The End of the Affair with Life: Loss and Vitality in the Face of the Corpse

**Introduction**

In what follows, I intend to reassert the significance of death within a materialist framework. It is a reassertion because, in my view, the materiality of death and what it entails theoretically are often systematically effaced within and excluded from this framework, characterized as it so often is at present by a resolute commitment to the affirmative. Many of those scholars who identify with the new materialisms

prefer a creative affirmation of a new ontology, a project that is in turn consistent with the productive, inventive capacities they ascribe to materiality itself. The prevailing ethos of new materialist ontology is consequently more positive and constructive than critical or negative: it sees its task as creating new concepts and images of nature that affirm matter's immanent vitality.[[1]](#footnote-1)

When death and the negative are included, they are addressed insufficiently. To address them sufficiently, I argue that we must turn first to the figure of the corpse. What can corpses teach us? If, as materialists, we have anything at all to say about death, then the corpse should be the originary site of our discourse. A corpse, of course, is a dead body, but rather than delving straight away into an analysis or exploration of embodiment, I will address the matter of death.

First, there is its ontology. What is death? In part, this question has already been answered in a highly condensed form. The immediate materiality of death is embodied in corpses, in dead bodies. A corpse is a formerly living body, often considered barren and lifeless. But we know that this is not exactly true, for the distinction between the living and dead is more complex and porous than it is often taken to be. Living bodies are saturated in deathliness, and dead bodies are sites of tremendous flourishing. Is it true, then, that “lifelessness is only a disguise behind which hide unknown forms of life”?[[2]](#footnote-2) Answering yes to this question characterizes the stance toward death held by the vital materialist, and there are good reasons to think that this answer is conditionally correct. It is only conditionally correct because, although the corpse is indeed more “lively” than it might seem, the strong vital materialist draws unwarranted conclusions from this liveliness.

Like what? For example, one recent and timely example can be found in Rosi Braidotti, who directly poses the following question: “How would a vitalist and materialist understanding of death work?”[[3]](#footnote-3) Her answer is that “a focus on the vital and self-organizing powers of Life/*zoe* undoes any clear-cut distinction between living and dying,” and, therefore, this demands a reconceptualization of “death, the ultimate subtraction, as another phase in a generative process […]”[[4]](#footnote-4) In other words, Braidotti seeks to reduce death to a temporary moment, sublated into the general trajectory of life. As she comments, “it can hurt,” but this is only because dying undoes a subject who may wish to remain unchanged, self-sovereign. However, dying also only transforms that subject, since all subjects are nothing more than brief becomings in the history of wholly immanent, motile Being.[[5]](#footnote-5) This is an example of a strong vital materialism, one which embraces the robustly Whitmanian insight that

[…]

The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,

And if ever there was it led forward life, and does not wait at the end to arrest it,

And ceas’d the moment life appear’d.

All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses,

And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The strong vital materialist stance is problematic, in my view, because it effaces the seriousness of death, the possibility that death matters or that a death is something more impactful than a mere transmutation of form. Does death matter? If the strong vital materialist is right, then it does not. Death is a kind of illusion. Nothing lasts, but nothing is lost.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Contrary to this stance, I posit a weak vital materialism, in which the materiality of death can be biologically or ontologically lively without this liveliness negating the negation that death is. To put it simply, death matters. Why? Death matters because a death is an absolute loss. Indeed, the condition of possibility for the absolute loss that death effects is precisely the overwhelming, swarming liveliness that the corpse embodies. This is one of the reasons why so many burial practices involve the preservation of the corpse in some fashion, ranging from cosmetics and embalmment to memorial portraiture and mummification.[[8]](#footnote-8) Preserving the corpse by whatever means is intended to ward off the specter of absolute loss. Of course, a death is not an effect of another subject’s response to it. When a death occurs, a subject is lost, and that loss is absolute.

Conceptualizing death in this fashion – not as a transitory moment in the general trajectory of life, but instead as an absolute loss sited upon the lively corpse – legitimates two needful things.

First, it makes possible what I would call a deep phenomenology of loss, one which neither effaces the wound of grief nor reduces and sublates the loss of the subject who has died. In turn, this dual function of the phenomenology in question suggests an intriguing elaboration of what it might mean to be a subject in the first place. Perhaps, at least in no small part, a subject might inhere in the capacity to experience the absoluteness of loss.

Second, understanding death in the manner I am sketching out beings to reincorporate the negative into a materialist framework. As stated above, it is common in the new materialist literature to adopt a strongly affirmative stance, methodologically or ontologically. Methodological affirmationism seeks only to avoid strictly critical-deconstructive labor (what Kosofsky terms “paranoid reading”) in favor of more generative engagements.[[9]](#footnote-9) By contrast, ontological affirmationism consists of a much stronger interest in “the creation of unashamedly metaphysical ontologies, the inventive potential of the subject, the necessity for production of novelty, and a concomitant suspicion of the negative and negativity.”[[10]](#footnote-10) From an ontologically affirmative point of view, then, a corpse is primarily a generative site, or else not worth considering at all, but I maintain that this is insufficient.

Citing the figure of the corpse as a paradigmatic case of material negativity – as both lively and lossy – enables us to grasp why negativity matters and also what the strong reincorporation of the negative that I propose begins to afford us in political-theoretical terms.

**Lively corpses**

If, as I argued briefly above, the liveliness of the corpse is indeed one condition of possibility for a deep phenomenology of loss, then each of these terms requires more attention. First, I will discuss what I mean by the term “liveliness” in the context of the corpse. What is liveliness? What does it mean to make the apparently counterintuitive claim that the corpse is indeed biologically or ontologically lively (that corpses are “sites of tremendous flourishing”)? Second, I will revisit what I mean by a deep phenomenology of loss and, briefly, why such a thing matters. Although I argue that the lively corpse makes such a phenomenology possible, there is a tension between the two that needs elaboration. The tension resides in the fact that, while the corpse may indeed disguise unknown forms of life, this does not ameliorate, ease, or lessen the absolute loss of a death. It is a tension I hope to sharpen rather than resolve. Finally, I will restate and, hopefully, strengthen the argument that the materiality of death and this phenomenology of loss – as well as the unbearable tension between the two – serves as a catalyst for the reincorporation of the negative into a materialist framework.

**Jane Bennett and the liveliness of things**

A good place to start is with Jane Bennett’s advocacy for the vitality of matter. In *Vibrant Matter*, Bennett argues that there is a capacity in things – nonhuman things such as “edibles, commodities, storms, metals” and many others – “not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Such a capacity, according to Bennett, forms a crucial part of “a materialism in which matter is an active principle.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Why? One of her goals is explicitly political insofar as she thinks that a manifest image of matter as brute and passive enables and encourages “human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

Another reason, more important for my purposes here (at least at present), concerns the ways in which seemingly inactive matter does in fact exert agency and effect consequences in the world. Bennett chooses metal as a paradigm case. Contrary to the manifest image of metal as “fixed matter,” as “uniform and homogeneous, devoid of any internal differences,” Bennett asserts that metal evidences a vitality of its own.[[14]](#footnote-14) She argues that metal – always an alloy, full of cracks and holes at the microscopic level – is an animated *topos*, one which is

not deterministic but expressive of an emergent causality, whereby [polycrystalline] grains respond on the spot and in real time to the idiosyncratic movements of their neighbors, and then to their neighbors' response to their response, and so on, in feedback spirals.[[15]](#footnote-15)

In more general terms, Bennett argues that there is a deep activity in the nature of things themselves. This principle of activity evidences itself both in the liveliness of things clearly living and in the liveliness of the inorganic, the nonliving. In the text, Bennett rarely addresses the matter of death, except insofar as she identifies “dead matter” and “dead thingness” with the manifest image of inactive matter that she wishes to dispel.[[16]](#footnote-16) To the contrary, it is an open question entirely whether or not anything resembling death as we commonly know it could exist in Bennett’s crackling, dynamic universe. In a vastly more sophisticated form, then, we return to a strong vital materialism, one in which death is refigured as “another phase in a generative process.”[[17]](#footnote-17)

Margaret Schwartz, in a recent paper, extends Bennett’s account of vibrant matter to the figure of the corpse. For her, though, the “dynamic assemblage” that a corpse (de)composes rapidly slips into cultural and symbolic registers. It is undoubtedly true that “the corpse localizes and identifies the dead,” that “it is always the body *of someone*, and it is always localized in a particular resting place.”[[18]](#footnote-18) However, Schwartz’s interest in using the figure of the corpse to examine the move “from the material to the expressive axis by means of reference” ends up eliding the raw, rotting materiality of the corpse as such.[[19]](#footnote-19) It is to this latter materiality that I first and foremost refer, and while it is certainly capable of bearing affective and semiotic relations of all sorts, the liveliness of the corpse can be sited directly upon itself. Schwartz writes of the corpse that “[t]he flesh itself is taxonomically human, but because it is no longer living, it is not functionally human.”[[20]](#footnote-20) As I will show below, this is not necessarily the case – corpses are ontologically lively, neither inert nor simply lively as assemblages composed of relations that supersede the merely biological.

What, then, does it mean to identify the corpse as lively? The strong vital materialist’s reply to this question is quite straightforward. Put simply, since all matter is vibrant, this includes the corpse. Corpses are no less lively than anything else. This is not my argument, however, for this argument is far too easy. Corpses are lively, I argue, but not simply because they partake in a principle of activity that inheres in the nature of matter *qua* matter. Rather, corpses have a liveliness that is unique to them, and to comprehend this uniqueness necessitates a much closer look at the nature of corpsehood.

**Animal bodies as “holobionts”**

To examine the corpse, we must first briefly consider the ways in which the living body is itself always already a composite and porous structure. We have a manifest image of the living body as ontologically distinct and, at least in some sense, entitative or self-identical. Bodies do not habitually merge into zones of visible or discernable indistinction. Barring unusual circumstances, we ascertain bodily identities easily and often, without noteworthy error. This manifest image has its purposes, of course, but there are good reasons to suspect that it is largely a convenient abbreviation for a vastly more complicated state of affairs.

For example, consider the bacterial and other components that contribute to the composite body. “The number of microbes in our bodies exceeds the number of cells in our bodies by 100 fold.”[[21]](#footnote-21) “Of all the cells in a human body, 10 percent are eukaryotic (derived from bacteria) and 90 percent *are* bacteria.”[[22]](#footnote-22) “The human distal gut contains more than 100 times as many genes as our human genome.”[[23]](#footnote-23) It may be tempting to dismiss factoids such as these as indicative of a state of affairs in which the body exists as a radically distinct structure within which other forms of life thrive (like a house filled with tenants), but it is not at all clear that this is simply the case.

Without our inner creaturely hordes, “our” bodies would cease to function properly, if at all, within a very short period of time. If the forms of life that largely compose us are as (or even more) crucial than many of our organs, which admit of at least functional replacement, then the existence and significance of these forms of life cannot be downplayed and should not be dismissed. In short, to speak of a body is necessarily already to speak of a plurality. Indeed, if “animals are symbiotic complexes of many species living together,” as Gilbert, Sapp, and Tauber have recently argued, then the point can be sharpened further.[[24]](#footnote-24) These authors identify a number of ways (i.e., anatomical, developmental, evolutionary, genetic, immunological) in which criteria of individuality are employed in our biological understanding of what an animal body is. They show and summarize how these criteria undercut themselves and instead reveal the individual to be a “holobiont,” “the anatomical term that describes the integrated organism comprised of both host elements and persistent populations of symbionts.”[[25]](#footnote-25)

These symbionts – e.g., the bacterial complexes that constitute a great deal of what it means to be an animal body in the first place – compose a constantly shifting economy of expiration and generation within us. In other words, even the healthy, living body is always already saturated in deathliness. In purely cellular terms, for the average human adult, an estimated fifty to seventy billion cells die via apoptosis (also called programmed cell death) in order to make room for new cells.[[26]](#footnote-26) Including the death tolls of the various bacteria and fungi that coexist within holobionts such as us increases the number significantly.

Examining the living body reveals the extent to which, at least in biological terms, the line of demarcation between the living and the dead blurs tremendously. Living bodies are also sites in which death continually occurs on a mass scale. Life and death appear inextricably intertwined – at times to the point of functional indistinction. How does this apply, then, to the corpse? I do not intend to argue that no distinction at all ever exists between the living body and the dead body, but rather to emphasize the ways in which that distinction is extraordinarily porous, especially from a biological point of view.

**What can a (dead) body do?**

What happens when a (human) body dies? Contemporary definitions of death tend to organize themselves around juridical and legal considerations, although these considerations frequently site themselves on the medical criterion of “the permanent cessation of the clinical functions of the whole brain.”[[27]](#footnote-27) The term “clinical functions” refers to “physical signs of brain function that are detectable on ordinary bedside neurological examination but excludes the meaningless cellular activities of isolated nests of surviving neurons,” characterized as “mere ‘physiologic activity.’”[[28]](#footnote-28) In my consideration, however, the “merely” physiological cannot be so quickly dismissed, especially given the fact that, while juridical and legal considerations are not insignificant, what interests us here involves the biological and ontological dimensions of death. Viewing death as “the permanent cessation of the critical functions of the organism as a whole” relies upon an understanding of the body as individual and self-identical that biology significantly complicates.[[29]](#footnote-29)

The corpse, as I have claimed, is a site of tremendous flourishing. If we circumscribe our feelings of disgust or revulsion, then the corpse can easily be seen as overwhelming lively. When blood stops flowing, cells and tissue begin to die. When the body dies, cell death is not apoptic, but necrotic – which is to say that the cells are not dying programmatically, but due to some external factor (e.g., infection, toxin, or trauma). Biological death is a process, not a singular event. “Skin can be used for grafting at twelve hours after death, and skin cells taken into culture after up to twenty-four hours are found to grow normally.”[[30]](#footnote-30) Likewise, muscles continue to react to stimuli for several hours, and white blood cells continue circulate for approximately six hours. Within the first twelve hours after death, the body undergoes rigor mortis, which results from the cessation of cellular respiration, a consequent failure to produce ATP, and thereby the inability of muscles to relax or retract. During the twelve hours following rigor mortis, autolytic processes and bacterial enzymes begin to breakdown muscular tissue as the body begins to decompose.

As strange as it may sound at first, it is during the process of decomposition that the corpse’s liveliness is most evident.[[31]](#footnote-31) “The countless microbes in the intestines are still alive and some of them (the clostridia, the coliforms) take the opportunity to spread through the body, invading the normally prohibited parts.”[[32]](#footnote-32) This stimulates the “bloat” stage, so termed because the corpse bloats with gases emitted as byproducts of microbial proliferation and the onset of putrefaction. As Cynthia L. Sears notes, “the human gut, predominately the colon, harbors the greatest number and diversity of organisms, primarily bacteria.”[[33]](#footnote-33) Consequently, these (but not only these) bacterial components of the body start to run wild. “The depletion of internal oxygen also creates an ideal environment for anaerobic microorganisms […] originating from the gastrointestinal tract and respiratory system.”[[34]](#footnote-34) After the body’s death, then, bacteria and other forms of life take over from within, so to speak. You could say that putrefaction is a process of revolution. New ecologies emerge from and within the corpse as it decomposes and putrefies, and the introduction of new forms of life (e.g., blowfly maggots and other insects) is systemic.

At the end of the bloat stage (and the beginning of the stage termed “active decay”), purged fluids are exuded from the corpse, which splits open. Both purged fluids and the splitting result from the internal pressure of bloating. The emission of purged fluids often “results in a localised flush of microbial biomass, shift in soil faunal communities, C mineralization (CO2-C evolution) and increase in soil nutrient status.”[[35]](#footnote-35) This localized flush is referred to as a “cadaver decomposition island” (or, sometimes, an “island of fertility”), and it signifies the emergence of a zone of indistinction between the corpse and its environment.[[36]](#footnote-36) Unfortunately, the exact processes generated within the decomposition island remain unknown to date, although distinct increases in bacterial and soil faunal communities have been observed.[[37]](#footnote-37) There are further stages of decomposition (“advanced decay,” “dry,” and “remains”), but they are increasingly difficult to individuate from local processes in the environment where decomposition takes place and the review so far should largely suffice for my purposes here.[[38]](#footnote-38)

It is certainly true that the death of the body signifies a change for that body, but I would argue that, at least in biological terms, the change is more like a change in management than a radically distinct transformation in state or substance. By now, the reason is clear. If the living animal body is a holobiont, rather than an individual in any classical sense of the word, then its holobiosis does not cease when “it” dies. What happens is that different components of the composite which the body already was begin to flourish in new ways. Some agencies and processes in the body are dramatically foregrounded, while others wither and disappear (but these transactions also occur apart from or prior to death, e.g., deciduous teeth, menopause, and sexual maturation). Eventually, of course, there is little or nothing left beyond bare remains, the minimal residue of a body’s presence, but this is because the agencies and fungible resources of the body have moved along.

**Nupta cadavera**

This very specific liveliness of the corpse has been noted before, sometimes in rather disturbing or surprising ways. For example, the Iranian philosopher Reza Negarestani dwells upon the ways in which a rather gruesome form of torture allegedly employed by the ancient Etruscans occupies a minor place in the imaginations of philosophers from Aristotle to Augustine. The torture in question entailed the binding of the victim to a corpse “with an obsessive exactitude” such that “each part of the body corresponded to its matching putrefying counterpart.”[[39]](#footnote-39)

Only once the superficial difference between the corpse and the living body started to rot away through the agency of worms, which bridged the two bodies, establishing a differential continuity between them, did the Etruscans stop feeding the living. Once both the living and the dead had turned black through putrefaction, the Etruscans deemed it appropriate to unshackle the bodies, by now combined together, albeit on an infinitesimal, vermicular level. Although the blackening of the skin indicated the superficial indifferentiation of decay […] for the Etruscans […] it signaled an ontological exposition of the decaying process which had already started from within.[[40]](#footnote-40)

This punishment seems to have played a prominent role in a now lost Aristotelian dialog called the *Eudemus*, where it is believed that Aristotle used “the metaphor of the [torture] for his theory of the duality of body and soul.”[[41]](#footnote-41) In other words, the figure of the corpse gets employed as an abject liveliness that describes or indexes the human condition as such. The human subject as *psyche* is in a quandary. It may be, as Bennett comments in a footnote, that *psyche* “marks the difference between a living human and an inactive corpse” for the ancient Greeks, but necessary for the existence of *psyche* in the first place is very precisely its embodiment.[[42]](#footnote-42) This is a point on which Aristotle is very clear.[[43]](#footnote-43) Aristotle’s view requires “that body and soul are somehow one.”[[44]](#footnote-44) It is interesting to note, then, how this lost fragment suggests a deeper awareness on Aristotle’s part of how the necessity and reality of death and decomposition (indeed, the principle of the negative as such) inflects the existence of any embodied animal subjectivity altogether.

Meditations on the Etruscan torture also appear in Augustine, who, citing a passage from Cicero, writes that

Aristotle says, that we are punished much as those were who once upon a time, when they had fallen into the hands of Etruscan robbers, were slain with elaborate cruelty; their bodies, the living [*corpora viva*] with the dead, were bound so exactly one against another: so our souls, tied together with our bodies as the living fixed upon the dead.[[45]](#footnote-45)

Given his notoriously antagonistic view of the body, perhaps it is obvious the uses to which Augustine intends to use the *nupta cadavera* as a metaphor – namely, as an example of the fallen, finite nature of mortal embodiment (the “double death” of the body and the soul, alike in sin). Nevertheless, the point remains. The point is that an awareness of the corpse as an impinging or lively source of agency long predates the present. If corpses were inactive or inert, they would not be particularly interesting. Importantly, the point is not exclusively a biological one. As Negarestani emphasizes to great effect, the reason that the Etruscan torture is philosophically interesting is precisely because it so intimately binds the vital principle inhering in the living body with its own impinging corpsehood. What could be more troubling for a vitalism *in simpliciter* than to be animated by and even in some ways indifferentiable from its apparent opposite?

**Necrolife and the necromass**

Another noteworthy place where the liveliness of the corpse is engaged explicitly can be found in Ingrid Fernandez’s recent dissertation, where she examines the ways in which what she calls “necrolife” impacts and influences literary and material culture in the nineteenth century in the United States. Unlike many texts in the field of “death studies,” Fernandez sites her project squarely upon the liveliness of the corpse and, therefore, first and foremost upon the biological qualities and material nature of corpsehood. “Necrolife,” she writes, “involves the post-mortem life-cycle of complex organisms as they are recycled into the ecosystem through decay and become the foundation for new life.”[[46]](#footnote-46) She does not simply articulate her project within a simple vocabulary of the “cycle of life,” however, for, as she observes, “Life and death are not linear processes. The cycle contains loops. As complex organic beings we are always alive and dead *at the same time*.”[[47]](#footnote-47)

As such, she identifies in different terms what I also seek to identify, namely, that the living body itself is saturated with deathliness and the corpse with liveliness. From this understanding of necrolife – an understanding which she argues permeates American culture in the nineteenth century – Fernandez begins to elaborate a somewhat expansive theory of subjectivity, describing the human subject in terms of what she calls the “necromass.”

A necromass is “rich mixture” of agencies and capacities that, when examined closely, reveals itself to be in flux between life and death at all times.[[48]](#footnote-48) In other words, the necromass encompasses both the living body and the corpse under a single term, a term which is intended to capture both the materiality and the temporality of existence as a body:

The necromass is formed by various agents, from bacteria to the actual human being, with all agents possessing their own drives. The non-human agents of the necromass can be more easily perceived in the processes of death and decay, because they break the boundaries of the body and reveal themselves to the eye or the microscope. But these agents have been there all along, from before the moment of birth. Sometimes they are dormant, at other moments, active, but each has its role and place in the life-cycle.[[49]](#footnote-49)

From this theory of subjectivity, she draws two normative conclusions relevant to my purposes here. The first, presented as a revision in our understanding of selfhood, entails “the acceptance of oneself as necromass, an entity that always carries living and dead matter in its essence and moves towards decay.”[[50]](#footnote-50) She continues:

During life, parts of our bodies die and regenerate, such as skin cells. We are alive but carry death in our everyday embodied self. In the post-mortem life-cycle, the dead matter of the corpse comes alive as a separate ecosystem populated by living organisms which utilize the remains to feed, reproduce and regenerate. Thus, the corpse is an active entity that is everything but static.[[51]](#footnote-51)

The second conclusion she summarizes as a generalized “necrophilia,” a term she divorces from its negative and pathological connotations (medical and psychoanalytic), instead articulating her intent “to return to the original meanings of *nekros* and *philia*. In this configuration, necrophilia stands for kinship with the corpse at both a biological and social level.”[[52]](#footnote-52) It is in this sense that she employs the term, a sense that serves as a critical extension of E. O. Wilson’s “biophilia” (defined by him as “the urge to affiliate with other forms of life […]” which naturally accompanies being alive in the first place).[[53]](#footnote-53) On her view, then, these two theoretical conclusions are deeply intertwined:

[…] there is not a clear-cut division between life and death. Everything is active or in wait. Dead tissue serves as a place of sustenance, growth, colonization and re-emergence. It represents positive decay. I propose our relation to the corpse be one of necrophilia – a recognition, kinship and identification that do not necessarily construct the corpse as exclusively human. Basically, if living organisms are attracted to their own kind, individuals as organisms must empathize with the state of being a corpse and the post-mortem life-cycle of the body. We all undergo a very similar process.[[54]](#footnote-54)

The two conclusions are so deeply intertwined because it is the subject’s own avowal of her existence as a necromass that enables her to be a necrophile, to affirm a kinship with the corpse. This kinship she identifies as “a form of enduring affection [for the corpse] induced by the desire to negate the trauma of loss.”[[55]](#footnote-55) It is primarily here that I part ways with Fernandez over the significance of the foregoing, for it is precisely here that her position reveals itself as yet another form of the strong vital materialism that I have been criticizing.

As I have argued, when the inner life of the body “breaks out” during decomposition and putrefaction, when the parliaments of microbial life that saturate the living body assume full primacy under conditions of mass cellular necrosis, this is arguably the body at its *most* lively. There is indeed an explosion of forms of life from the corpsely plane of immanence. Many of the agencies held in check by the living body in order for it to remain ambulatory have all restraints removed. However, to miss the fact that a death has nonetheless taken place – the real death of the subject – is to misunderstand this liveliness along with everything else. To blur the distinction between the living body and the corpse at the biological or ontological level is, I think, fundamentally correct, but to say nothing else – or, perhaps more importantly, to draw out normative statements about the significance of death from this – seems to be a mistake.

**“It’s your sadness, idiot”: deep phenomenologies of loss[[56]](#footnote-56)**

Before I can articulate sufficiently what I intend by a “deep phenomenology of loss,” it is necessary to briefly review two common understandings of mourning – the contemporary clinical understanding and the Freudian understanding. This is necessary in part because I seek to differentiate a phenomenology of loss from the process of mourning altogether. Mourning involves an overcoming, whereas a phenomenology of loss cuts deep precisely insofar as it acknowledges or is permanently marked by an absolute, irremediable loss. In other words, a deep phenomenology of loss is not a process at all. In fact, it resembles something like Catherine Malabou’s concept of “destructive plasticity” more than anything else.[[57]](#footnote-57) In what follows, therefore, I will briefly survey both the contemporary clinical and the Freudian perspectives on the mourning process. Then I will attempt to explain how a phenomenology of loss differs from the foregoing – and, indeed, from the work of mourning altogether.

In the contemporary clinical psychological context, mourning is defined as an active process that must necessarily follow the passive reaction of grief in order to avoid a descent into the pathological. As psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton writes, “[…] there is no moving beyond loss without some experience of mourning. To be unable to mourn is to be unable to enter into the great human cycle of death and rebirth – to be unable, that is, to ‘live again.’”[[58]](#footnote-58)

On this view, grief is composed of a complex of reactions to a given loss, and the etiology of grief is frequently decomposed into the following four component steps: (1) a strong affective reaction to the perception of the loss in question (e.g., sadness and shock), (2) a protest against the reality of that loss (e.g., anger and denial), (3) a physical-physiological reaction (e.g., loss of appetite and susceptibility to illness), and (4) a psychosocial reaction (e.g., avoidance of others and withdrawal from affective sociality).[[59]](#footnote-59)

“However,” as clinical psychologist Theresa Rando writes, “the healthy mourning of a loss demands more than mere expression of reactions.”[[60]](#footnote-60) A “significant loss – whether cherished persons, places, projects, or possessions – presents a challenge to one’s sense of narrative coherence” and therefore “to the sense of identity” a subject may have.[[61]](#footnote-61) In turn, after the wound of grief is inflicted, the clinical response encourages the subject to respond and repair (e.g., through narrative self-reconstruction).[[62]](#footnote-62)

This further response on the part of the subject is termed the mourning process. Although grief is conceptualized as the first (but only the first) stage of mourning, there is a developmental trajectory that is projected and prescribed for the subject who suffers a loss.

The bereaved must make a series of readjustments to compensate for and adjust to the absence of what has been lost. Failure to make the proper adaptations and reorientations necessitated by a loss leaves the survivor unsuitably related to the lost object and the old world. The new reality is not conformed to, and the individual persists in some fashion as if the world is the same when it is not.[[63]](#footnote-63)

As such, the process of mourning is intended to “take the individual beyond the passive reactions of grief and into the realm of movement and change [that is] demanded by a major loss.”[[64]](#footnote-64) In other words, “[w]hereas grief is an emotion of overwhelming sadness, mourning can be viewed as a process of internal transformation by which the old is relinquished and the new is engaged.”[[65]](#footnote-65) The etiology of mourning is therefore composed of two functional steps.[[66]](#footnote-66) The first step is to undo “the psychosocial ties that bind the mourner to the loved one” in order to facilitate “the development of new ties.”[[67]](#footnote-67) The second step is to allow the mourning subject to revise her relation to the new and altered state of affairs that now obtains – one in which the loved object no longer exists. These steps gets operationalized in a number of ways, depending on the clinical context, as well as the specific psychological or therapeutic framework within which the process of mourning is conceived. From the clinical psychological perspective, then, to mourn properly the mourning subject must relinquish all bonds with the deceased that presume the presence of the deceased in order to forge new bonds with the deceased that are appropriate to absence of the deceased, as well as forge new and reforge old bonds with the living who remain.

Regardless of exactly how the process of mourning is conceived or operationalized in contemporary clinical psychological terms, there is clear precedent for this approach to mourning in the work of Sigmund Freud. In his influential “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud provides his own account of “the work of mourning” that is necessary for a psychically healthy response to loss. In comparing mourning and melancholia, Freud argues that both of these “grave departures from the normal attitude to life” are in many ways remarkably similar.[[68]](#footnote-68) Melancholia, he writes, consists of

a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of capacity to loss, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment.[[69]](#footnote-69)

What differentiates mourning from melancholia, then? I refer to two distinguishing features in particular. First, in mourning, Freud notes that “[t]he disturbance of self-regard is absent in mourning; but otherwise the features are the same.”[[70]](#footnote-70) Second, the nature and specificity of the object loss in mourning is relatively explicit. In melancholy, this is not true – “melancholia is in some way related to an object-loss which is withdrawn from consciousness, in contradistinction to mourning, in which there is nothing about the loss that is unconscious.”[[71]](#footnote-71) While it is important to distinguish pathological mourning (in which the work of mourning is blocked from ever concluding) from melancholia, I will turn away from the topic of melancholia for now.

So, for Freud, mourning is a process of readjustment that follows the experience and recognition of a loss. The working through of mourning consists of the recognition that the loved object no longer exists and the consequent withdrawal of libidinal investment (decathexis) from that object. It is precisely a working through because of the subject’s natural resistance to such a withdrawal. Such resistance can become unhealthy, but usually “respect for reality gains the day,” if only “bit by bit, at great expense of time and cathectic energy […]”[[72]](#footnote-72) “The fact is, however, that when the work of mourning is completed, the ego becomes free and uninhibited again.”[[73]](#footnote-73)

In short, the difference between the work of mourning in any of its guises and what I have been calling the deep of phenomenology of loss is as follows. A work of mourning is a process of amelioration (of grief) and healing (of the wound of grief that a loss causes). When the work is completed, the subject has in some fashion recuperated from that loss. Even for Derrida, who extends and radicalizes the work of mourning into an infinite process that “can only displace, without effacing, the effect of a trauma,” it is still an ameliorative process, if one that remains necessarily incomplete.[[74]](#footnote-74) By contrast, a deep phenomenology of loss is voidal. Where a subject formerly was, there is now only a formless and unresponsive nothingness. Regardless of the work of memory or any material traces, when a subject dies, there is an absolute loss. That loss is immovable, an absence that may be abandoned or forgotten but not effaced or overwritten.

I term this precisely a phenomenology of loss and not an ontology because, following Cavell and others, it is not clear that a subject is exactly an ontological creature in the first place. Subjects and bodies overlap, but we can certainly conceive of bodies without subjects (e.g., the “Muselmänner,” figures of the concentration camps who, while nominally living, cease to be subjects entirely, or Catherine Malabou’s “Wholly Other,” those who have experienced brain injuries so severe that the subjects are annihilated while the bodies continue to live).[[75]](#footnote-75) Whether or not subjects can be conceived apart from bodies coherently is a different question (I doubt if they truly can, although M. R. James has certainly made a case for it), but not one which concerns me here.

What I propose, then, resembles a dark, inverse variation of Cavell’s account of the subject as an entity who, although embodied, necessarily exists in the space of acknowledgement rather than as the subject of a claim to knowledge. I call it a variation because I am not interested here in the failure or refusal to acknowledge which, for Cavell, entails a skepticism. Rather, the variation is a form of acknowledgement, but what gets acknowledged is the absolute loss of the subject that occurs upon her death.

Malabou prefigures a deep phenomenology of loss when she discusses the phenomenon of destructive plasticity, which, as she writes, “enables the appearance or formation of alterity where the other is absolutely lacking. Plasticity is the form of alterity when no transcendence, flight or escape is left.”[[76]](#footnote-76) For Malabou, the phenomenon has interest insofar as it relates to subjects who, through physiological and political trauma, have, in part or in whole, ceased to exist, but I suspect that the concept admits of radicalization in the direction I am suggesting. Indeed, Malabou explicitly seeks to distance the concept from the materiality of death. Destructive plasticity is “a destructive mutation that is not the transformation of the body into a cadaver, but rather the transformation of the body into another body in the same body, due to [trauma].”[[77]](#footnote-77) “The body can die without being dead.”[[78]](#footnote-78)

I argue that Malabou’s understanding of death is insufficient insofar as she fails to account either for the deathliness with which the living body is saturated or for the liveliness of the corpse. But the failure is a minor one and easily corrected. Malabou’s concept of destructive plasticity is not identical to the deep phenomenology of loss I suggest, but they are cognates. To introduce the cognate extensions of destructive plasticity into a more robustly materialist framework is not to lessen the impact – to equate the post-traumatic subject with the lively corpse and thereby efface the significance of trauma – but to sharpen it. As she writes, after all, destructive plasticity is

Approached but avoided, glimpsed often enough in fantasy literature but never connected to reality, neglected by psychoanalysis, ignored by philosophy, nameless in neurology, the phenomenon of pathological plasticity, a plasticity that does not repair, a plasticity without recompense or scar, one that cuts the thread of life in two or more segments that no longer meet, nevertheless has its own phenomenology that demands articulation.[[79]](#footnote-79)

But this does not apply only to brain damage and destructive alteration.

In summary, then, a deep phenomenology of loss is a dark, inverse variation upon Cavellian acknowledgement. What is acknowledged is the absolute loss of the subject who has died. That absolute loss of the subject is a species of destructive plasticity in Malabou’s sense. It is a species and not a mere example because Malabou does not think that death and destructive plasticity overlap directly. This is because she sees the distinction between life and death as relatively imporous. Revising that understanding in the light of the foregoing makes possible the extension of her concept into the deep phenomenology of loss that I suggest.

**Restatement**

To restate, then. The materiality of death as embodied in the corpse and this deep phenomenology of loss exist in tension with one another. There is a tension precisely because the subsuming of the corpse into its own liveliness forms a condition of possibility for the absolute quality of loss I choose to emphasize. This allows for the reincorporation of the negative into a materialist framework because it preserves the generative and vital dimensions of materiality while also making room for the negative as an inherent gap therein. The deep phenomenology of loss introduces an internal caesura that prevents us from simply sublating the negative back into “the stream of life.” It does not fracture a materialism back into some old dualism, for it is certainly coherent and conceivable to maintain that the capacity to bear a phenomenology of loss is simply inherent to certain forms or kinds of matter (e.g., animal, embodied).

**On necrohybridity**

In conclusion, I want to suggest a tentative (and seemingly teratological) revision of human subjectivity in light of the foregoing. What begins to emerge there, in my view, is a discourse of the human as necrohybrid – as an ambiguous creature whose living body is saturated with deathliness, whose corpse is lively, and whose life is conditioned by the effects and possibility of suffering absolute, irremediable loss. The term “necrohybrid” is an extension and modification of Donna Haraway’s conceptualization of hybridity.

For Haraway, figures of hybridity (ranging from cyborgs and companion species to mutants and OncoMice™) serve a distinct purpose. These figures are metaphoric revisions of what it means to be an embodied subject constituted by and ensnared inextricably within webs of shifting relation. As she writes, “Beings do not pre-exist their relatings.”[[80]](#footnote-80) For Haraway, the work of metaphor (like that of science-fiction) is actual and material. Its theoretical significance and the revisions such work can effect should not be underestimated.[[81]](#footnote-81)

As she writes, after all, “we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs. The cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics.”[[82]](#footnote-82) *Mutatis mutandis*, my suggestion that necrohybridity is our ontology does not in and of itself give us a politics. Indeed, I am wary of all claims that ontology can deliver a politics at all. I am wary not because of worries about political disaster, *per se*, but instead because of my suspicion that such claims often fail to cohere.[[83]](#footnote-83) Instead, what gives us a politics are the effects and possibility of absolute loss that necrohybridity allows for and conditions. What gives us a politics is the reincorporation of the negative into a materialist framework that the condition of necrohybridity embodies and makes possible. As Diana Coole writes, similar, regarding the structural necessity of “extreme negativity” for political praxis and theory, “negativity is already political inasmuch as it signals the vulnerability and contingency of every phenomenon that appears to be fully positive and replete.”[[84]](#footnote-84)

Thus, the necrohybrid is like a companion species in Haraway’s sense: “Companion species take shape in interaction. They more than change each other; they co-constitute each other, at least partly.”[[85]](#footnote-85) The difference is that, for the necrohybrid, what is interacted and transacted within the body is a deathly economy. Here we return to Negarestani’s *nupta cadavera* and the material image of the living body inextricably bound to its own impinging corpsehood. At the biological or ontological level, as I have argued above, the creaturely subject exists as a body situated rather ambiguously between life and death. At that level, the distinction is not merely blurry, but co-constitutional.

By contrast, phenomenologically, the difference between the living and the lost is relatively clear and distinct.[[86]](#footnote-86) At times, there are intimations in this direction in Haraway’s work. As John E. Seery suggests, Haraway is far more preoccupied with death than is generally acknowledged, and he emphasizes the ways in which she dwells constantly upon

apocalypse, AIDS, nuclear war, deforestation, toxic pollution, environmental rampage […] struggles, threats, diseases, violence, exploitations, dominations, deadly games, competition, resistances, and geometries of difference.[[87]](#footnote-87)

Indeed, deathliness appears to be far closer to the figure of the cyborg than Haraway usually acknowledges.

It is hard to ignore that the cyborg genre in science fiction and film is one of the most violent forms of storytelling imaginable. Under Haraway’s direction the cyborg provides an emplotment that might turn western violence upon itself and derail apocalyptic aspirations. Still, surprisingly, she never addresses the cyborg’s own frighteningly violent tendencies.[[88]](#footnote-88)

So what? If we revise our understanding of human subjectivity in terms of necrohybridity, what does this get us? What it gets us, in my view, is one step closer toward apprehensions of the political that we need – materialist ones in which the negative is frankly acknowledged rather than dismissed or ignored. It is a piece of the puzzle that composes a mournful politics, and the mournful politics I am suggesting exists under the conditions I have discussed. First, there is the needful recognition of the materially ambiguous nature(culture) of necrohybridity. Second, there is the needful (and needfully dark) acknowledgement of absolute loss without succor that forms the condition of possibility for all succor. What I have termed necrohybridity does not itself afford succor. It is not a springboard for a joyful rhetoric of eternal recurrence and rejuvenation, or of “finding beauty in a broken world.”[[89]](#footnote-89)

To the contrary, necrohybridity and the deep phenomenology of loss form necessary parts of a cousin to Timothy Morton’s “dark ecology,” characterized as a “perverse, melancholy ethics that refuses to digest the object into an ideal form.”[[90]](#footnote-90) This reincorporation of the negative further suggests what a politics composed of such subjects might look like. Such a politics would be both mournful and opportunistic. It would be mournful insofar as it were practiced under the conditions of absolute loss. It would be opportunistic in full awareness of the liveliness that undergirds such loss and, therefore, the various foreclosures and potentials that such losses open up in the space of things. This would evade the facile affirmationism of a politics of virtuality by instead taking seriously the darkenings and traumas that afflict the living and which the living inflict upon each other.

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43. See Aristotle, *On the Soul* in *Complete Works of Aristotle, Volume 1: The Revised Oxford Translation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), especially Book III, and also *Essays on Aristotle's De Anima*, ed. Martha Nussbaum (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), especially the essays by Jennifer Whiting (“Living Bodies,” pp. 75-92) and Michael Frede (“On Aristotle’s Conception of the Soul,” pp. 93-108). See also Sophia M. Connell, “Toward an Integrated Approach to Aristotle as a Biological Philosopher,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 55:2 (December 2001): 297-322. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Ronald Polansky, *Aristotle's De Anima: A Critical Commentary* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 547. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Cited in Negarestani, “The Corpse Bride,” p. 132. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Ingrid Fernandez, “Necrolife: Toward an Ontology of the Corpse in Nineteenth Century American Culture” (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 2012), p. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Ibid., 7 (emphasis mine). [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Ibid., p. 378. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Ibid., p. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Ibid., p. 383. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. See E. O. Wilson, *Biophilia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Fernandez, “Necrolife,” p. 379. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Ibid., p. 380. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Jean-François Lyotard, “On the Occasion of Deleuze’s Death,” cited in Gregory Flaxman, *Gilles Deleuze and the Fabulation of Philosophy: Powers of the False, Volume 1* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), p. 237. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Catherine Malabou, *Ontology of the Accident: An Essay on Destructive Plasticity*, trans. Carolyn Shead (Malden: Polity Press, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Robert Jay Lifton, “Preface” to Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich, *The Inability to Mourn*, trans. by Beverley R Placzek (New York: Grove Press, 1975), p. vi. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Joanne T. Jozefowski, “Anatomy and Physiology of Grief” in *The Phoenix Phenomenon: Rising from the Ashes of Grief* (Northvale: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1999), pp. 11-32. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Therese A. Rando, “Grief and Mourning: Accommodating to Loss” in *Dying: Facing the Facts*, eds. Robert A. Neimeyer and Hannelore Wass (Washington D.C.: Tayler & Francis, 1995), p. 219. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Robert A. Neimeyer, “The Language of Loss: Grief Therapy as a Process of Meaning Reconstruction” in *Meaning Reconstruction and the Experience of Loss*, ed. by Robert Neimeyer (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2001), p. 263. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Indeed, the clinical psychological literature places some stress on the possibility that, after the work of mourning is successfully completed, the subject may experience “significant gain, along with the experience of distress.” See Lawrence C. Calhoun and Richard G. Tedeschi, “Posttraumatic Growth: The Positive Lessons of Loss” in *Meaning Reconstruction*, pp. 157-172, quote at p. 158. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Rando, “Grief and Mourning,” p. 219. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Peter Shabad, *Despair and the Return of Hope: Echoes of Mourning in Psychotherapy* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2001), p. 299. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Rando, “Grief and Mourning,” p. 219. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Ibid., p. 220. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of*

    *Sigmund Freud*, Volume XIV (1914-1916), trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1957), p. 243. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Ibid., p. 244. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Ibid., p. 243. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Ibid., p. 245. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. Ibid., pp. 244-245. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. Ibid., p. 245. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Jacques Derrida, *The Specter of Marx: The State of the Debt, The Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 113. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. See Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 2002),pp. 42-86 and Malabou, *Ontology of the Accident*. Malabou introduces the figure of the “Wholly Other” on p. 3, but the figure recurs in various guises throughout the text. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Malabou, *Ontology of the Accident*, p. 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Ibid., p. 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. Ibid., p. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003), p. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. Similar conclusions about science-fiction and theoryfiction are also reached by Nick Land in the 1990s, who writes frequently of what he calls “hyperstition,” or “[…] fictions that make themselves real […] a term we have coined for semiotic productions that make themselves real.” See “Occultures” and “Origin of the Cthulhu Club” in Nick Land, *Fanged Noumena: Collected Writings, 1987-2007*, eds. Ray Brassier and Robin Mackay (Falmouth: Urbanomic Press, 2012), pp. 545-572 and pp. 573-582. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Free Association Press, 1991), p. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. See Christian Thorne, “To the Political Ontologists,” in *Dark Trajectories: Politics of the Outside* (Hong Kong: [NAME] Publications, 2013), pp. 97-121. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. Diana Coole, *Negativity and Politics: Dionysus and Dialectics from Kant to Poststructuralism* (New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 231. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. Donna Haraway, “Cyborgs to Companion Species: Reconfiguring Kinship,” in *Chasing Technoscience: Matrix for Materiality*, eds. Don Ihde and Evan Selinger (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2003), p. 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. As Malabou and others argue, death is obviously not the only form of loss. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. John E. Seery, *Political Theory for Mortals: Shades of Justice, Images of Death* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 151, but see also pp. 148-153 for a fascinating comparison of Haraway and Hobbes. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. Ibid. For contrast, see Sadie Plant, *Zeroes and Ones: Digital Women and the New Technoculture* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), as well as “Cyberspace Anarchitecture as Jungle-War,” “Meltdown,” and “Cyberrevolution” in Land, *Fanged Noumena*, pp. 401-410, pp. 441-460, and pp. 375-382. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. See Terry Tempest Williams, *Finding Beauty in a Broken World* (New York: Vintage, 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature:* *Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 195. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)