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CONTENTS

Introduction: Tangled Matters | Catherine Keller and Mary-Jane Rubenstein 1

MATTER, ANEW

What Flashes Up: Theological-Political-Scientific Fragments | Karen Barad 21
Vegetal Life and Onto-Sympathy | Jane Bennett 89
Tingles of Matter, Tangles of Theology | Catherine Keller 111
Agents Matter and Matter Agents: Interpretation and Value from Cells to Gaia | Philip Clayton and Elizabeth Singleton 136

THE MATTER OF RELIGION

The Matter with Pantheism: On Shepherds and Goat-Gods and Mountains and Monsters | Mary-Jane Rubenstein 157
Material Subjects, Immaterial Bodies: Abhinavagupta’s Panentheist Matter | Lotfali Biernacki 182
Theophanic Materiality: Political Ecology, Inhuman Touch, and the Art of Andy Goldsworthy | Jacob J. Erickson 203
Interdisciplinary Ethics: From Astro-Theology to Cosmo-Liberation Theology | Theodore Walker Jr. 221
Vascularizing the Study of Religion: Multi-Agent Figureations and Cosmopolitics | Manuel A. Vásquez 228
Introduction:
Tangled Matters

Catherine Keller and
Mary-Jane Rubenstein

It is not just that we are entangled in matter—we subjects who read, write, and ruminate on what “we” are. We are materializations entangled in other materializations; we happen in our mattering. What matters in our ethics, our politics, our worlds entangles us in and as new materializations. And at this juncture, it entangles scholarship in retrievals and rethinking of matter itself. Even disciplines that struggle with long histories of disembodied transcendence are registering the effects.

The “new materialisms” currently coursing through cultural, feminist, political, and queer theories seek to displace human privilege by attending to the agency of matter itself. Far from being passive or inert, they argue, matter acts, creates, destroys, and transforms—and, thus, is more of a process than a thing. “One could conclude,” write Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, “that ‘matter becomes,’ rather than that matter is.” Calling as they do on the insights of quantum mechanics, general relativity, complexity theory, and nonlinear biology to theorize matter as mattering, these thinkers work against much of what is often denigrated as “mere” materialism. Of course, the word will never make a safe slogan. It stimulates the whole modern array of old familiar materialisms, along with the dualist reactions against it, presuming pretty much the same inertly predictable stuff. A different materialism can therefore be introduced only in the company of such a caveat as Jane Bennett’s: “American materialism, which requires buying ever-increasing numbers of products purchased in ever-shorter cycles, is antimateriality.” It junkys old stuff so that we will buy buy buy new, and so conceals “the vitality of matter.” Moreover, it destroys it, producing the waste-monsters that are deadening the atmosphere and the oceans.

Taking cues from Whitehead, Deleuze and Guattari, Stengers and Prigogine, and Margulis and Sagan, the new materialists mobilize a revivified
materiality against such toxic materialisms. They accomplish this in part by rejecting traditional ontological hierarchies—especially those that seek clear distinctions between spirit and matter, life and nonlife, or sentence and nonsentence. They do not, however, embrace a straight reductionism, whether to cells, particles, or any purported fundament. Nor do they appeal to the strictly “flat ontology” of the speculative realists, according to whom “everything exists equally—plumbers, cotton, bonobos, DVD players, and sandstone, for example.” Like the new materialists, the speculative realists (especially those on the “object-oriented” branch) seek to unsettle philosophy’s traditional privilege of the human but reject what they call “process relationalism” insofar as it privileges “alliances” over entities, “couplings” over objects, and motion over rest. Demanding a theory of “sharp, specific units,” these thinkers proclaim the ontological equality of every discrete thing.

For the new materialists, by contrast, ontology is “monolithic but multiply tiered”; in other words, things are not simply “equal” because things are not “things” in the first place. Rather, things—actual entities—are multiplicities, assemblages, hybrids, resonance machines, sonority clusters, intra-actions, complexities, and viscous porosities—all terms that variously express the insight that each cell, organism, vegetable, and photon is irreducibly composed of what Karen Barad would call an “intra-active” host of others. This constitutive alterity holds for humans as much as for anything else; as Donna Haraway reminds us, “human genomes can be found in only about 10 percent of all the cells that occupy the mundane space I call my body; the other 90 percent of the cells are filled with the genomes of bacteria, fungi, protists, and such . . . . I become an adult human being in company with these tiny mates. To be one is always to become with many.” We could perhaps call such an ontology folded, even fractal, but not flat. And it is certainly not “hierarchical”; as Deleuze and Guattari caution, “It is already going too far to postulate an order descending from the animal to the vegetable, then to molecules, to particles. Each multiplicity is symbiotic; its becoming ties together animals, plants, microorganisms, mad particles, a whole galaxy.”

Given that all things are constantly becoming (and coming undone) in relation to constitutive multiplicities, it becomes difficult to say what the compendium of “all things”—or a “world”—might be. Faced with this difficulty and concerned about the ecological inaction that world-language purportedly instills, speculative realists Ian Bogost and Timothy Morton suggest we think of “world” as “just another being among the muskelmons and the lip balms,” and that we resist at all costs the effort to gather such beings into a coherent (Heideggerian) “world picture.” Uncomfortable with totalization on the one hand and fragmentation on the other, we would like to propose a third option. As this volume employs the term, “world” is not just another thing, but neither does it constitute a single totality; rather, with the political philosopher William Connolly, we call upon “world” to name a provisional set of “multiple, interacting open systems of different viscosity morphing at different speeds.”

Accordingly, the volume itself imposes no homogeneous concept, not even of “the new materialism,” let alone “the world.” Rather, it assembles a multiplicity of experimental perspectives on mattering, and so a multiplicity of worlds, which is to say a multiplicity of multiplicities. Whatever a “world” is, the motivation for its entanglement in the present multiplicity will neither reduce it to a philosophical or scientific interest, nor inflate it to a religious whole. The converging velocities of these transdisciplinary engagements do not rest with the description of a world. They charge the materiality of their cosmos with ethical intensity, with the spirit of specifically mattering bodies and with the chance of a cosmopolitics of the earth.

The politics that collects itself heterogeneously under the banner of new materialism comes energized already by its feminist, queer, and anti-racist orientations. It already already engages dialectical materialism and the range of counter-capitalist economies. But then as Pheng Cheah elucidates, the question is less that of the “relevance of these new materialisms to political thought” and concrete politics than of how they “put into question the fundamental categories of political theory including the political itself.” For this reason, Cheah surfaces the “urgency of rethinking the ontological bases” of the words and worlds of the political. Such ontological rethinking rides the force field of a world vastly exceeding the human, but tendering us no escape from the nonhuman. We are not enlisting troops for the “inhuman” or the “posthuman,” though certainly all the anthroposocials help break down anthropocentric delusion. Rather, it is a matter of being differently, perchance responsibly, human—and so, as Connolly puts it, “organized by a host of nonhuman processes.” The focus, as he elucidates in The Fragility of Things, “is on our entanglements with heterogeneous entities and processes in a world in which humanity matters immensely.”

Humanity matters for good and for ill, from the perspective of the vast variety of nonhuman beings composing the life of the planet. And so the entangling and entangled worlds of this rhizome of writers get thought and rethought at every scale. For “when the smallest parts of matter are found to be capable of exploding deeply entrenched ideas and large cities,” matter itself comes into question and brings us all with it. The quantum has unsettled our pretensions toward objectivity and individuality; its apocalyptic bomb-power has rerouted history; and yet it has not yet shattered commonsense notions of the elements of matter. “Perhaps this is why contemporary physics makes the inescapable entanglement of matters of being, knowing, and doing, of ontology, epistemology, and ethics, of fact and value, so tangible, so poignant.”
These allusions to the multilayered, many-genred, polyvocal ecology of our entanglements are not casual. The term “entanglement” was coined in English and German (Verschränkung) by Erwin Schrödinger in a 1935 letter to Einstein, in the heat and shock of the emergent quantum mechanics. He considered entanglement “not one but the characteristic trait of quantum mechanics, the one that reinforces its entire departure from classical lines of thought.” The observer and the observed, the subject and the object, enter into a dance barely glimpsed before in modern science. And the instruments of observation make the entanglement visible even as they join in to complicate it. The relation of entanglement, known also as nonlocality or nonseparability, so disturbed the common sense—of physics, yes, but of modernity itself—that Einstein called it (with dread) “spooky action at a distance.” He was haunted for the rest of his life by his failure to disprove it. The spookiness begins with two particles, entangled in a laboratory, flying off in opposite directions. If then you measure twin A, it will react, as quantum do, unpredictably. The spooky thing is that twin B will (as you measure it simultaneously) react exactly at the same moment, in exactly the same way. No matter how far apart: the width of a grain of sand or a galaxy. Physicists tend to reject the idea that a signal is being propagated at some mind-boggling speed, vastly exceeding the velocity of light; what seems likelier is that the particles are not sending a signal at all, but somehow remain nonseparable and so in touch, persistently entangled. At any distance.

Here we can only note that what the physicist Brian Greene calls this “earth-shattering result” has tested out both theoretically and physically for three decades, before which physicists (such as David Bohm) who tried in the United States to investigate the phenomenon were treated as heretics, accused of “juvenile deviationism.” In this century it is above all Karen Barad who from the scientific side has released the profound philosophical reverberations of quantum mechanics, discerning not only its use but its meaning: “We are of the universe;” she reminds us; “there is no inside, no outside.” Rethinking the bottomless entanglement of observer and observed, matter and discourse, cosmos and ethos, this stuff and that, Barad teases not only a fundamental ontology but, more radically, “a tissue of ethnicity,” out of our basest matter: “There is only intra-actioning from within and as part of the world in its becoming.” If that’s the case, we’d better get our intra-actions right.

The entanglements visibly and invisibly composing this volume mean to provoke all manner of deviant materializations—across a plane of ontological interrelation in which humans are remembering our inextricable interembodiments—before we really do shatter the earth. Among these constitutive nonhumans are, to be sure, minerals, vegetables, and animals. But those of us assembled here also leap with the quantum to another set of spooky actants: spirits, gods, and other subtle bodies. We attend with a variety of lenses to a variety religious traditions, where embodiment thins, speeds, or slow into the extremities of the world. From within a religious perspective, any becoming comes wrapped up in meanings and materialities that exceed and include it. But of course, the major religious traditions also carry long normative routines of disembodiment. Christianity in particular has long suffered from a condition of we could call “materiophobia.” Whether in ascetic practice, Pauline theology, or casual presumption, the spirit got pitted against the flesh, or the soul against the body, in league with a God who remains condescendingly above and apart from the world that “He” created. The word is “good” (yes, sure, of course), but it stepped out of line; the soul yielded to the flesh, and the flesh to sinful seduction. Matter, especially as the theological tradition digested its Platonism, was deemed inferior to and outside of what matters.

Not only theology as a constructive practice, but the study of religion as a descriptive discipline may also operate materiaphobically. Religious studies in its incipience conveyed a bemused fascination with the “animism” of “primitive” non-Europeans, according to which “what we call inanimate objects—rivers, stones, trees, weapons, and so forth—are treated as intelligent living beings.” When this spiritually materialist “animism” edged into “ fetishism,” however, the fascination turned to repulsion. As E. B. Tylor explains, “Fetishism will be taken as including the worship of ‘stocks and stones,’ and thence it passes by an imperceptible gradation into idolatry.” While no longer likely to pass such smugly theological judgments, the study of religion has borne like all other human and social sciences the Cartesianism that imported theological dualisms into modernity. Secularisms may proclaim one or another materialism, but may also remain hostile to the intra-actively vital versions engaged here. Such materialists however as Barad, Bennett, Connolly, and Haraway break down the very subject-object, observer-observed binary that constitutes “religion” as a mere object, and which renders any form of religious practice objectionable. And behind all those binaries lurks that of mind versus matter, as incoherent when it takes theological form as it is in scientific reductionism.

Alongside the theological degradations of materiality, however, there have all along been the voices of a positively material theology—even in the simultaneously materiaphobic traditions of Judaism and Christianity—voices pointing to the biblical tradition in which there is little textual support for such disembodiment. There is not only the exuberant affirmation of the universe as the creative effect of God (“O Lord how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all. The earth is full of your creatures” [Psalm 104:24]). There is also the scriptural absence of any concept of a changeless, unaffected One merely affecting the world from outside; and there is only salvation—
emerge the distinct voices of vibrantly variegated race-refractions, sexual dis/orientations, religious metamorphoses. They crisscross the economies and ecologies that are shifting the geologies, species, and force fields of the earth. In particular, the present conversation transverses several fields of academic discourse normally kept hygienically separate. Here such disciplines touch, transgress, and contaminate each other across their several carefully specified contexts. What Barad says of the virtual particles in a quantum field lends a parable for this volume: "All touching entails an infinite alterity, so that touching the other is touching all others, including the 'self' and touching the 'self' entails touching the strangers within." And in the responsiveness of this mutual touching of science, religion, philosophy and theology, indeed also of the social sciences and of the arts, the growing complexity of our entanglements takes on a consistent ethical texture of urgency.

This volume moves in three constructively interfering waves. The first sets forth a variety of perspectives on the agency of matter, from the quantum to the vegetable to the theopolitical to the cosmic. The second brings these perspectives to bear on a range of theologies, each of which animates materiality as the site of divine unfolding. And the third examines the ethical and political work that material theologies might do to unsettle the racist, colonial, and eccodial legacies of their materiaphobic counterparts.

What Karen Barad calls the "entanglement of matter and meaning" here takes on new resonances as it attracts religion-focused and theological response. Of course, there is a robust, century-long tradition of the dialogue between science and religion. Indeed, Whitehead's work early advanced such an exchange. But often the science-religion dialogue has assumed rather standardized forms of interaction between two well-formed, if comically imbalanced, modern orthodoxies. In the practice of transdisciplinary theology in general and in this assemblage in particular, we hope for something more like the intra-action that does not presume the established, preexistent representatives. We all bring vast histories and habits, but we bring them for the sake of an entangled becoming. The "new" attention to matter—even if the label has already gotten old for some—touches on the deep tissues of meaning, the layers so densely sedimented in the religious ways of the world. For good and for ill. For cliché or for new matterings.

MATTER, ANEW

In "What Flashes Up," Karen Barad exposes a startling new sense of matter. The "agential realist" interpretation of quantum physics in her monumental Meeting the Universe Halfway had already brought the indeterminacy and relationality—the "intra-activity"—of quantum ontology into resonance with human ethics: All beings compose and partake in the responsive structure of
the world. "Intra-acting responsibly as part of the world means taking account of the entangled phenomena that are intrinsic to the world's vitality and being responsive to the possibilities that might help us flourish."36 In the present discussion, Barad draws Walter Benjamin's messianic "now-time" via Judith Butler and quantum field theory into a deep meditation on the matter of time, a time that breaks from the scientific and political modernisms of purportedly linear progress. Here, in an exploration bursting with transdisciplinary theological possibility, Barad reads matter itself, by virtue of its entanglement with a persistently not nothing quantum void, as messianically inflected, kabbalistically encrypted, politically explosive. And so the "differential entanglements" that join us in our inextricable alterities echo "the mystical depth of Isaac Luria's cosmology, with the iterative rematerialization of the world based on ongoing intra-actions whereby...the world is re-created anew in each moment." Neither human figure nor final closure, the messianic lightning flash that is the possibility of justice now breaks science open to its constitutively social, political, and theological alterities. It is not that the messianic can be simply "naturalized," but that in the "thick now" no bit of matter can any longer be bored of ethical meaning or indeed of revolutionary possibility. "The flashing up of the messianic is written into the very structure of...matter-time-being itself."

Turning our gaze to the macroscopic register of the world's constitutive inhumanity, Jane Bennett attends to the spectrum of "Vegetal Life and Onto-Sympathy." Making a move startlingly congruent with Barad's other-than-human "feeling-with," Bennett calls her version "onto-sympathy." Tailing Darwin, Bergson, and particularly Thoreau in their adventures into the nonhuman, she magnifies the latter's insight that "the vegetation of humans and the vegetation of plants can somehow communicate. Why should I not, asks Thoreau, 'have intelligence with the earth? Am I not partly leaves and vegetable mould myself?'" Here Bennett finds a pre-echo of queer theory, particularly of Bersani's "failed subject," its outside that is "mine without belonging to me." Dropping out of conventional selfhood, Bennett sketches Thoreau's "psychedelic claim that each of the different materials—clay, water, sand, vines, human flesh—are variations on the theme of the droplet or 'moist thick lope.'" In the interest of hallucinogenic diffraction, we might mention the "tiny droplets...mingling and interacting with another, expanding and conjoining until a sap pours forth from them," observed by Moses, according to the thirteenth-century text of the kabbalistic Iyyun Circle.8

Like Whitehead and Barad at the level of the quantum, Bennett destabilizes at the level of the vegetal any borderline between the organic and the inorganic—let alone of the living and lifeless, the touching-feeling and inert. These mobilities render uninteresting the sort of boundaries that "Man" has erected beneath himself, hoping thereby to secure proximity to the transcen-

dent above. In their teeming fields of more-than-humanity, such new materialist reflections detect and amplify a new transspecies vitality, an intra-agental solidarity issuing forth for ethics and politics. Might these new multiplicities of multiplicities, inhuman but not dispassionate, teach us here something we ignore at our own manifold peril? Something beyond the vertical sovereignty modeled on the God classically forbidden to feel-with, the One who could only move and never be moved?

Reflecting on matter and its intimate ultimacy, Catherine Keller wonders about uses of the phrase "Christian materialism." She finds some shocking incongruity in the deployment of the phrase, and proceeds to locate it within a long and complicated history of religious materializations—in particular within Christian variegations of the "body of Christ." She takes the opportunity to stage an exchange between Barad and Whitehead, who reject the concept of "matter" for something very like the reason Barad nearly a century later embraces it. The vibratory becoming, from the quantum up, that drive both of them to a relational ontology come into potential solidarity here with a vibrant theological collective. Indeed the quantum mystery of entanglement, in which differences do not wash out interdependence, may find itself amplified in the subtle body of a Supreme Entanglement. But there will be many nicknames for the space—in its "Tingles of Matter, Mangles of Theology"—in which, for example, process, ecofeminist, and queer Christianities have been teaming up with ancient relics of holy matter and new diffractions of our teeming bodies.

Zooming out to the biospheric and in to the microscopic, Philip Clayton and Elizabeth Singleton affirm in "Agents Matter and Matter Agents" the agency of "every living being," from "the humble eukaryotic cell" to Gaia as an open and evolving whole. Beginning from what they call "the first agents," which is to say the simplest biochemical systems in which we can discern "teleology," the authors reveal each living thing as a network of intentions, environments, adaptations, communications, toxins, nutrients, and porosities. In dynamic, differential resonance with Barad, they thereby reveal (living) matter's prismatical entanglement with meaning: "When a single-celled organism spins its flagellum in order to move up a glucose gradient and obtain more nourishment," Clayton and Singleton explain, "it interprets the higher glucose concentration as a good and acts in order to ingest more of it" (emphasis added). Moreover, this pan-agental biosemiotics entails—and necessarily so—an "ethic of embodied responsibility." After all, to recognize living beings as "valuing" is to recognize them as "valuable"—not simply "in themselves," but rather as "participants in the entire system of life...held together by networks of bodies and objects" and collectively composing the fragile, interdependent biosphere in, through, with, and as which anything that lives, lives.
THE MATTER OF RELIGION

In the meantime, amid all this mattering and multiplying of the agencies with whom we come entangled, God-talk comes to matter again. Relieved of impulsive transcendence and immateriality, what sort of body might “God” signify? And freed of sovereign omnipotence, what sort of liberating agency? When religious figurations reappear, provoking unfamiliar forms, they demand the ministry of new language. But perhaps even more disturbingly than philosophy, theology comes haunted by deep pasts. What is “to come” comes superposed with what has not been allowed to become, indeed with possibilities blocked by religious authority. So in this part, each of the five authors reads divinity as emphatically and emancipatively materializing. At the same time, they each expose specific historical tangles of religious traditions whose past gifts of novelty and strangeness, lost in the margins or actively heretici- zed, have hardly yet been received.

For instance, what is “The Matter with Pantheism”? Mary-Jane Rubenstein asks a question that the Abrahamic traditions have with deafening success managed to silence for centuries. Baffled by this legacy of “name-calling,” she wonders what is really at stake. It was precisely for the “error” of granting God a body—not just one brief, Galilean one but the magnificent matter of the whole universe—that Spinoza was vilified. Even the trope of “the body of God,” when it surfaces as panentheism through scientifically engaged process and ecofeminist theologies, hesitates to display its Spinozan ancestry. Pantheism has served as such a foil for orthodoxy, such a settled no-no, that even liberal and progressive theologies—willing to risk an impressive host of heresies—quickly reassure readers that no, at least we are not that. So Rubenstein takes us on a journey back to the earlier accounts of the “pan,” replete with “Shepherds and Goat-Gods and Mountains and Monsters.” Her goal is not to propose a new materialist pantheism, but rather to consider what has been lost in the name-calling. What “intra-carnational” possibilities, what ecologies of planetary enfleshment, and what queerly interspecies sites of divinity have been, to our peril, repressed along with pantheism?

Far and free from this Abrahamic force field, Loriliars Biernacki considers “Material Subjects, Immortal Bodies” in the work of the medieval Indian Tantric philosopher and mystic Abhinavagupta. Bringing to light a thousand year-old and all-too-timely spiritual philosophy, Biernacki writes that “Abhinavagupta inherits an already sophisticated model of body as both physical and nonmaterial,” a “subtle body” that belies both Western and Asian tendencies to dualism and monism. Biernacki teases open this alternative materiality, nonseparable from consciousness, by drawing it into an engagement with the distinct quantum models of Karen Barad and Henry Stapp. Of course, there are significant differences between the tantra and the quanta; in particular, Biernacki notes Abhinavagupta’s concern to establish an “overarching subjectivity” whereas Barad has an intra-determinate relationality. Nevertheless, Biernacki finds materialist promise in the over-arch, channeling into current theoretical vibrancy Abhinavagupta’s extraordinary, panentheist teaching that “the highest principle is indeed the body of all things.” In his superposed interferences with quantum theory, this medieval Indian thinker thereby offers our new materialisms some old “options for thinking about matter and the body” as an actively becoming, “material-discursive occurrence.”

The next two essays consider the ways God matters in Christianity. In “Theophanic Materiality,” Jake Erickson has us following a trail marked by little piles of stones, cairns along a path in the Himalayas, and back through the “land art” of Goldsworthy. Along the way, Barad’s and Bennett’s materialisms not only set the stones into theory (and motion), but enable a startling rereading of the ancient Eastern Christian traditions of theophany. Erickson’s retrieval also of the suppressed ninth-century thought of John Scottus Eriugena—for whom God is manifest “through bodies in bodies”—glows with the dark brilliance of the path not taken. Ultimately, Erickson’s concept of “theophanic materiality,” in which “divine energy is entangled in the performance of indeterminate material agencies,” goes so far as to “create a conceptual possibility for the queer intimacy of divinity and earth.” This matters beyond cosmological mysticism: the uncommodifed ordinariness of Goldsworthy’s materials, the mobilization of counter-capitalist pleasures, and disciplines of attention to things, he imagines, “might effect a reimagined response to our current ecological crises.”

The urgencies of contemporary theological practice burst into an extra-terrestrial register in Theodore Walker’s passage “From Astro-Theology to Cosmo-Liberation Theology.” Drawing on the English natural philosopher and cleric William Derham, whose 1715 Astro-Theology performs an early modern integration of science and religion, Walker initiates a development of his previously proposed “constructive postmodern astro-theology.” Working with a Whiteheadian metaphysical realism, African American liberation theology, and Barbara Holmes’s originary synthesis of the latter with physical cosmology, Walker solicits an interdisciplinary cosmology to “inspire more liberating struggles.” He argues that a robust and ultimately panentheistic realism, embodying a biblical prophetic ethics and a natural scientific universe, is a needed antidote to cynicism. Does the consonance of “astro-” and “Afro-” seems to hint here at what in the world does matter? (As we write, “Black Lives Matter” reverberates through the land.) The feedback loops between the farthest flung matter and race-class-gender-sex-ecological entanglements register, for instance, in the concreteness of an African American/Africana dimension that
has been on the whole underdeveloped in the new materialist literature. We are composed, Walker writes, “of microscopic, cellular, subcellular, molecular, atomic, subatomic, and quantum parts-particles-wavelike and events.” For Walker, it is this “cosmic context” that demands andembolds the work of what he now calls “cosmo-liberation theology.”

Attentive to the movement—in fact the flows—that interrupt the singular integrity of any purported subject, Manuel Vásquez mobilizes religious studies beyond its human fixation. His essay, “Vascularizing the Study of Religion,” attends to the entanglement of “religious phenomena” with “their sociocultural and environmental contexts” as themselves the entangled products of “multiple types of agencies.” With and beyond Actor Network Theory, and in conversation with both Bennett and Barad, Vásquez examines the Mexican diasporic Light of the World Church to reveal its sites and celebrations as effects of complex flows of bodies, information, images, capital, and affect across various mediations of time, borders, satellite links, and screens. For Vásquez, such “transnational and electronic networks lead to the unsettled of established, territorialized cultural and religious habits and to the articulation of hybrid practices, identities, landscapes, and institutional arrangements.” It is this vital, de- and re-territorialized hybridity of people, places, and stuff—material, virtual, ideological, and legislative—that comes to light in his “vascularized” methodology. Here “religion” itself is revealed as irreducibly “polycentric” and “multidirectional,” a “lumpy landscape . . . of varying intensity, extensity, morphology, and durability,” whose bodies exceed, resist, and reconfigures the structures of the anthropos and nation-state alike.

ETHICOPOLITICAL ENTANGLEMENTS

Although all the essays in this volume gesture toward the ethical and political stakes of their variegated re-materializations, those gathered into this final part offer concrete visions of collective responsibility. In “Stubborn Materiality,” Carol Wayne White augments and complicates our collective effort to unsettle “the human” by focusing on African American “subjects whose full humanity was often questioned or denied.” In the harrowing wake of enslavement, black religions in North America have consistently proclaimed African Americans’ full humanity by means of dynamic, evolving “theological tactic . . . ontological justification[s],” and ethical reasoning.” Following the paths charted by Anna Julia Cooper, W. E. B. Du Bois, and James Baldwin, White traces here a discourse of “human desire” that unsettles nearly everything we associate with “humanism”—such as human autonomy, human exceptionalism, ontological hierarchies, and “environmental” instrumentalism. The task, she acknowledges, is “complex yet important”: to recognize at once the full humanity of “black (and other marginalized) subjects” while also celebrating “the interrelatedness of all natural processes. Whatever conceivable notion of black humanity I claim in this essay will be ontologically enmeshed and entangled with other forms of natural life.” Calling upon the “religious naturalism” of Ursula Goodenough, Donald Crosby, and Loyal Rue, White calls this ontological enmeshing and entangling, this more-than-humanism that speaks from and to the experience of African American becoming, “sacred humanity.”

Like White, Terra Rowe contests in “Grace in Intra-Action” the narrow, often all-too-theological humanisms that have set “us” apart from “nature,” thereby justifying its exploitation. “The inconvenient truth,” she writes, “is that climate change only lends further evidence to the theory that we live in what Karen Barad calls an “intra-active universe.” Plugging into the history of Christian eschatologies, Rowe locates the denial of this intra-action in unilateral theologies of grace, according to which God alone is active, and humans do nothing but receive. Particularly from an ecological and climate-concerned perspective,” she explains, the problem is that “the ‘free’ gift is not only free of obligation, but also of the intra-dependent relations that we now understand to make up the fabric of . . . existence.” At the other end of the spectrometer, the danger of an obligatory gift is that it binds the recipient in an agonistic, escalating indebtedness. Mobilizing Jacques Derrida’s and John Milbank’s stubbornly opposed—even mutually exclusive—readings of Marcel Mauss, Rowe heralds the former’s “unconditional gift” and the latter’s “exchange (or intra-active) universe” as complementary in the Bohrian sense. For the sake of the planet we inhabit and intra-actively compose, what we mean by “the gift”—and thus by grace—must mean, irreducibly and irreconcilably, “both an other-oriented, unconditional gift and a relational ontology of . . . exchange” (emphasis added).

In the essay of Elias Ortega-Aponte, the reader is “being touched and glimpsed” by the ghosts of an alternative spatiality. We feel the rhythms of Puerto Rican bomba begin to materialize “the sense of an alternate spiritual space.” In the process, a vibrational shift in the social study of religion becomes possible. With Dionne Brand and Édouard Glissant, he offers “haunting” as an analytical strategy “to reflect the contemporary situation and increased complexity of life in ‘late modernity,’”—but a life that “may itself be haunted by the specter of the transatlantic slave trade and its aftermath.” Ortega-Aponte’s “The Door of No Return: An Africana Reading of Complexity,” engages social theoretical incorporations of complexity theory to render space “relational, unfolding as network, and with continually emerging properties.” Indeed, in this altered space, affect and materialist perspectives may be “catching up,” he quips, with the insights emerging from the Afro-Diaspora experience. “If haunting reveals repressed possibilities and alternate arrangements, then . . . let ghosts loose to haunt every life, institution, and social arrangement,” but also
their theorization. For example, he argues, the figurations of the “Door of No Return, the abyss, and the plantation are more than sociocultural happenings that shape history, economics, and cultural worlds.” Rather, with their traumatic afterlives they are “deeper, implicating the nature of reality itself.” For the haunting, in particular in its altered and altering Africana spatiality, is also drumming up—by way of its embodied memory and its layered networks—a greater material complexity.

Finally, in “The Trouble with Commonality,” Beatrice Marovich offers a meditation on the category of “creature,” which along with “mortal” has the distinction of being one of “the few words to express the fact that humans are earthlings, bound in a kind of kinship with other creatures on the planet.” Like “mortal,” she argues, “creature” carries with it an ineradicable theological past; in fact, even an anti-theological like Richard Dawkins uses the term to signal the radical dependence and vulnerability of earthly life-forms under the regime of natural selection; for him as for contemporary theologians of “kinship,” the term “creature” comes “umbilically connected to a sovereign power over life.” For Marovich, such theological and scientific constructions of creatureliness locate our interspecies commonalities “in our incapacities,” neglecting both “the plurality of creaturely life and the differentiated nature of creaturely powers and capacities.” Concerned to attend both to bonds and distinctions, Marovich deploys Barad’s “diffractive” methodology to configure creaturely kinship as one of “connective distinction.” Although she concedes with Derrida that all creatures are radically different from one another, she also insists that, by means of this alterity, human and “other-than-human” life-forms are radically “intra-dependent.” In this connective distinction, Marovich finds a bond of “strange kinship,” which neither assimilates planetary others to the (always human) same nor writes them off as insignificant to our “own” flourishing.

Should this volume be read then as a companion to New Materialisms? The offering of a new theological materialism or a new materiality of religion? Or might it rather be something allied but other (a bit alien?), connectively distinct, pulsing across wide and wild frequencies, from the quantum physical to the materially religious to the polydextrally theological? Amid the turbulent cosmopolitics of race and sex, of religion and irreigion, of species and planet, these strategies of materialization insist in each case on mattering ethically. In gratitude for each of our authors, we turn to them now, in the hope that together we stir rather than satisfy interest in the entangled worlds we so precariously inhabit.

NOTES
8. Barad, Meeting the Universe Halfway, 36.
10. Deleuze and Guattari, Thousand Plateaus, 250.


33. For a critical treatment of the “newness” of this body of work with respect to feminist theories, and of its relative nonengagement of dialectical materialisms, see Sara Ahmed, “Imaginary Prohibitions: Some Preliminary Remarks on the Founding


36. Barad, Meeting the Universe Halfway, 396.