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**The New Novelty: Corralation as Quarantine in Speculative Realism and New Materialism**

**Abstract**

The foundational gesture of New Materialism and Speculative Realism dismisses vast swaths of past philosophy and theory in order to signify their own avant-garde status. The violence of this gesture, which tries to corral difference within past texts in order to feign its own purity, can be considered as a theoretical quarantine. Examples of medical and spiritual quarantine, the 2014 ebola epidemic and Jesus’ temptation, are analyzed to show that the figure is inherently compromised - the harder one fights to keep the other away, the more one becomes inseparable from it. Derrida’s reflections on the reactions against deconstruction show that this desire for progress is always inherently conservative; Meillassoux and Jane Bennett are considered as contemporary examples. A deconstruction of corralation and the academico-capitalist forces driving these ‘innovations’ might open us to reading the never-simply-past text, and to the possibility of the event.

keywords: New Materialism, Speculative Realism, quarantine, ebola, correlationism, Christianity, medical sociology

I would like to propose a quarantine. With the goal of arriving at the unadulterated essence of quarantine, the concept of quarantine as such, I would begin by ensuring we kept it free of all contamination, not merely by limiting it to its proper object and preventing metaphorical breaches, that is, not by restricting us to the medical quarantine enacted by a state at or around its borders, nor by tracing the word to its root in religious hermitage and ascesis, but by trying to think the concept pure of any quarantined object or quarantining subject. Can we raise walls around, besiege or isolate, contain and monitor this concept of quarantine, so that it does not escape the confines within which we place it? Or (and the undecidability of the difference is already our conclusion), to preserve it intact, to uphold its safety or salvation by maintaining all its others at the distance of difference? Perhaps we will find that the pure quarantine we isolate is already its own other, dependent on the violence of exclusion in such a way that it is in itself pure contamination. *Pure contamination -* can there be such a thing? Is this not already a failure of the philosophical impulse with which we began, that impulse toward the isolation of an idea, securing its self-identity by removing it from the contaminations of becoming and seeming? Would a philosophy of quarantine betray the violence and impossibility of this Platonic dream?

I raise this question in view of certain theoretical and disciplinary walls that erect themselves today. They have profited immensely from the rhetoric of quarantine, so that the very mention of their names, New Materialism, Speculative Realism, brings with it an air of contemporaneity, of rupture with the past.[[1]](#endnote-1) This gesture or rhetoric, by which vast swaths of history are sequestered under a single title and banished from what is to come, is by now familiar in a broad range of theoretical and critical fields. Its spread is rapid enough that one might compare it to an outbreak, epidemic, or contagion. In its New Materialist form, this invective opposes an invented movement often called ‘constructivism’ and identified indiscriminately with the past several decades of theory, from around the 1980s until the performative gesture declaring our break, our redemption or clean bill of health. The following example from Diana Coole and Samantha Frost’s introduction to *New Materialisms* isparadigmatic*:*

More positively, materialism’s demise since the 1970s has been an effect of the dominance of analytical and normative political theory on the one hand and of radical constructivism on the other. These respective Anglophone and continental approaches have both been associated with a cultural turn that privileges language, discourse, culture, and values … we believe it is now timely to reopen the issue of matter and once again to give material factors their due in shaping society and circumscribing human prospects. (Coole and Frost 2010, 3) EXT

This simple, linear division, between a past characterized by ‘language, discourse, culture, and values,’ and the once and future doctrine of matter, mirrors the gesture of Speculative Realism, which only widens the confines of the corral:

Such considerations reveal the extent to which the central notion of modern philosophy since Kant seems to be that of correlation. By ‘correlation’ we mean the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other. (Meillassoux 2008, 5) EXT

One can guess that if all philosophy since Kant can be gathered under a single moniker, the goal will be to corral it in order to surpass it, to leave the outside pure of this contamination of thinking and being to which Meillassoux finds himself allergic. If I speak of a corral here, it is because I see in this gesture or rhetoric of quarantine not the identification of a pre-existing corruption, but the violent suppression of difference, in order to feign the purity of the outside - not a pre-existing correlation, but a ready-made, speculative *corralation*.

My aim is not to cast a similar net, as though one could circumscribe every author placed under either of these labels, or even a single discourse, by means of this association. These fields are heterogeneous, not only amongst their variegated works but within each internally diverse text. Each, to varying degrees, will betray and contaminate the hoped-for one-sidedness of its opening gesture. My goal, then, is not to dismiss the work bearing these labels, and certainly not to shirk the task of patiently reading it, but to caution against the heady and headstrong declarations of a chronological break with the past or a logical opposition to the other pole of the structure. Regardless of a text’s other merits, no amount of tempering after the fact will justify the violence of this initial denegation, the corralation.

These dismissals of a discourse supposedly limited to thinking or language resemble the reactionary criticisms of deconstruction that have accompanied Derrida’s work since its inception. Derrida is certainly implicitly corralled by these authors, at least given the time period they claim can be univocally rejected, though it is rare to find a sustained engagement with his work. Of course, reducing generalized textuality or generalized writing to language in the traditional sense is no more justified when used as a tool of conservatism in the academic institution than as a crutch for a new avant-garde. Both these movements or directions, one a pure repetition of the same, the other a novelty secured by transgression and advance, depend on the very logocentrism that seeks to guarantee the pure iterability of ideas, whether to repeat or defeat them. Deconstruction, in teaching us that the essence or idea can never be preserved in a pure quarantine, uncontaminated by its many contexts and marks of signification, raises two objections against the Novel or Speculative corralation. First, any division we seek to place between two discourses will be a limit that runs ‘within’ each no-longer-individual discourse - because contamination is ineluctable, the difference between two discourses will never be secured at the level of positive knowledge. By extension, the sort of linear and transgressive progress of a discipline or of history on which these doctrines predicate their contemporaneity is impossible - the very distinctions that we hope would separate ‘our’ time from the time of the other remain abyssal.

Before returning to this field of theoretical quarantine and contagion, I will consider two examples that may seem more proper to the figure, uncontaminated by metaphor. Nonetheless, they are both successful failures of purity or salvation. First, a medical or perhaps pseudo-medical example, from the time of West Africa’s 2014 Ebola epidemic. Most people who were in America then will remember it not because they had family or neighbors affected or infected by the virus, but rather because it was the subject of one of the more egregious media frenzies in recent times. Individual cases in the US and vivid descriptions of symptoms and fatality rates were the subject of front-page articles and round-the-clock cable news coverage, while expert opinions on the unlikelihood of an epidemic in this country and of the virus’s gradual containment in Africa were underreported or directly contradicted by fear-mongering pundits. This media spectacle was enough to produce the type of panic that would have accompanied an actual outbreak in America. To cite one of myriad signs of this obsession, sales of hand sanitizer and disinfectants spiked here, even in cities and states that would never see a single confirmed case (Harlan 2014; Murray 2014) .

A peculiar form of quarantine was invented in response, a perfect reaction-formation to this mediated or media-induced epidemic. A nurse who traveled to Sierra Leone to treat Ebola patients was quarantined upon her return to the United States, a controversial move championed by New Jersey governor Chris Christie and univocally opposed by those working to contain the disease. The same artifactual tools spreading mass hysteria like a contagion were employed to feign the proactive response of a preservation from exposure within our borders (by broadcasting her confinement). Never mind that the CDC and other public health experts agreed such a quarantine would paradoxically increase the chances of a true US outbreak, by deterring volunteers and encouraging travelers from affected regions to evade the actual monitoring carried out by health officials here.[[2]](#endnote-2) From this example, we should retain the imaginary force of quarantine, which can answer a fear of openness to the other by preserving an illusory self-certainty, almost like a mirror stage. More importantly, we will focus on what Derrida would call the auto-immunity of quarantine, which is always already exposed to the other it pretends to isolate, and can only attack or sequester the other by doing violence to itself. A quarantine may very well ease the mind while diseasing the body.[[3]](#endnote-3)

In ‘Faith and Knowledge’ Derrida identifies this auto-immunity, by which a thing must attack or compromise itself in order to be or remain what it is, at the source of religion.[[4]](#endnote-4) If religion is always a desire for salvation, for an individual or community to retain or return to its safety and self-identity, it nonetheless demands the openness of faith in the unknown and unknowable other.[[5]](#endnote-5) We encounter the auto-immunity of religion at the origin of *quarantine* as well, the word as much as the concept. The name derives from the Latin for forty, attaining its medical definition only by means of a drift from *quarantena,* the Latin name for the forty days of Lent and the site of the fasting and temptation undergone by Jesus in the wilderness, which Lent commemorates (OED). These acts of devotion, secluding oneself and fasting, have their own auto-immune structure, bringing one closer to the divine while emphasizing our separation. If one is distanced from the body and its worldly satisfaction by such ascesis, the weakness, the dirtiness, and the a-sociality that ensue are reminders of the insistence of the body. A detail that appears only in the brief version of this narrative recounted by Mark, ‘he was [with](http://biblehub.com/greek/3326.htm) [the](http://biblehub.com/greek/3588.htm) beasts’ (Mark 1: 13), reminds us that this spiritual journey takes us beyond the confines of human society, within which Aristotle thought our essence as political animals resided: ‘he who is unable to live in society, or who has no need because he is sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or a God’ (*Pol.* I.2 1253a1). In attempting to surpass our hybrid status as a spiritual animal, do we become pure spirit, or pure animal, or do we remain in their undecidability?

It is here, where Jesus risks his humanity for the chance of gaining so much more, that the devil comes to compromise Jesus’ integrity. Matthew and Luke recount three temptations, turning stones to bread to satisfy his hunger, jumping from the temple so angels would catch him, and accepting dominion over the kingdoms of the earth. If we read this in folkloric fashion as three escalating examples of earthly temptation, our efforts are complicated by the reversed order of the last two temptations in the two gospels. They agree on the minimal degree of the first temptation - using Jesus’ divine gift to satisfy only his body. But which of the last two temptations is the greater sin or denial of God? Would it be worse to accept dominion over the earth, or to attempt to prove within the earth the presence and providence of God? Is it worse to embrace worldly power and knowledge, or to attempt to convert faith into worldly knowledge? The conclusion of this brief narrative exemplifies the auto-immunity of the Christian logic of sacrifice.[[6]](#endnote-6) After Jesus refuses to ‘tempt’ God by risking his faith to profit in knowledge, he is rewarded for these efforts by being given everything he refused to take, including a host of angels to minister to him. Not only does this parallel and almost parody the second or third temptation, but also the first: these angels who minister or serve (διηκόνουν) Jesus are often depicted in iconography as bringing him a feast (Matthew 4: 11; Mark 1: 13).

In this Christianization of wandering in the wilderness, the auto-immunity of God’s promised reward risks resembling a threat. How certain can it become before our bodily and earthly reward compromises the separation and separability of faith? How absent can it be without this quarantine *of* the body becoming impossible, the effort to isolate the spirit by isolating the body being mocked by the exposed individual who remains without salvation? Quarantine is the auto-immune effort to dissemble this contamination by violently opposing it to itself, risking itself only to reward it with more of the same.

The same ill-logic of auto-immunity is at work or in play in the theoretical quarantine with which we began - and which we can no longer justify calling a metaphor or figuration, given the lack of proper essence in the medical and spiritual quarantines that delimit the concept’s usage and history, its present and past. Derrida or deconstruction makes explicit the impossibility of containing his or any discourse within a dogmatic corral. A general undecidability would contaminate not only the effort to isolate materialism from idealism, formalism, or its other others, but would also interweave contemporaneity with the past it hopes to leave behind, and stain or stigmatize all novelty with repetition. One could look almost anywhere in Derrida’s texts for explications of the untenability of the rhetoric of quarantine, both in its efforts to reduce his work to a one-sided textualism, humanism, or idealism, and its claim to position itself as purely outside these confines. But his most explicit considerations of the rhetoric of quarantine on which Speculative Realism and New Materialism rely comes in ‘Some Statements and Truisms about Neologisms, Newisms, Postisms, Parasitisms, and other Small Seisisms.’ This lecture is perhaps Derrida’s most sustained consideration of the type of discourse that was most often used in summary dismissals or partisan appropriations of his work, terminology such as poststructuralism or deconstructionism, which Derrida almost never used (indeed, rarely even mentioned) and with which he never identified. It is possible, on the basis of his reflections, not only to mark the distance of deconstruction from such attempts at theoretical quarantine, but also to understand our contemporary drive for contemporaneity. We cannot isolate these themes, however, without first incorporating into our own discourse the immense care Derrida takes with his language in this essay.

Behind these titles that are sometimes meant to represent schools or doctrines of thought, that sometimes knowingly or unknowingly refer to a certain style of writing or methodology, that too frequently become referentless straw men, Derrida would like to locate what he calls jetties. These forces can be just as ‘libidinal’ as ‘historical-socioeconomic,’ just as private as public or concurrently ‘of desire and power’ (Derrida 1990, 65). They are represented, mirrored, refracted, and identify with or reappropriate their others. Most problematically, each force claims to encompass or account for all the others. All of this is to say that a force is not one, not a force and not a single force, neither in the sense that we might hope to identify one and the same force at work in several situations, or even in a single instance to de-limit the force or forces at work. Rather, within a certain context, a set of interventions appear to respond to their contexts in a related way. Out of this identification, names develop for what is ‘not yet *subject*, *project*, or *object*, not even rejection, but in which takes place any production and any determination, which finds its possibility in the jetty’ (Ibid. 65). The act of naming suggests a shared essence, which, if it names anything at all, must name something prior to any subject matter, field, methodology, or opposition; the essence would be the irruptive force, the jetty, on the basis of which these structures can take on a stabilized form.

Does it exist? Is it anything? The answer is not simple: ‘those titles do not respond, do not correspond to any classifiable identity, to any corpus which can be delimited. However, for all that, this doesn’t make those titles empty or insignificant’ (Ibid. 67). Each name has an effect, and one which is just as ‘theoretical’ as ‘institutional,’ in fact, which challenges the distinction or distinguishability of the two. For so many reasons, Derrida reminds us that the language we use to speak of ‘theory’ must be held at a distance. Those who ignore this gap offer the ‘theoretical’ discourses most relevant to the movements I have made my subject. There are as many similarities as noteworthy departures. First, Derrida notes, in recognition of the importance of institutionalization to these movements, ‘There was a time when titles and letterheads followed the establishment of the institution and the work of its founding members. Today we know that it is sometimes better to start with letterheads and self-representation’ (Ibid. 68). The race for self-nomination and self-institutionalization shows itself today in the eagerness not only for new newisms and postisms, but also in the primers, conferences, and colloquia that justify the presence of experts in these fields (or riding these jetties) in our departments and the presence of these newisms in course titles and as areas of specialty. We should note the obvious fact that an undeniably capitalist market force drives the invention of these titles and their justification by means of a rhetoric of post, new, and of enough turns that we have a very good chance of ending up right where we began, if perhaps a bit dizzied or deluded. The need for progress is felt just as much at a ‘libidinal’ level by the individual scholar as it is in the author’s or reviewer’s questionnaire from the university press that knows it needs a new product for the marketplace. Graham Harman says as much when he identifies ‘speculative realism’ as a ‘brand name,’ one that can attract attention and build institutional momentum for something that is not a movement in the sense of a common project or shared essence (Harman 2011, 21).

At most, these fields have agreed on what they are not. The authors who self-identify or find themselves identified as speculative realists all make the same opening gesture in their work, and usually on the first few pages. All past philosophy, at least since Kant, has been defined by a correlation, so they will move outside of it. They will think of what is beyond thinking. What’s that? Here is where they begin to disagree. Is it real or ideal? Mathematical, scientific, or commonsensical? A world of objects or processes? These arguments ensure that those who count themselves within this field will always have something to argue (to publish) about, while giving each of them the value of uniqueness - the last thing an author entranced by the fetish of novelty would want is to admit that they were engaged in an act of repetition, and so one will be unlikely to find an acknowledgement of agreement with a peer, unless it is immediately followed by re-marking their simultaneous difference. Because it is this mode of opposition (what Derrida referred to as the jetty that stabilizes itself in the form of rejection) that defines all these fields, I find it justified to say that all of them are a discourse of the new/post type. Even when neither word appears in their self-nomination, in the case of Object Oriented Ontology, Jane Bennett’s ‘Vital Materialism,’ or various historical or dialectical materialisms, it is the opening gesture of declaring their own novelty that prescribes the dogmatic essence of the work. We can then identify an important distinction between these jetties and those Derrida surveyed, exemplified by his following comment about the newism of his day:

No one presents himself, speaking in the first person, singular or plural, as a ‘*new* something’ or a ‘*post* something.’ If somewhere you come across a statement which rigorously affirms ‘*I* am a new-something or I am a post-something,’ please show it to me. It would be the exception and the sign that the author of such a self-referential statement did not understand the socio-academic game. (Derrida 1990, 73-4) EXT

Perhaps this was true in 1990, but alas, novelty is not what it used to be. Given the oppositional form that is itself the essence of every school of thought clamoring for the value of contemporaneity today, a today that is defined by this gesture (and that’s nothing new), it now seems commonplace for these terms to be deployed as self-predications.

Everything this implies about the state of the academic institution, and the market place that dictates what gets published, who gets work, etc. in an increasingly cut-throat field (whose competition is not irrelevant to the polemicism we are identifying here) has been referenced already. The further consequences we can draw from this transition to what we could call *self-identity* has to do with what Derrida calls the ‘destabilizing jetty.’ Wherever institutional and theoretical forces stabilize certain movements or jetties into recognizable forms, there is deconstruction to the extent that these boundaries and oppositions can be shaken up or disturbed. If ‘theory’ was not, at the time of Derrida’s writing, a field with an identifiable essence, this was due at least in part to the ‘questioning, which destabilized the axiomatics, the founding and organizing schemas of science and philosophy themselves’ (Ibid. 83). In typical fashion, one can read his invocation of deconstruction as a refusal to take credit for this or a taking credit for much more than we could ever know, ‘Let us call this [destabilization] an effect of deconstruction. And with this word I refer neither to specific texts or authors, and above all not to this formation which disciplines the process and effect of deconstruction into *a* theory or *a* critical method called deconstructionism or deconstructionisms’(Ibid.). What we see at work in the oppositionalism and self-nomination of the New Novelty or Corralationism is a massive dependence on the gesture of the stabilizing jetty, and the anchorage and safe harbor it provides to all of us who navigate increasingly hostile waters today.

What is lost, if the forces of destabilization are undernourished or underrepresented in ‘theory’ ‘today?’ Derrida considers a peculiar event whose possibility he ties to some destabilization, and we can say by extension that any event, the event as such, is what would be lost if we remain too close to the safety of familiar shores. Here is his description of an event in which he played a part, though one he refuses to name or stabilize:

It is more and more often said that the Johns Hopkins colloquium (‘The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man’) was … an event in which many things changed (it is on purpose that I leave these formulations somewhat vague) on the American scene—which is always more than the American scene … I don’t know what happened there, and I have neither the tools nor the time necessary to talk about it here … What is certain is that if something happened there which would have the value of a theoretical event … this something only came to light afterwards and is still becoming more and more clear today. But what is also certain is that nobody, either among the participants or close to them, had any thematic awareness of the event; nobody could take its measure and above all nobody could have or would have dared to program it, to announce or present it as such an event. (Ibid. 80) EXT

An event, which Derrida never wearied of telling us can only appear as the rupturing of any horizon of anticipation, would never be given a chance if it were presented as such. ‘If somebody claimed *today* to program or present a similar event, that person would be mistaken’ (Ibid.), not because of a nostalgia for a certain era or style, but because such anticipations foreclose the possibility of the event they announce. If there was some novelty to the generation of which that colloquium serves as an index, it cannot be divorced from a questioning of the linear progress of history and the oedipal form of identity in which the new novelty has sought refuge. If this novelty could be found in their texts, it was just as much in the opening they left to the ‘past’ texts they read - if those texts always remained capable of surprising us, our distance from them could never be assured. Their openness to the event depended on their willingness to open past texts in the first place.

Those who declare their own novelty in these Newist terms inevitably end up falling back on the most traditional forms of the concepts they invoke in order to support the dogmatic distinctions of their discourse. Curiously, one of the concepts these authors often claim to be making new is - novelty. In Quentin Meillassoux’s *After Finitude*, this becomes most apparent in his discussion of hyper-Chaos’s ability to bring forth new laws of nature. That there can be no necessary being makes contingency a necessity, and his aim is to prove that this contingency of all that exists, as well as the very laws of existence, is not a sign of our ignorance but of our absolute knowledge. His reconfiguration of metaphysical principles to protect the possibility of novelty shows the problem deconstruction poses for his project:

[T]he utterly Immutable instance against which even the omnipotence of contingency would come to grief, would be a contradictory entity. And this for the precise reason that such an entity could never become other than it is *because there would be no alterity for it in which to become*. (Meillassoux 2008, 69) EXT

If contradiction is possible, if a being can be both present and absent, both man and woman, both human and God, or can be neither with any certainty, then this deconstruction renders the possibility of novelty foundationless. In order for us to know that a ‘new’ law of nature has been produced out of the contingency of hyper-Chaos, we would have to know the laws preceding with a similarly absolute certainty. If our scientific knowledge remains revisable, if the laws we ascribe to nature are our best guesses, then a violation of these laws ‘of nature’ could just as well be a sign of our oversight rather than a transformation of the laws themselves. When relativity was discovered, for example, it would have been just as possible to claim that nature had transformed itself, rather than thinking that Newtonian mechanics had been less than universal all along. To insist on this undecidability is not to subjugate being to human thought, but to recognize that what belongs to thinking, and what intrudes upon it from outside, can never be sorted out by a cognition that is not itself absolute.

Now, Meillassoux can only defend this absolution of our knowledge by falling back on the very type of philosophical argument his project seeks to exclude. He must be able to prove the impossibility of necessity in order to claim that contingency is absolute. To do so, he posits a fundamental principle he calls unreason, which claims that we know with absolute certainty that there is no reason why things are thus and not otherwise. The Principle of Sufficient Reason then, must be excluded, ‘the principle of unreason teaches us that *it is because the principle of reason is absolutely false that the principle of non-contradiction is absolutely true*’(Ibid. 71). But in order to have absolute knowledge of novelty, in order to know when the laws of nature themselves have changed, we must have absolute certainty about the reasons for all that exists. He preserves unreflected the idea that absolute knowledge requires derivation from *a priori* principles, despite the impossibility of deriving anything like knowledge from a ‘principle of unreason.’ This is the reason that no proof is ever offered for the absolute status he grants to mathematics. The only argument he can offer in its favor undermines his entire project: ‘It is the discourse of empirical science which, for the first time, gives meaning to the idea of a *rational* debate about what did or did not exist prior to the emergence of humankind, as well as about what might eventually succeed humanity’ (Ibid. 114, my emphasis). Why would rationality be treated as a self-evident proof in a discourse that began by excluding the principle of reason and any search for grounds? His desire for contingency, which is a desire for novelty, is dependent on what necessarily deconstructs it, a desire for necessary, absolute knowledge.

Jane Bennett offers a New Materialist[[7]](#endnote-7) example of this desire for novelty and its umbilical relation to the tradition from which it hopes to depart. Her thesis in *Vibrant Matter* is that all matter, organic and inorganic alike, is free, creative, and living. Each predicate that she seeks to ascribe to matter has a fundamental relationship to novelty, to a departure from the deterministic representation of law-governed substance. In her words, ‘an active becoming, a *creative not-quite-human force capable of producing the new*, buzzes within the history of the term nature. This vital materiality congeals into bodies …’ (Bennett 2010, 118, emphasis in original). Like Meillassoux, Bennett seeks to give novelty an empirical, positivistic status, by claiming that our inability to predict certain events is proof of their inherent contingency and innovation. But the capacity for invention or decision characteristic of life (which, as we know, can always be subordinated to a higher order law, for example a genetic determinism) does not simply appear; it is differential. We see certain matter as living and innovative because it subverts the expectations our deterministic view of matter produces, such as the law of increasing entropy. Only if we first impose determinism on matter does organic matter begin to appear free, because it seems to suspend these laws. Liberating all matter from the reign of determinism does not disclose a universal creativity, but rather undermines the possibility of viewing any matter as inventive. Eliminating life’s other would make it indistinguishable from universal death or inanimacy. It would leave us with a nature about which we could form no principles or expectations, and thus whose novelty or repetition would remain undecidable.

In order to claim knowledge of matter’s creativity, Bennett must paradoxically resort to the most traditional definitions of matter and scientific certainty. This is most evident when she turns to scientific studies to prove that certain fats can have an influence on human behavior. To undermine the notion of an immaterial, free spirit, she subjects it to the very material determinism that her entire project excludes: ‘A widely cited 2002 “double-blind, placebo-controlled, randomized trial of nutritional supplements on 231 young adult prisoners …” shows a 35 percent reduction of offences among British prisoners given omega-3 fatty acids’ (Ibid. 41). She claims that chaos and complexity theory, which account for the probabilistic nature of this conclusion, provide scientific grounding for an indeterministic, freely creative representation of matter. But a truly free matter would have no determinable effect on human or other activity, nor could it produce anything resembling scientific knowledge. Chaos theory, like any science, produces legalistic explanations of phenomena, even if those laws include probabilities or uncertainties. In fact, perhaps the most basic chaotic model, the Lorenz attractor, proves that behavior completely unpredictable *for us* can be entirely governed by - quite simple - deterministic laws (Gleick 1987, 21-23). A science of freedom is impossible, and it will forever remain undecidable whether what appears to us is free or constrained. The desire to secure novelty, here as in the case of Meillassoux, requires reducing it to the antithetical order of scientific certainty.

Ironically, each of these thinkers who claims to open thought to its excluded other forecloses the possibility of the advent of the new. Derrida offers a description, in contrast, of openness to the event. It can only be stated in the simplest terms, ‘something would finally have a chance of happening or taking place, that’s all. It isn’t certain, it isn’t predictable - simply, it is better that something happen’ (Derrida 1990, 81). This should recall for us his ‘definition’ of deconstruction as ‘*ce qui arrive*’ - ‘what happens’ (Derrida 1995, 17). In response to the events of 1966, a stabilizing jetty arose to try to put a stop to what was perhaps new at that time. I say this with great caution, knowing that novelty can never be assured at the level of positive knowledge - nonetheless, it was doubtless some change that those who declared themselves ‘against theory’ sensed in the wake of the Johns Hopkins colloquium. It challenged disciplinary and institutional boundaries as well as the determinants of expertise in those fields, and those who felt themselves *behind the times* reconfigured this destabilization, as well as their own work, in protest or rejection. This stabilizing jetty took a by-now-familiar form: if these discourses that threatened to open the institution and its established fields to their others could be contained within its traditional borders, they could be dismissed from or on the inside. This should sound familiar from the auto-immunity of quarantine - the outside must be brought in, domesticated, in order to expel it. So, a discourse that threatened to disrupt the border between text and its outside, that thus opened the academic institution to a necessary dialogue with the ‘world’ from which it could not be separated, that insisted on questions just as political as personal about our texts and ourselves as readers (reading never being separable from that life thought to be lived outside of fiction and theory), a discourse that threatened the sanctity and sanctum of the inside, and rendered the premise of aestheticism impossible (art cannot be for it’s own sake if its inside is already compromised), was nonetheless cast as aestheticism itself. A supposedly willful, ludic discourse was said to engage in writing for its own sake while justifying this offense by claiming that everything else was just writing anyway. This conservative criticism, as we said, meant to bind deconstruction within traditional concepts of writing and aesthetics, despite this discourse beginning by placing those concepts in question. The difference between traditional and generalized writing, which I suspect is even familiar to many of those who elide it, was doubtless already at work transforming the academy when Derrida began to write of it, and so those who felt threatened by those changes sought to contain them within familiar categories, within the traditional academy.

It should give us pause to find this most conservative gesture mirrored in those who would cast themselves as the avant-garde. At the time of Derrida’s writing, New Historicism was his example of a conservative stabilizing force, securing the borders of academia the better to repeat them, while Marxism deployed the same stabilization for the sake of its avant-garde pretensions. To transgress the boundaries of academia, to be sure that our work is not merely theoretical but always practical, political, engaged, one must be certain where those borders lie, to know when one has crossed them. A deconstruction that places in question our good conscience at having fulfilled our responsibility toward this outside is a threat to this self-satisfaction, precisely because it argues that we are always already politically engaged.

The self-styled avant-garde among our ‘contemporaries’ positions itself by means of this same conservative gesture. One can identify it everywhere in the work dependent on the stabilizing rhetoric of quarantine. Levi Bryant, in his essay for the *The Speculative Turn*, a book as disparate as the movement for which it serves as a primer, makes a dubious effort at guilt-by association, writing that ‘The Derrideans and Lacanians tell us that we must analyze the manner in which language produces the objects of our world’ (Bryant 2011, 262). Graham Harman makes the same gesture in *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, while trying to contain deconstruction within the academy:

We will now see that it is only Derrida's tacit antirealist bias, typical of phenomenology and its French inheritors, that allows him to equate the being of a thing and the meaning of its name. The infinite inward depth of candles, stars, and moons is far more interesting than the supposed infinite complexity of multiple meanings — an increasingly academic notion … (Harman 2005, 110) EXT

And Rosi Braidotti repeatedly uses deconstruction as a straw man in her New Materialist critique:

With the demise of postmodernism, which has gone down in history as a form of radical scepticism and moral and cognitive relativism, feminist philosophers tend to move beyond the linguistic mediation paradigm of deconstructive theory and to work instead towards the production of robust alternatives. (Braidotti 2012, 25) EXT

She also makes curious reference to a ‘critical deconstruction’ that stops short of the ‘active production of alternatives’ (Ibid. 22). Of course, deconstruction is not criticism any more than it is trapped within the academy or its linguistics department. Undecidability makes any critical (from *krinein,* to separate and choose)project impossible, and whatever we imagine the limits of the academy and of language to be, deconstruction will always be what opens them onto their others.[[8]](#endnote-8) The New Novelty makes a common cause here with the most conservative forces of academia, in order to clear the space for their own innovation. This sort of self-assured, dogmatic, positional progress (the past said language, the present says not-language, etc.) shares its essence with the conservatism that hopes to repeat the past.

There is only so much time now, ‘today,’ and I will have to wait to read more closely some of the Speculative Realist or New Materialist texts that make this gesture we have called a rhetoric of quarantine, a corralation, or a new novelty. There is of course much to learn from this work, which cannot be defined by its corralationist gesture, any more than it can define the past by it. It may sound as though I have said that there was a time when authors created new ideas, but that time is no longer. But these distinctions between past and present, novelty and repetition, are the very ones it is necessary to unsettle. Even if there is something unanticipatable about the conclusions of Derrida’s readings, it is nonetheless the case that he discovers his ideas always in the no-longer-past texts to which he turns, and thus that an event different from a sovereign invention takes place. It is this openness to the surprise of past texts that one will be at a loss to find in the New Novelty. The simplicity of the border they draw between themselves and the past forecloses the chance that a deconstructive discourse offers to the no-longer-simply-past work. One can say of reading what Derrida said of the event - it is better that reading happen.

A logocentric thinking will hear my discourse as one against novelty, and assume that my desire is for repetition, but both of these figures, as I hope I have shown, share their essential possibility in the self-repeating idea that remains self-identical and pure of all its contexts and instantiations. If the idea differs from itself, it is not only repetition that becomes impossible, but a novelty which depends on identifying and isolating the past in order to surpass it, to guarantee its own stable, self-identical difference. To both these figures I would contrast an unending *renewal*, which is neither the sovereign action of the reader or thinker nor the lone accomplishment of the matter or text with which she works or by which she is affected, neither the conservative obedience to tradition nor the self-assured transgression of the avant-garde, neither the severance of our present nor the continuation of a past, neither belonging simply to being nor absence, but allows itself to be affected by the difference of repetition. As far as knowing what chance this idea has, it cannot be programmed, anticipated, or foreseen.

I am indebted to Sara Ahmed’s ‘Open Forum Imaginary Prohibitions,’ which questions the value placed on novelty by New Materialist authors. The responses to her critique bring out interesting nuances among New Materialists. Iris van der Tuin (2008) suggests that Ahmed’s argument is nostalgic—it locates the only legitimate feminist science studies in the past, therefore making contemporary feminism impossible. As far as I can tell, van der Tuin’s response is based on a misreading of Ahmed, who advocates this return in the specific context of work making a corralationist gesture, ‘We don’t always have to make a return to earlier feminist work, but if we represent that work as being this or that, then we need to make that return’ (Ahmed 2008, 36).

Noela Davis’ (2009) response is more nuanced. She argues that, at least for certain New Materialist (a term she borrows from Ahmed’s discourse without endorsement) authors, the distinction is between past work that may have engaged with nature/biology but saw it as separate from culture, as opposed to present work that recognizes them as always entangled. A full consideration of this hypothesis would require patient engagement with all of the work she cites (including those authors who self-identify as practitioners of deconstruction), which I hope to undertake elsewhere. The question or hypothesis that would guide that reading asks to what extent the effort to make this entanglement or undecidability *belong to nature* instills a one-sidedness that corresponds to its corralationism. One finds statements of the sort: past work represented undecidability as happening once culture befell nature, but we will find undecidability ‘already’ in ‘nature itself.’ Such a conclusion requires enforcing the most classical forms of the concepts under consideration, claiming that wherever language appears in past work a purely human, cultural artifact is meant, whereas whenever inorganic material processes are referenced in contemporary studies something natural is at stake.

The auto-immunity of quarantine could also be observed in efforts to fight ebola in the three countries experiencing a true epidemic. Liberia took the most severe steps toward a pure quarantine, surrounding an entire city with armed soldiers who even killed some of those trying to escape the starvation conditions within (Onishi 2014). Guinea and Sierra Leone developed hybrid forms of quarantine. In the case of Guinea, a policy known as cerclage provided food, water, hygiene supplies, and education for families and allowed for limited travel (Hersey et al. 2015; Dahl et al. 2016). One theory for the relative severity of the outbreak in Liberia and Sierra Leone and the difficulties controlling the disease there attributes it to the difference in quarantine policies (Youde 2016).

We see the same auto-immunity at work in the often whiplash-inducing rhetoric of Donald Trump’s presidential campaign. Its wild self-contradictions should not by any means be attributed to unintelligence or a lack of self-awareness - they obey the demands and the ill-logic of auto-immunity. *On the one hand*, extremes of protectionism and isolationism, including the expulsion of all undocumented immigrants, the refusal of virtually all new immigration, protectionist trade policies, abandoning our military alliances, and a racist and Islamophobic exclusivity that shows the ethnic and religious constitution of the imagined inside. *On the other hand*, unprecedented demonstrations of brute force and violence beyond our borders, including the desire to torture supposed terrorists, to murder their families, and a shocking eagerness to use nuclear weapons. These contradictions are the very essence of exceptionalism, a desire to value ourselves above all others by focusing within our own borders, in conflict with a felt need to prove our superiority with great (mindless, undirected) shows of force abroad. That these policies would lead to a collapse of quality of life within our country and a global destabilization that would be sure to affect our own safety and security are symptoms of auto-immunity. Our own safety and sanctity depend on some degree of openness to the other.

Much work on the intersection of materialist studies and deconstruction has focused on Derrida’s use of the term auto-immunity. See, for example, Andrea Timár (2015), and Eszter Timar (2017). While this debate centers around whether Derrida’s use of the term squares with its use among biologists, I am more interested here in setting to work or putting in play the resonances Derrida gives it, rightly or wrongly.

His clearest exposition of the tension between the two sources comes here: ‘we will put to the test the quasi-transcendental privilege we believe ourselves obliged to grant the distinction between, *on the one hand*, the experience of belief (trust, trustworthiness, confidence, faith …) and, *on the other,* the experience of sacredness, even of holiness, of the unscathed that is safe and sound (*heilig*, holy). These comprise two distinct sources or foci. “Religion” figures their *ellipse*, because it both comprehends the two foci, but also sometimes shrouds their irreducible duality in silence …’ (Derrida 2002, 72). The auto-immunity of these two sources is stated, among other places, here: ‘It [a sort of general logic of auto-immunization] seems indispensable to us today for thinking the relations between faith and knowledge, religion and science, as well as the duplicity of sources in general’ (Derrida 2002, 80).

Derrida reads Kierkegaard’s retelling of the Abraham story as a Christianization and indemnification of sacrifice in *The Gift of Death* (Derrida 2008, 94-5)*.*

Bennett rejects this label, opting for ‘Vital Materialism’ instead. Still, any number of passages could be brought forth from her work to show that she positions it as an advance beyond ‘constructivism,’ and that she is enmeshed in the pursuit of novelty.

David Cunningham in ‘Logics of Generalization’ offers an insightful critique of the Corralationist gesture that treats Derrida as a transcendental linguist akin to Benveniste. His conclusion, that self-styled speculative and materialist work ends up in a ‘return to a pre-critical idea of philosophy,’ demonstrates the relationship of supposed novelty to conservatism that I am sketching out here (Cunningham 2015, 97).

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1. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
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