



An Insurgent Ecology of Gestures: Saidiya Hartman's Critical Fabulation as Ecopoetics

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The article explores the work of Saidiya Hartman, and in particular her staging of Black queer desires in *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, from the point of view of ecocritical and new materialist epistemologies, suggesting how Hartman's method of writing and research can be considered part of an "ecopoetics" – that is, of practices of knowing and dwelling that oppose the essentialist, economic, and sociological determinations of the "environments" and "natures" that participate in the articulation of structural racism. Habits and pleasures appear in Hartman's work as something else than a determinable product of their regulation and form instead a broader texture of resistant and lively relations and dependencies that breaks with the sanctioned and the expected – a queer, insurgent, ecology of gestures. In this way, the lives of Black queer women in early 20th Century US slums and ghettos Hartman writes about can be proposed as a paradigm of what Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands calls "eco-sexual resistance," where what is stressed through the ecocritical framework is the radical interdependency and the common and contingent, material and sensuous, dimension of every political act.

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*our footsteps hold this place
together
as our place
our joint decisions make the possible
whole.*

Audre Lorde, Walking Our Boundaries

In these verses, the garden Lorde and her lover revisit at the end of winter becomes a place through their pacing: space and presence are entangled with the materiality of their feelings and their gestures. The two “our” in the poem, in this sense, can be read not as an affirmation of property, though property and belonging mean something different for the dispossessed than they do for those entitled to them, but as the claim to a mutual relation of care: the garden is there for them, who are there for it, inseparable from each other. Boundaries, here, are not the borders of occupation, segregation, and securitarian capitalism (see Mbembe 2020, 132 and 152), marking and separating people from within and without, but the reach of experience that the gestures and the poem extend across bodies, connecting them and crafting spaces, times, and possibilities (see Barad 2007, 136; Haraway 1988, 590).

The poem establishes the erotic proximity and mutual dependency of the two women’s bodies, a closeness and dependency of which these bodies are composed, there and then, together with a lone okra pod still clinging to the vine, a compost heap, and the branches of an apple tree which may or may not hold their promise of spring. “Joint decisions,” then, are not just about what the two women will do, though will and action again mean something different for the oppressed than they do for the oppressors, and may imply instead a broader, common unfolding of being. The last “our” may be taken, indeed, not to refer exclusively to humans. It does not stop at the brink of the poem, either, but reaches towards us, making us part of it, too.

Lorde may not have been seeking the posthumanist interpretation I am suggesting, but the poem may have found it and made it possible, still: as Wendy Delorme repeats in *Le Chant de la Rivière*, “the text has its own reasons” (2024, 27). Forms of life beyond our grasp sustain the erotic and poetic gestures that outline a place and a “we” to our experience. In turn, it is only through this shared agency that, as Lorde suggests, the possible can appear in its own, peculiar, plenitude.

This fragment we can use as a prism: to disperse, as it were (Barad 2007, 29; also see Haraway 2022, 320), and name what I think are two joint components of Saidiya Hartman’s literary and historical evocation of Black queer resistance and desires in her book *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*. One aspect of this we can call the gesturality of place: the material performativity (see Barad 2008, 122) that holds places and lives inseparably together, as opposed to the identitarian enforcement of borders that, instead, uses spatialisation to discriminate and kill. The other we can call the materiality of the possible: the understanding that possibility is itself a material and situated practice, dependent upon relationality and sharing. This means that possibility as such is always vulnerable and that it can be suppressed and destroyed (see Alaimo 2016, 5), but also that it has a concrete force of its own that we can foster and depend upon.

If matter itself is made of contingent encounters, phenomenal entanglements, or intra-actions (Barad 2007, 33), a place does not exist prior to the forces, the relations and the gestures, the attachments and disattachments, the alliances and betrayals, the violences and the liberations, that can be said to traverse it, simultaneously constituting

it and reshaping it. This particular entanglement can be understood as a specific sense of “political ecology,” which stresses not only the radical connections between ecologist, anti-colonial, queer, and anti-capitalist struggles, but also the intertwining of human and nonhuman agencies (Bennett 2009, 108), of bodies and environments (Barad 2007, 170), and the fundamental potentiality and “inoperativity” (the lack of predetermined qualities and essential purpose, see Agamben 2017, 594-595, 599, and 1112) of matter itself.

In the same way, the possibility of resistance and subversion, which we know to exist even under the most extreme conditions of violence and oppression, must exist materially while we are still unfree. Political potentiality is present, not ideally but relationally and tangibly, in the very environment that is bent on making it impracticable and unthinkable. This potentiality, in other words, should not be understood as an abstract quality emanating from humanist and bourgeois conceptions of the subject of rights, pre-existing and untouched by the concrete conditions and practices in which freedom and unfreedom are affirmed and contested (see Marcuse 1972, 56-58), but rather as a political aspect of “materialization” (Butler 2011, xii-xiii), which can be communicated and nurtured collectively. Many political actions and discourses that are dismissed as “utopian” or ineffective, and many more everyday practices that are not even deemed to be political, play in fact a fundamental role in the constitution of this “trans-corporeal” (Alaimo 2016, 2) potentiality of liberation.

It is precisely at this point of convergence of the impersonal materiality of agency, relational autonomy (Freeman 2011), and the insurgent politics of everyday life, queer and ecopoetic dis-identification and subjectivation, that, I think, new materialism and ecocritical thought can be made to encounter Lorde’s and Hartman’s work.

The borderlands of the archive

We wear our scars like armor for protection.

Julie Dash, Daughters of the Dust

Saidiya Hartman, a writer and a scholar in African American studies, has published three books. *Scenes of Subjection* (Hartman 1997) articulates a feminist analysis of sexual violence under slavery and its silencing in slave narratives with a critique of the disciplinary framing of Black emancipation through the “burdened individuality of freedom” (Hartman 1997, 62; 121-122) in the context of post-reconstruction white supremacy. *Lose Your Mother* (Hartman 2007) is a confrontation with, and personal localisation of, the losses and distances created by the transatlantic slave trade and its ongoing consequences, but also a work that embraces the radical alliances and forms of solidarity that emerged as part of dispossession. This material legacy of loss and rebellion Hartman opposes to what she considers in many cases to be an idealised discourse of “roots”, with reference to the popular work by Alex Haley, that would attempt to reinstate a genealogy of national belonging and to dream up allegiances to privilege and power precisely where, in the formation of Atlantic diasporic lives and cultures of Black liberation, not only a counter-history but an alternative type of history can be written, and a dissident idea of heritage and belonging can be imagined (Hartman 2007, 7; 74; 97).

Historians of the subaltern have to

grapple with the power and authority of the archive and the limits it sets on what can be known, whose perspective matters, and who is endowed with the gravity and authority of historical actor. (Hartman 2019, xiii)

Hartman's first two books intervened in questioning the possibilities and limits of the historical archive in reconstructing the lives of the enslaved and the disinherited, as well as the ethical and literary questions that arise with this practice. How to write the history of those whose history was erased, without either reproducing or disavowing this erasure? How to speak the words that were not spoken?

Life worlds disappeared and destroyed; the names of places that would never be remembered and all the names of persons that would never be uttered again. [...] To what extent can the archive represent the 'place' that these missing black bodies, denied the 'safe space' of the marked burial space, have come to (un)rest? (Saunders and Hartman 2008, 4 and 1)

Wanting to do more than recounting the violence that deposited these traces in the archive or prevented them from being recorded at all (see Hartman 2008, 2), Hartman reflected on the necessity "to imagine what cannot be verified" and on the costs of not doing this "work of imagination" – for a historian, as well as for history and politics at large (Saunders and Hartman 2008, 7 and 12).

Her following book, published ten years later, will be such an attempt to create a speculative "narrative of what might have been or could have been; a history written with and against the archive" (Hartman 2008, 12). Moving from but also beyond the historical records, then – walking the borderlands of the archive, as it were – she "fabricate[s] a witness" to deaths and lives, joys and rebellions, that were not much noticed (Hartman 2008, 8). *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (Hartman 2019, recently translated in Italian by Maria Iaccarino) is thus at once a historical and a speculative account of the errant paths traced by young Black women, of the pleasurable subversions and communal luxuries (Hartman 2019, 324), that were made possible, against all kinds of violence and normative determinations, in the slums and ghettos in Northern US at the beginning of the Twentieth century.

The disciplinary discursive-material environment of the slum and the ghetto is confronted with the tensions that are introduced in it by whatever is "errant, fugitive, recalcitrant, anarchic, wilful, reckless, troublesome, riotous, tumultuous, rebellious and wild" (Hartman 2019, 227). Hartman defines these "wayward" gestures, evocatively, as

the social poesis that sustains the dispossessed [...] to strike, to riot, to refuse, to love what is not loved [...] the practice of the social otherwise, the insurgent ground that enables new possibilities and new vocabularies [...] a queer resource of black survival [...] a practice of possibility at a time when all roads, except the ones created by *smashing out*, are foreclosed. (Hartman 2019, 227-228)

Wayward lives in Hartman's work are sometimes "explicitly" queer – like in the sections dedicated to Gladys Bentley's lesbian relations and cross-dressing performances – but the book actually proposes a queer look on every aspect of Black women lives that escaped or were forcibly excluded from the dominant complex of racial and gender norms. After establishing a methodological standpoint in the introduction and the first two sections, which offer a critique of the sociological imaginary of the slum and of the

violent capture of life through the compelled picture and implied rape of a very young Black girl by the photographer Thomas Eakins, Hartman's work proceeds as a series of short narratives of ordinary rebellion and non-normative living and dwelling, not only exposing the various forms of violent normalisation imposed on Black women at the onset of modernity, but frequently returning on spontaneous gestures and queer desires as fundamental sites of politics and subversion. Un-ruly and queer lives are posited, in this sense, as the general erotico-political ground of feminist resistance.

With this work, Hartman takes a further and radical step in her politics of aesthetics, theorising the entanglement of history and fiction as a necessary tool in the making and the telling of liberation, putting in practice an imaginative form of (historical, political, and erotic) writing, which she named "critical fabulation" (Hartman 2008, 11). *Wayward Lives* creates a counter-narrative about rebellious Black lives under the first Jim Crow (Hartman, 2019, xiv) that is fashioned from archival material but speaks of what the archive was, in fact, set to destroy: the insurgent, collective, potentiality of ordinary gestures of disobedience and enjoyment.

Hartman's method is, deliberately, an intersectional and poetic repurposing of Foucault's *Lives of Infamous Men* (Hartman 2008, 2): an aesthetico-political project of testimony and invention of the matter of Black lives and desires, against their reduction within the police sociology that both produced and was used to describe apparati of white supremacy like the ghetto, the prison, and the reformatory. The book, Hartman writes, "recreates the radical imagination and wayward practices of [...] young [Black] women by describing the world through their eyes" (2019, xiii), in order to "recover the insurgent ground of these lives" and to "illuminate the radical imagination and everyday anarchy of ordinary colored girls" (2019, xiv).

Hers is not so much an exercise in representation, then, than one of "inhabiting" (Hartman 2019, xiii). For Hartman, this means both to acknowledge and use the localisation of her knowledge and practice as a writer – making "the voice of the narrator and character" inseparable (2019, xiii) – and to break open (2019, xiv) historical and disciplinary documents so that the lives they contained will be able to project their possibilities into the present (Hartman 2008, 12). Hartman's idea of critical fabulation may be seen to be, in part, responding to Julie Dash's use of the term "speculative fiction" to characterise her own expansive way of adapting the history of slavery to cinema in her famous film *Daughters of the Dust* (USA 1991) (see Erhart 1996, 117-118). Both texts indeed address the "as if," potential, aspect of history, engage in a project of self-documentation which is seen as an essential part of survival (Erhart 1996, 121) and understand their use of history and fiction not just in terms of remembrance but as "generative work" (Erhart 1996, 129). These ways of thinking the intertwining of history, politics, and fabulation, in some respects at least, could be further connected with some strands of contemporary Black American science fiction, reaching from the other side the same threshold between storytelling and testimony that is touched upon by Octavia Butler in *Kindred* or, more recently, by Rivers Solomon in *An Unkindness of Ghosts* (see Reynolds 2023; Schultz 2023). Hartman's work, however, presents a further commitment to specific lives and concrete places that, I think, moves it further away from the logic of representation and brings it closer instead to the ontology and epistemology of material entanglements that are explored in contemporary ecofeminist theory.

“An everyday choreography of the possible”

*for the embattled
there is no place
that cannot be
home
nor is.*

Audre Lorde, School Note

The gesturality of place and the materiality of the possible follow after a model of politics based on a relational and material understanding of agency (see Gaard 2018, 98-99), rather than on a humanist and liberal affirmation of rights, or on a vertical pedagogy of emancipation (see Rancière 2009, 19-21). What Hartman’s *Wayward Lives* may be taken to add to this paradigm is a recognition of the ungovernable and desiring aspect of the material entanglements that construct and reinvent Black lives as fugitive lives (see Bey 2019, 5).

Esther Brown was sentenced to three years of reformatory under violation of the Tenement House Law for nothing else than being seventeen and Black, an unwed mother, and sexually free (Hartman 2019, 238-239; also see Fischer 2022). About her, Hartman writes:

She knew first-hand that the offense most punished by the state was trying to live free. To wander through the streets of Harlem, to want better than what she had, and to be propelled by her whims and desires was to be ungovernable. Her way of living was nothing short of anarchy. (Hartman 2019, 230)

Brown is presented as a Black *flaneuse* and a general striker against the biopolitical regulation of life. Invested by her hunger for beauty (Hartman 2019, 235), the city is materially transformed:

an everyday choreography of the possible unfolded in the collective movement [...] this repertoire of practices composed her knowledge. Her thoughts were indistinguishable from the transient rush and flight of black folks in this city-within-the-city. (Hartman 2019, 234-235)

Brown’s beautiful experiments in living *as if* she were free broke with the moral and material demands of capitalism (work, behave properly, look up to the people who exploit you), which are regularly cast as a requisite for freedom onto those who cannot enjoy it as an entitlement in the first place. In this sense, young Black women like Esther Brown were the uncredited models for the sexual modernists to come (Hartman 2019, xv) and radically political subjects. They were, like the title character in Toni Morrison’s *Sula*, where the expression comes from, “artists without an art form” (Hartman 2019, 60), transforming the world by working in the medium of life itself – a cheaper one, inescapable, if not more easily malleable, than even poetry can be (see Lorde 1993, 116).

Cut by the errant paths of “too fast” Black women, the slum becomes a whole world “intoxicated with freedom” (Hartman 2019, 8). Hartman describes early Twentieth century Harlem as a material and erotic continuum (see Rich 1980, 650; also see Lorde 1993, 55), where moans and music merge with the brush of a stranger’s hand and the smoke from a corncob pipe (Hartman 2019, 8), “communal luxury” (Hartman 2019, 324) sets the rooftops alight, and lives, imagined and otherwise, mingle along the fall of the tenements’ air-shafts (Hartman 2019, 183).

In the context of the confinement of Black lives in the ghetto, the dismissal of the political dimension of this continuum of pleasure and subsistence would lead to a reproduction of the logic of criminalisation and enslavement.

What the law designated as crime were the forms of life created by young black women in the city. The modes of intimacy and affiliation being fashioned, the refusal to labor, the ordinary forms of gathering and assembly, the practices of subsistence and making do were under surveillance and targeted not only by the police but also by the sociologists and the reformers who gathered the information and made the case against them, forging their lives into tragic biographies of crime and pathology. (Hartman 2019, 236)

In the photographs of the slum taken by social reformers on which Hartman's book opens, the "terrible beauty" of the slum and its "communal wealth" are made invisible by the very form of visibility that these pictures established – "an optic of visibility and surveillance that had its origins in slavery and the administered logic of the plantation" (Hartman 2019, 20).

Even the young W. E. B. Du Bois, whom Hartman casts as a character in a section titled "An Atlas of the Wayward," cannot resist dismissing as immoral the brazen lust a couple of women cast on a pair of flashy man's shoes, dreaming of the man who would be bold enough to wear them and of the person they would have to become in order to walk at his side (Hartman 2019, 81-84). The contrast that Hartman establishes between the sociological and moralistic gaze of the young Du Bois and the erotic and riotous one of the two girls speaks to the limitations imposed on the politics of emancipation by the curbing of the erotic and the devaluation of the "uneducated" agency of anonymous people. Limitations that tend to be functional to the conservation of a bourgeois elite and may end up supporting racist oppression and capitalist exploitation.

The material-political continuum which Hartman individuates as the insurgent ground of the "escape subsistence" of the Black city (Hartman 2019, 17), deposes the dualism that articulates as separate the individual and the collective, theory and practice, material environments and political potentialities. Where the slum and then the ghetto worked as instruments of structural violence, part of the changing forms of white supremacy in the history of the US (see Alexander 2010), and as a necropolitical architectural and socio-economic system that construed Black lives as dispensable, exploitable, and fundamentally "unliveable," Hartman makes it possible to imagine the gestures that broke with this "everyday eugenics" (Hartmann, 2006) and crafted instead the possibility of pleasure and anarchy within the very spaces of oppression (see Ingram 2010, 255-256).

Bodies do not simply exist in an environment and environments do not simply encircle them: both bodies and environments are constituted in their mutual relations (Barad 2007, 170). This makes it impossible to draw clear lines of relation between causes and effects, violence and responsibilities, from a deterministic or purely juridical standpoint, without recurring to political and ecological frames of reference. Where structural segregation and precarisation concretely subordinated the population to an "abstract calculus of power and identity" (see Alaimo 2013, 10) in which lives themselves were captured and spent, with little hope of transforming themselves or their conditions of existence, Hartman's perspective "re-enchants" (Federici 2019, 8) the Black inner city into a space of queer potentiality.

The chorus

*when I am done
each shard will spring up
complete and armed
like a warrior woman
hot to be dealt with
Audre Lorde, Chorus*

The lives of Black wayward women Hartman evokes through her critical fabulation constitute in this sense forms of “eco-sexual resistance” that can be seen to produce “a queering of ecocultural relations along the lines of Halbestram’s queering of space” (Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson 2010, 21-22). At the same time, Hartman’s work implicitly recognises that, as Greta Gaard put it, rejecting colonization requires “embracing the erotic in all its diversity” (1997, 132).

This way of thinking not only confirms the possible convergence of queer and abolitionist struggles, but, I think, affirms their constitutive entanglement. In this sense, *Wayward Lives* can be located at the meeting point of an emergent, insurgent, corpus of scholarship on Black geographies and ecologies (Moulton and Salo 2022, 157) and of a continuing Black radical tradition of material “ecopoetics” (see Moulton and Salo 2022, 160).

Foregrounding the physical spaces and environmental realities from which insurgent Black knowledge and critiques are articulated, Black ecologies scholarship calls attention to material place-making practices that evidence Black resistance to displacement and degradation. (Moulton and Salo 2022, 164)

Moulton and Salo intend “poetics” as a complex of practices of dwelling, in a way that is close to Hartman’s own reference Michel de Certeau (1988; Hartman 2008, 14), merging the poetry of the everyday with the Marxist concept of *praxis* as the effective combination of theory and political action. If we add to this definition forms of spontaneous insurrection, clandestine subsistence, and queer “dis-identification” (Preciado 2022, 25; 559), we obtain the whole subversive art of “plotting” the possible (see Roane 2018; Wynter 1971) that emerges in Hartman’s book. We can, in this way, reconceive Griffiths’s ecopoetics (2021, 74; 83-84) in the broader terms of a queer and abolitionist politics of form.

Hartman’s work rejoins queer ecofeminism from the other side of the assignments that define the ghetto: showing how the collective insurgence of queer desires configures an ecology of gestures that stands against the “economy” of natures and dispositions under white supremacy and, more broadly, the idea of a judgement and a government of lives (see Agamben 2017, 369-371; 2018, 83-84). Capitalism’s permanent process of primitive accumulation (Federici 2010, 101) can be interpreted from this perspective as a matter of transforming ecologies into economies – that is, of transforming complex material-discursive, human-nonhuman, subjective and environmental entanglements, into essentialised and mappable systems of operations and separate objects that can be controlled and exploited in a general instrumentalisation of matter, relationality, and being.

From an economy of environmental conditions causing and caused by “naturalized qualities,” we shift, then, to an ecology of gestures and “forms-of-life” – that is, as Agamben argues, to human lives “entirely removed from the grasp of the law and [to]

a use of bodies and of the world that would never be substantiated into an appropriation” (Agamben 2017, 889). Ecology and in particular an “ecology of gestures” can be understood then as a mode of knowledge and dwelling that is opposed to the economic and the sociological – a continuum and a commons that, in exploring and affiliating with all lives and all matter(s) (see Chisholm in *Queer Ecologies* 375), stands against the commodification and the government of the world.

Even though Hartman herself does not refer to ecofeminism, her idea of the insurrectional, queer, politics of life and desire in *Wayward Lives* is coherent with the engagement with materiality at the core of the various strands of queer and feminist new materialism – broadly intended as practices of knowledge and dwelling that address a material-political commonality of being, before and beyond the anthropocentric, the colonial, and the cis heteronormative boundaries of the human. In this sense, community and agency in Hartman can be said to be “ecologically conceived” (see Code 2006, viii; 4; 179) and constitute a “radically relational ecology” (see Griffiths 2021, 74) where what we are is nothing but whatever shared possibilities arise in our gestures. Without using this language, Hartman constantly stresses the impersonal, co-constructed, and transcorporeal quality of gestures of defiance and desire against the set forms that lives are assigned to by biopolitical and necropolitical power. Twisting a path, as it does, toward an ecology of liberation from the survival economy of entrapment, material deprivation, and denial of hope to which Black lives are condemned (see Fanon 2002, 89), Hartman’s ecopoetics does not address nonhuman materialities, but remains nevertheless constantly in touch with what we could call the impersonal dimension of politics – with a materiality that lies before and after the subject. Hartman’s closest name for this materiality in *Wayward Lives* is “the chorus,” the figure of an anonymous, communal, and performative gesture of claiming and sharing the possibilities of life. “To dance within an enclosure,” the chorus “bears it all” and “opens the way” (Hartman 2019, 347; 345).

The chorus conjures the promise that this night might never end, that there is no world but this one, that everything is possible, that the reservoir of life is limitless. (Hartman 2019, 196)

This is, of course, very different from the capitalist “everything is possible if you just do it” ideology, for it names the possibility of living where this possibility is denied. It is not imagined as the realisation of a potential, of a privilege, according to existing dispositions, either, but as a material-discursive reconfiguration of the sayable and the seeable – as “dissensus” (Rancière 2010, 37).

It is not really that dance and the chorus make liberation possible in the Black city, then, but on the contrary that they become possible as part of Black fugitive life only because they are movements of liberation *in the first place*. Dance is a gesture, in Agamben’s sense (2018, 84), only when, as Hartman puts it, it begins as “an arrangement of the body to elude capture, an effort to make the uninhabitable liveable” (Hartman 2019, 302). Politics, in this view, is an indissociable part of the materialisation of gestures and places rather than a consequence or a property of specific “techniques”. What is affirmed in *Wayward Lives* as the material ground of emancipation and resistance is a common dissensual body of relational dependencies: an insurgent ecology of gestures.

On the one hand, this is meant as a way of using the relational and environmental idea of agency that emerged in ecofeminist studies to describe the material ground of political and performative practices: gestures are seen to form contingent ecological

complexes, rather than to be expressions of a naturalised and normative order of natures and dispositions. On the other, ecologically conceived relations and intra-actions are invested with an immediately political dimension, not in terms of their biopolitical management but precisely as “insurgent” – that is, as constituting forms of agency and resistance to their inscription within structures and techniques of government (see Roane 2023, 4-6). I believe that some of the ways to move beyond the bio-political split upon which various forms of power in modernity rest, from extractivism to male and white supremacy, can be thought in this still nebulous field where our understandings of gesturality, ecology, and insurgency overlap.

Liberation, from this perspective, begins with the material presence and the concrete feeling of potentiality that is tended to and expressed in the struggle to live a free and shared life. In the gap between biopolitical violence and the arts of subsistence, between disciplinary regulation and the anarchy of everyday acts of resistance, silence is broken and lives are put at stake irreparably in their gestures (see Agamben 2017, 1184-1885). Liberation appears then in the first instance as a radically queer form of materialisation and dis-identification: only in the gestures that depose power and norms and embrace an ecologically conceived relationality can the possible become whole.

Spin-off: a material-discursive commons

Gesture names, in Agamben, the materiality of language: both in terms of its performative effects before and beyond signification and in terms of its entanglement with the constitutive ethics, relationality, and contingent history of the performing body itself. Gesture is not a matter of gestures as movements of the body, or as techniques of the body, but of the expression of being in language itself (Agamben 1999, 77-78). Gesture neither acts nor makes but “bears” and “supports” (Agamben 2000, 56-57): in this sense, for Agamben, it is immediately ethical and, we can add, radically material in the senses that are explored in contemporary feminist materialism. In other words, gesture deposes the distinction between “ideal” thought and “concrete” action, natures and possibilities, appearing thus as an alternative paradigm of agency and as the material-discursive, localised, contingent, wayward, common, and ecological ground of being and politics as such.

Life beyond its instrumentalisation and spectacular alienation is, for Agamben, “that which ceaselessly deposes the social conditions in which it finds itself to live” (Agamben 2017, 1275): form-of-life, in this sense, is wayward life, entirely at stake in its gestures. Agamben’s ideas of potentiality and gesture, understood in terms of a founding destitution of established forms and categories of being, can, here, be connected with queer and anarchist epistemologies and struggles and thus allow for an encounter between his genealogy of biopower and new materialism as well. Unwittingly, for sure (for ecology as well as anti-colonial struggles, feminism, or queer liberation are kept silent in Agamben’s work), when Agamben is writing that “politics is the sphere of pure means, that is, of the absolute and complete gesturality of human beings,” he can be taken to be arguing for the queer performativity of lives and for the materiality of political agency (see Agamben 2000, 60).

Potentiality emerges thus, I think, as a fundamental aspect of both politics and matter. Indeed, we cannot think potentiality as a linguistic, rational, and volitional break from the constraints of material “nature,” without eventually reproducing the normative, retrospective, construction of “natures” that is central to white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy (see Wynter 2003, 304-305; Haraway 1988, 592).

Understanding potentiality as gestural, as Agamben suggests, would mean instead not only that politics and ethics are at once material and discursive but also that materiality and politics exist without solution of continuity. If there is an obvious materiality to the politics of survival, subsistence, and escape, this also implies that there is a politicalness that is inherent to matter and takes the form of dissensus, inoperativity, and destituent power – that is, of a contestation and thwarting of the power of disciplinary apparatus to define what is real and possible in the first place (Barad 2007, 133). This is, to me, a further and crucial way of reading politically the entanglement of materiality and discourse that is characteristic of new materialist theory (see Højme 2024). Rather than imagining the material as prediscursive ground, or exclusively as the retrospective construction of discourse, we can think about it in terms of what necessarily exceeds and escapes, co-constitutes and transforms, disciplinary constructions, while being part of complex entanglements that are indistinguishably ecological and political and that cannot be addressed or “solved” beyond our own commitments to them. In other words: political potentiality and ecological entanglements, inseparably, are our material-discursive commons. New feminist materialism and Hartman’s work, from their different standpoints, elaborate and trace ecopoetic practices that can account for this sharing and enfolding, while being part of a general questioning of the boundaries that limit the ways in which we dwell on this planet.

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