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## **Ex-orbitant Generosity: Gifts of Love in a Cold Cosmos**

### **Love in the Time of Catastrophe**

By way of the curvature of its surface and the tilt of its axis, the earth receives the energy of the sun unevenly, its tropical latitudes catching the fullness of the solar flux that strikes the temperate and polar zones only obliquely. The ensuing temperature gradient drives the dissipation of heat northwards and southwards, a vast, ceaseless diffusion that is the major determinant of our planet's weather systems. This flow, too, is far from even, as it whips and gyrates across the earth's variegated surfaces. At any moment, meteorologists tell us, around a thousand thunderstorms are raging through the tropics, some of which develop into fully-fledged cyclones or hurricanes.<sup>1</sup>

In late August, in the midst of the 2005 Atlantic hurricane season, a tropical storm which formed over the south-eastern Bahamas strengthened into a cyclone as it made landfall in Florida. Here it weakened slightly, only to regain intensity as it entered the Gulf of Mexico. Having peaked at sea as a category 5 hurricane - with maximum sustained winds of 175 miles an hour, Katrina made a second landfall, in Louisiana on Monday the 29 August, by which time it had dropped to a 125 mile an hour category 3. It could have been worse. But it was enough to trigger the disaster that the people of New Orleans and neighbouring settlements had been fearing for some time.

We know the story. Hundreds of thousands of square kilometres of countryside were battered and inundated with the highest death toll of any cyclone in the United States since 1928. In what is the largest diaspora in modern American history, over two million people were displaced, many of whom have not returned home, and probably never will. 'Katrina', as one commentator put it 'is about the sudden and complete loss of all that home means – safety, respite, privacy, comfort, and security'.<sup>2</sup>

Cyclones may be an ordinary aspect of our planet's meteorology, part of the normal chaos of earthly existence, but there are mitigating factors, in the Southern States of the USA as elsewhere. The destruction of the Louisiana wetlands, the widening and heightening of the Mississippi River into what locals refer to as a 'cyclone alley', the subsidence of New Orleans, and the poor maintenance of the levee system are widely recognised as contributory factors, while the possible surcharge of human-induced global heating to natural extremity remains more contentious. For politically progressive thinkers, the close mapping of social stratification onto depths of floodwater in the worst hit urban sectors presented an irresistible indictment of the class and racialized injustice of the Deep South. Many other observers around the world were more than willing to see in the mass-mediated spectacle of delayed, inadequate and oppressive relief operations the confirmation of all their baser stereotypes of the world's remaining superpower.

But what else could we do with such a disaster? What more might we make of the experience of vulnerable bodies caught up in events beyond their control or comprehension, events whose ultimate origin is not even of this earth? While the acts of social neglect pre- and post-Katrina are clearly too stark to pass over in silence, it worried me when it looked like pre-packaged critique was being airlifted into 'ground below zero' faster than vital supplies. If this truly was a 'dis-aster', in the sense Maurice Blanchot talks about, it seemed as though not everyone had lost their guiding star.<sup>3</sup> And that some forms of writing, some intellectual agendas, were actually reinforced by the predicament that laid others low. If the gift of the disaster is that it stops us in our tracks, jolts us out of our usual circuits, makes us think and do things differently, then there is

something disappointing about critical practices so intent on rehearsing their regular modes of explanation that all other possibilities get pushed aside.

As Rebecca Solnit wrote in response to a different event: ‘One of the challenges of a natural disaster is that there is no one to blame, to allow us to make the shift from the difficulty of grief that is a kind of love to the ease of scorn or loathing that is a kind of hatred’<sup>4</sup>. In the apparently denaturalized disaster zone of Katrina, there was no such shortage of blameworthy targets, leaving little in the way of buffer zones to hinder the tempting passage from compassion to incrimination.

But there were exceptions to critical thought’s restricted conceptual and affective register. Though there are few North American writers as incisive on the subject of social injustice as Mike Davis, his interventions on Katrina are memorable for their celebration of the human warmth it incited. In an article coauthored with local writer Anthony Fontenot, Davis speaks first hand of his visit, in the aftermath of the cyclone, to Ville Platte – a small Cajun and black Creole community.<sup>5</sup> It was the people of this Southern Louisiana backwater, along with boat-owners from neighbouring settlements who banded together to form the ‘Cajun Navy’, the ad-hoc flotilla of fishing and hunting vessels that played a crucial role in rescuing stranded New Orleanians from the floodwaters. Despite a median income less than half the national average, the townsfolk of Ville Platte provided food, shelter and support to more than 5000 displaced people, who they referred to not as refugees or evacuees, but as ‘company’. Rallying under the slogan of ‘If not us, then who?’, relief efforts were organized, as Davis and Fontenot recount, like an extended family gathering and feast. As the banner over the local community shelter put it ‘No Red Cross, No Salvation Army or Federal Funds ...Just Friends’.<sup>6</sup>

While Davis characteristically teases out the political implications of this gesture and the situation that triggered it, he is equally comfortable speaking simply of ‘an act of love in a time of danger’.<sup>7</sup> In a related way, John Protevi moves between the familiar, mass-mediated version of the unfolding catastrophe in down-town New Orleans and the largely overlooked undercurrent of compassion.

Yes, we saw images of helpless poor people waiting to be rescued at the Superdome and the Convention Center, but we should never forget that they rescued themselves prior to that, through heroic solidarity, through what we should not be afraid to call “love”....<sup>8</sup>

As Davis, Protevi and other commentators know only too well, there was no shortage of barred escape-routes and blatant inhospitality during and after Katrina. But for a social formation that is so often taken to epitomize naked individualism and unbridled competitiveness, there is evidence of an inordinate amount of empathy engendered by the crisis, ranging from extensive donation and volunteering to the offering of 200,000 plus beds in homes across the nation to the estranged and the homeless.

As was also the case with regard to the irruption of charitable responses in the wake of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami,<sup>9</sup> many critical thinkers found much to disparage in this outburst of beneficence. While their commitment to narratives of structurally-induced disparities of wealth and power may be commendable, what was characteristically excluded in such accounts is more worrying. The insistence on revealing the inner workings of injustice – on exposing the chains of causality that result in under-privilege and vulnerability - encouraged the scrutinizing of all generous or charitable practices. This reflects a situation in which the intellectual left so much takes for granted that ordinary people engaged in everyday activities are complicit with major power-holders in the propagation of unjust conditions that the possibility of genuine compassion tends

to be precluded by a logic of moral accountability.<sup>10</sup> As a result, all but the most politicized interventions are taken to task for giving injudiciously, helping out of masked self interest, or for proffering charity in place of socio-political change.

But generic critical thought gags on more than just effusions of gifting. It also displays a pronounced tendency to devalue the role of natural physical processes in the genesis of disaster, in favour - once again - of explanations that revolve around identifiable social structural causation. And in this way, there is a largely unexplicated collusion between the disavowal of an earth or cosmos violently at odds with itself, and the foreclosure on the sort of responsiveness where people or communities are wrenched out of their usual orbits through exposure to the needs of others. Ironically, those who are most excoriating about the economistic logic of the current international order appear also to be most inclined to renounce exorbitance in two of its more striking manifestations. As if they could close the circle on catastrophe at both ends.

It is revealing, then, that the three critical thinkers I have referred to who seem least afraid to speak of `love' in a time of crisis are also set apart by their willingness to acknowledge the independent forcefulness of the physical world. As Rebecca Solnit wrote in an early response to the Indian Ocean tsunami:

The relief will be very political, in who gives how much, and to whom it is given, but the event itself transcends politics, the realm of things we cause and can work to prevent. We cannot wish that human beings were not subject to the forces of nature, including the mortality that is so central a part of our own nature. We cannot wish that the seas dry up, that the waves grow still, that the tectonic plates cease to exist, that nature ceases to be beyond our abilities to predict and control.<sup>11</sup>

Bucking the trend to rush to the `man-made' aspects of the disaster that was Katrina, Protevi begins with an account of the land, the river, the sea and, especially, the sun – drawing out the importance of solar energy both in the slave-labour based plantation economy that helped build Louisiana and in the genesis of the storm. Davis too, has been emphatic in his championing of earth processes as constitutive forces in the shaping of human existence. Not only is he one of the few critical thinkers to have consistently stressed the role of climatic variability, seismicity and biological agency in human history, but Davis has also taken his `exorbitance' very literally.<sup>12</sup> Seeking to enlighten his politically radical compatriots to the `revolutionary' significance of the last half century of development in the earth sciences, he has made a decisive claim for the openness of our planet to extra-terrestrial forces; pointing up the momentous significance of what he refers to as `the Earth's citizenship in the solar system'.<sup>13</sup>

Next to this more cosmological opening up of orbits, enthusiasts of gift theory are likely to be better acquainted with the ethical version of exorbitance associated with the work of Emmanuel Levinas – and all its far-reaching implications for the philosophical and social theoretical notion of the sovereign subject. They may be aware too that there is growing impatience with the definitive absoluteness of Levinasian alterity and with the otherworldly `shimmer of infinity' we may divine in the face of the Other.<sup>14</sup> And they may have detected a more general dissatisfaction these days with all those modes of philosophizing that hold out for a glimpse of transcendent exteriority, for a whiff of the ineffable, as the best hope of breaking thought free of its own bounds.<sup>15</sup>

It is probably fair to say that a certain kind of thematic about alterity and the gifts that shuttle between self and other is no longer on the ascendant. At the same time, however, we are increasingly being exposed to messages from the sciences

that point to the volatility and uncertainty of the physical systems that the human species and other life-forms depend upon. In some very sober and objective ways, the earth and life sciences are showing us that the multicellular and macro-scale life to which human beings belong may be more precarious than we previously imagined it to be. In this context, there is a growing willingness amongst some philosophers and social theorists to reassess the cold, hard facts of physical science, and to recognize that scientific truth claims may not be as foreign to the pushing and provoking of philosophical thought as many of us had come to assume.

With the question of our inhabitation of a changeable and uncertain planet in mind, I want to suggest that we are not yet finished with the resources that Levinas and other radical thinkers of the gift have to offer. And that there is work to be done to bring the event of a generous opening to others down to earth, while still keeping an eye on the cosmos. In this paper, I explore the idea of exorbitance, not only in regard to the event of a compassionate encounter with others, but in the sense of an earth open to its own incongruities and to the perturbations of the cosmos. I ask how these very different kinds of ruptures or openings might be brought into proximity, considering not only the question of how inter-human generosity implicates its constituent bodies in a relationship to an earth, but also whether or not we might wish to extend the notion of giving beyond the human, and even beyond the terrestrial envelope of life. What is at stake if we try and stretch the idea of gift-giving into the elements, across the earth, and out into the cosmos? While there may well be catastrophic events far beyond the shocks and traumas that trouble humankind, do we wish to imagine acts of love or care that *cross the wounded galaxies*? Or will this detract us from those very aspects of our humanity that we might most wish to clutch on to as we dodge the fallout from a cosmos composed neither for our comfort nor our continuity?

### **The Gift of Terrain and the Birth of Community**

In popular reportage and critical thought alike it is generally assumed that catastrophes are events that befall communities or regions. Whether it is believed to have arisen out of natural or social processes - or out of some conspiracy of the human and nonhuman - the disaster is viewed as impacting upon people and places that pre-exist its brutal visitation. But this implies a sequence that has been subjected to much philosophical scrutiny over recent decades, a premise that order comes before disorder, settlement before dispossession. As if, in the beginning, things were in their rightful place, and only afterwards came the shock of estrangement, the unworlding of the world.

In *The Natural Contract*, Michel Serres offers his own angle on the primordial story – one that provides an alternative to the version in which original plenitude reigns. Reminding us that the earth ever was unruly, he begins with the cataclysm - in the guise of the flood - and tells of the formation of the social or the communal in response to this event. ‘Floods,’ Serres contends, ‘take the world back to disorder, to primal chaos, to time zero, right back to nature in the sense of things about to be born, in a nascent state’.<sup>16</sup> Setting the scene in the alluvial delta, he speculates how the receding of a periodic inundation is the incitement for the establishment of order: an ordering which takes the form of measuring and marking freshly sedimented land so that it can be distributed amongst those who will set to work farming it. This inscription, this enactment of a border, Serres announces, is the first law on earth. Wherever it occurs – on the floodplain, around an oasis in the desert, in a forest clearing - it is this decision which inaugurates a bond between all those concerned. Through the process of distinguishing culture from nature, or rather, in agreeing how to make the cut and

accepting this jurisdiction, the collectivity defines and formalises its own existence. The same `cord' which cordons off and measures out a realm of cultivation also ropes us together into a new accord:

Thus was concluded a social contract – will we ever be sure of this? – out of which politics and laws were born. This contract may be a mythic or abstract notion or event, but it is fundamental or indispensable to understanding how the obligations that bind us to one another were born...<sup>17</sup>

What stands out in this account is not so much the link between the demarcation of ourselves from nature and the commitment to the basic covenant of the `social'. Political philosophers have a long tradition of imagining that it is the enactment of some kind of contract – albeit a virtual one – that marks our shift out of a `state of nature' and into the condition of socialised existence. As Serres himself stresses, what makes his version of the primordial scene distinctive is his insistence that the flood – or any other natural upheaval – is a recurring one. Our collective carving out of a civilised and contractual realm is not a once and for all achievement. It is something we have to persist with, a performance repeated each time the volatile forces of the nature reassert themselves. The trouble with the standard social contract story, and all successive social or historical narratives that imagine a decisive break with nature, Serres argues, is that once the separation from nature has been achieved, the `social' is henceforth imagined to be autonomous, self-mobilising, unmoored from any earthly directive. `From the time the pact was signed, it is as if the group that had signed it, casting off from the world, were no longer rooted in anything but its own history'.<sup>18</sup>

Through the flood story, Serres reminds his fellow continental philosophers that their extirpation of a particular metaphysics of nature should not simply endorse the idea of human collective existence as an open and endless play of its own internal forces. If society or community is to be prised out of its self-enclosure, this move demands rather than prohibits a further opening to the elemental forces that underpin human life. An opening that is enduring and resurgent. This means that far from unbinding the social from the natural, we are compelled to reconsider the question of a social ordering or communal formation that responds to the imperatives of the earth. This is not a call to re-embed the social in a stable substrate, but an insistence that social and communal life was and is responsive to the rumbling of the earth, to the periodic ungrounding of its ground.

In the light of a recent turn in philosophy, we might say that Serres anticipates a `non-correlationist' approach to nature and social existence, or being and thought.<sup>19</sup> He does not restrict himself to the question of access to nature, refuses to reduce human life to any kind of symmetry with natural forces, and is prepared to countenance independent forces which precede and potentially overwhelm the human. For Serres, there is no community that is not enabled, haunted, and from time to time commanded by `hostile conditions' – with analogies to what Quentin Meillassoux refers to as *the great outdoors*: a world thoroughly indifferent to human existence.<sup>20</sup>

But while Serres' flood fable does admirable work in revitalising the issue of the material ungrounding of community, the passage he charts from the chaos of the deluge to the consensual gathering around a new political-legal infrastructure seems overly hasty. And altogether too painless. If an earthly convulsion such as flood or a cyclone genuinely returns the world to chaos then there will be dispossessed, even traumatised people. The immediate need of the victims of such an upheaval is a life-line: shelter, friendship, love. When floods or other convulsions take away the certainty of the world, what the ones who have lost their footing seek above all is not the self-consciousness of

a contract: the figuration of common ground, so much as a literal ground to stand on. Or as Levinas puts it: 'the possession of a world I can bestow as a gift on the Other'.<sup>21</sup>

Serres reminds us that the tumult of the earth does not necessarily come after the community, but may be the very impetus for communal formation. Other thinkers have pointed out that this incitement requires first of all a gesture of welcome, an opening to those who are bereft. On an earth with a tendency for 'deterritorialization on the spot',<sup>22</sup> the effects of geophysical variability and volatility will inevitably be uneven: a differentiating force that leaves some severely undermined while others maintain the security of a relatively stable ground. This differential opens the possibility of what may be a primordial form of relating: the gift of a terrain - which those of us who have escaped the worst effects have at our disposal for those more severely dispossessed. Regarding the one who has been estranged by events, Alphonso Lingis observes 'The fatigue, the vertigo, and the homelessness in his or her body appeals for the force of terrestrial support from those whose earthbound bodies have the sense of this earth and this terrain to give.'<sup>23</sup>

This is Ville Platte's 'gift of love in the time of danger'. Not simply a community opening to outsiders, but what we might see as the very genesis of community. Community itself, forged out of its opening to what is not itself. By this reasoning, any togetherness which emerges in response to an extreme event would initially involve no more or less than a constellation of singular contacts: unique bonds forged out of difference within proximity - thus obviating any overarching presentation of itself to itself. In other words the disaster will incite being-in-common, rather than revealing or cementing common being. In the words of Jacques Derrida: '...before any contract, the singularity that is always other'.<sup>24</sup> It is about putting the sharing of a 'lack of an identity' ahead of a commitment to any kind of self-consciousness or 'substantial identity' of the social.<sup>25</sup> This is community understood as a gift of terrain, the need for a ground as the incitement to being together.

### **Touching an Earth**

It has been said that all true gifts are offerings of one's own body: that generosity is, at heart, corporeal.<sup>26</sup> For Nietzsche, and later Georges Bataille, this bodily giving had a material-energetic progenitor; the excess of solar energy that bathed the earth.<sup>27</sup> All gifts which passed from one body to another could be construed as a perpetuation of this vital charge of energy streaming in from beyond the earth. Because this passage of warmth and light is essentially an overflowing, as Bataille would have it, we are obliged to keep it moving, to pass it on and share it around rather than letting it build up.

In the work of Levinas, though in a very different way, generosity is also an opening of bodies that goes beyond inter-corporeality to implicate a more encompassing materiality. For him, to be an embodied self is above all to be receptive to other bodies. But Levinas also insisted, less famously, that 'to posit oneself corporeally is to touch an earth'.<sup>28</sup> And how we touch and are touched by earth, sky, water and light may yet turn out to be one of his enduring contributions to philosophical and social thought. As Lingis claims:

if the world is a field of things, there is then something else in subjectivity besides being in the world; there is a relationship with the terrestrial, with the light - and with the sensuous element... These elements will be a theme of some of Levinas's most original expositions.<sup>29</sup>

In the early text *Existence and Existents*, Levinas raised the issue of the elemental support of the human body as the deep and expansive underpinning of everything we do. Before we have made sense of the world, before we have fashioned a 'world' as an object of our sensing, he suggested, we have been nourished by flows, cradled by

firmness, awakened by radiance.<sup>30</sup> In the mode in which we first receive them, these enlivening offerings are not enactments of anything else. They are events of their own accord, self-sustaining and independent. Prior to any act of possession, or disclosure or work, prior to any action at all, Levinas proposed, is the sincerity of the earth's 'thereness' and our equally sincere reception of this reservoir of sustenance. 'The solidity of the earth that supports me,' he wrote, 'the blue of the sky above my head, the breath of the wind, the undulation of the sea, the sparkle of light do not cling to a substance. They come from nowhere'.<sup>31</sup>

Deviating from western thought's obsession with action, intent and deliberation, Levinas reminds us that if we are to be in a fit state to achieve anything, we must first be rested. And in order that we might rest, we require stillness in which to lay ourselves down - a stable ground to which we can entrust our supine and defenceless sleeping body.<sup>32</sup> But in its very exteriority, this anchoring earth, like all the elemental supports we rely upon, has a dark side. Conversing in important ways with Heidegger's insights on the interruption of taken-for-granted realities, Levinas reminds us that the continuous play of our relations with a sustaining world can also be suspended, interrupted, withdrawn, just as ineffably at it arrives.<sup>33</sup> There are times - such as when we find ourselves stumbling through the darkness of night - when the vertigo of formlessness envelopes us and we are bereft of the usual givenness of the ground, at least until the sun's rays again cast the world into clarity and substance.<sup>34</sup>

Through these moments when the very worldiness of our world is undone, Levinas directs our attention '...behind the form which light reveals into that materiality which...constitutes the dark background of existence'.<sup>35</sup> This withdrawal, this rupture in the knowing and trusting of existence, is quite distinct from the tumultuous effects of incessant solar flux in the work of Bataille. In both cases, there is a bodily relationship with an exteriority, but Bataille's exorbitant energies always come from a plenitude, an overflowing, a surplus of light. For Levinas, the subterranean rumbling of the elements constitutes a rift, a falling short, an inescapable inconsistency of illumination. As he later puts it: 'What the side of the element that is turned toward me conceals is not a "something" susceptible of being revealed, but an ever-new depth of absence, an existence without existent, the impersonal par excellence'.<sup>36</sup> And it is this epiphany of an otherness that can be traversed without ever being overcome, first glimpsed in relation to the earth in *Existence and Existents*, that precedes and anticipates the encounter with the faciality of the human Other for which Levinas is better known.

Levinas himself did not pursue all the implications of these formative ideas and tended to see his earlier treatises as 'preparatory' studies.<sup>37</sup> It is Alphonso Lingis, primarily, who has resuscitated the notion of a supportive but precarious ground, and brought it into closer proximity to Levinas's 'mature' thoughts on the ethical relation with the other. For Lingis, 'The face of the other is the place where the elemental surfaces to make demands...' <sup>38</sup> When we meet with an other, the one whom we confront is not just a body composed through its exchanges with other bodies, but also the materialisation of the elemental - a manifestation of all the physical forces this body has endured, all the extremes it has weathered, all the elements that have nourished or buffeted it. Whether or not we are attuned to it, what appears before us in any encounter (and what appears of us before an other) is a body which touches and has been touched by an earth: 'a face made of carbon compounds, dust that shall return to dust, a face made of earth and air, made of warmth and blood, made of light and shadow'.<sup>39</sup> The exhaustion we may detect in the other's face, the tension in their body, the marks of injury or exposure, implicate us not only in the life of the one before us, but also in the material processes that have composed that life: 'This perception extends on behind the substance enclosed within these surfaces, the depths of the world behind it - envisions the road the other has travelled, the obstacles he has cleared, the heat of the sun he is fleeing'.<sup>40</sup>



Contact with the other involves brushing up against a time, a world, a depth of experience, which is not our own and never will be: a past destined to remain '(i)mmemorial, unrepresentable, invisible'.<sup>41</sup> And that goes as much for the earth that the other has touched, the elements they have been shaped by. Some experiences of worldly upheaval will be raw and partially legible, as when they are etched in the exhaustion and confusion on the face of the recent evacuee. But even fresh injuries open into the unfathomable, to layers of past and ancient endurance - drawing us into the turbulent history of an all too physical and palpable earth.

With echoes of the early Levinas, Lingis suggests that every community, every event of being together is 'allied against the rumble of the world'.<sup>42</sup> There is no inevitability that the experience of the ungrounding of the ground will precipitate such being-with. 'We can turn away from faces as we can turn away from the surfaces of things',<sup>43</sup> Lingis reminds us, as we know only too well from reports of desperate New Orleanians whose passage out of their drowning city was blocked by armed guards or hostile neighbours. Just as we hear that even in the most welcoming places an initial amicability has often soured under the pressure of playing host, with no end in sight, to dispossessed and angry visitors.

And yet, for all its inevitable failures, shortfalls and oversights, the notion of the 'gift of terrain' acknowledges the force of the earth in our becoming human, becoming communal, and perhaps even in our unbecoming, in ways that have been all too rare in philosophy and social thought. Alloyed with the idea of a corporeality which touches an earth, it intimates a primordiality of the event of responsiveness to elemental inconsistency. As Lingis is well aware, with a nod to Bataille and Nietzsche, the dark background of our terrestrial existence opens out still further - into the cosmos and the literal dis-astrousness of dying stars, solar flares and impacting meteors.<sup>44</sup> Every cyclone, every heatwave, each descent into a glacial epoch is at least in part an expression of our planet's residence in the solar system and wider cosmos - and such events have left their mark indelibly, if not always visibly, on the earth's inhabitants. The face of the other, in this way, bears the trace of an 'infinity' that is palpably not of this world, one that is extra-terrestrial in a material rather than an ethereal or otherworldly sense: an exorbitance that no form of reciprocity, no contract, no economy on this spherical planet or anywhere else will ever square up. It might also send us back to the physical sciences, to open up the kind of conversation that could begin to renegotiate the relationship between the phenomenal experience of the 'immemorial, unrepresentable, invisible' and all those objective questions surrounding the limits of our knowledge, our planet, and our existence to which scientific inquiry is no stranger.

### **Elemental Generosity?**

Slavoj Žižek writes: 'There is ethics - that is to say, an injunction which cannot be grounded in ontology - insofar as there is a crack in the ontological edifice of the universe; at its most elementary, ethics designates fidelity to this crack.'<sup>45</sup> But Žižek is quite particular that the cracks to which he refers constitute failures in the process of *human* symbolization: they open up where truth cannot be relied upon to salve the wounds of existence, where the quest for clarity aggravates the very conditions it attempts to address.

But how far do we wish to extend these fissures into the literal 'universe'? And how far afield should we look for the signs of ethical fidelities that respond to these chasms? Only recently have philosophers begun to seriously reassess the post-Kantian conventions that have been holding them back from speculating what the world gets up to when human observers are not present: a turn which has reactivated the thematic of things-in-themselves with rich and complex existences of their own. One of the ways

that this topic has returned to the philosophical agenda is by picking up on the Heideggerian theme of breakdowns or breakthroughs that reveal the rifts between appearance and inner reality - and extending it beyond the human experience of the object world.<sup>46</sup> Thus there is little or nothing metaphorical, and a great deal of 'sincerity' in Graham Harman's concern with 'a history of the universe packed with numerous fateful revolutions: the emergence of the heavier elements from hydrogen; the birth of solar systems; the breakup of Pangaea into multiple continents; the emergence of multicellular life....'<sup>47</sup>

Like Lingis, Harman is a searching and extrapolative reader of Levinas. For him the work of Levinas displays a 'dramatic sense of the strife between the visible and withdrawn faces of the things themselves'.<sup>48</sup> Though Harman goes on to suggest that, in restricting this dynamic of exposure and concealment to encounters in which there are human actors present, Levinas holds back from realising the full potential of his insight. Whereas Lingis proposes that we can respond directly to the imperatives of the earth itself, or respond to the demands of the earth via the needs of the other, Harman pushes onwards to consider the possibility of other-than-human things responding to each other: Levinas's notion of distance within proximity extended to every object, everywhere, that ever existed.<sup>49</sup>

Harman has no qualms about positing nonhuman objects that attract and repel each other.<sup>50</sup> He conceives of the elemental surfaces of things as making demands on each other, responding with the same sincerity that Levinas spoke of, all the while concealing their inner depths. In the context of thinking through our inhabitation of a volatile earth, this sort of inquiry is deeply promising. Even if we are not yet enthralled by the issue of the interactions of astral bodies in far-flung galaxies for their own sake, the question of how independently forceful objects encounter each other on - or in the vicinity of - our planet has tremendous implications for the earth-bound beings who are constantly caught in the fallout of these clashes. Though, if we are willing to follow Harman and agree that nonhuman objects have their own imperatives, do we also want to posit that these elemental encounters prompt ethical fidelities amongst themselves - besides those they may or may not incite amongst the vulnerable human bodies transfixed in their path?

In recent writing on the gift, there have been a number of variations on the theme of Nietzsche's selfless, life-giving solar flux. For Adriaan Peperzak, musing on the heterogeneous character of gift-giving: 'Not only can the sun, trees, and animals give, but also anonymous forces and unknown sources. Nature, Fortune, Destiny, Moira, the gods, or God may be experienced or imagined as givers'.<sup>51</sup> In a related way, for Genevieve Vaughan, 'Gaia, our Mother Earth ....the abundant planet on which we live' is a preeminent source of the gifts upon which human life depends.<sup>52</sup> While such accounts rarely provide explicit consideration of the relations of give and take that might pertain amongst these generous entities in our absence, there is little to indicate that these bounteous flows switch off whenever their human recipients vacate the scene. Karen Barad, however, is unequivocal. In her extended consideration of the interactive materiality of the universe, Barad boldly insists that the world's constant becoming raises questions of ethical responsibility at every moment, whether humans are present or not: 'Ethicality is part of the fabric of the world; the call to respond and be responsible is part of what is'.<sup>53</sup>

The merger of ontology and ethics that Barad proposes is far from unique. In the current rage for philosophies of immanence, for neo-vitalism and processuality - the insistence on a single ontological plane in which disparate entities engage in streams of transmutation generally presupposes that the ethical is implicated in the all-encompassing creative flux. This does not imply creativity or becoming is painless,

however. In Deleuze's influential take on pure immanence, life may flow on indomitably, but there is nonetheless plenty of wounding as encounters between bodies trigger violent and unpredictable transformations. Thus: 'every dynamism is a catastrophe. There is necessarily something cruel in this birth of a world which is a chaosmos'.<sup>54</sup>

For Deleuze, and those in his orbit, the ethical is not primarily a response to the suffering that arises out of wrenching change – or any kind of response or obligation at all. As the affirmation of the transformative possibility that inheres in encounters and interactions, ethics is an immanent evaluation of the process of becoming. Although the usual term in Deleuze and Guattari's writings for the driving force of creative transformation is 'desire', John Protevi accentuates the ethical-ontological fusion by picking up those instances in their work when this is referred to as 'love':

When bodies join in the mutual experimental deterritorialisation that is love, we find Deleuze and Guattari's most adventurous concept: the living, changing, multiplying virtual, the unfolding of the plane of consistency. Love is complexity producing novelty, the very process of life.<sup>55</sup>

In this way, desire or love *is* becoming, and generosity is generativity - which makes it, to borrow a formulation from Ray Brassier, 'ontologically ubiquitous'.<sup>56</sup> Effectively, there is no need for a distinctive ethics to address the injuries of transmutation, because the catastrophe itself is ultimately productive. With the championing of pure process and incessant becoming that characterises much of the contemporary take on 'immanence', what counts is not so much the substantive bodies that happen to come into being, so much as the great overarching stream of generative matter-energy from which all individuated forms are bodied forth. Where the unlimited potential for becoming or change takes precedence over the limited and constrained condition of the actual bodies it gives rise to, there can be no absolute and irreparable loss. Whatever dissolution of bodily integrity takes place, whatever fate befalls actual beings, is less of a termination than a reconfiguration, a temporary undoing that facilitates a renewed participation in the greater flow. And with this prioritization of process over product, of virtuality over actuality, whatever fidelity is called for is to the 'flux of invincible life' itself - rather than to its interruptions.<sup>57</sup>

'Catastrophe', in this sense, is the speedy, if painful, passage to a fresh start, to a new life. If it is a crack that fissures the ontological universe, then it is ultimately a self-suturing one. But for some theorists who take the event of the cataclysm to heart, a non-annihilating disaster is not a disaster worthy of the name. As Edith Wyschogrod concludes of Deleuzo-Guattarian catastrophism: 'Because there is nothing but the fullness of desiring production, they cannot, strictly speaking, explain disease and natural catastrophe....'<sup>58</sup> For Ray Brassier, the fashionable avowal of pure process or immanence raises a more general issue: that of how such philosophies are to account for discontinuity at all, how they are to explain breaks in pure productivity or lapses into inactivity. This is a problem not just for Deleuze, he suggests, 'but for any philosophy that would privilege becoming over stasis'.<sup>59</sup>

### **Solar Catastrophe and Impossible Giving**

Brassier's engagement with solar extinction returns us to the literal exorbitance of an earth open and precarious in the face of an inhospitable cosmos and to the Levinasian theme of existence fissured by impassable rifts. Whereas Harman stresses the innumerable ruptures that punctuate a universe of heterogeneous objects, Brassier zeroes in on the quandaries posed by one particular juncture. Against any philosophy that

assumes the necessity of a thinking being to make sense of the world, and equally counter to any philosophical stance that posits an incessant stream of becoming, he draws out the significance of the moment when terrestrial life might be – or rather, will be – totally, irredeemably, extinguished. Playing off a discussion by Jean-François Lyotard about our sun gradually burning out and rendering the earth uninhabitable – an eventuality which scientists have predicted with some confidence – Brassier points up the certainty of non-existence that weighs upon all life.<sup>60</sup>

For Levinas, the impossibility of self-identity, of synchronicity, and of the closure of reciprocity is signalled by the passage into the time of the other: the interruption of self-presence by ‘a time *without me*’.<sup>61</sup> In his working through of the inheritance of Levinas, Derrida observes that love is always a rupture in the living present, haunted by the knowledge that ‘One of us will see the other die, one of us will live on, even if only for an instant’.<sup>62</sup> This is love’s exorbitance, the impossibility of its recuperation into an economy of reciprocal, synchronous or symmetrical gestures. For Brassier, that fact that terrestrial life is eventually doomed by solar catastrophe promises a time without me, without any of us, without thought or experience, without even the life that lends death its much-touted significance. This is a quite literal crack in the ontological edifice of the universe: objective scientific knowledge that propels thought on the impossible task of thinking thought’s own non-being. As Brassier announces: ‘Lyotard’s ‘solar catastrophe’ effectively transposes Levinas’s theologically inflected ‘impossibility of possibility’ into a natural-scientific register, so that it is no longer the death of the Other that usurps the sovereignty of consciousness, but the extinction of the sun’.<sup>63</sup>

In the face of the other, in its exposure to the elements, we catch a glimpse of our own vulnerability and finitude.<sup>64</sup> In the face of a cyclone, or the face of others traumatised by gale-force winds, we see forces strong enough to overwhelm communities, cities, entire regions. We may also in some opaque sense – but in a way that is currently subject to elucidation by the physical sciences – feel an intimation of energies that could overwhelm an earth. And ultimately annihilate every conceivable entity. In Brassier’s words:

roughly one trillion, trillion, trillion years from now, the accelerating expansion of the universe will have disintegrated the fabric of matter itself, terminating the possibility of embodiment. Every star in the universe will have burnt out, plunging the cosmos into a state of absolute darkness and leaving behind nothing but spent husks of collapsed matter.<sup>65</sup>

Negating the consolation of endless becoming or ubiquitous self-overflowing, this scenario implies that ethics too is ultimately doomed: the gift of the disaster pointing finally to the disaster of the gift. And yet, across a nation state that could have been any patch of the globe, ordinary folk offer beds to complete strangers, the townspeople of a backwater village ladle out lashings of Hurricane Gumbo to dishevelled company, and a million and one other obscure acts of love flare and fade away: tiny sparks of generosity that arc across the cracks in daily life. And keep doing so in spite of, because of, the perishability that characterises the gift, its giver and its recipient alike. For John Caputo, who also gazes directly at the coming solar disaster, it is the very ‘face of a faceless cosmos’ that makes of an ethical opening to an other ‘an act of hyperbolic partiality and defiance’.<sup>66</sup> In this way, it is not just that each gift is an offering of flesh and the giving of a terrain, but that every gift carries the trace of the very extinguishing of existence. In its responsiveness to the inconsistency or the excessiveness of light, each generous reception murmurs against the dying of all light.

Somewhere beside or beyond critical thought’s harsh cross-examination of compassion and the neo-vitalist extension of ethical dispositions into every corner of the cosmos,

then, runs this other option, propelled by the very exorbitance, diachrony and asymmetry that severs being from thought and unhinges ethics from ontology. If it negates the radical passivity of generosity to demand that it enacts a moral cost accounting before it sets forth, so too does it rebuke the idea of a responsibility that is primordially receptive to declare that every spontaneous energetic or material discharge is in essence a gift. Demands might well emit from any object, but not every thing can give in or give out in response to a summons. As biologist Lynn Margulis and science writer Dorion Sagan put it: 'life is matter that chooses'.<sup>67</sup> Which appears to makes choice fairly rare in the known universe, as well as contingent and, in all likelihood, ephemeral. Like other living creatures, we humans 'can turn away from faces as we can turn away from the surfaces of things'. Or choose not too. Even if it is not unique, perhaps our particularly pronounced capacity to vacillate between turning toward and turning away has a defining quality. If not us, then who?

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<sup>1</sup> Nigel Calder, *The Manic Sun: Weather Theories Confounded*. (London: Pilkington Press, 1997), p. 112.

<sup>2</sup> Sheila Crowley, 'Where is Home? Housing for Low-Income People after the 2005 Hurricanes', in Chester Hartman, Gregory D Squires, G (eds) *There is No Such Thing as a Natural Disaster: Race, Class, and Hurricane Katrina*, (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 155.

<sup>3</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> Rebecca Solnit, *Sontag and Tsunami*, available online at <http://www.commondreams.org/views05/0103-21.htm> (2005) accessed on 25 April 2005 (unpag).

<sup>5</sup> Mike Davis and Anthony Fontenot, 'Hurricane Gumbo' in Adolph Reed, Jr (ed) *Unnatural Disaster: The Nation on Hurricane Katrina*, (New York, Nation Books, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> Mike Davis and Anthony Fontenot, 'Hurricane Gumbo', p. 128.

<sup>7</sup> Mike Davis and Anthony Fontenot, 'Hurricane Gumbo', p. 121.

<sup>8</sup> John Protevi, 'Katrina', in Bernd Herzogenrath (ed) *Deleuze/Guattari & Ecology*, (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 177.

<sup>9</sup> See Nigel Clark, 'Living through the Tsunami: Vulnerability and Generosity on a Volatile Earth', *Geoforum* 38 (2007) p. 1127–1139.

<sup>10</sup> On the complexities of speaking of love or compassion in social thought and research, see Yasmin Gunaratnam, 'Where is the Love? Art, Aesthetics and Research', *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 21: 3 (2007), p. 271–287.

<sup>11</sup> Rebecca Solnit, *Sontag and Tsunami*, (unpag).

<sup>12</sup> Mike Davis, 'Cosmic Dancers on History's Stage? The Permanent Revolution in the Earth Sciences', *New Left Review* 217: p. 48-84. See also Nigel Clark, 'Ex-orbitant Globality', *Theory, Culture & Society* 22: 5 (2005) p.165-185.

<sup>13</sup> Mike Davis, 'Cosmic Dancers on History's Stage? p.49.

<sup>14</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA, Duquesne University Press, 1969). For critical perspectives, see Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans Peter Hallward (London: Verso, 2001), p. 18-20, and Peter Hallward, *Badiou: A Subject to Truth*. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003) p. 255-6.

<sup>15</sup> See Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) p. 129, and Peter Hallward, 'Ethics without Others: A Reply to Critchley on Badiou's Ethics', *Radical Philosophy* 102 (2000), p. 27-30.

<sup>16</sup> Michel Serres, *The Natural Contract*, trans Elizabeth MacArthur and William Paulson (Ann Arbor: University Of Michigan Press, 1995), p. 51.

<sup>17</sup> Michel Serres, *The Natural Contract*, p. 53.

<sup>18</sup> Michel Serres, *The Natural Contract*, p. 34.

<sup>19</sup> See Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans Ray Brassier. London: Continuum, 2008). See also Ray Brassier, 'The Enigma of Reason: On Quentin Meillassoux's After Finitude', *Collapse II* (2007) p. 15-54.

<sup>20</sup> Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, p. 63, 116.

<sup>21</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 50.

- <sup>22</sup> Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans Graham Burchell and Hugh Tomlinson (Verso, London: 1994), p. 85.
- <sup>23</sup> Alphonso Lingis, *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common*. (Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press: 1994) p. 128-9.
- <sup>24</sup> Jacques Derrida, J. (1992) 'Force of Law: The "Mystical Foundation of Authority"', in Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld, David Gray Carlson (eds) *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*. (New York, Routledge: 1992), p. 25.
- <sup>25</sup> See Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, trans. Peter Connor, Lisa Garbus, Michael Holland and Simona Sawhney (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press: 1991), p. xxxviii.
- <sup>26</sup> See Rosalyn Diprose, *Corporeal Generosity: On giving with Nietzsche, Merleau-Ponty, and Levinas*. (Albany, NY., State University of New York Press: 2002).
- <sup>27</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth, Penguin: 1961), Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: Volume I*, trans Robert Hurley (New York, Zone: 1991).
- <sup>28</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 128.
- <sup>29</sup> Alphonso Lingis, 'Translators Introduction', in Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*. (Pittsburgh, PA., Duquesne University Press: 2001), p. xx.
- <sup>30</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA., Duquesne University Press: 2001), p. 8, 30.
- <sup>31</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 141.
- <sup>32</sup> See Paul Harrison, 'Corporeal Remains: Vulnerability, Proximity, and Living on after the End of the World', *Environment and Planning A* 40: 2 (2008), p.423 – 445.
- <sup>33</sup> See Graham Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects*. (Chicago and La Salle, IL., Open Court: 2002), p. 236.
- <sup>34</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, p. 52.
- <sup>35</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, p. 54-5.
- <sup>36</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 142.
- <sup>37</sup> See Graham Harman, *Tool-Being*, p. 235.
- <sup>38</sup> Alphonso Lingis, *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common*, p. 132.
- <sup>39</sup> Alphonso Lingis, *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common*, p. 11- 12.
- <sup>40</sup> Alphonso Lingis, *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common*, p. 23.
- <sup>41</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being, Or Beyond Essence*, trans Alphonso Lingis (London, Kluwer Academic Publishing: 1998), p. 11.
- <sup>42</sup> Alphonso Lingis, *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common*, p. 12.
- <sup>43</sup> Alphonso Lingis, *The Imperative*. (Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press: 1998), p. 132.
- <sup>44</sup> See Alphonso Lingis, *Dangerous Emotions*, (Berkeley, CA., University of California Press: 2000), p. 135., *The Imperative*, p. 120.
- <sup>45</sup> Slavoj Zizek, *The Plague of Fantasies*, (London, Verso: 1997), p. 214.
- <sup>46</sup> See Graham Harman, *Tool-Being*, p. 135.
- <sup>47</sup> Graham Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things*, (Chicago and La Salle, IL., Open Court: 2005), p. 243.
- <sup>48</sup> Graham Harman, *Tool-Being*, p. 11.
- <sup>49</sup> Graham Harman, *Tool-Being*, p. 241-2.
- <sup>50</sup> Graham Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, p. 141-4.
- <sup>51</sup> Adriaan Peperzak, 'Giving' in Edith Wyschogrod, Jean-Joseph Goux and Eric Boynton (eds) *The Enigma of Gift and Sacrifice*. (New York, Fordham University Press: 2002), p. 165.
- <sup>52</sup> Genevieve Vaughan, 'Mothering, Co-muni-cation, and the Gifts of Language' in Edith Wyschogrod, Jean-Joseph Goux and Eric Boynton (eds) *The Enigma of Gift and Sacrifice*. (New York, Fordham University Press: 2002), p. 99.
- <sup>53</sup> Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. (Durham and London, Duke University Press: 2007), p. 182.
- <sup>54</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans Paul Patton (London, Athlone Press: 1994), p. 219.
- <sup>55</sup> John Protevi, 'Love' in Paul Patton, and John Protevi (eds) *Between Deleuze and Derrida*, (New York, Continuum: 2003), p.191.
- <sup>56</sup> Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, p. 195.
- <sup>57</sup> Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans Dana Polan and Reda Bensmaia (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press: 1986), p. 41.

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- <sup>58</sup> Edith Wyschogrod, *Saints and Postmodernism: Revisioning moral philosophy*. (Chicago, University of Chicago Press: 1990), p. 210.
- <sup>59</sup> Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, p. 220.
- <sup>60</sup> Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, p. 223-5.
- <sup>61</sup> Cited in Robert Bernasconi, 'What Goes Around Comes Around: Derrida and Levinas on the Economy of the Gift and Gift of Genealogy' in Alan D. Schrift (ed) *The Logic of the Gift: Toward an Ethic of Generosity* (New York, Routledge: 1997), p. 258.
- <sup>62</sup> Cited in John Protevi, 'Love', p. 185.
- <sup>63</sup> Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, p. 230.
- <sup>64</sup> See Alphonso Lingis, *The Imperative*, p. 220.
- <sup>65</sup> Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, p. 228.
- <sup>66</sup> John Caputo, *Against Ethics*, (Bloomington, Indiana University Press: 1993), p. 19.
- <sup>67</sup> Lynn Margulis and Dorion Sagan, *What is Life?*, (New York, Simon & Schuster: 1995) p.185.

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