

Harry Dodge

GONE, GONE. YOUR SHIT IS GONE: Notes on the Poetics of Anxiety & Interpenetration

Unabridged text on Matthew Barney's *River of Fundament*, presented in a conversation that included myself, Lanka Tattersall and Anna Sew Hoy
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Front row at the mass games
Untraceable by name
You speak of us in certain circles you will be dethroned or detained
Gone, gone
Your shit is gone, gone
When you come out your shit is gone

I'm in your area, I'm in your area [x2]
I know the first three numbers, I'm in [x2]
I'm in your area, I'm in your area [x2]
I know the first three numbers, I'm in [x2]

--*Death Grips, "Hacker" from The Money Store, 2012*

By way of opening, I should tell you that I view the sculptures on display here at MOCA as readable primarily in light of the film. Perhaps because that is the order in which I encountered them, but also because I know that Barney thinks of the film as sculpture in time. Now when I say the film I am, of course, referring to the almost 6-hour film, *River of Fundament* that Barney created with Jonathan Bepler over the last seven years—and which premiered across the nation during the course of this year, 2015.

Initially, I have to say, beyond the clearly overwhelming erotics of Big Materiality, the drama of duration, and the achingly manifest grid of white male anxiety, I was most caught up by the river of multiple Normans, his death—in increments—and the way “he” morphed, as he died, *when* he died, (it seemed like a process of shape-shifting and he seemed to be in and out of the underworld at once). He went from handsome white man to an old white man, some other folks (or so I understood), and finally a character played by Chief Dave Beautiful Bald Eagle. At one point we hear group after group of people goading him to just get on with it, “Die Norman, Die. Just die already.” (Or was that my homunculus talking?) **Norman**, the fellow's name, reminded me of **normal**, the *imperative*. I started thinking, this is one damn long funeral movie.

And so I became convinced that I needed to figure out who exactly was dying. It couldn't really just be Norman Mailer? Could I leap to reading it as the slow complex decline of the hegemonic power of the white elite? The fish-dance of capitalism? (Consider all the *muscle*: cars, boys, spectacle—manifold awe-inducing exhibitions of exploitive colonialist *industry!*—a lightly critical image-parade of industrial pollution, and a fantasia of historical/stereotypical/(hysterio-typical?) garb donned by the structural others of European humanism). Who was dying for 6 hours while we watched? Was it *nostalgic*? I mean was Norman sitting in for some a kind of **dandier** old-school machismo that had been uncaringly cast aside and let to rot? This was a lament! Aw shit, who doesn't love those old fuckers: Hemingway, Mailer, Updike. Harold Bloom (who bobs up in the wake scene) in the *Anxiety of Influence* contends that the young male poets are in such a tizzy about being historicized as geniuses that they can't

help but copy their predecessors. *That it's a paradox and a problem for them.* By the end of the film it had struck me as entirely possible that in an extended flourish of irony, Barney was self-parodying several things. Among them: a generalized white elite American fear of dislocation of supremacy, in tandem with (the same dynamic but writ person-sized) Barney's own very real grief about Mailer's demise. Or, related, that the ostentatiousness of so many of the performances (which were by turns intemperate, wasteful, toxic, grandiose, awesome, uncanny, violent and majestic) that these endeavors were self-consciously onanistic: orgies of industry somehow both smug and critical. To be clear, while watching, I started to think it was self-satire, among other things.

I tend to view art through a historical lens first, "What's going on in the world contemporaneously with the making of this thing—how is this relevant *right now*? Or even, "Who or what is this work dialoguing with?" So let me set the scene here for a moment. In terms relevant, I think, to the show, and relevant to social justice, the year might be summarizedⁱ as follows:

- ongoing campus disquiet, primarily at the University of Missouri, during which the departure of the president astonished the nation, exposing the broader American public to the old Jim Crow racism still commonplace at colleges;
- the removal of the confederate flag from the State House in South Carolina following mass protests;
- furor in Baltimore—and now Chicago—confirms that the Black Lives Matter movement is continuing growth (unabated by reverse-racism rhetorics generated by mainstream news outlets);
- wealth inequality spirals ever-higher, austerity programs are scrutinized across the globe, while the largest ever demonstration for fair wages—the "fast food-food strikes"—in the US occur and the protests blossom internationally;
- a billionaire who openly ignites racist and fascist sentiments explodes in popularity as he threatens to dismantle the Constitution, deport millions of immigrants and close our borders to Muslims. Simultaneously, a Democratic socialist attracts massive gatherings while championing living wages, single-payer health coverage and political revolution against the autocrats.

And the work, especially the film *River of Fundament*—conceived of during the 2008 financial crisis and constructed during Barak Obama's two terms in the White House, seems to me to bear the marks of its inception. Following the financial crisis which, as you may know, was attended by a blitz of Occupy encampments, mainstream white America was enveloped by (both the experience and narrative of) queasy solicitude. In the angry populist afterglow of the bailout, white America began grappling with its own self-image, the direction of the country's course, the unexamined politics of "individual personal responsibility," the decades-held faith in the unassailability of greed, and—attending these disillusionments—a sudden clarity that the "game had been rigged" against them (too!). These chunks of fusty emotional scrap decomposed into a ground—now fertile—out of which quickly grew the fear of "dislocation of supremacy."ⁱⁱ (Or, depending on your bent, fear of dislocation of the illusion of supremacy. Or even, fear of dislocation of the possibility for eventual supremacy.)

I think it's also helpful to note that the film was released now, here, during a couple of years stretch characterized fundamentally—not by a rise in—but by sudden public attention on apparently unfettered, unpunished racialized violence by U.S. police and policies. In the wake of this publicity, this broader conversation, the resulting protests, activism and study have been painful, intense and important. Since so much of America's past is the story of some few (white elite) Americans' affluence being built on the subjugation of other Americans, exposing these still-brutal, still-staggering injustices is bound to provoke a profound sense of apprehension for those bent on continuing a status quo.

And, since climate change is inarguably at issue in *River of Fundament*, let's throw the Paris climate talks—which ended two weeks ago—into the mix. The 24-hour news cycle shamelessly baits and switches the wholly-consuming but mostly sublimated dread generated by facts about climate change. We hear about terrorism, shootings, plots. We hear about immigrants, refugees, as threats to "our way of life" rather than any information about how to go about stopping the pollution now causing such great changes to the surface of the planet. I mean how exactly is it possible to characterize "terrorists" or "immigrants" as *existential threats* when pollution itself has progressed to the point at which we are now able to predict and describe details related to the cessation of all human life?

In considering Barney's infusion of white male anxiety with images of resplendent industrial effluence-effect, I remembered having read a paragraph in Naomi Klein's book, [This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs the Climate](#), in which she observes

...study after study showing absolutely clear correlations between a refusal to accept the science of climate change and social and economic privilege. So, overwhelmingly, climate change deniers are not only conservative but also white and male, a group with higher than average incomes. And they are also more likely than other adults to be highly confident in their views, no matter how demonstrably false... Given the expansive challenge that climate change poses to the industrial capitalist economic system, it shouldn't be surprising that conservative white males' strong system-justifying attitudes would be triggered to deny climate change..... If the free market system really has set in motion physical and chemical processes that, if allowed to continue unchecked, threaten large parts of humanity at an existential level, then their entire crusade to morally redeem capitalism has been for naught. ... As soon as they admit that climate change is real, they'll lose the central ideological battle of our time, because climate change detonates the ideological scaffolding on which contemporary conservatism rests. A belief system that vilifies collective action and declares war on all corporate regulation and all things public simply cannot be reconciled with a problem that demands collective action on an unprecedented scale, a dramatic reigning in of the market forces that are responsible for creating and deepening the crisis.

The experiment is over, the results are in. If we are ever to cope with climate change in a fundamental way, the kinds of urgent changes prescribed by scientists, philosophers and thinkers the world over are surprisingly "social" (in a fresh, absolutely broad and radical sense of the word) at their fulcrums. In short, to be effective, these solutions demand an *entirely new economic model and a new way of sharing the planet*. And we're going to need to pull it off *without delay*. According to the International Energy Agency "If we do not get our emissions under control by 2017 our fossil fuel economy will *lock-in* extremely dangerous warming... we either change now or we'll lose our chance...."ⁱⁱⁱ

Klein suggests that this sort of urgent transformation is possible but not "without challenging the fundamental logic of deregulated capitalism." She quotes Henry Red Cloud, a Lakota educator and entrepreneur who teaches young Native people to become solar engineers. Red Cloud tells his students that there are moments when we should be OK with small steps forward—and there are other times "when you need to run like a buffalo. Now is one of those times when we must run."^{iv}

Put—perhaps too—simply, what's on the table is gargantuan-scaled-international-collective action implicit within which is a full transfiguration of the ethoi/machinery that caused the crisis in the first place. Collaborative survival. We don't just need to clean messes in other words, though we need to do that too, we need to launch and cultivate new paradigmatic approaches. One part of this is to stop the capitalist war on all things public or common, right? (And the terms of this are complicated no doubt, depending on what senses of the words *public* and *common* you're employing) but staying within the allotted time here, let's just say this is necessarily attended by an urgent re-thinking of what it means when we say the word, *self*. At the very core of this trajectory is a question about our bodies existing as utterly separate from the rest of the material world. Human exceptionalism makes a certain kind of sense (we are after all, surely amazing collections of particulate matter!) but only if it can be attenuated by a massive shift in how we value matter in general. The cultivation of a radical awareness of our human bodies as being *made of, interpenetrated by, dependent on* the world *out there*, will take some study. And while some of the study is straightforward, easy to take in, other ideas I've been riding for months with very little headway. I won't have time to demarcate all of the concepts at issue but I can describe a few. And it starts with looking at particles, matter, and materialism in a new way.

And I think *River of Fundament*, the show, is absolutely in dialogue with some of these thematics. There's something I want to throw out about Barney's show, how it's relating to a version of our contemporaneity—and it has to do with how we relate to matter and how that can press on a question of ethics. Now, as Mark DiSuvero once said, "Sculpture deeply and basically, IS." Barney has not only made a very baroque and filigreed portrait of white male anxiety related to a "detonation of ideological undergirding," as I've suggested above—but is also playing the side of the environment at least insofar as he has constructed and presented massive spectacles of material magix—which I'm going to try to read here as a kind of claim to or performance of commitment to and engagement with matter—one that is filial, nuptial, and libertine all at once. Another way of saying that is, I think Barney is awake to penetration by what philosopher Rosi Braidotti calls, "eco-others."

I almost don't even need to state that in this film, Barney seems to be fundamentally interested in the fundament. Simply put, I think he is thunderstruck by molecules, chemical bonds, chemical reactions...in short, what matter *likes to do*. He is a voyeur, as are many of us, always hot to see another hobbyist explosion, regardless

how minor. Pyromania, objectophilia, crash erotics. Now I've heard people alarmed that the sex in the movie wasn't hot. But I would argue that the fulcrum for the erotics in this work is really situated in these spectacular displays of overwhelmingly large performative interactions (massive square dances or ballets or rituals) between human organisms and objects, whether they be globs of gold-gilded sewage, a dead cow carcass, automobiles driven by corpses, or a DIY river of molten steel emerging all at once from four elfin towers. I actually did find the 15 foot saw blade attached to the crane arm ripping apart that beautiful Trans Am a bit of a turn on.

And this is the thing. See this chart? Each of these materials has a tensile strength. This means that the bonds between the molecules are more or less intense. Muscle tissue has a tensile strength of 15 psi. A spider's web is thousands of times stronger. These things contain a force that is self-organizing. We are taught that materials are inert, but nothing, it turns out, is that. These traits could be said to be molecular desires, tendencies, habits, even a kind of *vitality*. And this is a hard thought to get to for some of us—to really get to. Contemporary Italian philosopher Rosi Braidotti designates a thought-stream like this “The Posthuman” which is also the title of her 2013 book. Regarding the vitality of matter, she explains,

the great scientific advances of molecular biology have taught us that matter is self-organized (autopoietic) and monistic philosophy adds the idea that is also structurally relational and hence connected to a variety of environments. These insights combine in defining intelligent vitality or self-organizing capacity as a force that is not confined within feedback loops internal to the individual human self, but is present in all living matter. Why is matter so intelligent though? Because it is driven by informational codes, which both deploy their own bars of information, and interact in multiple ways with the social, psychic and ecological environments (Guattari 2000).” In other words, “precisely because it is not disconnected from the rest of organic life.

In a related book called, [Vibrant Matter](#), contemporary American philosopher Jane Bennett takes us back to the formation of the Earth's crust in order to better describe what she calls, the “force of things.” She writes that human power is a kind of thing-power and acknowledges that a claim to vitality intrinsic to matter becomes more plausible if one takes a long view of time. Which is to say that when you look at evolutionary time, the active-generativity-intelligence of minerals, for example, can become legible. Cited from Bennett's book, this quotation from Manuel De Landa narrates the emergence of our bones:

Soft tissue (gels and aerosols, muscle and nerve) reigned supreme until 5000 million years ago. At that point, some of the conglomerations of fleshy matter-energy that made up life underwent a sudden mineralization, and a new material for constructing living creatures emerged: bone. It is almost as if the mineral world that had served as a substratum for the emergence of biological creatures was reasserting itself.^v

Bennett observes that “mineralization names the creative agency by which bone was produced, and bones then”

made new forms of movement control possible among animals, freeing them from many constraints and literally setting them into motion to conquer every available niche in the air, in water, and on land.^{vi}

Bennett adds, “In the long and slow time of evolution, then, mineral material appears the mover and shaker, the active power, and the human beings, with their much-lauded capacity for self-directed action, appear as its product. Vernadsky seconds this view in this description of humankind as a particularly potent mix of minerals:”

What struck him most was that the material of Earth's crust has been packaged into myriad moving beings whose reproduction and growth build and break down matter on a global scale. People, for example, redistribute and concentrate oxygen...and other elements of Earth's crust into two-legged, upright forms that have an amazing propensity to wander across, dig into and in countless other ways alter Earth's surface. We are walking talking minerals.^{vii}

In a footnote here she nuances these quotations and adds that she wouldn't attribute all of this effect to minerals alone but to what she calls, "the combined activities of a variety of bodies and forces acting as an agentic assemblage."

So this is one idea, *agentic assemblage*. And this kind of web of pressures, situations and collisions is everywhere all the time, going on—making us, us. What happens when we are able to reconfigure our "selves" as not unitary, but as being made each moment by a profusion of collisions? Dependent, in other words—*becoming* according to forces that are massive and proliferating—subject to a kind of "distributive agency." Also known as a kind of massive collectivity, a prizing of the idea of *the commons*, (and this is why it's possible to think of this pressure as being opposed to capitalism.) So: a machine that runs as assembled, but that cultivates difference, heterogeneity.

In accordance with this, Rosi Braidotti theorizes what she calls a *plural* subject and defines it, among other things, as "a relational subject constituted in and by multiplicity...which is both embodied and embedded." She aligns herself with "an *ethics of becoming* which, for a non-unitary subject, proposes an enlarged sense of inter-connections between self and others, including the non-human or 'earth' others, by removing the obstacle of self-centered individualism."^{viii} And the idea here, of a kind of broadened sense of self or subject is of course, an ethical injunction at its core, one that seeks to reconfigure hierarchies of privilege and exploitation on every level. This new "ecological posthumanism" is suffused with the questioning of power and entitlement in an era of corporate world-making. It proposes self-reflexivity on the part of subjects who have heretofore inhabited the former humanist core/corpus. Another way of saying this is that the *goal*, if it could be called such a thing, is to move beyond the binary of Humanism, anti-Humanism and trace an alternate discursive matrix, that seeks "affirmative" new modes of being in relation. Implicit in this maneuvering, this *transformation* is that the "structural others" of the modern humanistic subject (racialized, sexualized and naturalized others) "re-emerge with a vengeance."^{ix} (Which might, if we like, remind us of the probability of white male anxiety.) Certainly, the colossal emancipatory movements of the last century have been galvanized and guided by these unsinkable "others," as Braidotti writes

...the women's rights movement; the anti-racism and de-colonization movements; the anti-nuclear and pro-environment movements are the voices of the structural Others of modernity. They inevitably mark the crisis of the former humanist 'centre' or dominant subject-position and are not merely anti-humanist, but move beyond it to an altogether novel, posthuman project. These social and political movements are simultaneously the symptom of the crisis of the subject, and for conservatives even its 'cause', and also the expression of positive, pro-active alternatives. In the language of my nomadic theory, they express both the crisis of the majority and the patterns of becoming of the minorities.^x

Let's note that Barney's engagement with a kind of poetics of ecstatic matter-stuffs, is functioning in a dialogue with this timely resurgence of an (updated) philosophy of interconnectedness, intersubjectivity and interdependence. While I have little doubt that this latest Barney work is utterly poetic not having been wrought with a cogent or even slight political or ecological narrative (one might call it a parable rather than an allegory), I also feel these things are unequivocally the manifest expression of a figure sensitive to his complex surroundings and that the abovementioned strains of popular/philosophical thought are—consciously or unconsciously—primary fuel for the heat of his apparent compulsion—a plural and embedded subject, the crucible of the works production.

And while it's clear that the movie is concerned with industry/colonization/ industrial pollution as it is intertwined with the "deaths" or "fish-dances" of certain white male power webs, and while I could also say that Barney is acting—in making the show—as a filter of, conductor for, the anxiety currently arcing in the American elite, not excluding genetic contamination, the question still remains is "Can a thing re-inscribe and still be critical?" The answer to that question is yes. Sometimes. It depends on the work. It depends on the viewer. In conversation about the film I've also been asked why an artist might (if they are so "concerned and critical") make a narrative so fundamentally unnavigable and so gridded with parody? This is a question, one of my favorites, about efficacy and poetics, which is linked to the friction generated by satire, irony and self-effacing humor—forms of transgressive humor. While I will admit that there is no question in my mind that sarcastic or ironic humor wrought by an oppressed person works a qualitatively different action than farce or parody generated by the privileged—I also want to touch upon Simon Critchley's interesting idea that self-effacing humor is the salve that heals the split (wound of failure)^{xi} when we try to continue ethical action (perhaps largely impotent?) over the course of a lifetime. Making fun of ourselves but continuing on, in other words. I'm interested in guilty, paradoxical pleasures, and think there is a kind of deep authenticity/poetics in the images and choices Barney has made in *River of Fundament*.

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- ⁱ <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/21/opinion/the-years-biggest-social-justice-stories.html>
- ⁱⁱ <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/04/opinion/white-americas-broken-heart.html>
- ⁱⁱⁱ Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs the Climate*, 2014.
- ^{iv} Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs the Climate*, 2014.
- ^v Manuel DeLanda quoted in Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 2010.
- ^{vi} Manuel DeLanda quoted in Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 2010.
- ^{vii} Russian scientist Vladimir Ivanovich Vernadsky quoted in Lynn Margulis and Dorion Sagan, *What is Life?* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), quote in Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 2010.
- ^{viii} Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 2013.
- ^{ix} Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 2013.
- ^x Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 2013.
- ^{xi} Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance*, 2007.