselves, are not to blame for the subjugation of humans. The discussion of the commodity fetish in chapter 2 showed how subjects reproduce themselves as part of hierarchies or systems of social relations (section 2.5). “The subject is the substrate, the agent, the bearer that the fetishist system of valorization requires to assure production and consumption” (Jappe 2013:np). Here, Anselm Jappe describes the phenomenon in terms we are familiar with: the subject, like the use-value, is a substrate for capital’s accumulation. Because we are currently subjects of capital—it is the dominant relation among all others in our actor-networks—Jappe argues that any revolutionary subjectivity we may wish to develop out of our current state will never offer us complete emancipation. “The subject is therefore that from which we must be emancipated, and not that through which and in terms of which we must be emancipated” (Jappe 2013:np). However, even were we to shuffle off this subject-form, we would still find ourselves taking on other subject-forms and other fetishes.

Bookchin states that we must obliterate hierarchy from social organization, but the elimination of hierarchical domination does not preclude the formation of

⁸⁸ Kropotkin provides an example of community-led food distribution in crisis by the Berber people of Algeria, called the Kabyles [sic]. During the 1867-8 famine in Algeria, the Kabyles “received and fed everyone who sought refuge in their villages, without distinction of origin...no less than 12,000 people who came from all parts of Algeria, and even from Morocco, were fed in this way” (Kropotkin [1902] 2006:119). Kropotkin emphasizes that the village assemblies, “depriving themselves of necessities, organized relief without ever asking any aid from the Government, or uttering the slightest complaint; they considered it as a natural duty” ([1902] 2006:119).

subjectivities; in fact, it could grant us the ability to form multiple subjectivities that are not posited by capital or the state.⁸⁹ Bookchin describes the post-capitalist subject as one who lives in a mode of self-management, but is still part of a system, which manages the collectivity ([1972] 1975). This system would resemble on a more phenomenal level Latour's description of the social—a product of the movements of self-managing actants (see section 2.3). Still, Bookchin's own language alludes to the necessity of 'concretised' aspects in collective, ones that lend endurance to a larger body than the individual.⁹⁰ If people are to have the perpetual freedom of determining their own subject-roles, there would have to be enduring qualities to a system, even through the mediation of objects. Collectives have always been human and nonhuman, as I discussed in terms of gift economies and the capitalist mode of production. Bookchin's emphasis on horizontal, ecological thinking is a movement in recognition of this same fact.⁹¹

Bookchin suggests that a sort of mystification is required in order to prepare people for post-capitalist subjectivity. He describes, in particular, a new age of Enlightenment dawning in the unconscious direction of the antiestablishment identity politics of the 1960s and 70s.

The new Enlightenment is not simply changing consciousness, a change that is often quite superficial in the absence of other changes... The significance of the new Enlightenment, however, is that it is altering the unconscious apparatus of the individual even before it can be articulated consciously as a social theory or a commitment to political conviction. ([1972] 1975)

⁸⁹ "As the *human* essence of the proletariat begins to replace its factory essence, the worker can now be reached as easily outside the factory as in it. Concretely, the worker's aspect as a woman or man, as a parent, as an urban dweller, as a youth, as a victim of environmental decay, as a dreamer (the list is nearly endless), comes increasingly to the foreground. The factory walls become permeable to the counter-culture to a degree where it begins to compete with the worker's 'proletarian' concerns and values" (Bookchin [1972] 1975).

⁹⁰ "Viewed from the aspects of its concrete human side, such a collectivity can *be* nothing less than the fulfillment of the liberated self, of the free subject divested of all its 'thingifications,' of the self that can concretise the management of the collectivity as an authentic mode of *self-management*" (Bookchin [1972] 1975).

⁹¹ "Ecology... is an outlook that interprets all interdependencies (social and psychological as well as natural) non-hierarchically. Ecology denies that nature can be interpreted from a hierarchical viewpoint. Moreover, it affirms that diversity and spontaneous development are ends in themselves, to be respected in their own right. Formulated in terms of ecology's 'ecosystem approach', this means that each form of life has a unique place in the balance of nature and its removal from the ecosystem could imperil the stability of the whole" (Bookchin [1972] 1975).

While observing, as we have for decades after, the small political strides those individualist revolutions took, Bookchin sees the small movements as contributing largely to the dissolution of “the individual's obedience to institutions, authorities and values that have vitiated every struggle for freedom” ([1972] 1975). Again, he describes the important, relative quality in these forms of resistance as unconscious:

These profound changes tend to occur almost unknowingly, as for example among workers who, in the concrete domain of everyday life, engage in sabotage, work indifferently, practice almost systematic absenteeism, resist authority in almost every form, use drugs, acquire various freak traits — and yet, in the abstract domain of politics and social philosophy, acclaim the most conventional homilies of the system. (Bookchin [1972] 1975)

He sees a latency develop, a ‘precondition’ for a liberatory society that will be made conscious with the explosion of revolution or, perhaps, natural disaster. Latour is interesting both on the topic of rupture, and small gains such as the counter-culture movements represent, because attacking a totality destines the individual for ‘sure defeat’:

With respect to the Total, there is nothing to do except genuflect before it, or worse to dream of occupying the place of complete power. I think it would be much safer to claim that action is possible only in a territory that has been opened up, flattened down, and cut down to size in a place where formats, structures, globalization, and totalities circulate inside tiny conduits, and where for each of their applications they need to rely on masses of hidden potentialities. If this is not possible, then there is no politics. No battle has ever been won without resorting to new combinations and surprising events. (2005:252)

Likewise, Bookchin states that dealing in abstract terms like the “Proletariat” and “Society”⁹² puts revolution on a scale that individuals cannot engage and reinforces “the *bourgeois* antithesis between the individual and the collectivity in the interests of bureaucratic manipulation” ([1972] 1975). It is the combination of unconscious, individual-level programming and large-scale rupture that may form the most adequate ground for revolution, clearing the way for fetishized behaviour that is nevertheless ethical, as in mutual aid.

⁹² Bookchin capitalizes these concepts.

Bookchin says that spontaneity, i.e., direct action is integral to “the very dialectic of self-consciousness and self-de-alienation that removes the subjective fetters established by the present order” ([1972] 1975). I look at spontaneity in times of rupture, particularly how the relief effort organized by Occupy Sandy responded to the contingent necessity of the hurricane in New Jersey. Spontaneity, according to Bookchin,

is behaviour, feeling and thought that is free of external constraint, of imposed restriction. It is self-controlled, internally controlled, behaviour, feeling, and thought, not an uncontrolled effluvium of passion and action. From the libertarian communist viewpoint, spontaneity implies a capacity in the individual to impose self-discipline and to formulate sound guidelines for social action. Insofar as the individual removes the fetters of domination that have stifled her or his self-activity, she or he is acting, feeling, and thinking spontaneously. ([1972] 1975)

As if predicting the efficacy of spontaneity in Occupy Sandy’s relief program, he is clear that spontaneity (and consequently anarchism) “does not preclude organisation and structure. To the contrary, spontaneity ordinarily yields non-hierarchical forms of organisation, forms that are truly organic, self-created, and based on voluntarism” ([1972] 1975).

This chapter looks at the methods of organization Occupy Sandy used to distribute food and volunteers to Hurricane Sandy survivors, first, in the context of Kropotkin’s anarchist principals of mutual aid and the primacy of need (section 3.2), followed by a discussion of the logistical applications employed in the relief effort (section 3.3). I venture a comparison of Occupy Sandy and the Federal Emergency Management Agency’s (FEMA) different approaches to organization in an effort to define the ethics with which each relief effort was undertaken (section 3.4). In conclusion, I discuss how the practice of mutual aid could develop into mystified behaviour that is nevertheless ethical.

3.2 Occupy Sandy

Kropotkin puts what he argues is our evolutionary⁹³ tendency towards cooperation in the context of an unexpected crisis:

Suppose that one of our great cities, so egoistic in ordinary times, were visited tomorrow by some calamity—a siege, for instance—that same selfish city would decide the first needs to satisfy were those of the children and the aged. Without asking what service they had rendered, or were likely to render to society, it would first of all feed them. Then the combatants would be cared for irrespective of the courage or the intelligence which each has displayed, and thousands of men and women would outvie each other in unselfish devotion to the wounded. ([1892] 2007:77)

In the form of a hurricane rather than a military force, such a calamity befell the Eastern seaboard on October 29, 2012, hitting that most ‘egoistic’ city, New York, and devastating a great many others. The storm covered an area of 820 square miles when it made landfall in the state of New Jersey and affected 17 states in total, from power outages, to flooding, to total devastation (Webley 2012).

One organization that could be characterized by the ‘unselfish devotion’ described by Kropotkin is Occupy Sandy, who worked tirelessly and without remuneration to offer relief to Sandy survivors, in the days immediately after the storm struck and to this day.⁹⁴ Katherine Ramos, a member of Occupy Sandy New Jersey’s PR and social media group, is clear that recovery efforts are ongoing, even if more established relief organizations have moved out of the affected areas (personal communication).⁹⁵ Almost 10 months after Hurricane Sandy hit the Atlantic coast, Occupy Sandy remains committed to the communities they helped to recover. Moreover, and most interesting to this project, is the fact that Sandy survivors now

⁹³ “Darwin was quite right when he saw in man’s social qualities the chief factor for his further evolution and Darwin’s vulgarizers are entirely wrong when they maintain the contrary: The small strength of and speed of man (he wrote), his want of natural weapons, etc., are more than counterbalanced, firstly, by his intellectual faculties... and secondly, *by his social qualities, which led him to give and receive aid from his fellow men*” (Kropotkin [1902] 2006:91; emphasis mine).

⁹⁴ “Service rendered to society, be [it] work in factory and field, or mental services, cannot be valued in money” (Kropotkin [1892] 2007:95)—it can sometimes be measured in food.

⁹⁵ Details attributed to Katherine Ramos were learned in a personal communication that took place on August 8, 2013 over Skype. All references attributed to Ramos are from this correspondence. I received permission to quote Ramos verbally during our communication, which was confirmed in written form on March 8, 2014 (see Appendix).

look to the Occupy organizers for other political needs, are speaking a new language steeped in the anarchist tradition, and have, in some cases, become organizers themselves. Occupy, it turns out, not only survived the forced evictions of Zucotti and other parks across the world, but offered the staging ground—or network, rather—on which to build a successful relief effort.

The Occupy movement was born of an entirely man-made disaster, a response to the subprime mortgage crisis that erupted in 2008. Occupy Wall Street, its national, and international counterparts, raised a platform built on the principal of “collective responsibility located somewhere on the spectrum between self-interest and self-sacrifice, otherwise known as mutual aid” (Manski 2013). Although Occupy Wall Street identified the “root problem” of the crisis in the economic injustices of Wall Street,⁹⁶ Rebecca Manski says the “solution-oriented half of the message got lost” (2013). However, Occupy’s response to Hurricane Sandy suggests that the message was not lost; it rather developed as a latent potential. When Hurricane Sandy hit, Occupy activists were able to practice on a larger scale the potentialities that had formed within the ‘tiny conduits’⁹⁷ of the occupied park spaces.

The surprising thing about Occupy Sandy was that this seemingly disorganized and pluralist platform could be the basis of a successful and efficient effort to get food and other supplies to storm victims before established organizations even hit the ground. Occupy Sandy was running distribution efforts on the first day of the storm; while FEMA only arrived on Day 3, and the Red Cross had only a small presence a week later. Their approach to food was particularly interesting. Ramos described how Occupy organizers took the management of food donations to a different level: preparing, serving, and delivering hot meals to survivors who did not have electricity with which to prepare any of the perishable or nonperishable items donated to them. In effect, Occupy Sandy practiced the immediate, contingent ethics I described in chapter 2. At the peak of its service, Occupy Sandy was organizing the delivery of 20,000 hot meals a day (Manski 2013).

⁹⁶ I paraphrase Manski, here, who perhaps misses the opportunity to critique Occupy Wall Street for substituting Wall Street as a symbol of the crisis rather than addressing capitalism itself.

⁹⁷ From previous quote (Latour 2005:252).

Many organizations joined Occupy Sandy, while others kept their distance because of the movement's history of civil disobedience:

FEMA, the NYPD's Community Affairs division, and the Carlyle Group (a large private equity firm) had reached out to Occupy Sandy...for collaboration, according to organizer Daniele Kohn. The Carlyle Group reportedly wanted to send 200 volunteers to the effort before they found out how connected Occupy Sandy is to the Occupy Wall Street protests of [2011]. (Ohlheiser 2012)

Manski (2013) suggests that FEMA and the Red Cross's inability to begin on the ground recovery efforts immediately is owed to their strict, hierarchical models. Indeed, one anecdote she relates is about a doctor who began working with Occupy Sandy as soon as he arrived offering help, while working with the Red Cross would have meant waiting several days as he underwent bureaucratic processing. In a similar case, a military cadet instructor who contacted the Red Cross was met with an "impenetrable wall of bureaucracy, even in the face of devastation. When the instructor and his cadets turned instead to Occupy Sandy, they were given an assignment within an hour of first contact (Ohlheiser 2012).

The difference between Occupy Sandy and FEMA or the Red Cross, is the former's "unaffiliated, porous, *distributed* leadership network...able to engage in mutual aid across communities" and "redistribute resources from one place to another according to shifting needs" (Manski 2013; emphasis mine). Like FEMA, Occupy operated on a hub model of distribution, but one that organized donations, hot food, and volunteers in ways that catered directly to the needs of individual survivors (see section 3.3). Volunteers went as far into devastated areas as they could travel in vehicles and on foot, canvassing door-to-door for two things: to collect real data on the immediate needs of the survivors in that area, and to assemble more volunteers to continue the relief effort.⁹⁸ Canvassers would return to their hubs with lists of willing volunteers, and lists of needs, like diapers and baby food. Ramos explained how organizations like FEMA and Red Cross would set up in less affected areas and have people come to them.

⁹⁸ "None need fast in the midst of food...all is for all, in practice as well as in theory, and that at last, for the first time in history, a revolution has been accomplished which considers the NEEDS of the people before schooling them in their DUTIES" (Kropotkin [1892] 2007:70-1).

For us, we were getting into our cars and trying to get as far into an area as we could, and walk the rest of the way. [We would climb] ten flights of stairs, because the elevator is broken, and go door to door and see if everyone's ok. And, 1.5 miles away, there's a Red Cross station but they weren't allowed to canvass. We did anyway.

As a result, Occupy organizers frequently came across neighbourhoods that had never been contacted or visited by FEMA, where the survivors did not have the ability to reach the larger organizations, lacking internet access and means of transportation to the hubs. Ramos also explained that areas with sparser pockets of devastation were neglected by the larger agencies in favour of areas of concentrated devastation.

Despite the risks involved with this canvassing method, Occupy organizers put needs first and let it be the guide for their organizing efforts. Kropotkin states that it is a lack of needs-based thinking in our knowledge-power structures that has allowed ethics to become a separate field of concern instead of the horizon of all others. Science, “having lost sight of the needs of man, has strayed in absolutely the wrong direction, and [its] organization is at fault” ([1892] 2007:203). Need, according to Kropotkin, should be the first concern in any event. Hence the principal argument in *The Conquest of Bread* that managing food as an “object of first necessity” ([1892] 2007:47), must be the first task during revolution. In taking immediate needs as priority, as well as their emphasis on face-to-face interaction through canvassing, Occupy Sandy arguably practiced what Kropotkin calls a *Science of Social Physiology* ([1892] 2007:203).⁹⁹

That was the unique thing [about our method]. They got to see our faces...you get to see someone day in day out, at least once a week, and they realize you aren't going anywhere. [It] makes folks more at ease, knowing that we were going to physically, actually be there to have a conversation and not just drop things off, or send them a cheque or a generalized letter about the situation. (Ramos)

The interpersonal methods of Occupy Sandy are consistent with the phenomenal aspect of social physiology—accounting for needs that extend beyond the physical

⁹⁹ “[L]et us reorganize production so as to really satisfy all needs. The only way that would allow of Political Economy becoming a science--the Science of Social Physiology” (Kropotkin [1892] 2007:203). Although Kropotkin does not explicitly define this science beyond these references, it is clear that he sees the focus on needs as the science's building block. He also has difficulty defining it because this science can only mature in a post-capitalist society, whereas now, the only needs capital serves is its own.

body to the interaction between bodies. Here, Ramos illustrates the survivors' need for human interaction and the sense of security that familiar faces and the constancy of community provide, something that the commodity form precludes. I think Kropotkin would agree that the methods of Occupy Sandy acted "much more in accordance with science than those of the economists who draw so many distinctions between instruments of production and articles of consumption" and that they understood that meeting needs "is just the point where the Revolution ought to begin" ([1892] 2007:93).

Occupy may very well be laying "the foundations of the only economic science worthy the name—a science which might be called '*The Study of the Needs of Humanity and of the Economic Means to satisfy them*'" (Kropotkin [1892] 2007:94). In addition to its canvassing effort, mutual aid and social physiology were employed in Occupy Sandy's methods of organizing volunteers and donations. Distributions of food and skills were managed using tools more commonly associated with capitalist supply chain management, but in ways that maintained the humanity of the transactions between organizers, volunteers, and survivors. In other words, Occupy Sandy's distributed network supports the forming of bonds, not unlike gift societies in a general sense, rather than being predicated on division and abstraction, in the vein of capitalist relations.

3.3 Occupy Sandy Logistics

In the early days of the disaster, a familiar narrative emerged around the donations of unwanted materials. In an article entitled "Vases instead of food," an associate director of the National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster called the donation of such items a 'second disaster.' From the perspective of relief organizations, donations of anything other than necessities and, more specifically, other than money, take additional time to process.

Ad hoc relief groups need to make sure they are taking in only items that are requested and can be distributed. Money is the best because organizations don't have to pay to move it and can tailor spending to

changing needs, McGowan said. Transporting and distributing a simple donated can of food can be \$15 to \$25. (Mulvihill 2012)

Melanie Pipkin of the American Red Cross also stated that “well-intentioned, yet inappropriate donations can divert relief groups and governments” (Mulvihill 2012). Even in moments of rupture, capital aims to reestablish itself, which the focus on monetary donations allows it to do. Since the relief work of government agencies seeks to return devastated areas back to the status quo, which is likely as a site of capital’s circulation, they appeal to the universal equivalent as the means of access to necessary items.¹⁰⁰ As a result, collective responses to disaster become divided and dehumanized by the money-form and the atomized nature of capitalist exchange.

Occupy Sandy also worked with monetary donations, but preferred to concentrate their efforts on tangible donations, which they redistributed from their central hubs. Ramos described a previously operating soup kitchen in Newark which became a 24-hour hub and where 50-foot trucks would deliver supplies and donations. “It wasn’t that big of a space, but donations would come in and be gone within the hour...It was really, really important to have a central location for these deliveries” (Ramos). Occupy Sandy was supported by transport workers under the Transport Workers Union of Philadelphia, which contributed warehouse and dispatch services to the effort, likely alleviating the allegedly high costs of transporting a single can of food to those in need (Unions begin supporting 2012). As I mentioned previously, Occupy Sandy took their approach to food donations an ethical step further by preparing and delivering hot meals to survivors. Occupy Sandy New Jersey delivered prepared food to survivors using a donated U-Haul truck, nicknamed ‘U-Hungry,’ which delivered over 300 hot meals a day for the first four months of recovery. Survivors and volunteers would also congregate and eat food prepared in the kitchens at the Occupy Sandy hubs. Reflecting on the claim that it can cost \$25 to move one canned food donation, Ramos said,

If you take that can and put it in a kitchen, in a hub, and you feed not one family, but four other ones, it definitely stretches out that particular donation. What can we get the most out of...yeah, it takes effort and

¹⁰⁰ Marx argues that the “need for money is...the true need produced by [capitalism], and it is the only need which the latter produces” ([1927] 1987:116).

energy on the part of the people organizing it, but we're all doing it as volunteers, so maybe it costs \$25 because you're paying whoever it is to do it, which is interesting to me; but we were doing it with no payroll, only the time we had to be able to do it.

Here, the mediation of the wage does not organize the relations of organizers, volunteers, and survivors. The hubs operate on the communist model of 'from each according to his ability, to each according to his need.' Later, I give a more detailed description of how Occupy Sandy's system of volunteer recruitment embodies Marx's popular slogan.

To facilitate donations of nonperishable items for survivors and supplies for relief volunteers, Occupy Sandy made the novel decision to use Amazon gift registries (Occupy Sandy data project 2013). If you visit the as-yet live links for the registries, you will see amusingly that the requests come as if from would-be spouses. For example, the heading on one page reads 'Occupy Sandy and Staten Island's Wedding Registry.' The 'Occupy Sandy and Occupy Sandy' registry lists the couple's style as "warm" and "non-perishable" (*Figure 3*). Of course, the requested items on the Occupy Sandy registries were not made by an abstract couple. Rather, they were gleaned directly from the forms volunteers filled out during face-to-face canvassing efforts. The Amazon registry platform is, in Amazon's own words, "universal" because people can add any item available for purchase on Amazon to their wish list (Registry FAQ 2013). This mechanism allowed Occupy Sandy to make requests that ranged from infant formula and teddy bears, to insulation and reciprocating saws. In addition, administrators for the registries will see who donated what items in their Thank You List (Registry FAQ 2013).

The screenshot shows a wedding registry page on Amazon.com. The title is "Occupy Sandy and Occupy Sandy's Wedding Registry". The shipping address is "Occupy Sandy - Brooklyn, New York" and the event date is "May 15, 2012". The couples' style is "Warm, non-perishable". The description asks for help donating to the victims of Hurricane Sandy by shipping items to a new Coney Island distribution hub. It lists the team members: John Heggstuen, Alex Nordenson, and Katherine Dolan. It provides contact information for the registry and a link to a Tumblr page. A note states that the couple has requested no gift wrap. The page includes a "Print Registry" button and a "Sort by" dropdown menu set to "Product Category". The registry is categorized under "Cookware & Bakeware" and shows a list of items. The first item is "T-fal A9228064 Specialty Nonstick 12-Quart Stockpot Dishwasher Safe Stock Pot Cookware, Black" with a quantity desired of 3 and a quantity received of 3. The second item is "Excelsteel 16 Quart Stainless Steel Stockpot With Encapsulated Base" with a quantity desired of 2 and a quantity received of 2.

Figure 3. Screenshot of Occupy Sandy wedding registry on Amazon.com.

Whereas a monetary donation may be universal in its equivalent nature, the gift registry mechanism allows people to connect a requested item for donation with the real need it meets: requests for garbage bags, bleach and mold remediation products, kitchen equipment, and other household items tell the story of Sandy's devastation; while requests for baby food remind us of the more vulnerable people among the survivors. I asked Ramos if she thought the registries lent a tangibility to donations that simply donating money could not. She said,

Absolutely. And we preferred it that way. Because having an emphasis on a dollar as opposed to actual physical things that you can bring or send, it steers away from real connection to the issue; you can throw \$1000 at something, or you can send \$1000 worth of baby items, and you can think, 'Yes, I'm helping a family or multiple families out.' It makes a difference in the psyche, not just for the person sending it, but generally, to have an emphasis on the items or the families you're connecting the stuff to, as opposed to just a dollar amount that you're throwing in someone's direction. (Ramos)

In this way, the registry allows something to persist between people which commodity exchange does not, and which monetary transactions with organizations like the Red Cross do not. For each person donating, there is a stronger sense of a contingent need, a clearer image of the relationship they have to the survivor. Though a capitalist exchange occurs through the Amazon platform, as a donation and a gift, the use-value becomes a substrate for something more than exchange-value.

In addition to appropriating Amazon registries to its own use, Occupy Sandy made inroads towards adapting enterprise resource planning (ERP) software to their needs. ERPs are used for logistical coordination of resources, production, and distribution of products by for-profit and non-profit organizations alike. Occupy Sandy built its environment using the SahanaEden open source ERP platform intended for humanitarian projects and crisis management, which was developed and deployed following the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami. I was granted access to the test environment for Sandy Relief, where some of the data is still housed. The logistics of food distribution seems not to have been carried out through the Sandy Relief site, instead being handled on the fly at the various distribution hubs set up throughout the affected areas. However, developers have said that it will be incorporated infrastructurally for future projects, which includes more focus on localized, cooperative food production and distribution (personal communication).¹⁰¹

A far more significant application used by the group was CiviCRM,¹⁰² constituent relation management software, where survivor needs and volunteer abilities and availability were married into more organized and efficient assignments than could possibly be done with phone-to-phone data collection. In both cases, paper canvass forms filled out during face-to-face conversations in the affected areas were important sources of data. Through online and paper canvass forms, organizers solicited information about areas of volunteer ability and would sort tasks among people according to preference where possible. Tasks could include donation receipt and sorting; cooking; canvassing; as well as maintenance and repair, especially mold remediation and ‘mucking out’ homes. Organizers also ran all of this information

¹⁰¹ This comes from an email exchange with Devin Balkind of the Sarapis Foundation, which hosts SahanaEden site for Occupy Sandy. Balkind writes more about Occupy Sandy and SahanaEden on the Sarapis website (2013).

¹⁰² “It’s a really simple plug-in, you can put in information...so we would have handwritten stuff, we would go canvas and people would fill it out, and we enter the information (their contact information, best time to receive help or be a volunteer). We would plug in to the network, or they could, depending if they had Internet access. A series of questions, a survey, and when you submit, it sends it into the system, and we could check it and block off people who were available on the weekends, for example; people who were available for construction, or only sorting donations, or couldn’t do heavy lifting. So we could sort it that way, and it would give is a list of people we could contact and we would either email them with a blast of where there was volunteer ability for them to go, or we would contact them if we had a group of people who could go to their area to help them out with whatever their needs were” (Ramos).

through a database that matched skills up with specific areas of need, in specific locations, which made larger scale recruitment and deployment possible. Ramos frequently referred to CiviCRM as a site where people can *plug into* the network. Remember that Latour uses the same term as a metaphor for distributed potentials (2005:214). Survivors and volunteers plugged into Occupy Sandy's network, but the mutual aid distributed to and through them is its own form of plug-in in the subject-forming sense that Latour described. In contrast to the wage paradigm, the mutual aid paradigm potentially allows for the formation of multiple subjectivities, as the opportunity to form diverse relations is greater.

Cindy Milstein (2012) writes of Occupy Sandy's inclusivity and the encouraging environment in which it organized relief:

There was, it was instantly clear, so much energy, enthusiasm, and initiative in whatever Red Hook church I had stumbled on in my search for an Occupy Sandy Relief site. And it was apparent that the Catholic Charities' folks who had borrowed this church put anyone and everyone to work the minute they walked into the entryway...First things first, though, before I was given a task. The woman who greeted me offered me warm food and coffee, and then gave me a thoroughly warm hello again. Most people were wearing nametags, but everyone introduced themselves to each other anyway, as she had to me.

Notable, here, is that the distribution of food was an aspect internal to the relief effort, as the bodies performing that work also needed sustenance—remember, “the Revolution could not triumph unless those who fought on its side were fed” (Kropotkin [1892] 2007:70). Moreover, the line between volunteer, survivor, and organizer was also blurred, as survivors became engaged in the relief effort, first, on their own streets and in their own neighbourhoods, but eventually branching out, and in some cases, becoming a fixture in the organizing effort itself (Ramos). “There have been a lot of survivors that have become organizers...that mobilized themselves out of the circumstances” (Ramos). Ramos told me the story of Mary,¹⁰³ a volunteer Emergency Medical Technician in Keansburg, NJ, whose home was devastated. Mary became an active member of the relief effort, filling pantries and cooking, and becoming a stronger organizer because of the support and resources Occupy Sandy

¹⁰³ Not real name. While Ramos is a media contact, I chose to anonymize any other people she may have referred to in our conversations.

gathered into its hub locations. These shifting subjectivities are an aspect of Occupy Sandy's flat organization, with numerous actor-networks working in tandem, and through different distributions of skills and resources.

Ramos said that the early days of distribution and volunteer management were very ad hoc, but took on a more systematic fashion as they moved into hub spaces, mostly churches and veterans of foreign wars halls, and incorporated logistical applications. Surprisingly, social media would be the last site of information exchange in Occupy Sandy's logistical network, where focused donation requests and locations of need were advertised to donors and volunteers. Occupy Sandy is also making the effort to organize data from their relief initiatives in order to benefit other organizations and inform future emergency response. In a call out to programmers and hackers for International Data Day 2013, Occupy Sandy organizers expressed their intent to "collect, digitize and pre-process data that includes canvassing forms, Amazon registry records, and more...so that [the] data can be used to inform civil action, community initiatives and research more broadly" (Occupy Sandy data project 2013). As became clear from my conversation with Ramos, Occupy Sandy is a future-oriented project.

Organizers, volunteers, and survivors initially set out to address immediate need on a large, fractured scale. The networks they developed and the transactions that form and sustain them, however, are still in motion. Occupy is still operating in New Jersey, where residents now see the organizers as willing and compassionate aides, whom they can contact for issues directly and not-so-directly related to the hurricane. Homes are still 'mucked up' and rife with mold. Repairs are also still being organized on an in-kind basis, giving out-of-work tradesmen meaningful work—and, of course, hot meals. But while long-term recovery efforts continue, advocacy work has also begun: community gardens have been planted in Keansburg, Gainsbourg, and Newark, and more are planned; organizers are also helping Hoboken renters push back against plans to demolish public housing and replace it with high-rent apartments (Ramos). Sustainability is a keyword in post-hurricane conversations with residents, but in terms of community stability and self-organization. "We're having those conversations and talking about food...sustainability of self and sustainability of the environment, and

sustainability of the community, because it's all tied in" (Ramos).¹⁰⁴ The significance of Occupy Sandy's impact is summed up by Ramos in a new mentality:

this shift of 'let's call the gov't' to 'let's call each other; let's build a network with each other...that's been driven home, and people are really really focused on how they did it on their own, with minimal resources...Occupy Sandy has been able to move over 300,000 volunteers with no reliance on a big name, with no reliance on specific funding...it was just a network of people.

When I thanked Ramos for her contribution and expressed embarrassment about turning a recent crisis in an academic subject, she brought the conversation back to the network. Our conversation was just another transfer of plug-ins, another transaction that can support the existing network and open it to other actor-networks. In other words, myself and the few people who will read this can learn from Occupy Sandy. After all, "climate change; we're just getting the first strokes of it; once this stuff happens and continues to happen, this ability to rely on your community members, that's what we're really trying to accomplish more than anything else" (Ramos). The interest in creating post-recovery groups to lay the groundwork for future crisis relief is not surprising given the current state of climate change, with Occupy Sandy providing an excellent example of how successful such a network can be. Ramos told me of at least four groups that had formed in New Jersey since the Sandy relief effort slowed down, showing that the momentum of their autonomous, community-based organization is being carried forward.

Again, to be prepared is not necessarily to be paranoid. Kropotkin imagines a revolutionary scenario where this sort of foreplanning puts power in the hands of the people to organize themselves and their food supply:

In twenty-hours the revolted town or district will know what Paris has not found out yet, in spite of its statistical committees...the quantity of provisions it contains. In forty-eight hours millions of copies will be printed of the tables giving a sufficiently exact account of the available food, the places where it is stored, and the means of distribution. ([1892] 2007:103)

¹⁰⁴ "All is interdependent in a civilized society; it is impossible to reform any one thing without altering the whole. Therefore, on the day we strike at private property, under any one of its forms, territorial or industrial, we shall be obliged to attack them all" (Kropotkin [1892] 2007:92).

Although couched in the language of revolution, Kropotkin's words still ring true for crisis recovery: "If the coming Revolution is to be a Social Revolution it will be distinguished from all former uprisings not only by its aim, but also by its methods. To attain a new end, new means are required" ([1892] 2007:95). Under the right application, one can imagine that software like CiviCRM and Sandy Relief could contribute to what Kropotkin describes as "the most favourable conditions for giving society the greatest amount of useful products with the least waste of human energy" ([1892] 2007:172). This is where we must consider the prefigurative aspect of Occupy Sandy. Of course, nation states prepare for crises, and have the details of food supply, etc., in their possession, but the majority of people impacted by such crises do not have access to it. "The ideal of modern industry is a child tending a machine that he cannot and must not understand" (Kropotkin [1898] 1994:209). Such is the effect of the distributed network of capital relations. Even when we most need immediate control of our bodies, such as in a survival situation, we cannot gain access to our own struggle and must be saved. We are reliant on organizations like FEMA instead of being able to organize ourselves, but movements like Occupy are beginning to see how building infrastructure for mutual aid could make all the difference in a future moment of crisis. And the effect is not lost on the hurricane survivors: "mutual aid, is one of those words that people weren't necessarily using before, and now I hear it all over the place...it changes the narrative and it also opens people's perspective" (Ramos).

3.4 The Failure of FEMA

It is interesting to spend this much time delineating the organizational culture of Occupy Sandy considering Occupy Wall Street's own resistance to conceptualization in the past. And yet, there is clearly a network and method to be traced through their operations. To borrow terms used by Rachel Dowty and William Wallace (2010), Occupy Sandy is an example of low grid, high group organization. The terms here are drawn from Mary Douglas (1999), for whom 'grid' means "how rigidly rules and traditions influence decision-making and action-taking (e.g.

application and use of rule structures)” and group meant “the tightness of interpersonal and professional ties seen through the frequency and transparency of communications and group solidarity” (Dowty and Wallace 2010:58). Based on Manski’s (2013) and Ramos’ descriptions of Occupy Sandy, the recovery effort seems to exhibit the egalitarian or communitarian qualities of low grid, high group organizations.

Low grid organizations “us[e] simple rule structures, expect[t] ad hoc rules and competition for resources to effectively manage supply chain disruptions, and justif[y] this rationale through valuing individual worth” (Dowty and Wallace 2010:59). The level of inclusivity Occupy Sandy showed to volunteers, and its ability to distribute skills according to ability and according to need, contributes to its profile as a low grid organization. High group initiatives expect “risks to form from new combinations of strategies and technologies” and are also “characterized by expectations that strong integration best manages collective resources” (Dowty and Wallace 2010:59). For Occupy Sandy, risks became opportunities, since the established way of distributing relief left people isolated and even neglected. For people’s needs to come first, new combinations of strategies must be developed, like Occupy Sandy’s mix of face-to-face and web-based interaction.¹⁰⁵ While Occupy Sandy shares some traits with low group organizations, operating on the premise “that needs are best addressed through individual skill, justifiable through the potential for creativity in resource management” (Dowty and Wallace 2010:59), the principal of mutual aid organized and integrated the working of individuals into a single culture fitted to the large task of recovery before it.

In Dowty and Wallace’s case study analyzing a contract between FEMA and an ice transport company following Hurricane Katrina, the former emerges as a high grid, low group organization whose structural rigidity detracted from its ability to adequately deliver aid.¹⁰⁶ The study reveals several logistical errors in FEMA’s management of ice delivery:

¹⁰⁵ “No battle has ever been won without resorting to new combinations and surprising events” (Latour 2005:252).

¹⁰⁶ “HIGH GRID levels are typically consistent with organizations that assess risk taking through complex, institutionally defined rule structures... Taking risks is justified [in] LOW GROUP organizations in terms of making reasonable sacrifices of the collective for individuals or components” (Dowty and Wallace 2010:59).

FEMA bought the ice and contracted transport before delivery destinations and routes were established for each load... This led to weak integration between FEMA and trucking companies, drivers being redirected to numerous destination points across the nation, and millions of dollars wasted on unnecessary transport and storage costs. (Dowty and Wallace 2010:60)¹⁰⁷

According to Dowty and Wallace, these logistical errors are rooted in the incongruity of FEMA's organizational culture with others different from it.

FEMA expected rule structures to manage resources without first establishing destinations and routes because ice is a time-tested necessary resource for victims after a hurricane. The organization justified taking the risk through institutionally defined rules and goals (e.g., acquisition ice and get it onto transport as quickly as possible). These expectations and justifications are characteristic of HIGH GRID risk and resource management. However, the weak integration between FEMA and the trucking company left an essentially one-way line of communication from FEMA to Universe Truck Lines. (Dowty and Wallace 2010:61)

Emergency supply redistribution can be hampered by what Mark Horner and Michael Widener have identified as a failure in contingency plans to truly account for "the potential damage that may be caused to a transportation network" (2011:1620). Hurricanes and storms "can severely damage transportation network infrastructure rendering it unusable," making it difficult to reach the disaster victims who inevitably decide not to or cannot evacuate the at-risk area (Horner and Widener 2011:1620). During 2005's Hurricane Katrina, it is estimated that half of the population of the affected area, approximately 100,000 people, remained behind (Horner and Widener 2011:1621). In their study, Horner and Widener developed a test scenario for advanced emergency preparation, in the form of storing necessities at strategic locations, which incorporates an expectation of failed transportation lines. They found that by storing food at distribution nodes "that tend to be robust over a range of

¹⁰⁷ After being rerouted four times and ten days of driving, driver Mike Hohnstein was told to take his "truckload of ice to Bettendorf, Iowa, at which point the truck had traveled 3282 miles and had not delivered ice to a single hurricane victim. The final bill Universe Truck Lines delivered to FEMA was over \$15,000 when the ice was worth less than \$5000. Although they had jumped at the original opportunity to serve hurricane victims through FEMA, the next time FEMA called and asked Universe to take ice from Fremont, Nebraska to Fort Worth, Texas, the company refused" (Dowty and Wallace 2010:61).

scenarios,” meaning those that can be reached from several different lines of transportation, “that even with some level of link destruction, the vast majority of a population tend not to be cut off from the rest of the network” (Horner and Widener 2011:1632,1629). Of course, who is to say what portion of a population that majority truly represents, or what other circumstances besides road transportation might govern access to those distribution nodes?

In practice, Occupy Sandy found that many trailer parks, areas outside of the larger scenes of destruction, and neighbourhoods lacking access to Internet or because of language barriers, *were* cut off from FEMA and Red Cross hubs.¹⁰⁸ The point of access outside of these hubs is a fillable form: digital government forms and grant requests that survivors had to fill out to receive aid or notice from the government organizations.

That was one of the saddest things to find. We would go into a community, and find out that we were the only ones who’d been there, the only ones that would be going there, even in checking in a couple of weeks later, or a month later, or three months in... What happens to the person who doesn’t have family or friends in the area, the person who doesn’t have internet access or power. They get forgotten. It’s so sad and unfortunate, but that’s what we were coming across. (Ramos)

One task performed by Occupy Sandy volunteers was informing residents about and helping them access these forms as they canvassed, and providing computer resources at the donated hub spaces. Ramos stated that residents living in trailer parks, many of them undocumented workers, had in a majority of cases heard about forms and grants from neighbours or relations who had filled them out, or the Occupy Sandy volunteers—not from the larger organizations.

If we, like Horner and Widener, were to look at aid distribution solely through the scope of transport logistics, it would be easy to think that FEMA’s inability to organize ice distribution after Hurricane Katrina had something to do with inaccessibility of the transport networks. However, it may have had much more to do with organizational failures within and incongruous biases between itself and the company it contracted to deliver the ice. Horner and Widener’s study does not account

¹⁰⁸ Occupy Sandy used Spanish-language canvass forms in these areas.

for the organizational failings that Dowty and Wallace (2010) describe. The combination of low grid, high group qualities of an organization like Occupy Sandy means that individuals are given the resources and network of support they need to direct themselves and perhaps introduce solutions that would be impossible to undertake in fixed and inflexible structures. In their own interactions with FEMA, Occupy Sandy had asked government relief workers to provide them with the locations where they could find survivors who had been moved to hotels in order to canvass and deliver donations. Under the privacy act, details like names and phone numbers are protected; but FEMA and the Red Cross both withheld general location details, even though they were not willing to extend their outreach as far as Occupy Sandy volunteers did.¹⁰⁹ Agents of FEMA, however, would not be empowered to make calls about how best to address immediate need outside of its own mandate.

When it comes to a state of crisis, we're not looking for personal information, we just want to know what hotels they're at. Don't give us their names; give us a list of the hotels. Even the general area, as to where these people were sent. And they refused to give us that. So that's one of things that we did bring up...there was a town hall with [Governor of New Jersey] Christie and other officials from towns that were affected... We had a representative for Occupy Sandy there, and that was one of his questions... Is the privacy thing more important than helping someone out of a very dangerous situation... It's a very fine line; there are ways to work around it in a time of crises, but you have to make a decision in a very quick way, cause for some folks it could be life or death, and for some people it was. (Ramos)

The thrust of Dowty and Wallace's argument is that organizational models may not work together, and the high grid, low group nature of FEMA makes it difficult for other forms of organization to be incorporated or engaged effectively in

¹⁰⁹ "Looking at different areas of devastation, we wanted to find the different areas of need, where the needs were, because we didn't have access to what FEMA or Red Cross had, so we would go to different areas, and just based on what people would say, we'd hear, oh I heard from my friend that this total block was devastated in this small town, and we would go there; we would hear businesses were affected, not residents, but when we got into those trailer parks, then we were like, wow. The same thing going into South Jersey; one area would be really bad, but you go a little further in, and one block will be awesome, and two blocks later, it's completely ripped apart. So it's really odd how things were affected. But that's how we got it done, was through canvassing, and then we just focused on specific areas based on what people told us, or our door to door tactic, and just wrote down as much information as possible, and plugged it into the network, and that way we stayed in contact both with volunteers and people in need" (Ramos).

mutually constructive action. FEMA seems to recognize this in its own way, proposing a new philosophical outlook in the 2011 publication, *A Whole Community Approach to Emergency Management*.

As a concept, Whole Community is a means by which residents, emergency management practitioners, organizational and community leaders, and government officials can collectively understand and assess the needs of their respective communities and determine the best ways to organize and strengthen their assets, capacities, and interests. By doing so, a more effective path to societal security and resilience is built. In a sense, Whole Community is a *philosophical approach* on how to think about conducting emergency management. (FEMA; emphasis mine)

And yet, the fact that entire neighbourhoods were neglected by FEMA during the Sandy recovery effort casts this organizational manifesto as mere rhetoric. Having done so little compared to Occupy Sandy to really engage with the community, especially those people cut off from their distribution hubs, “was the failure of FEMA” (Ramos).

3.5 Conclusion

FEMA may take a self-professed philosophical approach to community, but Occupy Sandy put that philosophy into practice, and the result has been both surprising and inspiring.

Long term success, where someone is permanently active, as opposed to temporarily putting on a hat, you’re more invested that way, it’s in your heart; it’s part of the integrity of the human, to do that...people who didn’t have the self-esteem to get up and do that, are now doing it, so it changes them, it changes you, it changes us, it changes us everybody. In the overall umbrella of it, it goes back to people power; when you can really connect with another human being, all that you needed was access, or a resource, or someone to say to them, you got this, you have the power to do that, I support you. (Ramos)

It is pertinent to wonder, like Manski, if

maybe getting things done in the first days of a collective crisis isn’t about expertise. More than anything, it’s about claiming agency, connecting with front-line communities without a moment’s hesitation...rather than

imposing the cookie-cutter, assembly-line approach that often dehumanizes disaster victims. (2013)

During our personal communication, I suggested to Katherine Ramos that there was a different ethics practiced in FEMA that emphasized the ends: numbered, monetary disbursements (the digital transactions of forms and delivery of cheques) and that the political practice of Occupy Sandy was its ethics of need. Ethics has been lost in politics, because it is considered a separate thing. But Occupy Sandy operates from an ethical standpoint. First, people are coming to the organizers not because they are representatives, but because they have had face-to-face interaction with them. And, secondly, a trust has been built. In this way, ethics is politics. Ramos agreed: “It is the politics, it really is. Because it’s about the people, it’s always been about the people; for us, it’s about putting people above anything else.”

Milstein calls mutual aid a social relation (2012). Likewise, Kropotkin holds that it, more than competition, has allowed animal and human societies to reproduce ([1902] 2006). Before the mediation of capital’s abstractions, the distributed network of potentials lay in a landscape where ‘from each according to ability, and to each according to need’ was the rule. While this may inspire visions of vicious competition for resources, Kropotkin insists that in the face of adversity, the human developed and reproduced through “social qualities, which led him to give and receive aid from his fellow men” (Kropotkin [1902] 2006:91). Occupy Sandy, the thousands of volunteers it mobilized, and most of us, live in a distributed network of capital relations that reproduces itself according to the law of value. Events like Hurricane Sandy break this law by temporarily arresting the network in its distributions, during which time new relations may form.

The humanist in Kropotkin posits mutual aid almost as a spirit running through human history, activated at times of crisis. We may think of it as a plug-in or subprogram, the origins of which are as mystified as human origin itself. Kropotkin describes a battle going on in the human between this ancient programming and the ‘individualistic creed’ embodied in capital relations:

In our mutual relations every one of us has his moments of revolt against the fashionable individualistic creed of the day and action in which men are guided by their mutual aid inclinations constitute so great a part of our

daily intercourse that if a stop to such actions could be put...all further ethical progress would be stopped at once. ([1902] 2006:189)

The work of Occupy Sandy has shown that ethical potential is not completely lost to us. Moreover, the rupture Occupy Wall Street sought to bring to the distributed network of capital relations in 2011 began another new Enlightenment of the sort Bookchin describes—a latent tendency towards mutual aid which Hurricane Sandy actualized. It would be easy to trace the ethical potentialities embodied in the recovery effort to an actor-network including Zucotti, its global counterparts, thousands of voices and bodies coming into tangible spaces, refusing to be divided by capital and its structures. Yet, the historical origin of such events are impossible to fully map, especially with the silence that nonhumans keep. Mystification forms in this silence and never speaks its name, though it may move us.

If groups like Occupy Sandy succeed in establishing greater networks of distributed community relations, we may find that practicing a contingent ethics will become easier, as the structures around us afford more possibility to do so. In the post-capitalist future, if it is an ethical one, we will have forgotten the origins of such structures and will reproduce them unconsciously. For example, regional and sustainable food production will have shed its source in self-reflexive community gardens, having done the work of bonding people and bringing us into a more ethical relationship with our food sources. An ethical fetish, lived by the human and programmed into durable objects and infrastructure will oversee social relations as the commodity fetish does now, silently, nameless.

Afterword

Before taking up the topic of food, my interest was in interrogating the ethics I assumed to be inherent in programs of redistribution, such as social assistance. Upon closer look, I began to see that the ethics of welfare are tied more firmly to capital than to any form of deep-seated human compassion. The intervention of money in redistribution, as in all things, has a tendency of making the recipient beholden to a benefactor—in this case, the state or the market—who in return, is owed accountability, personal information, and civil obedience. As illustrated by Kropotkin ([1892] 2007) and Sen (1982), welfare systems are required because of capitalism's failure as the ideal to achieve prosperity for all. While I moved away from the redistribution of wealth in the form of money, it is not because I think redistributing money to the unemployed or impoverished does more harm than good, an idea I associate with Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead* ([1943] 1996).¹¹⁰ Instead, I wanted to think of redistribution in terms of an object that has more immediate potential for the recipient and greater bonding power than money. Food, for these reasons, is an object of ethical contemplation in and of itself. Of course, a significant portion of welfare funds will be spent by recipients on food, but the direct provision of food creates metabolic capacities that truly form a body's potential in the world. An equal distribution of food to people is a truer measure of equality than an equal distribution of money. Such a measure would be based on Kropotkin's post-capitalist version of political economy, namely the science of social physiology.

What this thesis has demonstrated is just how difficult it is to address the necessity, primacy, and ethical nature of food distribution, when the chasms opened by capital between the human and all things preclude direct ethical activity, because one can rarely act without the intervention of abstractions. So, while I thought I had left money behind, as capital's dearest medium, it appeared again and again as the force undoing all bonds that once may have grounded ethical and ecological transactions between humans and with nonhumans. Though I may be concerned with the direct experience of food, which occurs in the realm of individual consumption, I first had to

¹¹⁰ Rand's Elsworth Toohey is the altruistic antagonist to the individualist protagonist, Howard Roark. As the villain of Rand's novel, Toohey uses his 'altruism' to break the human will.

consider the methods of food production and the distribution of the means of production as the primary sites of the divestment of food's necessity and investment in the commodity form.

I am tempted to say here that food has been divested of its 'value,' but I risk mirroring myself again in the ambiguity of a term that means something different to almost anyone you ask—let alone the stringent definition it is given in Marx's value theory. I previously cited Jane Bennett's aim to see more value distributed to bodies as such (2010:13). Rather unobtrusively, I used a similar turn of phrase to Bennett's later on, but substituted the word 'care' for 'value,' a decision I would like to qualify now.

I have suggested that, between humans and other humans, and humans and nonhumans, there is disproportionate distribution of care (see section 1.4) and that we must seek a greater distribution of care among bodies as such (see section 2.4). While value is the form of labour in the capitalist mode of production, until such time when other forms of value may come to define social relations, I must assign another term to how we ethically relate to or assess other bodies. Thus, I invoke the primordial experience of care (defined in section 1.3) not only as a cognate to value, but its foundation. The evaluative moment is a relation between bodies, as care is the relation of one body confronted with another—an "object-directed emotional and volitional attitude or posture" (Bakhtin [1977-1979] 1999:17). In purely phenomenological terms, we can peg 'value' as this relation between bodies in transaction; in Marx's terms, also, since capitalism appears phenomenally as a 'social relation among things.' Value is a relation, but its objectification in the commodity-form denies direct relations with one another.

The decision to substitute 'care' for 'value' was made only in conclusion to the foregoing chapters, but I think its development will be crucial to finding a more robust definition of what a distributed ethics is. I have posited that our ability to care in the primordial sense is compromised because of wage dependency, and by the mediation of screens and the pollution of distances (see section 1.4). Our attention is either turned only to survival, or refracted by screens. The horizon of care that Heidegger says grounds our being is displaced through these mechanisms, and may only be regained in moments of rupture (*Ereignis*).

My discussion of Occupy Sandy in chapter 3 is where I ground this final supposition. The Occupy volunteers are versed in revolutionary literature and practices, and so, Hurricane Sandy did not necessarily represent a rupture in their thinking, though it was certainly an event drawing their care and giving shape to the distributed potentials they formed in 2011. The rupture's world-changing force is more aptly represented by the survivor's movement towards the revolutionary paradigm, following Occupy's example, but also in recognition of how a dearth in community infrastructure leaves individuals prone in and to crisis. The subsequent projects Occupy has initiated or assisted with in New Jersey are oriented towards a future where decision-making is not distributed only on a global level (Hornborg 2010), but brought back to a human scale, one more conducive to a contingent ethics. At the time of this writing, the potential for self-management and autonomy is forming in the institution of community gardens.

Though regional control of food distribution cannot be solved with one or even a few gardens, it is something that the New Jersey experiment could inspire. "What we want to do is step away from...this national structural thing, and things finally trickling down to the community; it really needs to be rooted in the community," says Katherine Ramos. While the gardens are currently bringing people together in physical work and in conversation, to form stronger community bonds, the garden itself may become the mediating object that 'programs' the community towards a more ethical future, in a similar, but completely opposite fashion to the way that capital's material mediation diverts us from one. Ramos stated further, that in her experience, ideas for community engagement or autonomy were more easily adopted in devastated areas than ones where infrastructure was not compromised, confirming the power of rupture beyond its initially destructive aspects.

In truth, this thesis is only one half of a more encompassing project I wished to complete on the topic of food. The element that I jettisoned because of page and time constraints is connected to the discussion in chapter 1 of food processing, Virilio's theory of speed and acceleration, and primitive accumulation. While I rely heavily on Virilio's phenomenology, he never specifically talks about food and rarely about agriculture. However, in one very interesting passage, he draws a line between

agriculture and the military as antithetical industries: one striating, tied to land, the other, smoothing and land-effacing.

This indelible dichotomy is the one that exists between the nature of the moving-power of invasion and that of the landowner's (or sedentary worker-producer's) relative inability to move, to displace himself, attached as he is to his little parcel of land; the dichotomy between the geography of the inhabitant and that of the passer-by. (Virilio [1977] 2006:92)

While the farm worker himself engages in a personal cycle of reproduction, his work also produces the means of metabolic reproduction for other specialized workers, such as the soldier. As John Armitage and Phil Graham observe, the maintenance of standing armies or regular contracts with mercenaries was “one of the earliest forms of socially institutionalized excess” (2001:115). Virilio's ‘passer-by’ was sustained by the work of the ‘inhabitant,’ and certainly history holds true. Consider the practice of plunder and its institutionalization in the feudal order.

The history of food and the military will be something I pursue as I proceed with my research. The division of life-sustaining and life-depleting forces is an obvious subject, but so is their intersection, which takes several forms. For one, as in so many cases, technological innovation first applied to war has been applied to agriculture. For example, German laboratories devoted to creating solutions to food scarcity through innovations in fertilizers were the same factories that enabled Germany to engage in chemical warfare in WWI (Fraser and Rimas 2010:139). Preservation techniques for food that we still use today—canning and freeze-drying, for example—share a history with war as well. If one is concerned with how the question of ethics is removed from the production of food, the intervention of military technology seems a necessary topic to explore, and a good point of departure.

Going forward, in addition to further developing a definition of distributed ethics, and exploring the dichotomy proposed by Virilio and just described, I intend to unpack some of the arguments made here pertaining to the spectacular nature of food production and packaging. In particular, I believe there is more to be said about the food commodity as a black box, and perhaps as an element in a system of communication. While it only strikes me now as a metaphor, with further study, food itself could be characterized as an object of media archaeological studies, beyond its

usual treatment as an object of cultural studies and anthropology (see, e.g., Parikka 2012). This move could be the element that ties together the topics proposed here: food from the view of a distributed ethics; food as an element of military technology and strategy; and food as an object of communication.

Appendix: Permission to quote from Katherine Ramos

Gmail - Occupy Sandy questions

14-03-25 10:23 AM



Siobhan Watters [REDACTED] >

Occupy Sandy questions

Katt <[REDACTED]>
To: Siobhan [REDACTED] >

Sat, Mar 8, 2014 at 2:32 PM

Hello!!

All is well. Hope you are too. I'm so glad it all worked out and I was able to help. You have explicit permission to quote me.
Hope this helps. :)

Katt Ramos

[Quoted text hidden]

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Curriculum Vitae

Name: Siobhan Mildred Watters

Education

Candidate, Master of Arts in Theory and Criticism, 2013
The Centre for the Study of Theory and Criticism
The University of Western Ontario

Bachelor of Arts, Honors English Literature, 2010
English Language and Literature
The University of Waterloo

Awards

2012-13 Ontario Graduate Scholarship
2011-12 Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Grant
2011-12 MA Entrance Scholarship, The Centre for the Study of Theory and Criticism

Teaching

Teaching Assistant, MIT 2500: "The Meaning of Technology"
Faculty of Information and Media Studies
University of Western Ontario
Fall 2012

Teaching Assistant, MIT 2200: "Mapping Media and Cultural Theory"
Faculty of Information and Media Studies
University of Western Ontario
Fall 2011

Presentations

"Hold Your Horses: The EU Horsemeat Scandal and the Problem of Origin"
Mediations 3.6 – Faculty of Information and Media Studies
University of Western Ontario
March 21, 2014

Respondent, Bernd Frohmann – "General Intellect, Communication, and Contemporary Media Theory"
Mediations 2.7 - Faculty of Information and Media Studies
University of Western Ontario
March 15, 2013