Contagion and the Ethics of Difference

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Art always has to do with cosmogony, but it exposes cosmogony for what it is: necessarily plural, diffracted, discreet, a touch of color or tone, an agile turn of phrase or folded mass, a radiance, a scent, a song, or a suspended movement, exactly because it is the birth of a world (and not the construction of a system). A world is always as many worlds as it takes to make a world.

—Jean-Luc Nancy, Being Singular Plural

Whence Leibniz’s idea that our souls sing to themselves — spontaneously, in chords — while our eyes read the text and our voices follow the melody. The text is folded according to the accords, and harmony is what envelops the text. The same expressive problem will animate music endlessly, from Wagner to Debussy and now up to Cage, Boulez, Stockhausen, and Berio.

—Gilles Deleuze, The Fold

I

Contagion: from Latin, con meaning “together with” and tangere meaning “to touch”. If contagion entails what we might, on this basis of this particular origin, call with-touching (as the inversion of with-holding), this form of infectious contact describes the risk of transmission. The risk of contagion is perhaps always the risk of a making-more, beyond containment—that is, beyond with-holding (con-tenere).

In the medical context, contagion refers to ‘the communication of disease from body to body by contact direct or mediate’. Here, contagion is characterized negatively as a form of communication that pollutes—a transmission that dirties. Contagion is thus met with quarantine: an attempt to contain the polluting agent—to with-hold the with-touching. However, to associate contagion solely with hygiene would be a mistake. As anthropologist Mary Douglas observes in her seminal work Purity and Danger, in the religious context, contagion is bound to sacredness as the foundation for communities of religious worship. Here, “[t]he sacred must always be treated as contagious because relations with it are bound to be expressed by rituals of separation and demarcation and by beliefs in the danger of crossing forbidden boundaries”. Generally this connection between the sacred and contagion has, as in the medical context, been bound up with the maintenance of hygiene (Douglas engages the long anthropological debate around whether to consider these rituals primarily in their spiritual or otherwise in their hygienic aspect, ultimately claiming the two are inextricable). In some cases however, the conjunction of sacredness and contagion can
collapse the distinction between purity and pollution. While sacred contagion delineates taboos against that which is considered dangerous, on occasion the transgression of these taboos—exposure to contagion—becomes the means of binding community. Here, being touched by contagion becomes a means of communing with the sacred. (As in the cases of numerous medieval Christian mystics known to have drunk the water used to wash lepers as a means of communion with God.) Considering contagion’s (for lack of a better word) “metaphysical” communicative potential, we might turn to Antonin Artaud’s retelling of the tale of the Grand-Saint-Antoine—a plague-carrying ship turned away from Caligari, Sardinia in 1720 by the city’s viceroy after a dream, consequently docking in Marseille and unleashing its pestilent cargo—in which he insists that certain “emanations” established ‘between the viceroy and the plague a palpable communication, however subtle’ and as such ‘it is too easy and explains nothing to limit the communication of such a disease to contagion by simple contact’. Here, Artaud imagines the plague as ‘a kind of psychic entity’ that ‘reforges the chain between what is and what is not, between the virtuality of the possible and what already exists in materialized nature’. With this mode of “psychic emanation” in mind, we shall now consider whether the concept of contagion can become a vehicle for the communication of both ethical and ontological considerations within (and perhaps beyond) a philosophical context. More specifically, we will ask whether contagion can be understood as a means of communicating an ethics rooted in the promiscuous creation of difference.

We might briefly indicate the context in which this ethics of difference arises. Broadly speaking, in post-war France the concern for such an ethics arises from the three principal “philosophers of difference”—as indicated by François Laruelle in Philosophies of Difference—Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, and Gilles Deleuze. (To utter these four names in the same breath is not, however, to indicate any substantive commonality between them save the devoted concern for the Idea of difference.) If, in Greek, Ethics describes the search for a “good way of being”, ethics of difference (in the broadest sense) seeks to propose a “way of being” faithful to the Idea of difference. Moreover, with relation to two of our principle interlocutors—Nancy and Deleuze—the Idea of difference forms the beating heart of Being itself. Here, Being and difference are interwoven such that they collapse into each other on every level and scale. As we shall see, this equally entails a collapse between ethics and ontology, since Being (ontology) is inextricable from difference and therefore ethics—as a “way of being”—entails the search for and affirmation of Being’s constitutive difference. In this aspect alone, the ethics of difference with which we are interested must be distinguished from other notable strands in the recent philosophy of ethics. Take for instance the work of Alain Badiou, in which ethics ‘is indicated by the chronic conflict between the two functions of the multiple material that makes up the whole being of a some-one’: on the one hand, the multiple and different being which “some-one” is and on the other, the obscure and singular access this “some-one” can forge to a transcendent Same indicated by the category of “truth”. Thus, in stark contrast to an ethics suggesting that a “way of being” should focus on the production and expression of the difference inherent in Being itself, Badiou argues that ethics concerns the overcoming of difference hic et nunc in lieu of the faithful search for a (Same) truth “once and for all”. With this counterpoint in mind, we hope to indicate the singularity of the ethics with which we are preoccupied. In the end, it seems to us that the resounding proposal (perhaps begrudgingly) shared by the singular formulations of ethico-ontology offered by Nancy and Deleuze respectively, could be phrased as follows: “Being differs, so be with and for this difference!”
The desire to explore the intersection between difference ontology and contagion arises from a belief in the urgent necessity to communicate and transmit a system of ethics. This desire is underwritten by yet another assertion made by Nancy: that there is an ongoing necessity to think through a total world-ontology—that is, ‘an ontology for each and every one and for the world “as a totality,” nothing short of the whole world, since this is all there is’ (BSP, 53-54). As such, to conceive of an ethical pathogen not only entails the need to think through a total ontology but also insists that this thinking be contagious—overflowing disciplinary boundaries, the enclosures of individualism, and all other modes of thinking that instill notions of ethical hygiene (of purity and separation) under the aegis of the transcendental categories of the Same and the Other. For, only after being touched, dirtied, and polluted by the profound and irreducible difference that lies at the heart of Being itself, can we begin to move past the myriad of divisions, diversions and oppositions that render the notion of a world-totality impossible.

Thus, by focusing primarily on the ontologies proposed by Nancy and Deleuze—for whom the world is composed of an infinite number of singular (heterogeneous) partes extra partes whose irreducible difference forms a common degree-zero—we will attempt to argue that this notion of difference can (or perhaps, must) be subject to contagious transmission. It is our hope that by tirelessly re-articulating this encounter with difference, it might eventually seep through the partitions that hold fast to the venomous beliefs in purity, separation, and opposition. In turn, our investigation will begin by considering the work of Georges Bataille, for whom contagion describes the convulsive and inter-subjective communication of finitude. We will then move on to Nancy’s inheritance from and critique of Bataille by way of introducing Nancean ethico-ontology. Then with a considerable leap, we will then move onto Deleuze’s discussion of ontology in The Fold, through which we will propose the affirmative expression of difference as “catchy”. Finally, we will conclude with a discussion of the Arts in the hopes of grounding our discussion of contagious ethics in a somewhat more concrete and practical framework.

Before moving on, we should also briefly address the contextual nature of this study. For those readers familiar with the work of Bataille, Nancy, and Deleuze, it might seem odd juxtapose the former two with the latter, considering substantial antagonisms that will become clear below. However, it is our hope that by placing these incommensurable worlds side-by-side—by contextualizing them with one another—we draw attention to the obscure and productive space between these worlds. Our work will thus not be one of synthesis—the proposition of transcendent notions common to these thinkers—, but instead one of dramatic dialogue (as in the tradition of Nietzsche’s dramatic method). Ultimately, this dialogue will emerge from and as the formal operation of contextualization.

II

The notion of contagion with which we are interested finds its roots in the early work of Georges Bataille. In articles written for the dissident surrealist publication Documents, as well as in a smattering of articles written for other journals such as Contre-Attaque, L’Acéphale, and others, Bataille employs “contagion” to refer to the violent transmission of affect. In After Bataille, commentator Patrick ffrench argues that we understand this transmission in terms of what he calls “affectivity without a subject”. Here, affect is conceived as ‘a play of charge and discharge, a potlatch of instinct’ that overflows the idealized conception of subjectivity as an
enclosed rational, economic, and linguistic agent. Bataille thus imbues affect with a decidedly Dionysian character. Following Nietzsche’s formulation in *The Birth of Tragedy*:

> These Dionysiac stirrings, which, as they grow in intensity, cause subjectivity to vanish to the point of complete self-forgetting, awaken either under the influence of narcotic drink, of which all human beings and peoples who are close to the origin of things speak in their hymns, or at the approach of spring when the whole of nature is pervaded by lust for life.

As with the young Nietzsche, Bataille’s affective contagion is a means of communing with a vitalistic current that overflows the structures of individuation rendering human beings as discontinuous, individual subjectivities—what Nietzsche, after Schopenhauer, refers to as the *principium individuationis*. However, for Nietzsche it was crucial that these “Dionysiac stirrings” be tempered with an antithetical Apollonian (representational) pole lest they descend into purely destructive intoxication. We are not to abandon the *principium individuationis* (for which Apollo is the ‘transfiguring genius’) but to bind Apollo to Dionysus—to sample Dionysiac destruction in order to undertake the ‘playful construction and demolition of the world of individuality’.

Nietzsche thus saw the greatest potential for this play in the forms of music and Attic tragedy. For, above all else, ‘the tragic translates instinctive, unconscious Dionysiac wisdom into the language of images [Apollo]’ and thereby solicits the reciprocal destruction and re-construction of individuality.

More gravely however, Bataille saw the apex of affective contagion in the ritual of sacrifice through which representation is altogether abandoned—lost in a movement of pure, destructive negativity. Rooted in the history of what Douglas calls “rituals of uncleanness”—and rightfully so considering the substantial influence Henri Hubert, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Marcel Mauss had on Bataille’s work—the Bataillean sacrifice entails that those who witness it be substituted for the sacrificial victim, and that by means of this substitution *every element entering into the sacrifice enter into each other*. This “mutual entry” is achieved by virtue of shared or communal exposure: the exposure of life to death—the exposure of the “discontinuous” individual to the “continuous” flux of material life. Here, exposure is the operation that touches and thereby pollutes all the ritual’s participants. For Bataille, exposure reveals the singular and limitless human capacity for loss that, as we shall see, becomes a contagious adhesive that in being shared binds us to one another—to a human totality.

The death of the sacrificial victim is experienced by each of the ritual’s participants through what we might understand as a shared loss of the personal. Here, the loss of the personal refers to the loss of the capacity for self-representation and thereby any construction of the subject as homogeneous, self-same and separate from the world of objects. As blood is spilt, the victim is robbed of the seemingly necessary “self” that inhabits it and is thereby reduced to ‘an inevitable point of view, a direction of being required by the eagerness of its own movement’ [my emphasis]—the victim is undone, becoming nothing more than an instance of the *impersonal*, convulsive movement of Being.

As such, the sacrificial victim and, by contagion, all the participants of the ritual are faced with Being as a form of non-human vitality that surges up from and returns to an indifferent nature. For Bataille, this loss of the personal is shared as the exaltation of radical sovereignty in each participant insofar as sacrifice reveals the intoxicating limit of the “me that dies” and thus extols the participant’s freedom to ‘throw himself suddenly outside of himself’, breaking with the various penal structures imprisoning the
self. Very much like excessive drunkenness or staring at the sun, this sovereignty is the freedom to cast oneself beside oneself. Paradoxically however, this sovereignty invokes less an in-dependence than a co-dependence. Bataille writes of the sacrificial victim: ‘At the same time the shadow of the divine person, laden with love, disappears—not exactly as vain appearance, but as dependence on a denied world that is founded on the reciprocal dependence of its parts’ [my emphasis]. The victim’s death exposes a capacity to lose the personal shared by all the ritual’s participants. This loss in turn becomes a means of communication and communion in which the boundary between self and other is transgressed. As this distinction between self and other collapses, the victim’s death metonymically becomes the death of each participant. The participants share the loss of a dependent element as a reciprocally dependent community—and yet this loss always exceeds the sacrificial operation that puts it into play. For this loss leads us beyond the realm of the economical—beyond a goal-oriented exchange for truth. As such, the loss of the victim is lamented as a loss shared by the community through a contagious burst of affect that exceeds the limits of the personal—the representational. In a contradictory turn then, Bataille’s sacrifice consecrates a community of reciprocally dependent and yet radically sovereign individuals. What enables this paradoxical resolution is precisely the excess and formlessness of affective contagion. Here, loss emerges as an overwhelming vertigo of love and fear that overflows each participant—leading to the ‘rupture of personal homogeneity and the projection outside the self of a part of oneself.’

As Julia Kristeva points out, the mutual contamination of love and fear is even more evident as sacrificial communion is often paired with celebration: ‘lavish feasts, sanctioned violence, trances, dancing, rhythm, cry, incantation—to the point of “losing one’s head,” losing consciousness, annihilating the capacity for representation itself.’ Thus, for Bataille the contagion resulting from sacrifice doesn’t involve the “complete self-forgetting” of young Nietzsche’s “Dionysiac stirrings”, as much as it hinges on the survival of a “self” exposed to the limit of death—a self no longer able to represent itself. The resultant collective (of exposed selves) forms a human totality, since the human is, above all, characterized by this capacity for exposure—this capacity to lose oneself and one another.

Wrought by the sacrificial contagion of affect, this diagnosis of the human is, however, decidedly not the basis for an ontology. For the material flux of life or indifferent nature to which the human is exposed is not the constitutive material of ontological materialism. Instead, it forms the groundless ground of what Bataille calls “base materialism”. As numerous readers, including Roland Barthes, Denis Hollier, and Rosalind Krauss have observed, the concept of the “base” arises in Bataille’s work as a third term that undoes all dualisms (e.g. noble/ignoble, high/low, matter/spirit, etc.). Like Derridian différence—that endless play of differentiation and deferral, which forms the groundless ground of all difference—“baseness” is always lower than itself, casting off any determinable meaning other than its endless self-abasement. For base material is characterized by what Bataille calls la différence non-logique (non-logical difference) that denotes difference beyond equivocation, irreducible to any systematic form of measurement or knowledge. As such, the material of base materialism always eludes the grasp of any and all systems of knowledge (among which we must count ontology). The human totality bound by the contagious affect of sacrifice is thus one that is groundless par excellence—for what is shared is precisely facing an absence of ground. It is a totality characterized by an infinite capacity for loss—to lose ground, to expend surplus, to lose its head, to lose knowledge. In the final analysis then, Bataillean “man” is, as Martin Crowley argues, ‘l'homme sans l'homme’—man without man, man who loses himself, man without...
III

As ffrench writes, after Bataille ‘the concept of contagion implies a passage from one to another, even if in such a contagion the limits of the one and the other are transgressed. *Something* is affected, infected’. Although Bataille’s fervent refusal to recuperate forms of knowledge that eclipse the capacity for loss preclude his particular formulation of contagion from being capable of transmitting ontology. The assertion that contagion entails the violation of boundaries—particularly the boundaries of the representational—will be critical in figuring a contagion that transmits an ethics of difference. In conceptualizing loss, Bataille fetishized representations of brutal primitivism that owed as much to Nietzsche’s fantastical anthropology as to the gruesome fictions of Marquis de Sade. In the interest of retaining the adhesive ethics of Bataille’s contagion then, it was both apt and necessary for Nancy to pose the question: ‘Isn’t it time that we concerned ourselves with a participation and a communication that would no longer owe anything to sacrifice?’

Nancy explains:

“Sacrifice” means: the appropriation of the Self in its own negativity; and if this sacrificial gesture has been abandoned to the finite world, it is simply in order to draw out all the more clearly the infinite sacrificial structure of this appropriation of the Subject (FT, 59).

Described as such, the loss of self or subject revealed by Bataille’s sacrifice is a play aimed at appropriating the very finitude it serves to expose in ‘a passage through absolute negativity and through death’ (*ibid*). Adhering fastidiously to the dialectical mimesis of what Bataille calls “the rhythm of the Universe”: the negation (murder) of the victim becomes the self-abnegation of each participant—negation of the other as negation of self, which is in turn sublated into an appropriation of finitude. To be sure, Bataille did not figure sacrifice in this way, for his very critique of the Hegelian dialectic was that of excising the possibility for sublation (synthesis)—replacing it with rupture. Yet, Nancy counters by asking ‘whether there is, in a general sense, any “rupture” that would not be “mimetic.”’ Nancy calls this dialectical mimesis “transappropriation”: ‘an appropriation through the transgression of the finite, of the infinite truth of this very finitude’ (FT, 59). In turn, if we can describe Bataille’s work as thinking through this process of transappropriation—thinking as sacrifice, writing as sacrifice, etc.—Nancy seeks to retain this process without the act of sacrifice—asking: whether the ultimate achievement of sacrifice would not be to sacrifice sacrifice itself (FT, 64)? For, according to Nancy, sacrifice always fails to achieve the transappropriation it sets out to undertake. Finitude is never appropriated, the subject is never restored, ‘sacrifice leads nowhere, provides no means of access’ (FT, 69). As such, ‘finite existence doesn’t have to give rise to its meaning with a burst that destroys finitude. It’s not just that it doesn’t have to do it but, in a sense, it simply can’t do it; […] existence can’t be sacrificed’ (FT, 74). After sacrifice, then, what becomes of the contagious communal potential of transappropriation?

In *Being Singular Plural*, Nancy proposes an ontology in which Being is figured as that which passes between all singular beings. Here, each singular being or body presents the point of origin for each singular world. Each point of origin is absolutely distinct and presents a distinct world-creation—or cosmogony—that is a necessary constituent of the world at
large. Each singular world contains within it and is composed as the co-existence of an infinite number of other singular worlds. Thus, if each being presents a world that is inextricable from “all that is”, Being is conceptualized as that which passes between each and every one of these worlds. In this respect, perhaps Nancy does not propose an ontology at all, but instead offers a theory of relationality and difference that is simultaneous with Being. For, Nancy insists upon an equivocation between Being and relationality—and in these terms, what we offer is less a theory of Being as such than an insistence that Being is nothing other than the relation between beings. That is, relationality between beings is all there is. He writes, ‘The unity of a world is nothing other than its diversity, and this, in turn, is a diversity of worlds. A world is a multiplicity of worlds; the world is a multiplicity of worlds and its unity is the mutual sharing and exposition of all its worlds—within this world’. As such, difference (diversity) is the degree-zero of the world, since “all that is” arises by virtue of the coexistence of different bodies, different beings, different worlds.

In this configuration, the human is assigned a privileged position as the species which, following Bataille, exposes the world. Nancy writes: ‘humanity is the exposing of the world; it is neither the end nor the ground of the world; the world is the exposure of humanity; it is neither the environment nor the representation of humanity’ (BSP, 19). Humanity is the exposition of “all that is” by virtue of expressing—or communicating—its exposure to the non-human. However, Nancy is not suggesting that the human is an enclosed, finite, interior term posed against the backdrop of an exterior, non-human world. Rather, since a world is always already composed of a multiplicity of other worlds, the human is figured as a world that already contains (in some form) that which lay outside:

A stone is the exteriority of singularity in what would have to be called its mineral or mechanical actuality. But I would no longer be “human” if I did not have this exteriority “in me,” in the form of the quasi-minerality of bone: I would no longer be a human if I were not a body, a spacing of all other bodies and a spacing of “me” in “me” (ibid.).

Thus, although each body presents an irreducibly singular world, it is a world that would not exist if not for its co-existence among an infinite number of other, different worlds. A being or body is thus always already “with” an infinite number of other beings/bodies both internally and externally (BSP, 11). Moreover, this spacing is sustained even at one’s most intimate interiority as the spacing between ‘Corpus meum and interior intimo meo’—that irreducible spacing between “me” and “me” (in this sense, there is no distinction between inside and outside).

However, a problem arises from the consideration that these beings/bodies/worlds are totally, irreplaceably distinct and therefore absolutely heterogeneous. For, this claim maintains that there is no continuity “between” worlds. Nancy writes, ‘[t]his “between” […] has neither a consistency nor continuity of its own. It does not lead from one to the other; it constitutes no connective tissue no cement, no bridge’ (BSP, 5). In this respect, what passes “between” is always perpetually withdrawn since it cannot be retained, absorbed or held. Thus if Being is only Being-with-each other, this “with” is always withdrawn, withheld, deferred. Nancy’s understanding of exposure then, is exposure to that which is withdrawn—exposure to a co-existence whose co-has no consistency. With this in mind, the task faced by the human is, above all, to communicate and to make sense of this “with” and this “between”, even
if the very notions of “sense” and “communication” themselves are subject to the same withdrawal and deferral of that which they are charged with presenting. “Communication” and “making sense” are therefore interminable tasks that must be pursued tirelessly in spite of the fact that each singular transmission, like each being/body/world, is finite and will too be withdrawn. ‘Certainly, everything is said, for everything has always already been said; yet, everything remains to be said, for the whole as such is always to be said anew’ (BSP, 88).

Following the path traced by Bataille, we might suggest that what is both contagious and adhesive in Nancy’s ethics is still transappropriation, but rather than the loss of life, what we share and what binds us is the withdrawal of sense. To be more precise, Nancy makes an equivocation between the withdrawal of sense and the loss of life: ‘Death is the very signature of the “with”: the dead are those who are no longer “with” and are, at the same time, those who take their places according to an exact measure, the appropriate measure, of the incommensurable “with”’ (BSP, 89). This suggests that the “with” can only be measured by the loss of something absolutely irreplaceable, and the very withdrawal of sense in language is the incorporeal mirror of the loss of a being/body/world. He continues, ‘[i]n this sense, language is exactly what Bataille calls “the practice of joy before death.” […] In one sense, it is the very tragic itself [my emphasis] (ibid.). Language is tragic insofar as it poses the incorporeal production of sense (re-presentation, since presentation must always be presented anew) against the material condition from which it is infinitely withdraw (non-human materiality). Returning briefly to Nietzsche’s configuration of tragedy as the reconciliation between Dionysus (transcendental unity) and Apollo (representation), Nancy’s claim that language is tragic suggests that Dionysus and Apollo can only be reconciled in Apollo’s persistent failure or negation (as the withdrawal of sense). Language is tragic because sense passes between us as life passes into death. To make (create) sense is therefore to make a singular measure of the “with” insofar as it necessarily passes away, withdraws. Again, the “with” can only be measured exactly through loss.

However, if for Bataille it is the sacrificial loss of life that unleashes an excess of love and fear, transgressing the boundaries of the personal in the form of an affective contagion resulting in communal adhesion—a communion of sovereigns before death. Nancy’s transfiguration of loss into withdrawal—retaining the former’s tragic charge and contagious potential—entails that the way in which Nancean ethics is transmitted is completely distinct from that of Bataille. For, the base materialism of Bataille’s world renders all that is human (all its systematic, structural and linguistic manifestations) parodic. We mustn’t take lightly the words with which Bataille opens ‘The Solar Anus’: ‘It is clear that the world is purely parodic, in other words, that each thing seen is the parody of another, or is the same thing in a deceptive form’ [my emphasis]. ‘But what does this eye actually see?’ responds Nancy, ‘It sees its own sacrifice. It sees that it can only see because of an unbearable, intolerable vision—that of sacrificial cruelty—or it sees that it sees nothing’ (TF, 59). As such, the human is perpetually dethroned, debased by the irremediable incongruity between humanity and the base materiality to which it bares witness. The human is a parody because it is excluded from the material basis of the world. For Bataille, humanity is thus figured as separated from and opposed to this materiality. In stark contrast, Nancy asserts that the human is immanent to the world on a material level—that is, the human shares equally in this materiality. For, the human, as all matter, is composed of an infinite regression of diverse worlds—worlds within worlds within worlds. As Nancy writes:
What is shared is nothing like a unique substance in which each being would participate; what is shared is also what shares, what is structurally constituted by sharing, and what we call “matter.” The ontology of being-with can only be “materialist,” in the sense that “matter” does not designate a substance or a subject (or an antisubject [as in the case of Bataille]), but literally designates what is divided of itself, what is only as distinct from itself, partes extra partes, originally impenetrable to the combining and sublimating penetration of a “spirit” [or “mind”], understood as a dimensionless, indivisible point beyond the world (BSP, 83-84).

In Nancy’s formulation then, the contagious withdrawal of the personal is still a means of transmission and adherence to an ethics. However, the personal is no longer lost because its value is effaced before that which it cannot appropriate. Instead, the personal is withdrawn because, like all sense, it passes away into the space between the partes extra partes of the material world. Here, any identitarian formulations foisted upon the transcendental categories of the Same and the Other are invalidated since they depend upon the notion of “spirit” as a dimensionless point beyond the world—as in the classic Cartesian formula of cogito ergo sum, in which the ergo requires God as mediator, or otherwise in the cases of Kierkegaard and Pascal for whom faith is a prerequisite for the thinking subject. Thus, like all sense, the personal is perpetually withdrawn and must be re-created (here again, we must note the profound resonance with Nietzschean tragedy—that reciprocally destructive and creative play of self-representation). In the final analysis then, we might say that it is this perpetually need to re-create new worlds, to make and re-make sense in the face of this perpetual withholding, that constitutes Nancy’s ontological contagion. That by constantly, tragically withdrawing sense in the same way we pass between worlds, bodies and beings, we are bound to one another as beings who are exposed to and thereby expose the world. Exposure transmits its own exposition.

IV

In so far as we might call Nancy Bataille’s most faithful contemporary, we have thus far followed a rather linear trajectory in our conceptualization of contagion and its potential for ontological transmission. Having identified the dissolution of representation (through loss for Bataille and withdrawal for Nancy) as the consistent feature of our ethical pathogen, we might now take a leap by turning to Deleuze, who—in spite of ceaselessly deriding the negativity at work in Bataille and, by inheritance, Nancy—shares a commitment to the form of dissolution that interests us. After all, the impersonal and non-human formulation of immanence for which Deleuze has become renowned began, in Difference and Repetition, with a fervent attack on identity and the personal.36 Thus, by turning to The Fold we will attempt to frame Deleuze’s ontology of eco-immanence as implicitly necessitating the transmission of this very same dissolution of representation. However, our discussion thus far produces considerable friction with Deleuze’s own formulations in two important ways: 1) for Deleuze, the personal is overcome rather than lost or withdrawn, 2) Deleuze and Guattari’s own reading of sacred contagion stands in notable contrast to our own. We will begin by briefly addressing these two points of tension.

1) If approaching the Deleuzian “image of thought” entails the abandonment of representation and the transcendental model of Similitude, this abandonment is framed exclusively in terms of “overcoming”—that is, in strictly Nietzschean, or non-Christian
terms. Here, the personal is not lost since loss and withdrawal imply absence, which Deleuze rejects on the basis of an ontology of material plentitude. Once overcome, the personal gives way to a sense of material plentitude that overflows lack or any conception of non-being. As such, the personal is conceived as a form of representational blockage the overcoming of which would only be joyous (affirmative) and never lamentable (negative). In this respect, we might parody the difference between Deleuzian and Nancean ontologies as follows: on the one hand, for Nancy materiality is finite whereas the infinite is relegated to the realm of the incorporeal (language); on the other hand, for Deleuze materiality is animated by an inexhaustible difference that should never be reduced to the representational antinomy of finite and infinite—that is, (material) difference always exceeds representation.

Deleuze conceptualizes difference as the Dionysiac *par excellence*, however this is a Dionysus emancipated from his tragic marriage to Apollo. For if Nietzschean tragedy initially describes a face-off between representation (Apollo) and the unrepresentable (Dionysus), this tension is reconciled in a representational (Aristotelian) theater in which Dionysus is reduced to an undifferentiated abyss. Although Deleuze initially attempts to reconfigure this tragedy in *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, he goes on to abandon it entirely by *Difference and Repetition* as a means of liberating Dionysus—the distinct-obscurc, or purely virtual form of difference—from any and all representational fetters. As such, the “overcoming” of representation entails an overcoming of the tragic altogether in lieu of a purely affirmative apprehension of difference.

Thus we might further contrast Nancy and Bataille as dependent on a leaden Christian pathos of tragedy, whereas Deleuze attempts to overcome this negative and representational schema entirely. Having teased out this critical difference between Nancy and Bataille on the one hand, and Deleuze on the other, we must insist that no reconciliation between these perspectives is necessary. After all, what interests us is whether Deleuzian ontology might too be transmitted as contagion. Furthermore, if we take Nancy seriously, it seems hardly necessary to assert that the name “Deleuze” designates a singular world that need not be synthesized or reconciled with any other. What we are ultimately seeking is what passes between these heterogeneous worlds—what is communicated between them.

2) In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari figure sacred contagion—after Lévi-Strauss and the structuralists—according to a “series” model, claiming that sacrificial contagion is ultimately aimed at the erasure of difference and the identification with a final term. However, in our discussion contagion certainly does not adhere a sustained identity, but conversely to the failure of identification—to the loss, withdrawal or overcoming of (self-)representation. In withdrawing the sacrificial act, Nancy substitutes the originary “Natural” mimesis on which sacrifice is founded by the Western tradition with a less determinate methexis or “participation”. After Nancy, our contagion becomes a question of the “with”, and ‘the question of the “with” can never be expressed in terms of identity, but rather always in terms of identifications’ (BSP, 66). Here, a multiplicity of identifications does not imply the survival of identity as a transcendental category but rather that identification, like sense, passes away, withdraws and fails. Our ethical contagion describes the transmission of this dissolution. In these terms, our contagion is already nearer “contagion” and “epidemic” as employed by Deleuze and Guattari—that is, as a swarming epidemic of becoming. For, ‘A becoming is neither one nor two, nor the relation of the two; it is in-between. The border or line of flight or descent running perpendicular to both’ [my emphasis] (TP, 323). For Deleuze and Guattari, becoming describes a process of continual, creative differing provoked by the “involution” between co-present, heterogeneous terms. ‘Becoming is involutionary, involution is creative […] to involve is to form a block that runs its own line
“between” the terms in play and beneath assignable relations’ (TP, 263). Here, we must be careful to specify that the “between” invoked by Deleuze and Guattari is in many ways an inversion of the “between” called upon by Nancy—and exemplified by Nancy’s counterformulation of “unbecoming”. On the one hand, for Deleuze and Guattari this involutionary “between” is non-relational—describing a sub-relational interaction between heterogeneous terms that causes each term to self-differ independently. (This is the basis for Peter Hallward’s critique that in Deleuze’s work ‘there is no place for any relational concept of “self”’). On the other hand, for Nancy there is nothing but relationality—relationality is, in the strongest sense, all that there is. In spite of this critical difference, our original definition of contagion still holds: contagion is propagated through the direct or mediate contact between co-present heterogeneous terms. However, we can now further specify that what is transmitted is intermediate—residing in the “middle”, or the “between”. Although this intermediate zone is subject to divergent interpretations, in both cases, it stands as a space through which difference is transmitted contagiously. For this “between” always carries with it a burning question whose flames lick at the very foundations of representation. Be it negative or affirmative, the “between” of our ethical contagion spells the dissolution of representation itself (whether or not representation should be reasserted seems to be the real point of conflict).

In The Fold, Deleuze proposes a Baroque ontology founded on the basic unit of the Leibnizian monad that, for the purposes of our discussion, we might understand as an indeterminably small and irreplaceably singular point of view or expression of the world. Here, “Baroque” primarily signifies that the structure and operation permeating this ontological formulation is the fold. The monad is a fold insofar as the world is composed—after Spinoza—of a univocal essence (“God”), a single line or fabric that is folded in an endless number of singular ways. Aggregates or assemblages of folds compose every “thing”—corporeal and incorporeal—and each singular fold therefore reciprocally constitutes an expression of this univocal essence. Each fold possesses distinct qualities: on the one hand, there are folds of matter that are guided principally by “instinctual” or “associative” relations to other folds; on the other hand, there are folds of spirit able to “apprehend”, “aggregate” and “subsume” other folds into assemblages (TF, 22). Applying this, for instance, to a human body: each atom presents a fold that is assembled under the fold of the cell, cell-folds are assembled under folds of muscle or tissue, and all these folds are subsumed under the reigning spiritual fold or monad of the subject to whom the body “belongs”, the “spiritual” subject is, in turn, subsumed by other, larger folds and so on (TF, 113). The fold as operation rather than object—although form and function are equivocated in Deleuze’s formulation—moves in one of two directions along a scalar axis: to fold means to become smaller (moving down the axis), whereas to unfold means to become larger, to expand and extend (moving up the axis). Thus, on the one hand, when a spirit thinks or creates, it unfolds: extending itself by subsuming a new, as yet unassembled body of monads; on the other hand, when a spirit dies, it folds in on itself: breaking down into the profusion of singular material folds that it once subsumed. The world, as such, is understood as an everfolding and unfolding multiplicity of the infinite number of monads of which it is composed: a world is as many monads as it takes to make a world.

This formulation is founded upon two particularly radical assertions:
1) There is no interiority—or rather, interiority is a phenomenon that only arises by folding absolute exteriority (Spinoza’s “God”, or the world’s univocal essence). This essence is understood as exterior because no single fold, or point of view is capable of expressing the world in its entirety. As such, the essence always resides “outside” of the fold in spite of the fact that this outside is the very material from which the fold is created. Nonetheless, what determines each fold is its difference from all other folds, its singularity. As Deleuze and Guattari summarize in *A Thousand Plateaus*: ‘Being expresses in a single meaning all that differs’ (TP, 280). As such, a monad might only commune with the essence of the world in and as the multiplication and diffusion of difference (as in Nancean ontology, difference is taken as the degree-zero of the world). Here, one ascends towards “God”, so to speak, by creating more difference—by expressing the outside in new and different ways. Therefore, when one creates difference, one creates for the world, multiplying its diversity and conversely finding in this diversity an accord. In order to create difference, one must “inherit” the differential essence of the world—‘inheritance is’, Deleuze asserts, ‘the final cause of the fold’ (TF, 113).

2) “Spirit” or immanence—the name given to what we might think of as an incorporeal (virtual) organizational or creative capacity—is inherent in all matter. The figure with which Deleuze opens *The Fold* is the two-story Baroque house in which the top “spiritual” floor is completely enclosed and sits atop the bottom “material” floor that has windows and doors, allowing other monads to come in from the outside. Here, the top floor is folded over the bottom floor and, although they are completely separate, they communicate via resonances that pass through the floor. This figure holds for all monads—meaning that each material monad has a spiritual fold or floor. Formulated in *Difference and Repetition* as the virtual and the actual—spirit and matter always coexist at every level of the world. This suggests that the cellular breakdown of a tree, for instance, is guided by the same “spiritual” essence as the human creation of a work of art. In turn, the principal distinction becomes how elevated this creative capacity is in relation to the degree-zero of the world—“God” or absolute exteriority. In other words, since the creation of an artwork is the creation of something “more different”—that is more irreplaceably singular—than the cellular and atomic reorganization created by the decay of wood (guided principally by what Deleuze calls “associative” links to other monads), the creation of a work of art ventures nearer to “God”. Yet, as we shall see, this creative ascension only occurs by means of a deconstruction of determinate forms and systems.

The creation of difference is where we rediscover our contagion. For, according to Deleuze the creation of difference necessitates the overcoming of the representation, and the transcendental model of Similitude. As Deleuze and Guattari put it in *A Thousand Plateaus*, to create is

> To reduce oneself to an abstract line, a trait, in order to find one’s zone of indiscernibility with other traits, and in this way enter the haecceity and impersonality of the creator. One is like grass: one has made the world, everybody/everything, into a becoming, because one has made a necessarily communicating world, because one has suppressed in oneself everything that prevents us from slipping between things as growing in the midst of things (TP, 309).
To create difference is thus to peel away the epiphenomenal levels of sameness that emerge on the surface of monadic assemblages (the most poisonous being those of self-same subjectionhood and objecthood). This is how we must understand Deleuze’s citation of Leibniz: “The true opposite of the self is not the non-self, it is the mine; the true opposite of being, that is, the having, is not the non-being, but the had” (TF, 110). Here, material plentitude is posed as the antithesis of the human representational schemata of self and being—rather than absence, materiality emerges as the counterweight to self-representation. In order to create, one must dive into this chaotic material reservoir (since this is where difference originates) and thus be overcome in creation. This self-overcoming is figured, in Deleuze’s adoption of Leibnizian language, as a sacrifice:

… certain monads are endowed with the power of extending themselves and intensifying their zones, of attaining a real connection of their conscious perceptions (and not a simple associative consecution), and of surpassing clarity with what is distinctive and even with what is adequate: reasonable or reflexive monads, to be sure, find their condition of self-development in the sacrifice of certain ones among them—the Damned—that regress to the state of almost naked monads, their only single and clear perception being their hatred of God (TF, 92).

If “God” describes the univocal world-essence—absolute exteriority or the degree-zero of material difference—the hatred of God would be the hatred of this essence or, more precisely, the hatred of difference. Monads intent on denying this difference—monads that, for instance, propagate assemblages based on Sameness—would be “the Damned” that must be sacrificed. As such, the self, as an enclosed self-same subject must be sacrificed. However, here we must be very careful to clarify Deleuze’s employment of Leibnizian terminology. For, Leibniz is one of the principal figures that Deleuze faults for having created a representational infinity that fails to apprehend difference in-itself. In the same way that Deleuze abandons the negativity of representation, we must equally understand this sacrifice as transformed—disconnected from its Christian pathos. In stark contrast to the contagious negativity of the Bataillean sacrifice then, here the sacrifice of the damned is not subject to a redemptive economy—that is, as the transappropriation or the sublation of human finitude. Here, the damned are not lost (in the sense of becoming absent) but instead serve to fertilize the plentiful material world of monads. This sacrifice is therefore figured in terms of overcoming—a sacrifice robbed of its representational negativity so as to be reconciled with an overriding affirmation of “God” or the abundant diversity of material difference. With this in mind, “sacrifice”—like “between”—arises as another slippery point of reversal between our negative and affirmative ontological formulations.

By virtue of the world’s self-differing nature, such a sacrifice or creative gesture would never be self-contained. Rather, it would always be subject to involution, transmission and communication. For, if the creation of difference entails the agglomeration of new monadic assemblages, this entails the establishment of new zones between as yet un-related (or differently related) monads. However, what underlies this seemingly local gesture is a repercussive sonority that resonates with the entire world-essence. Here, Deleuze employs the analogy of musical accords—specifically harmony and melody—so as to figure creation in terms of monadic assemblages made to tremble with resonances that are always extended or transmitted to other monads:
At its highest degree, a monad produces major and perfect accords: these occur where the small solicitations of anxiety, far from disappearing, are integrated in a pleasure that can be continued, prolonged, renewed, multiplied; that can proliferate, be reflexive and attractive for other accords, that give us the force to go further and further. [...] In this sense the perfect accords are not pauses, but, on the contrary, dynamisms, which can pass into other accords, which can attract them, which can appear, and which can be infinitely combined (TF, 131).

This transmissive model of harmonious and melodic attraction is the infectious contagion of music itself, travelling from monad to monad until all are made to sing in harmony. Musical contagion then, is the means by which a unified accord between the distinct partes extra partes of the world is achieved. For this contagion is, above all, a means of communication: ‘It is as if Leibniz were delivering us an important message [...] don’t complain about not having enough communication, for there is always plenty of it. Communication seems to be of a constant and pre-established quantity in the world’ (TF, 134).

Finally, not even damned monads can escape this pre-established condition of constant, contagious communication. It is simply that while monads affirming the difference of “God” resonate in perfect, consonant accord, the Damned,

whose souls produce a dissonance on a unique note, a breath of vengeance or resentment, a hate of God that goes to infinity; but it is still a form of music, a chord—though diabolical—since the damned draw pleasure from their very pain, and especially make possible the infinite progression of perfect accords in other souls (TF, 131-132).

This final point returns us to our insistence that, for Deleuze, the damned are sacrificed as part of a purely affirmative process of differentiation. The damned are not negated but dismembered and scattered (like Dionysus), making possible the infinite proliferation of perfect accords. As such, these sacrifices are not to be lamented. For, it is only by virtue of both the persistence and overcoming of the Damned that other monads ascend towards “God”—that a melodic accord can be made to resonate for the world. Here, accords proliferate as a form of pleasure that allows melody to be transmitted and even the damned are not exempt from this pleasure. However, what distinguishes the pleasure in perfect accords is that, in tarrying with “God”, this melody can be carried on to inexhaustibly—risking endless, contagious transmission. In the end, this “perfect” pleasure is none other than the pleasure of affirming a material plentitude that overcomes anxiety, fear, loss, and the negativity of representation.

V

Having touched upon Deleuze and Nancy’s difference ontologies and specified therein the terms of contagious transmission, we might conclude by proposing that it is the creative act that runs the risk of touching (tangere) others with (con) an infectious current of difference. So as to illustrate this, we will conclude by turning to the Arts as the discipline that has perfected the notion of self-differing and self-perpetuating diversity.
In the simplest terms, we might say that the creation of a work of art is constituted by a dual necessity: first, it requires as its condition an undetermined multiplicity of other, singular artworks; second, the creation of an artwork transmits the necessity to create more works of art and so on. In these terms, the artwork is conceived as the singular expression of a diverse condition that it, in turn, serves to multiply—a singularity whose point of origin and address is the multiple. Or, in the interest of emphasizing the process of creation rather than the created, the artwork emerges from a process of singularization enabled by the establishment of an interminable circuit with the multiple.

In The Muses Nancy suggests that if we can call artistic creativity a force, ‘this force springs up in the plural. It is given, from the first, in multiple forms’.53 As Nancy explains in our epigraph, art is to do with cosmogony—‘Art does not deal with the “world” as understood as simple exteriority, milieu, or nature. It deals with being-in-the-world in its very springing forth.’—, but perhaps more critically art exposes cosmogony as always among, with or between other cosmogonies—‘the world is dis-located into plural worlds, or more precisely, into the irreducible plurality of the unity “world”: this is the a priori and the transcendental of art’.54 To create a work of art is thus to create a world, but more importantly to understand the condition of creation as the co-existence among other worlds. This insistence on co-presence or communication (intended here both in the Nancean and Deleuzian senses) between worlds, or monads expresses a continuous scattering and gathering under the aegis of multiplicity and heterogeneity. Here the multiple always refers back to the singular and the singular to the multiple in a self-perpetuating circuit. As Michael Hardt explains, the singular and the multiple emerge as ‘two moments [that] imply one another as a perpetual series of shattering and gathering, as a centrifugal moment and a centripetal moment, as emanation and constitution’.55 It is ultimately this perpetual and reciprocal affirmation of the singular and the multiple that governs a world whose degree-zero is difference in itself. As Deleuze exclaims: ‘Everything is regular! Everything, too, is singular!’ (TF, 61). In this sense, we might read Nancean and Deleuzian worlds as placing respective emphases on these two reciprocal moments: where Nancy emphasizes the shattering, scattering, and passing into the “between” of heterogeneity (unbecoming), Deleuze concludes The Fold with an unrestrained emphasis on the accord with a univocal force that creates difference (becoming). He writes,

> But this continuity of the arts, this collective unity in extension, goes out and beyond, towards an entirely different unity that is comprehensive and spiritual, punctual and indeed conceptual: the world as a pyramid or a cone, that joins its broad material base, lost in vapors, to an apex, a luminous origin or a point of view (TF, 124).56

To create an artwork is thus precisely to pass through these two moments, to shatter and gather difference, to unify and disperse, since it is only through this dynamic affirmation that one creates a new world, a different agglomeration of monads—something new. This affirmation—actualized in the creation of something different—is what is contagious, what perpetuates its own movement of dispersion and unification: the melody that the spirit sings to itself. (Ultimately, the question of whether this suggests that art makes truth or truth makes art becomes yet another point of reversal between Nancy and Deleuze. On the one hand, Nancy suggests ‘truth would make art’—that the Arts emerge as a form of production generated by the truth of the singular expression of the multiple. The Arts, as such, become the patency or exposure of truth—‘that there is art and that there are several arts, this is what is
exposed as patency’. On the other hand, Deleuze insists that ‘[w]hat the artist is, is creator of truth, because truth is not to be achieved, formed, or reproduced, it has to be created. There is no other truth than the creation of the New: creativity, emergence, what Melville called ‘shape’ in contrast to ‘form’.)

However, this creative process cannot be trivialized in the least because it is in its very essence painful and destructive (although as we shall see, for Deleuze, rather than being subject to pathos, this pain is always converted into pleasure). For if, in our study, the creation of difference always entails the dissolution of representation—be it in the Bataillean or Nancean forms of tragedy, or in Deleuze’s alliance to an unfettered Dionysus—, this dissolution is always agonizing and synonymous with (some sort of) failure. As Deleuze and Guattari suggest in Anti-Oedipus, the artist is possessed by a destructive mania: ‘The artist stores up his treasures so as to create an immediate explosion, and that is why, to his way of thinking, destructions can never take place as rapidly as they ought to’. Moreover, if we inherit from this formulation a conception of the Arts as the inscription of desiring production, this inscription occurs through the acquisition of a painful debt (with relation to desire) on the part of artist, which is in turn seized by an “evaluating eye” as pleasure. As such, the Arts are nothing less than a Nietzschean festival of suffering—someone’s pain is always someone else’s pleasure. For Deleuze and Guattari, this debt further is reflected in the immanent failure of the representational or imitative arts:

No art is imitative, no art can be imitative or figurative. Suppose a painter “represents” a bird; this is in fact a becoming-bird that can occur only to the extent that the bird itself is in the process of becoming something else, a pure line and pure color. Thus imitation self-destructs, since the imitator unknowingly enters into a becoming that conjugates with the unknowing becoming of that which he or she imitates. One imitates only if one fails, when one fails [my emphasis] (TP, 336).

Here, the self-destruction of imitation becomes an affirmation of the agonizing debt to desire—“Be gone, mimetic fictions of representation! Everything is becoming and the pains of growth!” In turn, it is precisely this failure that constitutes a “sacrificial” moment (here sacrifice must be understood in all the senses discussed above—that is, as loss, withdrawal and overcoming in co-existent worlds) in which representation itself becomes the victim. Whether read in the negative or in the affirmative, sacrifice is put at the service of something greater than itself, becoming a crucial operation in the creative practice.

Yet we must ask whether we can still afford this sacrifice with the contagious charge upon which Bataille insisted so fervently. Ultimately, sacrifice still signals the exposure to death (absolute exteriority) and spells an intolerable nudity before something altogether too great to be reduced to any concept or category that is not in a perpetual process of self-dispersion (in the case of Nancy and Deleuze: self-scattering multiplicity). Paradoxically, what sacrifice recuprates—and this would certainly the basis of its continuing contagious force—is a vitality, or joy born in the sublime reconciliation between the pain and pleasure. For, (even in the negative) sacrifice becomes the affirmation of a fundamental groundlessness perpetuated as an impersonal movement that carries itself to the limit. However, this affirmative and contagious sacrifice comes at a considerable price for those willing to submit themselves to its movement. As Deleuze and Guattari write in What is Philosophy?
In this respect artists are like philosophers. What little health they possess is often too fragile, not because of their illnesses or neuroses but because they have seen something in life that is too much for anyone, too much for themselves, and that has put on them the mark of death. But this something is also a source or breath that supports them through the illnesses of the lived [...]. [my emphasis]

This excessive or sublime “something” is the very excess that overcomes or breaks representation. Thus, if the affirmation of difference is made up of moments of shattering and gathering, we might think of sacrifice as the shattering which comes to be gathered again in the creative act—not revived but reconstituted, transformed. In the final analysis then, the sacrificial moment is necessary for the transformative creating that becomes a form of contagious cosmogony—birth ing ever-more worlds for the world. Moreover, even after representation is shed, this sacrificial moment is still characterized by a, now impersonal, affect:

For the affect is not a personal feeling, nor is it a characteristic; it is the effectuation of a power of the pack that throws itself into upheaval and makes it reel. Who has not known the violence of these animal sequences, which uproot one from humanity, if only for an instant, making one scrape at one’s bread like a rodent or giving one the yellow eyes of a feline (TP, 265).

Yet we must never forget that this affect comes at the price of pain, resistance, and upheaval. *Per aspera ad a terrarum*—through hardship to the world.

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3 See Angela di Folignio’s *Memoriale* among others (Spoleto: Fondazione Centro italiano di studi sull’alto Medioevo, 2013), among others.
5 Ibid. 18; 27.
6 As Nancy asserts: ‘There is no difference between the ethical and the ontological: the “ethical” exposes what the “ontological” disposes’, (BSP, 99).
8 There are, admittedly, considerable issues with this purported necessity. For if a total world ontology is predicated on the measurement of “something” common to all beings—in this case, difference—the conception and apprehension of this common is contingent on its being “universally accessible”. The extent to which a white, male philosopher is capable of making claims about any such “universally accessible common” is dubious at best when considering, for instance, Donna V. Jones’s *The Racial Discourses of Life Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010). This caveat does not, however, entirely undermine the present study, but instead serves to indicate a substantial shortcoming of any such endeavor.
9 For various interpretations of the dramatic method, see Bataille’s *Inner Experience* (trans. by Leslie Anne Boldt, New York: State University of New York Press, 1988), Gilles Deleuze’s *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (trans. by Hugh
very institution of the absolute economy of absolute subjectivity, which can only really mime the passage
Bataille is as follows: ‘Sacrifice as self-communication, as Bataille conceives it, equals religion. But such communication cannot be with a beyond, as is the case with mysticism. For Bataille, it is conceptually impossible to know or communicate with what is beyond death, since death is an absolute limit of human experience, beyond which we cannot travel and return. […] Mysticism is a by-product of the growth of individualism, in which God becomes substituted for social cohesion. […] Bataille was not looking for a new form of mysticism, but to reintegrate the notion of ecstasy into the body social, within which it would have a virulent and contagious quality’ [my emphasis], The Absence of Myths: Writings on Surrealism, ed. and trans. by Michael Richardson (London: Verso, 1994), 18; 21.

15 It is worth noting here that Bataille makes a crucial equivocation between religious activity and communication that distinguishes his religiosity from any form of mysticism. As Michael Richardson writes: ‘communication, as Bataille conceives it, equals religion. But such communication cannot be with a beyond, as is the case with mysticism. For Bataille, it is conceptually impossible to know or communicate with what is beyond death, since death is an absolute limit of human experience, beyond which we cannot travel and return. […] Mysticism is a by-product of the growth of individualism, in which God becomes substituted for social cohesion. […] Bataille was not looking for a new form of mysticism, but to reintegrate the notion of ecstasy into the body social, within which it would have a virulent and contagious quality’ [my emphasis], The Absence of Myths: Writings on Surrealism, ed. and trans. by Michael Richardson (London: Verso, 1994), 18; 21.


17 Among which we must count surplus-economy, language, philosophy, religion, architecture and all the other dispositifs that work to produce the enclosure of a homogeneous self. Ibid., 70.


19 This is to say that the victim is not lost in exchange for some transcendent truth. The capacity for loss always leads us beyond the realm of exchange or anything reducible to knowledge.


23 Hollier, La prise de la Concorde, 169-171.


25 ffrench, After Bataille, 63.

26 Bataille implicitly retains a distinction between ethics and ontology, which, as we have seen, Nancy (and Deleuze) does not. As such, for Bataille the exposure to loss opened up by sacrifice is certainly the basis for a communal ethics but refuses to ground this ethics in any ontological system.


28 See Bataille, ‘The Critique of the Foundations of the Hegelian Dialectic’ in Visions of Excess, pp. 105-115. Cf. FT, 55. In this regard, Nancy’s reading of sacrifice and the place of mimesis therein is at least as indebted to René Girard’s Violence and the Sacred (London: Continuum, 2005), Hegel, and Thomas Aquinas as to Bataille. However, here Nancy complicates the notion of mimesis with Lucien Lévy-Bruhl’s notion of methexis, which would be nearer “participation” rather than an operation of miming (TF, 62). As such, Nancy’s rereading of Bataille is as follows: ‘Sacrifice as self-sacrifice, universal sacrifice, the truth and sublation of sacrifice, is the very institution of the absolute economy of absolute subjectivity, which can only really mime the passage
through negativity, in which, symmetrically, it can only re-appropriate or trans-appropriate itself infinitely’ (TF, 62). Bataille effectively denies the moment of equivocation between the operation of trans-appropriation and literal sacrifice by insisting that a victim actually die—blood must flow in order to suspend the philosophical knowledge of sacrificial truth (a resistance of which Bataille was proud).

29 ‘We also know that Bataille didn’t just want to think sacrifice; he wanted to think according to sacrifice. and he actually wanted sacrifice itself. At the very least, he never stopped presenting how own thought as a necessary sacrifice of thought. With the same movement, the motif of sacrifice in Bataille involves the sacrificial gesture itself, the establishment of community or communication, art in its ability to communicate and, finally, thought itself’ (FT, 54). However, Nancy later adds, ‘At its limit, […] Bataille’s thinking is perhaps less a thinking of sacrifice than a thinking ruthlessly drawn or torn by the impossibility of renouncing sacrifice’ (FT, 62).

30 For Nancy “being” and “body” are equivocal and a “body” describes anything from a human body, to an animal, to a stone, to an atom etc. (BSP, 19).


33 ‘As is the case at other decisive points in our Western discourse, the representation of a loss of truth—here, the truth of sacrificial rites—leads directly to the representation of a truth of loss: here, the truth of the victim, the sacrifice itself’ (FT, 61). However, if sacrifice always fails to appropriate this truth and this process of appropriation is infinite (the “infinite truth of finitude”), then what we are faced with is the continual withdrawal of truth (or sense) rather than its loss full stop.

34 Since we must always renew (re-create) sense in spite of its withdrawal, the way in which Nancy employs “tragic” is much nearer Nietzsche than Bataille—what is lost is only withdrawn since it is already renewed in and as difference itself.

35 Bataille, ‘The Solar Anus’ in Visions of Excess, pp. 5-9, 5. It is critical to note that in Bataille’s work, vision (‘…that each thing see is the parody of another…’) is a faculty equivocated with the misplaced arrogance in the idealized figure of the human. For more on this, see Martin Jay’s chapter on Bataille and vision entitled ‘The Disenchantment of the Eye: Bataille and the Surrealists’ in Downass Eves (London: University of California Press, 1993).


37 For Deleuze, the world consists of a material fullness that, in reconceptualizing nonbeing in corporeal terms, can only think nonbeing as extruding being. Like most ecstacies, the terror of nothingness, the horror vacui, is a dark night of the soul that must be avoided at all costs. It is realizable only as a cordonning off of nonbeing (Neoplatonism) or the positive ontologization of lack as reframed in postmodern terms (Deleuze), Edith Wyschogrod, Saints and Postmodernism (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1990), 212.

38 This may seem odd considering material is conceived in Nancean ontology as an infinite regression of worlds within worlds. However, we mustn’t forget that these partes extra partes (worlds) are always finite in themselves. As such it is only by virtue of human exposure—specifically, linguistic exposition via the Derridian operation of difference—that the “infinity” of this material regression emerges. For more, see the chapter ‘Elliptical Sense’ in A Finite Thinking.

39 ‘The entire alternative between finite and infinite applies very badly to difference, because it constitutes only an antimony of representation’, Deleuze, Difference and Repetition, 264.

40 We might problematize this slightly by pointing out that the germinal flux proposed by Deleuze and Guattari in Anti-Oedipus seems to default on the very representational infinity that Deleuze seeks to avoid: ‘We are now able to outline the various instances of territorial representation in the primitive socius. In the first place, the germinal influx of intensity conditions all representation: it is the representative of desire. But if it is termed representative, this is because it is equivalent to the noncodable, noncoded, or decoded flows.’, Deleuze and Guattari, Anti-Oedipus, trans. by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (New York: Continuum, 2000).

41 ‘In the case of a series, I say a resembles b, b resembles c, etc.; all of these terms conform in varying degrees to a single, eminent term, perfection, or quality as the principle behind the series. […] This is because in both cases Nature is conceived as an enormous mimesis: either in the form of a chain of beings perpetually imitating one another, progressively and regressively, and tending toward the divine higher term that they all imitate by graduated resemblance, as the model for and principle behind the series; or in the form of a mirror. Imitation with nothing left to imitate because it itself is the model everything else imitates, this time by ordered difference.’ Later on: ‘the imitation of a primal model with a mimesis that is itself primary and without a model. […] The serial theme of sacrifice must yield to the structural theme of the institution of the totem, correctly understood.’

This sub-relational interaction is described by Deleuze in *Difference and Repetition* in terms of the “dark precursor”: “Thunderbolts explode between different intensities, but they are preceded by an invisible, imperceptible *dark precursor*, which determines their path in advance but in reverse, as though intagliated. Likewise, every system contains its dark precursor which ensures the communication of peripheral series. As we shall see, given the variety among systems, this role is fulfilled by quite diverse determinations. The question is to know in any given case how the precursor fulfills this role. There is no doubt that there is an identity belonging to the precursor, and a resemblance between the series which it causes to communicate. This ‘there is’, however, remains perfectly indeterminate. Are identity and resemblance here the preconditions of the functioning of this dark precursor, or are they, on the contrary, its effects?”, Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 119.

In any case, whether it be attributed to either substance or modes, what’s clear is that the notion of infinite and self-grounding perfection is not itself up for qualification. And once carried to the absolute, there can be no ‘substantial’ difference between a purely self-differing unity and a purely self-scattering multiplicity, since in either case there is no place for any relational concept of ‘self’. Peter Hallward, *Gilles Deleuze and the Philosophy of Creation* (London: Verso, 2006), 156.

Whether philosophy is even capable of thinking difference is certainly debatable. For more, see François Laruelle’s *Philosophies of Difference: A Critical Introduction to Non-Philosophy*, trans. Rocco Gangle (London: Continuum, 2011).

It is because the monad is expression; it expresses the world from its own point of view (and musicians such as Rameau forever underscore the expressive character of the chord). Point of view signifies the selection that each monad exerts on the whole world that is including, so as to extract accords from one part of the line of infinite inflection that makes up the world’ Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold*, trans. Tom Conley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 132. Hereafter abbreviated as TF.

Spinoza’s approach is radical: Arrive at elements that no longer have either form or function, they are abstract in this sense even though they are perfectly real. They are distinguished solely by movement and rest, slowness and speed. They are not atoms, in other worlds, finite elements still endowed with form. Nor are they indefinitely divisible. They are infinitely small, ultimate parts of an actual infinity, laid out on the same plane of consistency or composition. […] Thus each individual is an infinite multiplicity and the whole of Nature is a multiplicity of perfectly individuated multiplicities’ (TP, 280).

As with Nancy, the world is conceived as an infinite regression of smaller and smaller singularities—although Nancy uses the term “world” to refer to what Deleuze here calls the monad. In the context of Deleuze’s discussion of Leibniz, he also employs the concept of the “world”, however to very different ends. In *Cinema 2*, Deleuze writes: ‘It is not the simple empirical content, it is the form or rather the pure force of time which puts truth into crisis. Since antiquity this crisis has burst out in the paradox of ‘contingent futures’. If it is true that a naval battle may take place tomorrow, how are we to avoid one of the true following consequences: either the impossible proceeds from the possible (since, if the battle takes place, it is no longer possible that it may not take place), or the past is not necessarily true (since the battle could not have taken place). It is easy to regard this paradox as a sophism. It nonetheless shows the difficulty of conceiving a direct relation between truth and the form of time, and obliges us to keep the true away from the existent, in the eternal or in what imitates the eternal. We have to wait for Leibniz to get the most ingenious but also the strangest and most convoluted, solution to this paradox. Leibniz says that the naval battle may or may not take place, but that this is not in the same world: it takes place in one world and does not take place in a different world, and these two worlds are possible but are not ‘compossible’ with each other.’ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (London: Continuum, 2005), 126.

It may be helpful here to specify that the term “multiplicity” refers to a whole that is constantly augmented by the differences created therein: ‘A multiplicity is defined not by its elements, nor by a center of unification or comprehension. It is defined by the nature of dimensions it has; it is not divisible, it cannot lose or gain a dimension without changing its nature. Since its variations and dimensions are immanent to it, it amounts to the same thing to say that each multiplicity is already composed of heterogeneous terms in symbiosis, and that a multiplicity is continually transforming itself into a string of other multiplicities, according to its thresholds and doors’ (TP, 275).

Our suggestion that Deleuze does indeed privilege human creation might seem to be out of step with most contemporary post-Deleuzianism that has, rather apocalyptically, tried to wash the human entirely out of “non-human” immanence. However, we maintain that Deleuze’s persistent use of human creative models—language
in *The Logic of Sense*, painting in *Francis Bacon*, cinema in *Cinema 1* and 2, and the Baroque unity of the arts in *The Fold*—employs the human as the privileged image or event opening onto the non-human.

50 After Whitehead, Deleuze asserts that we move from object and subject to “objectile” and “superject” (TR, 21).

51 ‘Finally, returning to Leibniz and Hegel and their common attempt to extend representation to infinity: we are not sure that Leibniz does not go ‘farthest’ (nor that, of the two, he is not the least theological).’, *Difference and Repetition*, 264.

52 As with Nietzsche, this is certainly another case of Deleuzian “buggery”—turning Leibniz into an atheist monster.


54 Ibid., 18.


56 Here, we must understand Deleuze’s suggestion of a unified, conceptual point of view in terms aptly summarized by Nancy in *The Muses*: ‘Being-in-the-world (which is the being of the world) takes place and can take place neither according to generality (which is itself a particular *topos*, e.g. that of a discourse on art in general) nor according to universality understood as the resource of a uniqueness and a unity of origin. More exactly, the “point of view” of an *initus originarius* is not that of a being-in-the-world, which is why, moreover, it is not a “view.” If there is a “point” (without dimension, therefore), it is that of a “creation” of the world’ [my emphasis], Nancy, *The Muses*, 19.

57 Ibid., 33; 34.

58 Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 142.

59 Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 34.

60 Ibid., 208.

61 Here, we are referring to a what Deleuze and Guattari call ‘real limit’—the apocalyptic immersion into decoded flows of desire (as schizophrenia is to capitalism), ibid., 192.