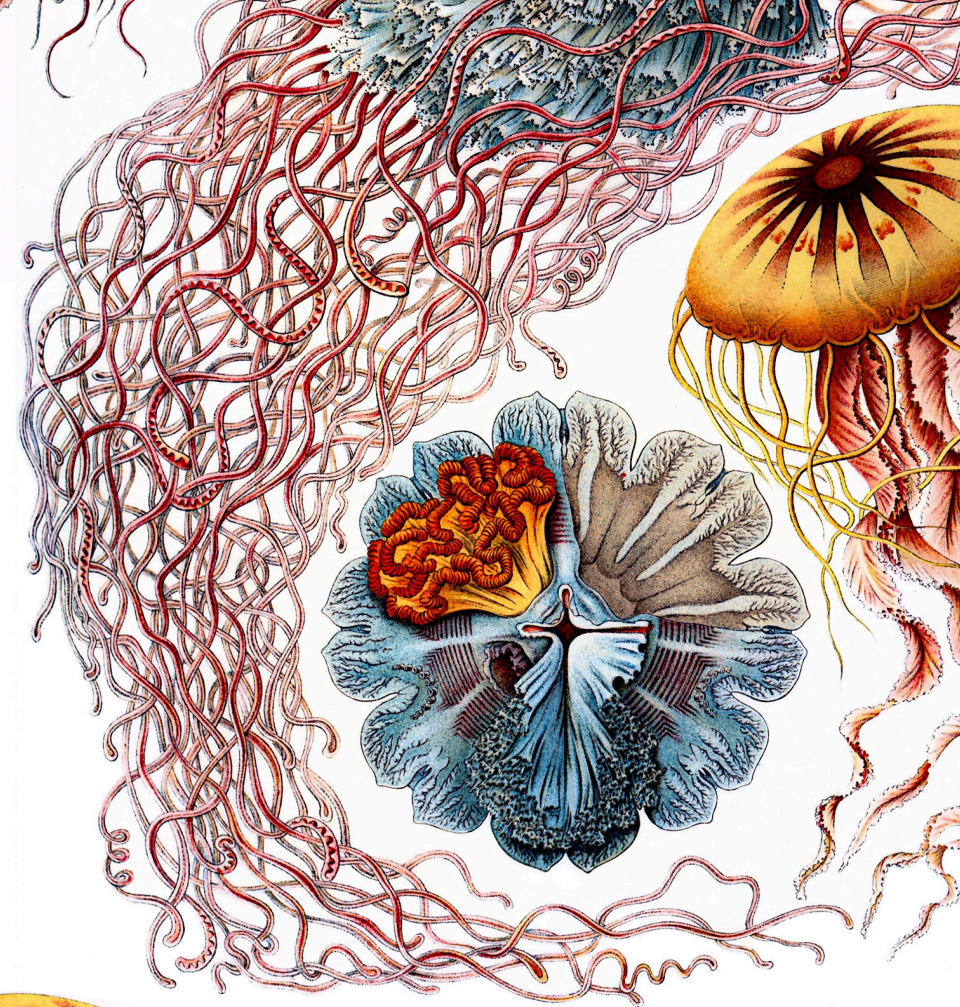
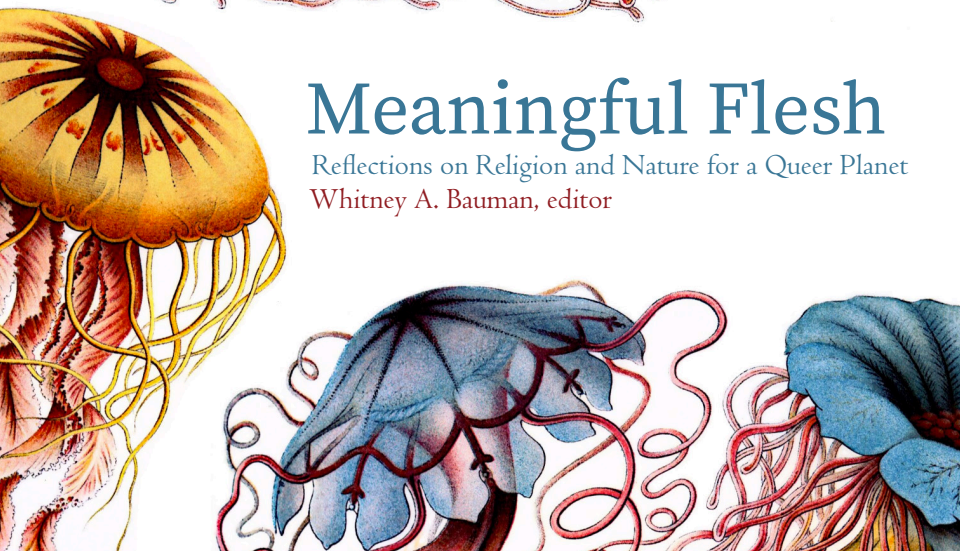




Meaningful Flesh

Reflections on Religion and Nature for a Queer Planet

Whitney A. Bauman, editor



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Irreverent Theology: On the Queer Ecology of Creation

Jacob J. Erickson

Nature is infinitely scandalous!

— Isabella Rossellini

*All this would entail, in the larger scheme of things,
an irreverent turn in ecocriticism...*

— Nicole Seymour

Scandalizing Nature and God

“How did Noah do it?” the Italian-American actress Isabella Rossellini asks inquisitively. She is dressed in black, stands in front of a similar black background, and holds in her right hand a yellow umbrella. “How did he manage to organize all animals,” she asks *you*, “into couples?”¹ Rossellini poses this question in the course of a series of hilarious and provocative short films produced for the Sundance Channel on the theme of *Green Porno*. In the course of those films, she artistically explores the complexities of animal sex, performing a variety of animal spe-

¹ Isabella Rossellini’s video “Seduce Me — Noah’s Ark” can be found at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3WBr7aVADtU>.

cies and exploring their sexual quirks, oddities, and pleasures. As she describes the series in the book inspired by her project, “I imagine myself as a particular animal and make love as that animal would. Each film is scientifically accurate; nature is infinitely scandalous” (Rossellini 2009).

Infinitely scandalous nature is precisely the odd focus of Rossellini’s peculiar film about the biblical story of Noah. She observes that God calls pairs of animals into Noah’s ark precisely to sexually reproduce, to repopulate the earth, to “be fruitful and multiply” after the mythic flood. But, as Rossellini goes on to show, such a task is biologically fraught.

The scene’s imagination expands: a large pop-up book *Holy Bible* opens and out emerges the biblical story. A cloud, rain, and lightning appear above the wooden ark while God’s arm — Rossellini’s arm with hair drawn in marker all over — scrutinizes the animals entering the ark two by two.² First, elephants climb the boarding ramp — genitals prominently on display, male and female. Following the elephants, however, is a lone earthworm, and the situation gets complicated:

“You!” God accuses. “Why are you alone?”

“I’m an earthworm. I am an hermaphrodite.” Rossellini replies, in the guise of her earthwormed costume. “I’m both male and female. To reproduce, I can mate with another hermaphrodite, or I can segment my body and clone myself.”

The human Rossellini reappears, asking quizzically, “What did Noah do with hermaphrodite animals? What did Noah do with transsexual animals?”

2 The flood narrative in Genesis is, of course, a complicated text in and of itself—woven together strands of the Yahwist and Priestly creation narratives. Rossellini’s treatment of the Noah story misses a number of crucial details of the actual story—most that it is commonly held that in the Priestly version of the story two of every kind of animal are taken onto the ark, whereas in Yahwist version of the story, seven pairs of all clean animals and a pair of all unclean animals are taken. The intertextual difference is quite often overlooked, though this difference in the text would little change the reality of Rossellini’s argument. See Genesis 6–11 for the flood story.

And the piece spirals on—hermaphrodite animals, animals that change sex, animals that transition sex and sexuality, parthenogenetic species that reproduce asexually all appear on the boarding plank up to Noah's ark, making complicated God's command that only "one male and one female" be allowed on the ark.

The short film concludes with a biological provocation that extends beyond the scope of the biblical myth she reenacts. Rossellini asks, "How did Noah do it—hermaphrodite, transvestites, transgender, transsexuals, polygamy, monogamy, homosexual, bisexual—how could it all be heterosexual?" And the sound of rain pours on...

"How could it all be heterosexual?" The question seems innocuous enough, but the inquiry opens a veritable can of hermaphroditic worms. On the surface level the question begins to subvert the literal logics of the religious narrative. Taken on its own terms, the story of Noah's flood is an impossible one, mythic in its telling, upended by the biological facts of life. That upending, for Rossellini, also seems to attempt an upending of the social and theological forces that often read biblical texts in an overtly literalistic manner. Such theological viewpoints often contribute to a rhetoric celebrating and assuming heterosexual life and relationships as norm. Those theological viewpoints often scapegoat queer lives by calling them deviant. By lifting up biological oddities in a strange kind of midrashic retelling of the flood story, Rossellini's questions subtly challenge the assumptions of broader heterosexist theologies and hermeneutics.

The film also serves to subvert our cultural assumptions about everyday biology. Animal life is not divided into heterosexual pairs, and the diversity of animal sex and sexuality multiplies in strange and surprising ways. What biologists may take for granted about the queer sexual pleasures and reproductive lives of the animal kingdom, viewers are suddenly reminded of or confronted by. Not only are preconceptions of religious storytelling to be rethought, but also Rossellini exposes heterosexist assumptions projected onto nonhuman life through an ecological parade of animal sex and sexualities.

At this point, we might deduce yet another subversion. If neither assumptions of scripture nor projections of biology fully encapsulate actual life, then what about the question implicates human beings? Not all of human reality — yours, mine — is heterosexual, despite the assumptions of heterosexism structuring various oppressive regimes. The analogy is such — if animals, in their sexual and biological diversity, are more complex than a certain reading of the biblical text indicates, might not the sexuality of human animals be more complex as well? Might human beings themselves corporealize a diversity of sexes, sexualities, genders, and relationships?

Rossellini's art is playfully irreverent of theological and biological imagination; indeed its irreverent of human imaginings of the ecological world. Her performances expose the viewer's assumptions about what constitutes theological culture, what constitutes what is "natural," and further exposes how deeply implicated culture and nature are together. Her art and the questions her art raises makes it possible for the viewer to reconceive their ecological world, their religious expectations, or their understanding of what it means to be a human being all together. The theological, the erotic, and the human all entangle one another in assumptions shaping attentiveness and negligence of actual planetary life. If animal sexuality (if we can use that phrase at all) is far more complex than is often assumed, what does that mean for theological reflection, ecological relationships, or human life and responsibility for nonhuman life?

It's true, talking about "queer ecology" might conjure up strange rumors of gay penguins or evoke bestial accusations against queer communities. But for the last few decades an emerging theoretical conversation between environmental ethics and queer theory — like Rossellini's art — has been stirring up new perspectives on the constructed boundaries of nature and culture, animality and humanity, ecological responsibility and environmental degradation. Recent volumes entitled *Queering the Non/Human* and *Queer Ecologies* examine everything from biophilia to *Brokeback Mountain*, eros to starfish, and reproduction to bunny rabbits (with the latter not being a very large

leap).³ As Timothy Morton summarizes in his influential piece, “Ecology and queer theory are intimate. It’s not that ecological thinking would benefit from an injection of queer theory from the outside. It’s that, fully and properly, ecology is queer theory and queer theory is ecology: queer ecology” (Morton 2010, 281).

Scholars of religion, theologians and ethicists, both anticipated and followed this turn in the nineties by incorporating religious perspectives with lesbian and gay liberation, queer theory and ecological ethics. A number of ecofeminists, theologians like J. Michael Clark, and ethicists like Daniel T. Spencer provided insightful analyses of the twin ghettoization of LGBTQ voices and the earth. They point towards, as Spencer describes, the “self-contradictory positions of condemning lesbians and gay men for being both ‘unnatural’ (where natural sexuality is read as procreative heterosexuality) and ‘too close to nature’ in the sense of homosexual behavior being ‘lower’ or ‘animalistic’ and outside the boundaries of acceptable human culture” (Spencer 1996, 80–81). In this way, these scholars focused on the fraught eco-social and material dimensions of queer and ecological voices.

My own goal in this chapter seeks to further this remarkable interdisciplinary conversation in an odd theological key by engaging the recent work of feminist philosopher of science, Karen Barad. Barad’s writing is key, I think, for mutually-enhancing and collaborating the insights of queer theory, philosophies of science, and ecology. Particularly, I stage an encounter between Barad’s concept of “posthumanist performativity” and the sixteenth-century reformer and monk Martin Luther’s pe-

3 For earlier attempts at a queer ecotheology, see the multiple trends of ecofeminism and ecowomanism, as well as: Clark 1993; Spencer 1996. Alongside the work of Clark or Spencer, see the growing bodies of queer ecological literature (the following are listed chronologically): Gaard 1997; the work of the journal *Undercurrents*; Stein 2004; Barad 2007; Giffney and Hird 2008; Alaimo 2010; Morton 2010; Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson 2010; Halberstam 2011; Johnson 2011; Azzarello 2012; Boer 2012; Chen 2012; Roughgarden 2013; Seymour 2013; Ahmed 2014; the chapter on Walt Whitman in Keller 2015; and Keller and Rubenstein 2017.

cular understanding of the incarnation of Spirit in Creation. I do so to begin to construct a queer ecotheology where Luther's passion for incarnation, critically reimagined with Barad's work, offers the potential for a queer incarnation of divinity where that divinity is caught up — even plays several roles — in the performative indeterminacy of the earth and of the cosmos. In the irreverent slippage of God and earth, "creation" signals a divinely queer ecology.⁴

The Irreverent Collaborations of Queer Ecology

Rossellini's short film is just a finite glimpse into what is possible in the infinitely scandalous interrelations of theology, ecology, and sexuality. What follows in my theological writing is a fragile, playful, expansive hope for theology that wishes to take our contemporary planetary crises seriously in their depths of life and death. What follows is a fragile, playful hope that queer bodies, queer failures and pleasures, and queer play and hope might offer some distinctive imagination to ecological theologies as they attempt to think on a dying planet — at least a planet dying, for the first time, at the hands of human beings. What follows is nothing more than a creative hunch, a speculative possibility of flesh. What follows is nothing more than a playful caress of theology. My flirtation is that ecological theology is, or can be, a poetry and practice of irreverent criticism, of irreverence to conceptual realities overwhelmed by ecological crises.

In arguing for *theological* irreverence, I am constructively rallying to and riffing off of ecocritic Nicole Seymour's call for what she calls an "irreverent ecocriticism," a kind of criticism "whose inquiries are absurd, perverse, humorous in character, and/or focused on the absurd, perverse, and humorous as they arise in relationship to ecology and representations thereof" (Seymour 2012, 57). Given the state of environmental collapse, the continuous reports of ecological devastation, and multiply-

4 I use the terminology of "earth" here to signify not any kind of foundationalist ground, but a kind of nominalization of dynamic planetarity.

ing effects of global warming, she asks how we might continue in our ecological work. How might we go forward given the deep helplessness and hopelessness of our current milieu?

Drawing on contemporary, poststructuralist thought and queer ecology, Seymour argues for an irreverent turn that “would allow us to address and grapple with [...] those emotional and conceptual pressures we face” (Seymour 2012, 61). As she notes, there’s “something laughable, even hilarious, about the collective position of the ecocritic in the face of ongoing environmental devastation. Rather than ignore that hilarity,” she continues, “I want us to talk about it” (Seymour 2012, 68). To talk about that hilarity, Seymour argues, focuses on our awkward dispositions, affects, silly constructions, ideas, and low culture that may, in fact, offer political ways of feeling out the undeniable ambiguity and uncertainty of the current moment. Irreverence might be a way of materially navigating the difficult absurdities of our current moment while still committing ourselves to the political and ethical possibilities ecocritical writing often (absurdly) desires.

Still, irreverence seems innocuous, too, at first. The phrase sounds like I’m simply not taking my theological work seriously enough. I may be coyly joking about God, giggling in church, or scandalizing theological language. But, perhaps, you may assume that by irreverence I’m intentionally trying to destroy or disrespect theology or practices of faith (only certain kinds). Disrespect is hardly my intention, though I most certainly flirt with such danger. In point of fact, my imagination is seduced by an irreverent faith and an irreverent reflection of faith.

Even more, however, my own desire for an irreverent ecocriticism is aimed at nothing less than the most revered: “Nature” and “God.”⁵ Two ontotheological concepts — two sovereign subjects imagined and imaged in the Modern era — utterly distant

5 The complication here, of course, is that the celebration of the concept of “Nature” as uncivilized land, empty land, and ordered land instigated a level of ecological degradation never before seen on the face of the earth — so much so that we now find ourselves in a planet irrevocably shaped by the plunder, violence, and ecocolonialism of human animals.

from the actual textures of planetary, earthly life but with catastrophic effects upon that life. On one hand: “God”, the word that evokes assumptions of omnipotent control; “God”, the assumed distant creator and providential controller of all that is; “God” imaged in masculine — even “straight” — terms; “God,” who remains unaffected by earthly life and the chaotic fecundities of creation. On the other hand, far apart from “God”: “Nature,” the wild that is distantly “out there somewhere”; “Nature,” like God, is set apart from human living, yet set apart to be tamed and conquered by human “Culture”; “Nature,” the eternal laws that shape creation, properly ordered and *straight*. What is human “Nature,” we might ask? And the answer that seized control for the past centuries is that of a straight, white, European male — imago Dei in its most anthropocentric guises (Erickson 2015).

What we’re wrestling with, then, is static notions of “Nature” and “God.” And yet those notions are entwined, pale reflections of each other, ordering and sanctioning the devastation of life in the Anthropocene — we might call it the “Androcene,” we might call it the “Heterocene.” Put another way, I may be critiquing precisely what Laurel C. Schneider calls the “logic of the One” or talking about Marcella Althaus-Reid’s “indecent theology” in a consciously ecological key (Schneider 2007; Althaus-Reid 2002).

My irreverence, then, glances back and subtly rolls its eyes at this construction of “God” and this vision of “Nature” together. It offers a perverse seduction in asking new questions: How can one speak *passionately* of the divine after “God”? How to speak of the complex desires of our planetary life after “Nature”? How can we theologically reflect on the actual ecologies and loves of this planet? Can we love the soil with more wild abandon? What kind of earthy language do we seduce?

Such a love would be a queer proposition, but perhaps this irreverence is done with a kind of divine passion — a passion precisely for the scandalous love that cannot, in fact, be revered appropriately. Reverence would be business as usual. Reverence would miss the longing of our own flesh and the longing

flesh of divinity. To revere, we might say, is to capture, to be able to identify the object of our reverence, to be able to identify the strange relationships, genders, creatures, and divinity that make the planet what it is. To enforce reverence in our present day and age is to enforce a respect for tradition, a respect for “the way things are,” a respect for nature “out there” which we are most certainly not part of but might appreciate. To revere is to not question what has gone before; “God” and “Nature” are sacred — don’t mess with them. Sadly, reverence has lost all etymological sense of “awe” (Rubenstein 2010). In that sense, I might say that my theological reflection attempts to reopen or stir afresh the clogged senses of queer wonder in the world. Again, my fragile hunch is that sexuality, ecology, and divinity are all intimately implicated in each other, every other, and that a queer ecotheology should put that threesome in awkward and strange positions, some of them potentially unorthodox. What follows theologically is thought experiment — a conceptual possibility — that attempts just that. To do so, we turn to one of the most important contemporary figures in queer ecology and feminist philosophy of science.

“Nature”: Karen Barad’s Posthumanist Performativity

In her 2007 book, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, Karen Barad sets out to deploy a theory of what she calls “agential realism,” an “epistemological-ontological-ethical framework that provides an understanding of the role of human *and* nonhuman, material *and* discursive, and natural *and* cultural factors in scientific and other social material practices” (Barad 2007, 26). She charts a middle way through multiple binary tensions of construing the world through a creative exploration of the quantum philosophy-physics of Niels Bohr. From Bohr, Barad argues a number of salient ontological points.

Primarily, she argues that, “individually determinate entities do not exist, measurements do not entail an interaction between separate entities; rather, determinate entities emerge

from their *intra-action*" (Barad 2007, 128). Said in another way, creatures are not isolated entities — "Nature" somewhere "out there" — but *phenomena* of intra-active agencies. Relations always precede entities; difference and distinction are rooted in the intra-activity of previous, multiple relations. And because entities, creatures, emerge and become from multiply occurring intra-activities, their being is always indeterminate, at the end of the day, becoming, and open to change. Matter, creatures, and the like are *dynamic*, *agentic*, and open to possibility.

Barad is attempting to disrupt what she views as a misguided turn and reductive impulse in recent constructivist philosophy. "Language has been granted too much power," she laments. "Why are language and culture granted their own agency and historicity, while matter is figured passive and immutable or at best inherits a potential for change derivatively from language and culture?" (Barad 2007, 131). Barad is not alone in this effort. A number of other voices like Vicky Kirby, Stacy Alaimo, and Jane Bennett echo Barad's concerns (often directly referencing her) that thought about matter really doesn't take the agencies and creative processes of materiality seriously (Alaimo 2010; Kirby 2011; Bennett 2010).

But it's the particular conceptual creativity of Barad that fires my imagination here. Indeed, she finds a strong, fundamental resonance between an indeterminate material agency with queer performativity — queer performativity as elucidated by a number of scholars of drag and in the oft-cited work of Judith Butler. Most of us have heard some iteration of Butler's argument or another, where gender is not an inherent trait or ontological fixity but rather an indeterminate process, a doing, a kind of deep praxis citing, interpolating histories and assumptions about gender and in their very citation opening the possibility for subverting those very gender assumptions.

Barad insightfully finds both material promise and critique in this concept. She argues that, "Performativity, properly construed, is not an invitation to turn everything (including material bodies) into words; on the contrary, performativity is precisely a contestation of the excessive power granted to language

to determine what is real” (Barad 2007, 133). Here, Barad turns to Judith Butler’s book *Bodies that Matter*, where Butler struggles to theorize the slippery matter of the body (Butler 1993). Barad argues that here, “Butler’s reconceptualization of matter as a process of materialization brings to the fore the importance of recognizing matter in its historicity and directly challenges representationalism’s construal of matter as a passive and blank slate” (Barad 2007, 150). Again, performativity assumes a ‘process of *materialization*’, where matter is involved in the becoming of bodies all the way down as a ‘congealing of agencies’.

Still, Barad argues that Butler misses a fundamental point: “while [Butler] correctly calls for the recognition of matter’s historicity, ironically, she seems to assume that it is ultimately derived (yet again) from the agency of language or culture. She fails to recognize matter’s dynamism” (Barad 2007, 64). Butler (at least in her early work, I might add) seems to too thinly theorize a crucial dimension to the materialization of bodies, those complex agencies of matter itself. Barad continues that, “it would seem that any robust theory of the materialization of bodies would necessarily take account of *how the body’s materiality* (including, for example, its anatomy and physiology) *and other material forces as well* (including nonhuman ones) *actively matter to the process of materialization*” (Barad 2007, 65). Not only do bodies offer resistance to representation (as Butler along with Foucault admits), but “natural” matter contributes in rich ways and participates in the constitution of cultural formation and practice. Climate change and global warming are perfect examples of this phenomena, where human cultural-material practices and unruly matter intra-act together in the tragic devastation of our current sense of the planet.

In turning to “matters of practices, doings, and actions,” Barad argues that performativity composes a nature-cultural perspective on material production. She argues this active sense of matter as a “*posthumanist performative* approach to understanding techno-scientific and other nature-cultural practices that specifically acknowledge and take account of matter’s dynamism” (Barad 2007, 135). Matter is, in Barad’s words, “an active

participant in the world's becoming, in its ongoing intra-activity" (Barad 2007, 136).

In a 2011/2012 article, "Nature's Queer Performativity," Barad reiterates the queer dimensions of her argument in *Meeting the Universe Halfway*. She notes the importance of the concept of performativity for queer theory and then criticizes typical uses of the concept for remaining rooted in an anthropocentric vision of the world, noting that "human exceptionalism are odd scaffoldings on which to build a theory that is specifically intended to account for matters of abjection and the differential construction of the human, especially when gradations of humanness, including inhumanness, are often constituted in relation to nonhumans" (Barad 2012, 30). A reader might hear resonances in Barad's writing here with Spencer's earlier observation of the contradictory logic of queers as both "unnatural" and "animalistic" in passion.

Barad highlights the strange phenomenal relations and entanglements of what she delightfully calls "queer critters" — of lightning strikes, receptor cells in stingrays, phiesteria (a dinoflagellate responsible for the mass killings of marine life — think, red tide), and atoms — all of which are ontologically indeterminate in behavior and occurrence. The queer reality of nature, here again, is that creaturely performances are different from one occurrence to the next. One burst of lightning strikes completely differently than another in the communication of the atmosphere and the ground. Lightning performs differently as the material conditions of atmosphere differently become in time and space and as others (in our case, humans) intra-actively observe these phenomena.

Queer critters are particular phenomena, bursting relations that congeal differently, but in that very congealing create a difference to be respected. Barad notes the "posthumanist" point is not to blur the boundaries between human and nonhuman, not to cross out all distinctions and differences, and not to simply invert humanism, but rather to understand the materializing effects of particular ways of drawing boundaries between 'humans' and 'nonhumans'" (Barad 2012, 31). For those of you

familiar, Barad is deeply sympathetic here to Jacques Derrida's concern in *The Animal That Therefore I Am* that we not wipe out all the differences between creatures, between humans and animals, but *multiply* them.⁶

Matter's indeterminate performance, Barad notes, is something worldly kin to deconstruction. The histories and memories of these multiple critters multiply just as the world turns. And they trace lines, leave traces, in the multiply repeating iterative intra-activity of world. Memory in the movement of posthumanist performativity, Barad writes, is the "*pattern of sedimented enfoldings of iterative intra-activity*." "The world," she continues, "is its memory (enfolded materialization)" (Barad 2012, 44). We might say that this "world of becoming," to borrow a phrase from political theorist William Connolly, holds a deep geo-philosophical memory that holds subtle traces of the world's performative shenanigans (Connolly 2010).

"God": Martin Luther's Masks of the Divine

And so, we come to the more irreverent theological shenanigans. With a queer cloud of witnesses in Rossellini, Seymour, and Barad in memory propelling us forward, I want to take a queer turn here too and briefly cite the material of the towering figure of my own tradition — Martin Luther. I desire to cite and seduce his incarnational theology of creation away from its own moorings into conversation with Barad's thought to think through the possibility of what I might unimaginatively call ecotheological performativity. Many queer theorists note the kind of theatricality that 'performativity' evokes — for good and ill — and I want to dangerously risk eliding a concept of posthumanist performativity with one theatrical metaphor of per-

6 As Derrida writes, "Everything I'll say will consist, certainly not in effacing the limit, but in multiplying its figures, in complicating, thickening, delinearizing, folding, and dividing the line precisely by making it increase and multiply" (Derrida 2008, 29).

formance beautifully riddled with theological and incarnational implications.

A number of ecotheologians and ethicists have previously turned to Luther's thought to shake out an ecotheological promise from it. In the now classic *Earth Community, Earth Ethics*, Larry Rasmussen points towards an ecological glimmer in Luther and the Lutheran Dietrich Bonhoeffer "that the finite bears the infinite and the transcendent is utterly immanent (*finitum capax infiniti*)" and that, in what Rasmussen calls an "earth-bound theology," "God is pegged to the earth. So if you would experience God, you must fall in love with earth" (Rasmussen 1996, 272–73).

These binary languages of transcendence and immanence, finiteness and infinity, are notoriously difficult, of course, but what intrigues me is that this theological commitment leads to, as Rasmussen notes, "Luther's image of the 'masks of God' (*larvae dei*) or God's 'wrapping' (*involucrum*)" (Rasmussen 1996, 279). Creatures, according to Luther, are incarnational masks of the divine, divinity enfolded in the stuff of the earth. These larval masks both reveal divine immanence in the world, Luther notes, and reserve a kind of terrible hiddenness of a divine who, in some traditions, one cannot see face-to-face and live. So creatures function as a mask, a concrete instantiation for the incarnation of divinity where both nearness and alterity function together. It's almost as if, for Luther, the divine is caught up in a kind of queer performativity of the earth, and desires to play, revel in it.

In his most recent book, *Earth-honoring Faith*, Rasmussen reiterates and catalogs some of these moments of ecotheological promise from the span of Martin Luther's writings:

For [Luther], 'the finite bears the infinite'; nature's creatures are God's 'masks' or, in another image, the 'wrappings' and trappings of God. God's presence fills 'all things, even the tiniest leaf' and 'every little seed.' Not only is the divine wholly present 'in a grain, on a grain, over a grain,' Luther even finds the very 'footprints' of God in those of a mouse. They have

‘such pretty feet and delicate hair,’ he says (Rasmussen 2012, 198).

Luther’s writing and theology becomes a basis for reorienting theological attention to the earth. Divinity is immanently enfolded in the stuff of the earth; divinity curled infinite and infinitesimal in the unruly and strange forces and agencies of creaturely life. Such creation mysticism asks that we reflect on the topsy-turvy material conversations we are in divine creativity. As Rossellini earlier conversed with the imagined and real animals of Noah’s ark, Luther’s human creatures converse with all creatures in odd ways, and those creatures are indwelt with divinity. “Christians,” Luther writes, “hold converse with trees and all else that grows on earth, and the latter, in turn, with them.”⁷ The finite and the infinite wrap around each other, and the edges blur or transfigure.

Theo-ethicist Cynthia Moe-Lobeda picks up this same trajectory of unexpected divine indwelling in mystical, Christological, and ethical directions. She points to a more elemental passage in Luther where he writes that “All creatures are [...] permeable and present to Christ [...]. Christ fills all things, Christ is around us and in us in all places. He is present in all creatures, and I might find him in stone, in fire, in water” (Moe-Lobeda 2010, 207). Such indwelling, Moe-Lobeda argues, serves to highlight the multiplicity of divine agency, different modes of divine action in the earth — creative, revelatory, teaching, saving, sustaining, and empowering (if elusive in strange) divine relation.⁸

Both Rasmussen and Moe-Lobeda, then, find glimmers of this ecological Luther, unsurprisingly, in Luther’s sacramental writings on the incarnation, especially in a 1527 piece called

7 For unearthing this quote, I am indebted to Churchill 1999. See also Clough 2009.

8 Moe-Lobeda writes, more specifically, “Earth embodies God, not only as creative and revelatory presence, but also as teaching, saving, sustaining, empowering presence — as agency to serve the widespread good” (Moe-Lobeda 2010, 208).

“That These Words of Christ, ‘This is my body,’ etc., Still Stand Firm Against the Fanatics” (Of course it would be called that). Here Luther writes the paradoxical masks of God where divinity is “completely and entirely present in every single body, every creature and object everywhere, and on the other hand, must and can be nowhere, beyond and above all creatures and objects” (Luther 1961, 60). While Luther, at the end of the day, still privileges a kind of all powerful, omni-God, we have to acknowledge that this is no straightforward utter transcendence or accessible immanence, but a complex, paradoxical enfolding of the two towards, at least, a kind of carnivalesque panentheism where divinity occurs in a number of guises.

We might call Luther’s theological disposition to see creatures as masks of divinity as a hybrid methodological species, a theo-ethico-onto-epistemology, or a theo-ethical disposition *in* creation. Martin Luther’s writing itself is performative, carnivalesque, sometimes unethical to contemporary minds.⁹ But Víctor Westhelle notes that Luther approaches theological language with a “burlesque attitude,” and that, “With his language, Luther brought the carnival to academia, to the pulpit, to the square, breaking down the disciplined frontiers in which these utterances were allowed” (Westhelle 2016, 33). Westhelle surmises that “[the mask trope] touched the people’s imagery in which the mask had a very concrete and popular significance [...] the popular burlesque of carnivals, not however in the feast of fools, where it would be routine, but rather in the interdicted space of the pulpit, of academia, and of publications” (Westhelle 2016, 33–34). Luther’s writing itself messes with rigid boundaries of specialized academia and the theology of everyday life. It evokes the queer instabilities of those boundaries. And that incarnate instability in the tones of Luther’s writing might, in fact, perform a poetics of the flesh, a carnivalesque way divinity relates to the mysterious depths of creation itself (Rivera 2015).

9 We might note here everything from his crude humor to his deeply violent caricatures of Judaism.

Those instabilities work themselves into the slippages of a potential ecological vision of planetary life that might both cherish ecological life and take seriously the very real losses planetary life wracks up in natural disasters, predatory relationships, and natural selection. In her “From Cross to Tree of Life: Creation as God’s Mask,” theologian Wanda Deifelt writes that “If we speak of creation as God’s mask, creation both reveals God’s presence and conceals it. It contains both the pleasurable and hurtful” (Deifelt 2013, 170). Deifelt riffs on some of Westhelle’s work on the *larvae dei* and what those masks mean for creaturely life. The masks that proliferate in the wild, so to speak, “Because God escapes our understanding, we are prevented from domesticating God and limiting the divine to the aspects of creation that please and appease us” (Deifelt 2013, 170). Divinity might occur in unexpected relations, in the wake of ecological devastations just as much as in the beauty of a scene. The wrapping of divinity means that human beings cannot simply “see” divine masks where convenient. She writes, “We cannot just select creation as God’s mask because of its beauty, but also because it contains aspects of divine relation we can’t fully grasp” (Deifelt 2013, 171). Slippages of creatorliness and creatureliness abound.

For Deifelt however, the inability to domesticate divinity is also deeply ethical. The masks of divinity occur in scorched places, in the faces of endangered creatures, in biodiversity loss, in the ravages of the Anthropocene. Theologically reflecting the masks of divinity entails reflection on the pathos, passion, compassion, and pain that go along with ecological crises today. “To say that creation is God’s mask and that creation is in pain (Romans 8) is to say that also God is in pain” (Deifelt 2013, 174). Acknowledging that pain simultaneously lures theology into compassionate understanding, ethical responsibility, breathing with other masks in their labored breaths, and even celebration of creaturely love.

Larval Divinity, Carnavalesque Panentheism

German Luther scholar Hans-Martin Barth writes that, in Luther's theology, "Believers assert that all creatures are masks and costumes God chooses to cooperate with God, even though God 'can and does do everything without their cooperation.'" Barth then exclaims, "God conceals Godself, dresses, wears costumes!" (Barth 2013, 108). This Barth is very excited at this divine fashion show. And I think we can seduce this costuming God, this dress into a kind of cosmic drag show, where divinity intra-acts, performs with the deep materiality of the becoming of the world. *Creation is Divinity in drag*. Divinity lures a passion for carnival, for creaturely burlesque.

I think this metaphorical life of earthy, creaturely masks, *larvae dei*, offers the possibility for thinking divinity and creation in the key of posthumanist performativity. Incarnation occurs in the midst of complex material agencies, luring them on in mutual process of transformation. I might say here that instead of enacting any straight forward account of incarnation—a one-to-one correlation of a determinate divinity intimately becoming determinate flesh—I'm advocating something more like a nature-cultural "intra-carnation," where the divine and creatures enflesh together, are wrapped together, open possibilities of becoming differently, are fundamentally indeterminate, and appreciate responsibility to the multiplicity of divine-creaturely masks. Drag shows, carnivals, burlesque only occur in the creative flow and intra-active participation of performer and spectator. And those masks quite often become blurred or change roles.

Barad's intra-activity might then challenge Luther's sense of holding on to God's independent action and unilateral choice in creation. Or Barad's intra-activity may expand the more radical impulses of Luther's burlesque, expand the possibility where Divinity dresses, wears costumes precisely because the world seduces divinity to, transforms divinity in the infinitesimal becomings of the world. As a number of ecological thinkers have rightly pointed out, an omnipotent God who unilaterally shapes

the matter of creation simply re-performs an anthropocentric logic of human mastery over passive nature. And perpetuates that logic in lived ecologies.

We might take the contemporary, biological meaning of “larval” and apply it to these divine, incarnational masks. Divine performance in the world is always an unfinished memory, a trace, a gestating, changing possibility of metamorphosis though indeterminate material agencies of the cosmos. Earth is the materialization of *divine* memory and eschatology as well. In a view of ecotheological performativity, divinity becomes a “queer critter” seducing other queer critters’ disturbing loves and ever-new queer responsibilities.¹⁰ Relational responsibility for the show proliferates in the planet and leaves traces for good and ill in the memories of planetary flesh.

Divine incarnation of spirit, then, occurs convivially: in, with, and under the messiness of this queer earth — tragedy, rainbows, biodiverse arks and all. It might be that creatures are wrapped up in biodiverse performances of divinity, that divinity is wrapped up in creatures, divinity intra-acting in water, fire, soil, and air. These performances are the ecotheological version of guerilla theater or guerilla gardening; divinity bursts and becomes in the most unexpected, elemental places, stirring up new possibilities for relationality, speaking back in scorched spaces, and seducing creatures in a fleshy display of queer play.

And so perhaps, playfully, we need a new recognition of our intellectual and embodied heritages as well: Theology is irreverent, particularly in its attempts to speak of divinity, a depth of which constantly lures us to rework, refold, and remake our

10 Joan Roughgarden concludes that the story of Noah’s ark, at the end of the day, might urge us to cherish queer biodiversities. She writes that, “the well-known story of Noah’s ark imparts a moral imperative to conserve all biodiversity, both across species and within species” (Roughgarden 2013, 9). I read the story as being a bit more complicated than that statement, ecocritically. The indeterminacy of the place of animal life in the Noah stories is dubious — the Noahic covenant is made with “all flesh” and simultaneously much animal life dies, is sacrificed, or is sanctioned to be sacrificed at human hands. But her point and ethical stance is well-taken.

categories. Theology is irreverent in logics of God that issue from a creation, boundless and unceasing in creativity. Theology is irreverent in the ways our analogies bring the unexpected together. Our language, speaking of God and creation, is carnivalesque, topsy-turvy, performative, animated, vibrant, constantly changing shape and drag. Theology *produces* queer ecologies, precisely in attempts of performed utterance, known and unknown. Even the most stable or ordinary theological constructions contain manifold instabilities. We can never speak fully of this divinity related to us, and we can never fully exhaust the possibilities of our contextual, ecological speaking of the Divine. Theology is irreverent and lures forth responsibilities of wonder and ethical care where we thought they might not bloom.

But we cannot stop at outing theology for its irreverence, its audacity, its “incantation at the edge of uncertainty,” or in the transgressions of that uncertainty (Keller 2003, xviii). We cannot stop queerly playing with and subverting the fantasies that fashion our ecological life. That play is not nihilistic or purely chaotic — it wraps us together in masks of divinity and beckons us to take on different responsibilities or create new roles. Rossellini’s question surfaces again, “How could it all be heterosexual?” My hope is to make an eco-moral claim out of this questioning as well. For this particular nature-cultural moment, we must be irreverent of old stories and ideas in our constructive creativity. Ideas of pristine nature, untouched wilderness, essential selves, essential genders, and uncomplicated assumptions of desire and sexuality, deaden and violate the messy and embodied realities of creativity, embodied ecology, and enfleshed divinity. For the masks of divinity absurdly frighten, play, enthrall, tease, seduce, and expose love. They ask us to make a playful future together in the strange planet shaped in human power. Creatures respond in a multiplicity of ways. Creation’s quite the “showmance,” as my theater friends say. But the performance is never complete: divine larvae are always gestating, becoming something different. And, to be frank, that drag show of the divine and the crea-

turely must go on if we are to live and adapt, mourn, and, dare I say, irreverently celebrate in a new planetary situation.

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