



UiT The Arctic University of Norway

Department of Archaeology, History, Religious Studies and Theology

**Materiality, Monstrosity, and Queer Ecology:**

**An Archaeology of Failure**

Geneviève Godin

A dissertation for the degree of Philosophiae Doctor - June 2023





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# Part I

# Chapter 1 — Context

## 1.1. Background

This project is a small piece of a larger research project called “Unruly Heritage: An Archaeology of the Anthropocene” that investigates the persistent material legacies of a present characterised by material profusion. According to the UNESCO World Heritage Centre, “Heritage is our legacy from the past, what we live with today, and what we pass on to future generations. Our cultural and natural heritage are both irreplaceable sources of life and inspiration” (2022). Although not contradicting this definition, which it sees as very inclusive, Unruly Heritage joins others in identifying something as missing. Indeed, while it does locate heritage in the present, how “our legacy has become so conspicuously manifest that it has become diagnostic of a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene” is not reflected in this definition, and it largely omits that this legacy is also “becoming increasingly mixed and messy” as exemplified by “landfills, archipelagos of sea-borne debris, ruining metropolises, industrial wastelands, sunken nuclear submarines and toxic residues” (Olsen and Pétursdóttir 2016, 38). This alternative definition of heritage as *also* being made up of a “‘raw’, unfiltered legacy” orients itself towards material persistence more so than towards actively chosen forms of preservation and commemoration, presenting unruly heritage as heritage that is non-optional, non-selective, and inevitably lived with (Olsen and Pétursdóttir 2016, 40).

These are the central tenets of Unruly Heritage as a whole, but it is further divided into two research strands: sticky heritage and surplus diasporas. Sticky heritage deals primarily with issues of abandonment and ruination, employing a comparative approach. Its sites of interest are remote settlements located in the Russian Kola Peninsula, as well as the Finnmark region of Norway, which have undergone processes of ruination in the recent past. These include “abandoned military sites, vacant homes, ruining factories, closed shops, and derelict council

buildings” in addition to the remnants of mining enterprises (Olsen and Pétursdóttir 2016, 41). The ‘stickiness’ of this heritage refers to its ubiquity, and the challenges its continued presence poses for notions of memory and time. Surplus diasporas looks at both proliferation and movement, as its name suggests. The material basis for this inquiry is seaborne debris, which enjoys thriving yet unruly afterlives in the form of drift. In doing so, it troubles the “distinctions between resource, heritage, and waste” (Olsen and Pétursdóttir 2016, 42). Once considered an invaluable resource for their driftwood in areas otherwise not rich in timber, drift beaches now look very different, having turned into an environmental concern due to high concentrations of what is most commonly known as waste.

By offering this summary article (or *kappa*) and three related publications, my dissertation aims to explore the phenomenon of unruly materiality as well as address another element from UNESCO’s definition, which is that of life itself as intersecting with heritage. The notion of the *unintentional* is present throughout, as a key element of both the Anthropocene and heritage that behaves in an unruly manner. More precisely, my project belongs to the second group of case studies that jointly constitute Unruly Heritage, with emphasis on its second geographical area of interest: surplus diasporas, exploring “the growing problem of marine debris in waters and *along shorelines*” (Olsen and Pétursdóttir 2016, 42, emphasis mine). While both research strands were initially meant to concentrate their efforts on the North Atlantic region, I have opted to supplement this with other locations that were suited to my research objectives, as I will explain later. I otherwise closely follow the aims of the project, which are “neither to trivialize the serious environmental problems caused by seaborne debris nor to suggest specific programs of action” but to investigate “how these accumulating assemblages of stranded things throw light on things’ unruly afterlife,” as well as its suggested methodology, which combines “a number of approaches associated with the so-called ‘material turn’ in the humanities and social sciences” (Olsen and Pétursdóttir 2016, 42).

## 1.2. Themes and Objectives

The materials I look at are things that have been abandoned, lost or discarded, and meet three criteria. First, they should have come into contact or near-contact with water—things adrift, things that have become stranded ashore, and/or things on the shore that do not show clear evidence of having been in open water. Second, they should be situated in the Anthropocene. Since this project is carried out in the *now*, I view the presence of these things (or the experience of these things) as inevitably part of the Anthropocene from a temporal standpoint, although I do not discriminate based on the actual date of their production. When I speak of mudlarked objects, for example, I simultaneously speak of Roman coins, Victorian shoes, and plastic bottles. Third and last, they should show evidence of failure, which is here defined exceptionally broadly and used in ways most commonly found in queer theory. The forms such failure might take are varied; anything that was intended to disappear but returned has failed, anything that has not retained its original form in its afterlife has failed, anything that has broken away from common-sense categories (often expressed as oppositions, such as nature and culture, human and nonhuman, alive and dead, and so on) has failed, and anything that cannot readily be defined has failed.

In line with this, the themes that feature most prominently in the publications associated with my dissertation are ambiguity, othering, and monstrosity. The project itself is structured around a central research aim, which is to come to a more complex understanding of material manifestations in the Anthropocene—that is, the same overarching aim as that of *Unruly Heritage*—using the tools of materially-oriented approaches and of queer theory—the latter being my unique contribution. From this central aim also emerge a series of research objectives, which are to:

1. Reflect on unexpected, unintended, and unwanted material legacies in the Anthropocene;
2. Demonstrate the potential uses of a queer theoretical framework or lens in contemporary archaeology;

3. Explore materiality through various conceptual frameworks borrowed from disciplines outside of archaeology;
4. Deploy monster theory to investigate the affective and haunting dimension of material legacies in the Anthropocene;
5. Further develop a contemporary archaeology of failure and, consequently, of unexpected, unintended, and/or unwanted futures.

These research objectives reflect a project that is, for the most part, a conceptual and theoretical inquiry—as will become apparent when reading this summary and the associated articles (as opposed to, for instance, objectives such as “To investigate X site.” or “To produce a typology of materials found in Y location.”). I chose this angle since I felt it was most appropriate for research that aims to shed light on a phenomenon based on its material manifestations, and that sees this material as having significance as an actor *and* as part of something broader than itself. It seemed to me that a purely practical inquiry into materials adrift would leave out the conditions in which they are produced and proliferate, but that treating them as vehicles for human meaning would be equally unsatisfactory. I therefore settled on a primarily theoretical, yet object-oriented project as a way of addressing this problem. In this chapter, I will review the methodology behind this project, after describing the fieldwork that was carried out.

### 1.3. Fieldwork

I knew that I should explore several types of landscapes and determined that these would include a High North site, a heritage site, and an urban site. While not representative of *all* materiality adrift, I felt that selecting such different sites would nonetheless provide me with an overview of what material interactions are possible and how geographical realities may influence them—one that is broader in scope than if I had selected sites along the same body of water and proceeded with a comparative analysis, for example. In the spirit of an ‘archaeology of us’ (see Gould and Schiffer

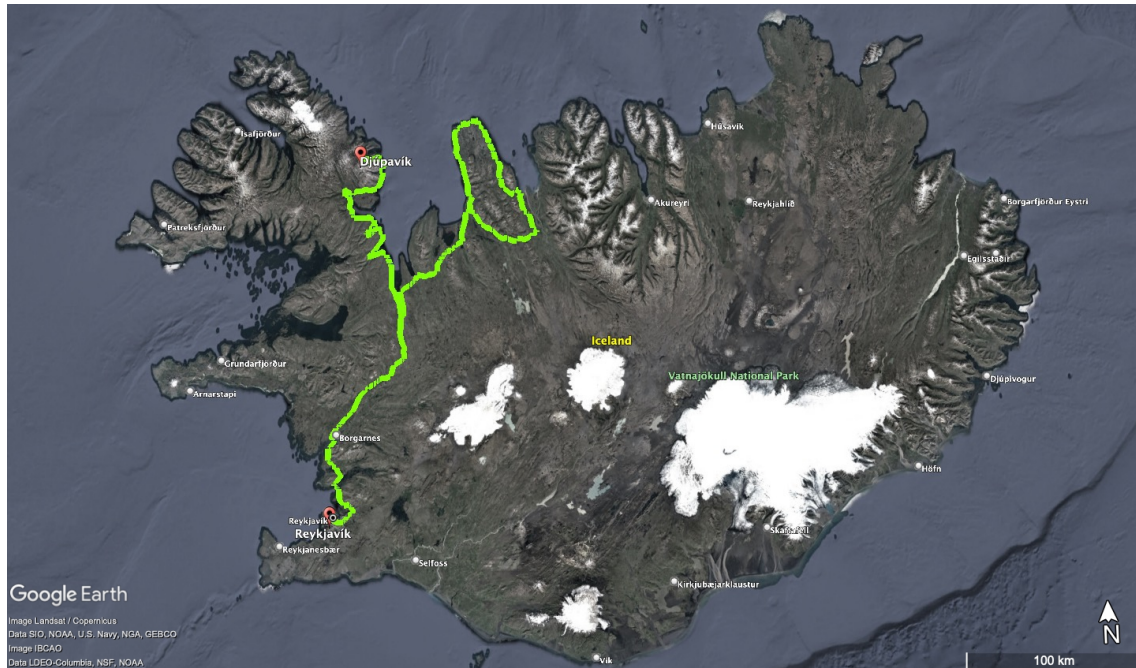
1981 and Rathje 1981, among others) I limited the search area to places where I had connections, whether that was through the people around me, or due to having previously lived or made visits there—this also made the fieldwork a collaborative process. Selecting fieldwork sites in this way partly adhered to the geographical reach of Unruly Heritage, which focuses its efforts on the High North and the North Sea, and to that, I added other sites that tied into my own research objectives. From then on, I welcomed opportunities as they presented themselves and remained as flexible as possible, allowing myself to be surprised by the materials and landscapes I encountered. It was important for me to be guided by them, as opposed to seeking and artificially crafting specific material encounters. In the end, the fieldwork was carried out in three locations: Iceland (the High North site), Cornwall (the heritage site), and London (the urban site).

### **1.3.1. Iceland**

The fieldwork in Iceland took place in July 2018, focused on the shoreline, and covered parts of the Northwestern Region and the Westfjords (see Figure 1). The itinerary was mapped by my main supervisor Dr Þóra Pétursdóttir (currently Associate Professor at the University of Oslo), and the fieldwork was carried out also with Dr Esther Breithoff (currently Senior Lecturer at Birkbeck, University of London). I was fortunate enough to be invited to join them. The richness of the drift found in these areas has already been documented, and such sites provide a perfect introduction to the masses of things that may become stranded (see Pétursdóttir 2017 and 2020, among others). Although the materials encountered were varied, the majority of them belonged to one of three overlapping categories: drift (mainly wood), the fishing industry (mainly nets and buoys), and plastics (often in the form of plastiglomerates) (see Figures 2 to 6). During this trip, I became fascinated by ghost nets and the things they gather during their journeys at sea before becoming stranded. This went on to be the case study for my first project-related publication, “Monstrous Things: Horror,



Othing, and the Anthropocene”, which compares the appearance of ghost nets to sightings of sea monsters (Godin 2022a). It is also then that the notion of the ungraspable—of things that are too messy, too strange, and too entangled to fully make sense of—entered my work, and eventually became central to it.



**Figure 1.** Google Earth itinerary for the fieldwork in Iceland.



**Figure 2.** Driftwood scattered on the shore.



**Figure 3.** A mix of driftwood and remnants from the fishing industry.



**Figure 4.** An entangled mass of fishing nets.



**Figure 5.** More fishing nets, partly enmeshed in a plastiglomerate.

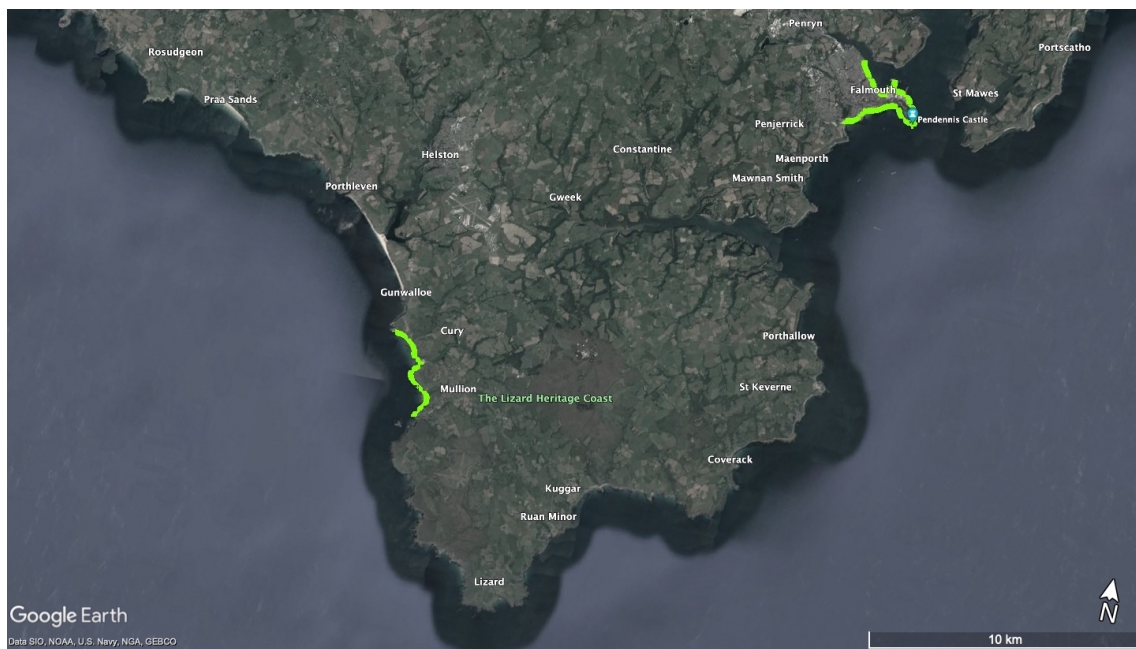


**Figure 6.** A particularly large plastiglomerate.

### 1.3.2. Cornwall

The second set of landscapes I surveyed was located in Cornwall, England, and this fieldwork was carried out in November 2018 (see Figure 7). Those familiar with the area might notice that some of the highlighted coastal zones are not suitable for surveying, as there are many cliffs in the region. Since I did not conduct any excavations or gather artefacts, I thought it best to highlight the *paths* I followed, as opposed to the specific locations I stopped at. I identify these coastlines as heritage since they are part of the South West Coast Path, which is the longest National Trail in the United Kingdom, containing a multitude of heritage sites with various official designations. I focused my efforts on the areas around Mullion, Gunwalloe, and Falmouth. The latter I surveyed on my own, while Professor Caitlin DeSilvey (currently at the University of Exeter) and Tanya Venture (currently a PhD Student at the University of Exeter) introduced me to the first two, which I later revisited. During this fieldwork, I began to think about sea foam, which went on to form the basis of my

third project-related publication, “Zombie Materiality: Sea Foam, Ecocriticism, and Persistent Waste” (see Figure 8 and Godin forthcoming). I was also struck by the nature/culture entanglements I encountered (see Figures 9 to 11). Most importantly, I learned more about Cornish folklore through meetings with local artists. This sparked my interest in ecocriticism, which eventually led me to compare climate writing and the genre of horror (as Godin 2022a shows, I retroactively applied this new knowledge to the fieldwork in Iceland).



**Figure 7.** Google Earth map of the fieldwork in Cornwall.



**Figure 8.** Sea foam at Gunwalloe Church Cove Beach.



**Figure 9.** A mix of nature and culture.



**Figure 10.** A small monstrous thing.

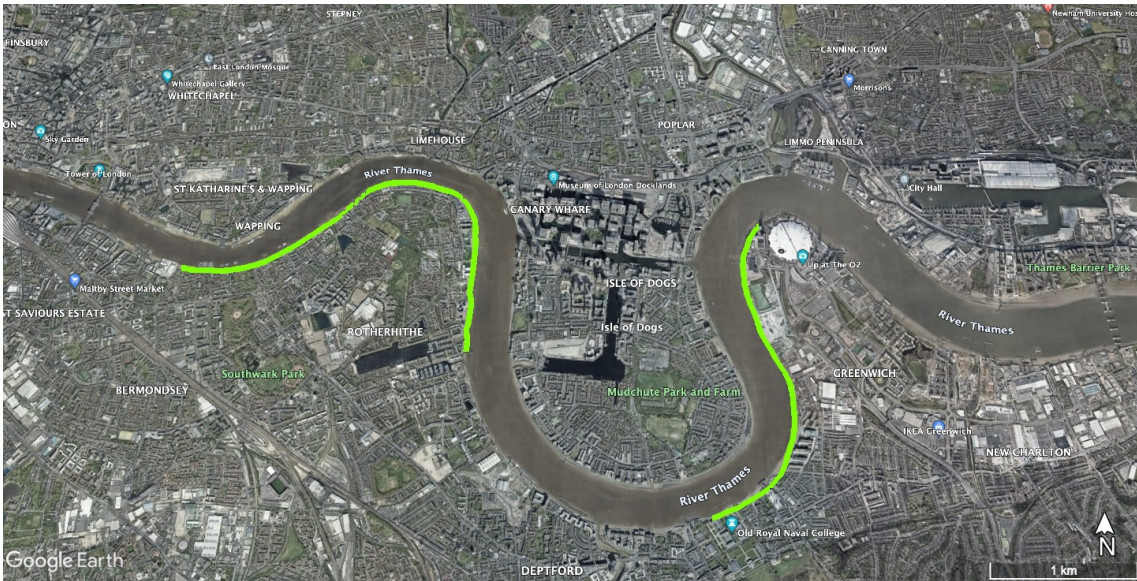


**Figure 11.** Human-made fibres in the churchyard of Saint Winwaloe, The Church of the Storms.

### 1.3.3. London

The last of my fieldwork was carried out in London to fulfil my self-imposed requirement of an urban landscape. The longest of all three fieldwork seasons, the selected areas were surveyed from June to September 2019, focusing on Rotherhithe and Greenwich (see Figures 12 to 14). A few months prior I had taken a trip to London, during which I arranged to meet Adrian Evans, Director of the Thames Festival Trust, to learn more about the Thames. I also met with Nicola White, a mudlark who shares finds on social media platforms and transforms some of them into pieces of art, to learn more about mudlarking. Unbeknownst to me, White had already been asked to take part in a forthcoming exhibition called *Foragers of the Foreshore*, organised by the Thames Festival Trust as part of the annual *Totally Thames* festival. Everything fell into place by chance when I was invited to join the festival as a volunteer, as well as make a minor contribution to the exhibition. I arrived three months before the opening of the exhibition to carry out fieldwork. I did most of the field walking on my own, but I also followed mudlarks on several occasions and joined a few guided walks as part of the *Totally Thames* programme (see Figures 15 and 16). Not being a Thames Foreshore Permit holder myself, I did not mudlark or touch any of the finds, as per the guidelines issued by the Port of London Authority. Instead, I observed closely, made notes, and asked questions.





**Figure 12.** Google Earth map of the fieldwork in London.



**Figure 13.** Foreshore view from Greenwich.



**Figure 14.** Foreshore view from Rotherhithe.



**Figure 15.** Foreshore walk in Rotherhithe, part of the 2019 *Totally Thames* programme.



**Figure 16.** Example of a mudlarked find.

My role in the *Foragers of the Foreshore* exhibition, which ran from September 24 to 29, 2019 at the Bargehouse in the Oxo Tower Wharf development, was mainly to assist with setting up the exhibition (see Figure 17). This benefited me greatly since I was introduced to the mudlarks taking part in it. I also provided a poster with information about the Unruly Heritage project, focusing on the idea of ‘future heritage’ to raise awareness about the type of legacies we may leave behind (see Figure 18). The exhibition featured texts, photographs, finds from prehistory to today, and artworks (see Figures 19 and 20). Each guest mudlark had their own room or area. Most importantly for my work, the exhibition included a wealth of online content. The resource I most benefited from was the oral history database, created in collaboration with the *Foragers of the Foreshore* mudlarks. They were each asked a series of questions by volunteers, and recordings were made available online on the Thames Festival Trust’s website. Since it exceeded the number of interviews I would have been able to conduct on my own within the timeframe I had, this database proved invaluable for writing my second research output—“Meeting Things: On

Material Encounters Along the River Thames” which looks at the relationship between mudlarks and foreshore finds (Godin 2022b). I wanted this paper to be an exploration of mudlarking that combines the landscapes in which it is carried out (as per my own data) *and* people’s attachments to the practice and the things encountered (provided by the aforementioned oral histories).



**Figure 17.** Plans by Crispin Hughes for the *Foragers of the Foreshore* exhibition.



Figure 18. The Unruly Heritage poster.



**Figure 19.** The room in which the poster was located, curated by Nicola White.



**Figure 20.** Visitors enjoying photos and mudlarked finds.

## 1.4. Methodology

Although the three articles associated with my dissertation each provide more insights into the specific methods used to collect the data they are based on, this section aims to provide a broad overview of the main methods used throughout my project. It is divided into five parts: methods I do not use, surface methods, queer phenomenology, field walking, and interviews. The first two have more to do with a general approach to, or methodology for contemporary archaeology. After that, I shift to a more specific philosophical positioning in relation to the materials studied through the use of (queer) phenomenology. This section concludes with the two main methods employed for collecting information—field walking and interviews—and offers some thoughts on their usefulness, as well as explains the specific ways in which I used them.

### **1.4.1. Methods I Do Not Use**

Within the scope of a project that so heavily emphasises processes of othering, I find the methods I have chosen to exclude almost as telling as the methods I have chosen to include. Before turning to scholarship on the academic importance of vagueness, I want to bring up commentary by Harrison and Breithoff on contemporary archaeology's perceived need to self-justify (2017, 207). Citing the example of the well-known van project—the excavation of a Ford Transit van by Bristol-based archaeologists—they highlight a recurring discussion in contemporary archaeology that revolves around its usefulness (or lack thereof?) and frequently involves forms of self-justification. They argue that “the perceived need to justify such work has tended to force a focus on field-based archaeological methods fairly narrowly defined in exploring what is most distinctive about contemporary archaeology in and of itself” (Harrison and Breithoff 2017, 207). In other words, they suggest that the impulse to justify ourselves by demonstrating a strong connection to field-based methods may

sometimes obscure what is unique to contemporary archaeology, as well as its interdisciplinary nature and the other methods it may benefit from. Furthermore, it is possible—and I believe this to be the case here—that vagueness is an inherent but overlooked quality of some things (Sørensen 2016b, 741).

Of course, we are not dealing with an either/or situation but with different ways of capturing different realities. I wondered—and still wonder—if my methodology is lacking in archaeology. Is it sufficient to study materiality and to do so archaeologically, or do I need to break ground? In asking this question, am I falling into the trap of reducing archaeology to excavation? Ultimately, I asked myself: what would it contribute to this project if I were to excavate a square on a beach? What could test pits along a coast tell me about roaming materials? And what would tracing the provenance of materials in one cove tell me about unruly materiality and its perception at large? Given the scope and focus of my particular project, the answer to all of these questions was: very little, beyond the superficial impression of being *more archaeological*. Instead, I turn to work on the tension between the familiar and unfamiliar, and on how to approach that which is ambiguous, vague, or otherwise conceals itself (see Andersson 2014; Buchli and Lucas 2001; Pétursdóttir 2014; Sørensen 2016b). The type of unruly materiality I look at certainly falls under the umbrella of "that which cannot be measured, mapped or fails to assume concrete form" and is therefore considered vague (Sørensen 2016b, 743). However, as I argue throughout this dissertation, I do not wish to render this materiality legible, but to accept its vagueness as fact and attempt to work with it rather than remedy it. To this end, I have opted for methods such as non-invasive surface survey, queer phenomenology, and field walking.

#### **1.4.2. Investigating the Surface**

As stated above, my methods were non-invasive; there was no breaking ground and no collecting or moving of artefacts, only surveying, observing, and documenting.



The methods presented in this chapter were therefore carried out on the surface. To be specific, that surface was the space that allows land to reach water and vice versa, whether we call it coast, foreshore, beach, or any other term, depending on the location and the type of waterway we are speaking of. What comes to mind when I think about archaeological methods that do not involve excavations in the context of contemporary archaeology is Harrison's 2011 paper, "Surface assemblages. Towards an archaeology *in and of* the present." The main suggestion put forth in this paper is that an archaeology fully oriented towards the present can best be achieved by "moving away from the trope of archaeology-as-excavation and towards an alternative metaphor of archaeology-as-surface-survey and as a process of assembling/reassembling" (Harrison 2011, 143-144). If we unpack this statement, the first thing we encounter is a critique of archaeology's over-investment in excavation as a method, which itself is tied to "the idea of a past which is buried and hidden" (*ibid*, 141)—something that is evidently not the case in the landscapes I present as part of this project, where the notion of past and present as *displayed* is in fact crucial.

Second, we move on to the alternatives, of which there are two: archaeology as surface survey, and archaeology as a process of assembling/reassembling. I will discuss them jointly, through archaeology as *surface assemblages*. Looking at surface assemblages further advances the project of distancing ourselves from stratigraphic depth as a pre-requisite for archaeology in order to achieve what Harrison refers to as a flattening in engagement (a theme which will return in Chapter 4 in relation to symmetrical archaeology). This flattening is in part literal since we are no longer invested in achieving distance between the visible surface and deeper hidden layers, and metaphorical as well, through greater recognition of the agency of nonhumans (Harrison 2021, 155). The latter arguably has more to do with the concept of assemblages than with surfaces themselves. The assemblages found on the surface include "people and things, the living and the dead, the operative and defunct" which do not need to exist concurrently or make their mark on the surface at the same time, as long as they are together (Harrison 2011, 157-158). These suggestions evoke a

multitude of themes that resonate strongly with me and, I believe, with Unruly Heritage more generally—themes such as the present always being in the making, the past always returning (as opposed to buried), and the surface as dynamic.

By approaching contemporary archaeology through above-ground methods, however, I run the risk of portraying the present moment as a phenomenon that unfolds exclusively on the surface, when that could not be further from reality. Although I, myself, am interested in the process of ontological flattening, this does not mean that modernity itself is flat. The concept of the “archaeosphere” proposed by Edgeworth *et al.* defines the Anthropocene as a geological layer that has been modified by humans (2015, 33), and which contains the combined effects of “artificial ground of industrial date, archaeological strata, buried infrastructure, quarries, landfill deposits, agricultural soils, and surface layers of relevant material *irrespective of depth*” (*ibid*, 40, emphasis mine). Furthermore, the process of growing the archaeosphere does not occur unidirectionally, from surface to depth. It also involves burying the surface to great depths (through geological carbon sequestration, for example), expanding the archaeosphere downwards to exploit or occupy increasingly deep layers (from underground shelters to deep mining), as well as penetrating the depths and bringing them to the surface. Here, we may think of the estimated 50 to 57 gigatonnes of materials mined and quarried annually, including coal, sand, and various metals (Jennings 2011 and Douglas and Lawson 2001 *cited in* Edgeworth *et al.* 2015, 39). My focus may be shallow and flat in its methodology, but the Anthropocene as a whole is deep, reaching down into the Earth to an extent that arguably far exceeds other periods in history.

### **1.4.3. (Queer) Phenomenology**

Surface methods require interpretive methods as well, and I have attempted to align myself most closely with phenomenology, specifically the queer kind proposed by Ahmed (2006a and 2006b). Phenomenology emerged in the twentieth century as a

branch of existential philosophy and is associated with thinkers such as Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty, whose approaches vary in some aspects (Van Dyke 2020, 8556; see also Thomas 2009 for a historical overview). The kind of phenomenology I employ is "concerned with the world as it manifests itself to those who take part in it" (Olsen 2010, 63) and posits that we, therefore, make sense of this world by experiencing it (Van Dyke 2020, 8557). According to Olsen, two main insights emerge from the phenomenological approach: first, that human and nonhuman beings are fundamentally entangled in the world (as reflected in the definition provided in the previous sentence), and second, that these are bodily entanglements (2010, 63), given that knowledge is acquired "through the spatial and material possibilities that are open to the body" (2010, 73 referencing Merleau-Ponty; see also my application of these ideas in Godin 2022b).

Archaeology and phenomenology are well-acquainted and have been since British post-processual archaeologists began exploring the latter's relevance for their work in the early 1990s (Van Dyke 2020, 8555;8557). Although not *all* phenomenological archaeology focuses on past landscapes, a great deal certainly does, especially its earliest articulations. This can be attributed to the dissatisfaction that drew post-processualists to it in the first place, which was at least in part the result of placing linguistics at the forefront of research so that what could be spoken about, thought of by name, and recorded took precedence over bodily experiences of the world and its material dimension (Olsen 2010, 63). This resulted in a view of landscapes (and their materiality) as having the ability to become containers for meaning, but being voids in and of themselves. As a solution to the shortcomings of the space-as-container approach, Tilley, inspired by Heidegger, proposed archaeological phenomenology—that is, a contrasting perspective that views bodily experiences as a meaningful channel for the experience of place (see Tilley 1994). Landscape phenomenology further takes a relational stance, asserting that "Human interventions are done not so much *to* the landscape as *with* the landscape, and what is done affects what can be done" (Bender 2002, S103).

Phenomenology provides a way for archaeology to overcome the perception of landscapes as inherently empty, while also bringing the importance of experience in world-making to the forefront. In doing so, it emphasises notions of entanglements, in addition to acknowledging that “people and their worlds are mutually, continually engaged” (Van Dyke 2020, 8558-8559). But what makes *queer* phenomenology different from phenomenology without a qualifier? To answer this question, I begin by pointing out that phenomenology works exceptionally well with other outlooks that break down dichotomies such as those between “subject/object or actor/structure” and instead emphasise “the ways in which understandings, meanings, and actions are mutually constitutive” (Van Dyke 2020, 8556). Ahmed argues that several aspects of phenomenology make it particularly well-suited to queer theory: first, it recognises the importance of lived experience; second, it emphasises the role of “what is ready-to-hand” or nearness, which we may also refer to as entanglements since they contain an element of proximity; and third, it highlights the “role of repeated and habitual actions in shaping bodies and worlds” (Ahmed 2006a, 544). Although this third aspect is “not properly phenomenological” Ahmed points out that queer phenomenology “might rather enjoy this failure to be proper” (2006a, 543). A central component of queer phenomenology appears to be the notion of orientation, of that towards which we are oriented—for example, we may think of emotions, specifically fear, which is always oriented towards something; we are afraid *of* something (Ahmed 2006b, 2).

Feeling *towards* is as important as *feeling with* in the work I present here, which in part explains my own orientation towards the genre of horror and emphasis on human-to-nonhuman relationships. If to be oriented is to turn towards things that help us find our way (Ahmed 2006a, 543), then to be *disoriented* is to turn to that which we do not recognise, cannot understand, or that does not obey our wishes—in other words, that which is unruly or ambiguous. Queer phenomenology, then, is “an orientation toward what slips, which allows what slips to pass, in the unknowable length of its duration” and disorients us (Ahmed 2006a, 566). Most importantly, it does not aim to “overcome the disalignment of the horizontal and vertical axis” but

instead allows “the oblique to open another angle on the world” (*ibid*). This makes me wonder what such an orientation—one that allows things to slip through—might look like from a methodological standpoint. Although the work I present here is, to once again borrow Ahmed’s terminology, not *properly* phenomenological, I do attempt to orient myself towards the *disorientation* by paying attention to disorienting and disoriented things, and by not attempting to realign them—or, in other words, to render them knowable. I try my best to approach materiality as it slips, to see where it may lead. Keeping in line with the phenomenological tradition, being there is also important, as is reflected in my emphasis on field walking.

#### **1.4.4. Field Walking**

On the topic of walking as an archaeological practice, González-Ruibal writes that it is done by “not mov[ing] much in space, but by walking slowly and seeing carefully” and that “walking is just one of the practices that we have for re-enchanting the landscape” (2019, 161). Landscapes themselves are integral to walking research, for walking both adapts to space and makes places through movement, placing itself at the heart of *in situ* encounters. As part of their exploration of walking as methodology, Springgay and Truman claim that “walking is a way of becoming responsive to place; it activates modes of participation that are situated and relational” (2018, Introduction). Here I am reminded of matter adrift, which seems to *activate* a new kind of landscape through movement and create new relationships, both human and nonhuman, following its arrival into and enmeshment with coastal areas. Hinted at in these passages is the idea of walking as a relational methodology and a way of bringing together bodies and environment, which is very much in line with the goals of other movements that reject dualisms (primarily of the mind/body kind, but also human/nonhuman), such as phenomenology and queer approaches, and instead emphasise being-in-the-world or embodiment as proper method (Springgay and Truman 2018, Chapter 2).

Field walking also goes hand-in-hand with surface and other non-invasive methods, hence why I employed it extensively. I engaged in three different forms of walking surveys: guided walks, participant observation, and self-guided walks—most often in that order for each location I visited. I consider walking tours and itineraries determined by other people as falling under the umbrella of guided walks. We may think, for example, of the fieldwork carried out in Iceland, as well as part of the Cornish fieldwork. In London, various organisations and individuals (including Thames Discovery, Thames Explorer Trust, Thames Festival Trust, as well as archaeologists and mudlarks) organise foreshore tours as part of their regular programming or within the context of special events. I focused on those that were part of the Thames Festival Trust's *Totally Thames* festival, which I attended both as a volunteer and as a paying guest. The participant observation portion of my survey was a method exclusive to the London fieldwork, where I was able to make contact with licensed mudlarks and academics researching the foreshore who allowed me to tag along. The remainder of my time in all fieldwork locations was used for self-guided walks, which formed the bulk of my walking surveys.

Although the next section is dedicated to interviews, I should already point out that many of these walks—except the solo ones, of course—contained elements of the walking interview and ‘socialised’ or peopled the process of walking through speeches by guides, questions by others guests, and the dialogues I personally engaged in. The walking interview is a tried and tested ethnographic method, and its primary aim is to “recognize the ways in which lived experiences, perception, and meaning-making are constructed through place and spatial practices of sociality and positionality” (Springgay and Truman 2018, Introduction). Lastly, documentation was present across all types of field walking, although it mainly functioned as a behind-the-scenes method—one that does not overtly feature in any of the research outputs or past this point of the dissertation's summary, but is understood to be necessary and assumed to have taken place. While photography often figures prominently in contemporary archaeology, I myself am not particularly drawn to it or other visual methods as a

matter of preference, and a complete lack of artistic talent. Because of this, the main documentation technique I employed during fieldwork was note-taking, which I transcribed into a word processor after each walk, adding additional phenomenological details and new relevant information (supplementary research, fact-checking, further questions, and so on).

#### **1.4.5. Interviews**

Contemporary archaeology is often described as a way of making the familiar unfamiliar. That is, a process of alienation in the hope that, through this distance, we may discover something new about ourselves (Buchli and Lucas 2001, 9). However, it is also the case that this sort of work tends to, as Harrison and Breithoff write, “focus rather heavily on material forms of evidence, arguably to the detriment of oral and documentary records” (2017, 206). Keeping this critique in mind, I attempted to find ways to work in an object-oriented fashion while also drawing from people’s experiences, without it appearing forced or as an afterthought. Incorporating the voices of mudlarks in my paper on material encounters on the foreshore (Godin 2022b) seemed both obvious and essential, and I did so by conducting semi-structured interviews as background research to guide my fieldwork, before employing the oral history archive created by the Thames Festival Trust as sources for the paper. This ensured that my sources would be freely and easily available to anyone who might be interested in learning more about the topic, without needing to find a publication channel for my own interviews and notes, which were not always consistent in terms of format, length, tone, and the questions asked.

But I did not only interview humans. As the Monster Network collective tell us, “our storytelling practices are haunted, possessed, speaking in/with voices not their own” (2021, 150). That is to say, people may speak for themselves and use their own voices, but those stories tell us about a world that goes far beyond the individual, for they inevitably dwell in, write in, and think thoughts in that world. It is also this

approach to storytelling that, I believe, makes it possible to interview texts, which, after all, are (AI aside) written by people. While stories of monsters, zombies, and post-apocalyptic worlds are not first-hand accounts of experiences unfolding in the *real* world, so to speak, they exceed their own discursive forms, telling us about that which haunts us, about the others that live in our voices. I view ecocriticism—the process of investigating ecology through literature—as a form of interview. I read these stories, and I asked them questions. After that, I read about how they were created and interpreted and used those texts to answer my inquiries. From that perspective, I interviewed both people and texts.

### 1.5. Research Outputs

As I have already mentioned, the main research outputs for this project consist of three papers: “Monstrous Things: Horror, Othering, and the Anthropocene” (Godin 2022a), “Meeting Things: On Material Encounters Along the River Thames” (Godin 2022b), and “Zombie Materiality: Sea Foam, Ecocriticism, and Persistent Waste” (Godin forthcoming). The first is very much aligned with the themes of *Unruly Heritage*. It looks at discarded things adrift, placing them in the Anthropocene, which I refer to as an *Age of Things*. Drawing parallels between materiality and monstrosity, I explore the ways in which the former carries on and undergoes processes of othering, concluding that the figure of the monster presents itself as a way of grappling with anthropogenic materials that defy definition. Although “Monstrous Things” begins with a case study of an Icelandic ghost net, it quickly departs from it and outlines the general themes I work with. While it is a standalone piece on the relationship between materiality and monstrosity in archaeology, within the broader scheme of things, this paper is akin to an introduction or a literature review and serves as background for subsequent ones.

Two themes are carried over from this article to the other two papers. Material encounters and attachments go on to form the basis of “Meeting Things”, and things



that have been made monstrous through othering take centre stage in “Zombie Materiality”. Unlike the first (and third) paper, the second is close to what we may consider a ‘proper’ or traditional case study. It looks at the practice of mudlarking—that is, gathering things from the foreshore, specifically in London, England—in ways and locations already discussed in this chapter. Although the methodology used is rather human-centred, the article itself focuses on the landscapes of mudlarking and answers a central question: what is it about this place that makes human-to-nonhuman encounters possible? It concludes that the act of touching makes mudlarking an intimate, affective, and shared experience, and that the foreshore itself, as the meeting point between underworlds, surface worlds, and liquid worlds, mirrors this blurring of bodies. The notion of blurred boundaries is picked up again in the third paper, “Zombie Materiality”.

Similarly to the first paper, the third one begins with a case study—the presence of sea foam in various locations—but quickly embarks on a more theoretical journey into the world of zombies. It looks at the struggle of waste containment from a queer theoretical standpoint and challenges the notion of material inertia. It circles back to human and nonhuman entanglements, and introduces ecocriticism as an analytical method. Although this third article is the most narrow in focus, I believe it effectively ties all of the research outputs together: it is grounded in the theory of “Monstrous Things”, builds on forms of intimacies beyond the human outlined in “Meeting Things”, and concludes on the theme of failed, unwanted, and improper futures. Readers of this chapter will know that this concluding theme was, in fact, my starting point—the thing I most wanted to investigate from the beginning, and which I expand on in subsequent sections of this summary article. It was not intentionally kept hidden in the first two research outputs, nor did I retroactively decide to change my research topic. To offer thoughts on the place of failure in contemporary archaeology, I first needed to look at how it manifests itself materially and theoretically, which is what I hope to have achieved through these three articles.

## 1.6. Structure

The rest of this summary builds on the aforementioned research outputs and is split into two halves: Part I and Part II. Part I opens with the current chapter, which is intended to define and contextualise my doctoral project by drawing on scholarship that is, from this point forward, primarily *external*. By that I mean that I do not propose brand new arguments or generate my own content in Part I—for the most part, at least—but rather explain the context from which my work emerges, state where it situates itself academically, and list the combination of theoretical and methodological approaches that guide it. Part I includes three more chapters. The one that immediately follows this one touches on the Anthropocene, situating the project in time and in the material conditions it uses as a starting point to build upon. I then turn to philosophies of materiality or ways of *thinking about* materiality that are of relevance, providing an overview of key topics such as vibrancy, drift, waste, and disposal. The closing chapter of Part I has to do with archaeological approaches, or ways of *working with* materiality, including new materialism, symmetrical archaeology, object-oriented approaches, and posthumanism, as well as the inclusion of queer perspectives.

Part II shifts away from the literature review format towards original work. It fills in the many gaps left behind by the three papers submitted alongside this summary, and expands on the themes they touch on. Part II opens with a short introduction, focusing on what I call ‘the ungraspable’, which is then followed by three more chapters and a conclusion. The next chapter touches on the topics of horror and monstrosity, reviewing the theories employed in my research outputs before delving deeper into the contemporary zombie and its archaeological relevance. Establishing a link between zombies and ecology leads to Chapter 7, which has to do with ecocriticism and the category of the natural. In it, I introduce material ecocriticism as an approach that is relevant both for climate narratives and for archaeology. I also address the age-old nature/culture rift and explore how it is

rendered materiality. Chapter 8 opens with an overview of the field of queer ecology and of queer theory itself. This chapter reflects on my dissertation as a whole since it is primarily informed by queer theory, in order to expose how the various themes addressed within it have, in fact, *also* explored the notion of failure. This discussion carries over into the concluding remarks, which summarise and synthesise Parts I and II, reflect on my three research outputs and the new material included in this summary, and offer some suggestions as to how this work may expand contemporary archaeology.

## Chapter 2 — The Anthropocene

### 2.1. Beginnings

The work I present here addresses the proposed epoch known as the Anthropocene, or Age of Humans, and concerns itself with several of its key aspects including interdisciplinarity, excess, and speculation. It should be said that we are here speaking of a *geological* epoch, which encompasses a range of human-modified deposits that form the archaeosphere mentioned in Chapter 1 (Edgeworth *et al.* 2015). This new epoch follows the Holocene and differentiates itself from it through an anthropogenic geological impact that is now far too significant to overlook (Campbell 2021, 1315). As such, it can exist alongside other social, cultural, temporal, and political movements without contradiction. These include supermodernity, postmodernity, or, as it is often referred to in archaeology, the contemporary past, the recent past, or simply the contemporary. Although there are issues associated with the origins of the Anthropocene as a geological concept—which will be discussed shortly—it has grown into an idea that captures much more than geology and the earth sciences (Thomas, Williams, and Zalasiewicz 2020, Preface). What makes the Anthropocene of interest for contemporary archaeology is that, while it is grounded in a new geological phase, it is also driven by ecology and climate change, both of which directly relate to material transformations, and those transformations are primarily anthropogenic in their origins (González-Ruibal 2019, 13).

Before turning to the manifestations of the Anthropocene, it is worth looking at its beginnings, which remain up for debate. Indeed, there is currently no agreement as to when the Anthropocene started, both in terms of its social dimension and its stratigraphic markers (Edgeworth *et al.* 2015, 33). An astonishing range of dates have been proposed as the start of the Anthropocene, from 400,000 years ago and the ability to use fire (Scott 2017, 3), to 8,000 years ago and the mid-Holocene warming period (Ruddiman 2003, 261), all the way to the late 1700s and the First Industrial

Revolution (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000, 17). Some locate it as recently as 1945, which marked the beginning of the Great Acceleration (Steffen *et al.* 2015, 93), while others argue that it can be traced to the exact second of its (nuclear) inception, specifically “at the moment of detonation of the Trinity A-bomb at Alamogordo, New Mexico, at 05:29:21 Mountain War Time ( $\pm 2$  s) July 16, 1945” (Zalasiewicz *et al.* 2015, 200). The consensus, however, seems to be that the Anthropocene covers roughly the past 250 years (González-Ruibal 2018, 15), and has accelerated significantly from the mid-1900s onwards (Pétursdóttir 2017, 179). Given that the Anthropocene is not strictly geological and largely driven by humans as agents of change, others have suggested that its origins should be oriented towards the social by, for example, locating its beginnings in the colonisation of Africa or the Americas, or in the rise of certain modes of consumption, especially in relation to fossil fuels (Lorimer 2017, 124; Campbell 2021, 1317). Defining geological epochs is perhaps best done retroactively, as we do not yet know the outcome of the Anthropocene or the trajectory it will follow. Furthermore, as Harman suggests, the birth of an object is not synonymous with its effects, thus making it even more challenging to point to a definite start date, knowing that things linger and their outcomes do not correlate with their human creation (2016, 35).

## 2.2. Human Impact

The Anthropocene is not strictly limited to a geological epoch but constitutes a concept that can be used as a means of capturing the planetary impact of humanity, especially in relation to the climatic consequences of production, consumption, and discard. It presents itself as “the sum total of human impacts on the planet”, although it is important to remember that the idea of a sum does not imply uniformity, but instead allows for responsibility and impact to be unequally distributed, and for the Anthropocene to have evolved along drastically different trajectories across time and space (Witmore 2019, 141; Thomas, Williams, and Zalasiewicz 2020, Chapter 8). It

follows that, if the Anthropocene arises from the consequences of anthropogenic actions, it also comprises what has been described as a reckoning with these environmental impacts—or else we would not have the need for a new epoch (Campbell 2021, 1315). I would argue that this is somewhat too generous of an assessment since a reckoning generally implies making serious attempts to deal with the issues at hand, but the Anthropocene has certainly prompted a crisis of sorts. In the aftermath of humanity becoming aware of its own role as a planetary force, this crisis articulates itself as a series of debates around, as well as a reframing of human/nature relationships and the impacts of materiality (Lorimer 2017, 123).

The Anthropocene can be said to exceed geology and goes beyond anthropogenic climate change as well. Indeed, it is not synonymous with global warming, pollution, or other environmental problems—although it does, of course, encompass these manifestations (González-Ruibal 2018, 12; Haraway 2015, 159; Thomas, Williams, and Zalasiewicz 2020, Preface). The Anthropocene refers to an incredibly wide range of actions and their consequences, intended or otherwise. The Anthropocene is climate change, but it also is toxicity, depleted resources, the legacies of mining, disappearing ecosystems, garbage patches, and rising sea levels. It is the unequally distributed consequences of systems collapsing, the burden of waste, exploitative capitalism, environmental injustices, and the poisoning of bodies through contaminants in complex systems that are entangled under the banner of the Anthropocene (Haraway 2015, 159). The Anthropocene as an epoch can be said to differentiate itself from the Holocene not only through what it has done to the Earth in terms of its geology, but also in the way the Earth is no longer “as conducive to human wellbeing” as it once was (Thomas, Williams, and Zalasiewicz 2020, Preface).

### 2.3. Interdisciplinarity

If the Anthropocene is in some sense about everything, then it is no wonder that projects investigating aspects of it—including this one—often cross disciplinary

boundaries and encourage collaboration. The concept has been employed in both the natural and social sciences as well as the humanities, by disciplines such as anthropology, environmental history, ecology, geography, sociology, economy, political science, and the likes (Edgeworth 2014, 74). That being said, the Anthropocene cannot be seen as a strictly academic concept as it now permeates discussions outside the aforementioned disciplines (Lorimer 2017, 117). Lorimer identifies five sectors in which the concept of the Anthropocene has been used: scientific inquiry, ideological provocation, intellectual zeitgeist, and science fiction (*ibid*, 118). The first is fairly self-explanatory, and the ideological provocation, which has already been hinted at, manifests itself as a reframing of the human/nature relationship, most notably by recognising that the idea of a human-dominated and human-controlled nature is no longer tenable (*ibid*, 125-126). Lorimer further argues that these new ontologies allow for an understanding of “people as materially embedded within ecological and geological assemblages” that is key for a contemporary archaeological investigation of the Anthropocene (*ibid*, 128).

It is in the last two areas—intellectual zeitgeist and science fiction—that my project grounds itself, and that the research outputs mentioned earlier focus the most. It is worth noting that I draw extensively from the idea of the Anthropocene as a “plastic and catchy label for a common curiosity” about the role of humans, their impacts on the planet, but also the future of humanity in an era where the Anthropocene cannot be escaped, where nothing lives outside of it, and nature is not under human control—that is, a *zeitgeist* (Lorimer 2017, 121). This curiosity also implies an act of speculation about anticipated and alternative futures, which does not solely manifest itself through predictive models of climate change, scientific projections, and so on. In the current intellectual zeitgeist, curiosity takes the form of works of Anthropocene science fiction—utopian, dystopian, epidemic, conflicted, apocalyptic, post-apocalyptic, and so forth—which are, interestingly, generally situated in the *near* future, in the Anthropocene itself, rather than a very distant era

characterised by great technological triumphs, spaceships, and the successful disentangling of humans from earthly nature (*ibid*, 128-129).

#### 2.4. The Unintentional

If speculative endeavours and imaginings of the future occupy such an important space in the Anthropocene, I argue that it is partly due to a lack of intention behind the era—we did not envision ending up here. It was not the intended or predicted trajectory, but we may imagine where we will go next. These forms of imagination also become a tool for engaging with the present itself (Lorimer 2017, 130). It has been argued that humans as a geological force have taken a life of their own, meaning that our actions and outputs as a collective planetary force now “operate just as nonhumans would, independent of human will, belief, or desires” (Grusin 2017, ix). Before turning to acts of speculation, it may be relevant to look at the unintentional in relation to accumulation and excess. A particularly compelling take on the Anthropocene is that it did not arise from a break with the past, but from a past that has accumulated and become overwhelming (Pétursdóttir 2017, 182;194). Putting accumulation and lingerings at the heart of the Anthropocene not only makes it highly relevant for contemporary archaeology but also further emphasises the idea of an unintentional, resilient material legacy—that is, an unruly heritage (*ibid*, 178).

By employing Augé’s concept of the supermodern (2009)—which González-Ruibal argues is most useful in an archaeological context—in conjunction with the Anthropocene as defined above, we may begin to expose supermodernity as “modernity gone excessive” (González-Ruibal 2019, 12). The *super* indicates that modernity (or indeed the past) has not necessarily been left behind, but has grown to a size that cannot be contained (*ibid*). This excessiveness has been further theorised by others, notably Morton, who proposes the concept of hyperobjects, which are entities so large and so distributed that they cannot be apprehended using conventional concepts of space and time (Morton 2013; Thomas, Williams, and Zalasiewicz 2020,



Chapter 1). The Anthropocene is a hyperobject, and so are climate change and radioactive legacies, to only name a few. They are persistent objects and as such are archaeological as well, but hyperobjects are so massive and so distributed that conceptualising them poses a genuine intellectual and methodological challenge (Campbell 2021, 1322-1324). Through hyperobjects in the Anthropocene, the excesses of supermodernity grow exponentially and generate new variables to contend with, as “big data just keeps getting bigger” (Thomas, Williams, and Zalasiewicz 2020, Chapter 1). Indeed, the quantities of data required to make the Anthropocene quantifiable and modellable as a single, cohesive planetary system—should we be so inclined, which I am not—are so great, they become virtually unthinkable (Thomas, Williams, and Zalasiewicz 2020, Chapter 1).

## 2.5. Anthropocene Horror

In “Monstrous Things: Horror, Othering, and the Anthropocene” (Godin 2022a), I argued that “in the absence of concepts that fully grasp such materials, the monster appears as a fair substitute”, suggesting a close relationship between hyperobjects, the ungraspable, and the genre of horror fiction, especially in the non-academic and popular intellectual zeitgeist. The links between horror and the Anthropocene are aplenty, and many of them can be said to stem from the claim that “the world is increasingly unthinkable” (Thacker 2011, 1). Horror is an affective genre of limits and liminality, if not of outright crisis, emerging in moments when we are no longer able to tell stories without incorporating elements of fiction, speculation, or the imaginary, and instead turn to the concept of the monstrous broadly defined, whether that be literally or metaphorically (Dillon 2018, 10). Horror further ties into narratives around the Anthropocene in the form of “Anthropocene horror” (Clark 2020, 61). Different from the ecological grief we more commonly hear about, Anthropocene horror is said to refer not to the deep sense of loss that arises from the actual or threatened destruction of something specific, but to a pervasive sense of impending

doom that is not associated with a particular place, event, threat, or other (Clark 2020, 61).

Anthropocene horror arises from the multifaceted changing environmental and material conditions that are experienced globally, and creates an affective condition that cannot be attributed to a particular monster, but to the elusive impression that monstrosity itself is at work, and that this monstrosity is inescapable. One of the key affects at the heart of Anthropocene horror is said to be a sense of powerlessness, albeit one that is different from that of ecological grief (Clark 2020, 61). As Clark explains, grief implies the mourning of a loss but does not necessitate a personal implication in the loss that is being mourned beyond familiarity with its subject. Horror, on the other hand, hints at a “context of latent environmental violence” and the feeling of being “personally trapped in its wrongs” (Clark 2020, 62). This feeling of entrapment applies to the Anthropocene more generally, from which there is no longer an outside, no place it has not reached, no body it has not entered, and no nature it has not affected. As McFarlane writes, “stickiness and thickness now recur as both textural and textual ‘horizon markers’ of the Anthropocene” (2020, 78) so that “we can no longer easily hold Anthropocene materials away from us” (*ibid*, 77 referencing Morton 2013).

In relation to discarded things, Pétursdóttir and Olsen have phrased this inescapability as things being “thankfully no longer here, but (...) unfortunately still *there*” (2013, 4990). Following Latour, they suggest that this “lack of outsides” is what led to the rise of environmentalism observed in recent years (Latour 2009 *cited in* Pétursdóttir and Olsen 2013, 4991). Indeed, Latour points to “the disappearance of the outside” as “the defining trait of our epoch” and of environmental responses as a result of that shift (2009, 144). This lack of outside is linked to the end of a distinction between categories such as nature and culture, so that materiality can no longer be held at arm’s length (Latour 2009, 143), as will be discussed in Chapter 7. Archaeologically speaking, it is in direct conversation with material profusion, while also introducing an important caveat: it is not that we no longer have *space* for our

things, wanted and unwanted, but that “literally there is no outside” (*ibid*, 144). Employing McFarlane’s terminology (2020), we may say there is no outside to which the markers of the Anthropocene will not stick, and no place that is not already thick with them. In sum, the inability to externalise the Anthropocene is linked to both the aforementioned loss of control and the issue of material persistence—if there is no outside, then there is nowhere to go, for anyone or anything (Clark 2020, 68-69).

## 2.6. Three Problems

It is around this feature of the Anthropocene, its lack of outside, that some of its harshest critiques have been articulated. Indeed, it is easy to understand the claim that we are all in this as meaning that we are all in this *together*, in this *equally*, or *equally to blame* for this (see Witmore 2019, 141). The Anthropocene manifestly has a people problem. That is to say, all are framed as guilty for anthropogenic legacies, while many are in reality their victims (González-Ruibal 2019, 14)—or lesser perpetrators than others, since we will all eventually feel its effects. To name an epoch ‘the Age of Humans’ requires asking what or who we mean by that, argues Braidotti (2013b; 2017). We may be speaking of a geological epoch and a set of environmental conditions that operate on a planetary scale, but such concerns “are not immune to social relations of class, race, age, disability, sexual preference and should not be renaturalized” (Braidotti 2017, 40). González-Ruibal also warns us of the dangers of attributing the conditions of the Anthropocene to “generic humans” when we should instead turn our attention to the “Man of humanism”—that is, the white, Western, able-bodied, presumably cis, straight, and reproductive man of capitalist systems, who acts as a marker of normality and of normal futures (González-Ruibal 2018, 13 and 2019, 14; Braidotti 2017, 40). The first problem we may identify in relation to the Anthropocene is therefore a problem of responsibility and origins, or, for short, a people problem.

From this problem emerges a second one: an issue of naming that is not limited to the misleading use of the term ‘humans’ but extends to the name of the era itself. This issue is somewhat paradoxical as we are seeing an overabundance of terms to speak of our times, yet many have pointed out the inadequacy of those appellations. In an attempt to bring to the forefront various aspects of the Anthropocene, a plethora of terms have been suggested, highlighting facets such as scale, responsibility, temporalities, dynamism, or synchronicities (Haraway 2015, 159). These include Haraway’s Cthulucene (2015) and Plantationocene (Haraway *et al.* 2016), Malm and Moore’s Capitalocene (Moore 2016), LeCain’s Carbocene (2015), González-Ruibal’s Age of Destruction (2018), and my own preferred label, Age of Things. Haraway advocates for the use of more than one name, so that we would not simply speak of the Anthropocene, but of the Anthropocene (to reflect the role of humans), Plantationocene (to reflect the legacies of colonialism and forced labour), Capitalocene (to reflect the impact of capitalism), *and* Chthulucene (to reflect the tentacular forces and mixed temporalities of our epoch) (2015, 160). González-Ruibal similarly suggests selecting the most appropriate framework for one’s area of inquiry, and further proposes that speaking of an Age of Destruction could be particularly relevant for archaeology given its attention to materiality and its lifecycle (González-Ruibal 2018, 16-17).

This idea that not all disciplines should embrace the same framework brings us to the third and final issue I will raise in this chapter, which is the use of a geological framework in a material, archaeological context. This problem has led to the suggestion that archaeology should perhaps reclaim its own potential and methodologies rather than embrace a borrowed term and its shortcomings (González-Ruibal 2018, 10;16). Although this does not solve the naming problem, the use of a geological marker to describe material phenomena creates a tension that is worth pointing out. Indeed, it has been argued that geology should not dictate all of our understandings of the current era, especially since the entirety of human existence and its consequences barely register on the deep time scales within which the discipline of

geology operates (Thomas, Williams, and Zalasiewicz 2020, Chapter 6). Ironically, the use of geological scales also risks creating some confusion around the scale of change which is diagnostic of the Anthropocene. As Olivier points out, the notion of the past accumulating into the present is not entirely new, but the *scale* to which it does so—although nothing but a geological blip—has “shaken [our] long-standing view to the core” when it comes to concepts of time and accumulation (2019, 22). We may therefore call the issue of geological scale an issue of unit instead, and of employing deep time to attempt to capture an Anthropocene that is “short/thin” and more akin to a boundary event than a genuine geological epoch (Haraway 2015, 160). Deep time additionally risks obscuring issues that are of importance to the humanities but do not necessarily register in the earth sciences, and changes which have occurred heterogeneously across time and space with entangled yet disparate aftermaths (González-Ruibal 2018, 13;18).

## 2.7. New Possibilities

The three issues I have briefly discussed—a problem of origins, a problem of naming, and a problem of scale—do not mean that the Anthropocene as a category is without merit or cannot productively be thought about. One of its main redeeming factors is undoubtedly the many discussions it has animated, which go well beyond academic circles, and the kind of environmental and ecological thinking that has emerged from them (Lorimer 2017, 125). The value of the Anthropocene as a pedagogical tool should not be ignored either, as both the term and what it stands for can now be said to be part of the intellectual zeitgeist of our times. While it may not always be called by name, the themes and anxieties addressed through the concept of the Anthropocene are now firmly entrenched in the media, the online sphere, environmental discourses at large, as well as a wide range of creative and fictional works (Edgeworth 2014, 73-74; Lorimer 2017, 122). In academic circles, the Anthropocene has enabled rigorous research to be conducted in multiple fields, which

may or may not have come together in conversation had they not been provided with common thematic grounds where they could do so (Edgeworth 2014, 74).

Moreover, these new conversations draw attention to two key themes: nature and materiality. The introduction of a new geological epoch that establishes humans as a global planetary force calls attention to climate, ecology, vulnerability, instability, and so on, which, regardless of intention, are at least in part anthropogenic (Grusin 2017, ix). Returning to archaeology specifically, Pétursdóttir maintains that the discipline has a lot to contribute to the Anthropocene—and, in return, that the Anthropocene lends itself particularly well to archaeological inquiries—through the attention it has long paid to nature-culture relations in its methods, approaches, and perspectives (2017, 181-182). The Anthropocene contributes something new to these discourses insofar as it highlights the ways in which nature, culture, materiality, machines, humans, and nonhumans are always entangled and, perhaps more than ever, blend into each other. This is reminiscent of Haraway's foundational work on cyborgs, which explores such entanglements and examines them against the backdrop of past human attempts to establish total domination over nature—which, as far as we know now, were destined to fail (Grusin 2017, viii; see also Haraway 1991 and 2006). In such contexts, the potential of things to operate as agents, actants, or actors of sorts becomes evident, thus making “imperative the question of how to attend to this agency” in inquiries about and in the Anthropocene (Pétursdóttir 2017, 196).

I have already identified material accumulation and excesses as diagnostic of the Anthropocene, and their lingering as a key manifestation of the unintentional character of the epoch. I argue that a turn towards materiality is therefore very much in line with a rapidly growing interest in the complex intertwining of nature, humans, and nonhumans, against the backdrop of urgent ecological concerns, that have emerged as a result of declaring ourselves to be living in an Age of Things. A concern for materiality also ties seamlessly into narratives of Anthropocene horror, namely the anxiety-inducing feeling of entrapment, of there being nowhere to go where we will not find more Anthropocene—or indeed, more *stuff*. This also raises the question of

whether or not we can even speak of humans, nonhumans, and nature as separate entities. It is no wonder, then, that the Anthropocene has permeated conversations and made its way into the narratives we generate about ourselves and potential futures, whether they be desirable or not. Despite its downsides, the Anthropocene as an epoch, a concept, and a framework deserves to be taken seriously, even if this endeavour requires us to (re)define it in a way that challenges human control and is more attuned to the nonhuman, while maintaining the broader ideas it stands for in the zeitgeist of the times.

## Chapter 3 — Philosophies of Materiality

### 3.1. Thing Philosophy

By referring to the Anthropocene as the Age of Things—and deliberately disregarding its actual etymology—I attempt to orient myself towards materiality, towards that which has substance, is proliferating in the Anthropocene, and is spectacularly resilient. What I have not yet addressed, however, is how we may think of this materiality and how we may work with it. This chapter is intended to accomplish the first task, while the next will attend to the latter. In the following sections, I provide a selective (and thus partial) overview of ways of approaching materiality conceptually—or what we may call *philosophies* of materiality—that position accumulation, excess, and human-to-nonhuman entanglements situated in the Anthropocene as key areas of concern. These philosophies also engage with ecology, ambiguity, and dynamism. Like the previous one, this chapter begins first and foremost with the idea that we live in an age that can be explored archaeologically as it unfolds, and that this era is a fundamentally material one, characterised by profusion and excess on an unprecedented scale, which result in accumulation on a similarly expansive scale (González-Ruibal 2019, 6).

Using this premise as its foundation, the philosophies of materiality I present here do not constitute a comprehensive literature review, but a collection of approaches put forth by various scholars to whom I directly owe the ways of thinking that underpin this dissertation. I begin by introducing two recurring themes: the first is what we may think of in terms of aftermaths, lingerings, or hauntings, to list only a few labels referring to similar phenomena; the second has to do with saturation, which is itself a function of profusion and accumulation. Then, I present three research topics or bodies of work from which I draw inspiration: Bennett’s vibrant matter (2010), Pétursdóttir’s drift matter (2018 and 2020), and texts on waste and disposal by various scholars. Approaches that define themselves as new directions, shifts, or turns in



archaeology will be explored in the next chapter, as stated above. Although there is significant overlap between this chapter in the next, I have attempted to separate concepts that have to do with thinking about things and reflecting on the ways in which they manifest themselves from approaches that also involve a great deal of theorising, but are more explicitly methodological in their orientation towards doing archaeology and engaging materiality. Before delving into these philosophies, it is worth engaging with one such area of overlap in order to explain what I mean when I say that things, actors, concepts, monsters, and so on are ‘entangled’.

While the idea of entanglements has been employed in a plethora of ways, not all address the material properties of things directly (Hodder 2011, 163). Barad understands the term to mean that “matter and meaning are not separate elements” (2007, 3). Similarly, for Latour, entanglement refers to the world and thought as mutually constituted (Harman 2014, 40). The way it is employed in this text, however, is how it has been defined by Hodder: entanglements are the sum of things depending on other things and humans depending on other humans, as well as things depending on humans and humans depending on things (Hodder 2014, 19-20). Through this definition, Hodder maintains the dichotomy between the human and the material, but recognises their dependencies (Harman 2014, 44). It may appear contradictory to embrace this separation, yet speak of things so deeply entangled that ‘depend on’ seems too weak of a descriptor. However, I argue that an approach that both maintains some separation and acknowledges difference allows for the emergence of things-in-themselves, which is a key element here. Hodder further clarifies that “the idea of entanglement is not simply co-dependence or mutualism or co-evolution or systems feedback between humans and things. Rather, it tries to capture various forms of being caught up” (2011, 163-164). It has been argued that the state of being caught up, which is also referred to as *entrapments*, has often suppressed the potential of both humans and things to be autonomous—something that both Hodder’s entanglements and the object-oriented approaches of the next chapter aim to redress (Harman 2014, 47).

### 3.2. Aftermaths, Lingerings, and Hauntings

The first of two recurring themes I review bears many names, all pointing to similar phenomena: legacies, aftermaths, lingerings, ghosts, hauntings, and so on (see Godin 2022a for a more in-depth discussion). These terms indicate a *failure* of sorts on the part of materiality, an inability or refusal to disappear, a rejection of its own end, and a disregard for human wishes. In some sense, they relate to entanglements as well, in that they remain caught up even after their ‘end’. These terms have parallels in memory studies, which have produced numerous foundational texts on topics such as collective memory (see Halbwachs 1925), the political underpinnings of remembrance (see Trouillot 1995), and the materialisation of memory (see Nora 2001). Memory and matter come together within the framework of horror in Gordon and Radway’s *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (2008), and in relation to modern ruination in the work of Edensor (2005a and 2005b), both of which have influenced my approach. Whether we think of the Anthropocene as an Age of Humans—as its name indicates—or as an Age of Things—as I suggest—it can be said to be “in essence an age of drift matter” and a witness to the longevity of things (Pétursdóttir 2018, 96).

While all ages endure in some sense or else archaeology would have nothing to concern itself with, things in the Anthropocene exist in excess, both buried and moving across the surface cyclically (Pétursdóttir 2018, 97). This further poses a challenge to the idea that things remain stable through time and space, and thus cannot haunt, only wait. Indeed, Hodder takes a stance against the idea that materiality is fixed while the human meanings it is imbued with can change, arguing that things themselves are in actuality “always falling apart, transforming, growing, changing, dying” (Hodder 2011, 160). There is also something to be said about the dynamic nature of things that complicates the process of a “smooth” transition to their end (Olsen 2010, 147). The valuable may carry on, but so does the unwanted, broken, neglected, redundant, and outdated—a process that is accelerated by the scale of the

destruction witnessed by the Anthropocene, of which something is always inevitably left behind (Olsen 2010, 147). This acceleration is also associated with a general trend towards a shortened use-life for things, whether that is through disposability or planned obsolescence, leading to a saturation of what comes *after*.

The failure of things to disappear or ‘die’ therefore presents itself as material persistence, which takes the form of aftermaths, lingerings, and hauntings. These three terms are carefully chosen to capture both a termination and a carrying-on past that concluding moment. They at once suggest the contradictory notions of vitality, regrowth, and the desire to hold on *as well as* destruction, endings, and death or the end of usefulness. Although not a substance this project focuses on, plastics are perhaps the contemporary matter that best captures this duality, as they are now “emblematic of economies of abundance and ecological destruction” (Gabrys, Hawkins, and Michael 2013, Introduction). Plastics have arguably enabled as much as they have destroyed, their abundance a convenience that constantly requires more *stuff* to contain or remedy their consequences. More than most matter, plastics force us to pay attention to their persistence by forcing their way into our lives and bodies, for their materialities are both “indeterminate and harmful” (Gabrys, Hawkins, and Michael 2013, Introduction). As this example shows, thinking about aftermaths, lingerings, and hauntings provides an alternative to a view of materiality as made up of finalised, contained, and controllable objects.

My own examples of this are explored through the ambiguous, invasive, and uncontainable figure of the zombie, which is similar to plastics insofar as it is indeterminate in nature yet harmful in practice (Godin forthcoming). Zombie materiality allows us to employ a well-known and popular figure of horror fiction to problematise and question the so-called end of non-fictional materiality, allowing us to instead develop an alternative view of materiality as unable to be fully, definitively, and successfully ended—if we understand such endings to be synonymous with total annihilation, after which nothing of things would remain. Like plastics (which can also be zombies), zombie materiality carves a new path for itself, roaming and

drifting, lingering and haunting, and, most of all, remaining. Aftermaths further problematise material endings by questioning whether or not things can ever truly be thrown away if they continue their activities beyond the event of their death (Bennett 2010, 6)—a phenomenon that the discipline of archaeology can be said to have been founded on, given that it studies that which endures. “Every material is a becoming”, writes Ingold (2012, 435). That is to say, as a result of their vitality, things, like zombies, seem fairly unbothered by their own death, whether that takes the form of an intentional discarding, an abandonment after neglect, an event of small-scale or mass destruction, or a simple misplacing.

### 3.3. Saturation

The theme of saturation is another recurring one in the work presented here, and I use several different terms to address its many facets—accumulation, excess, abundance, profusion, and so on. Saturation is also subsumed within the category of the ungraspable, which I repeatedly employ in order to convey a form of materiality that is so large and saturated, yet so ambiguous and diffuse, that it cannot fully be conceptualised or readily understood (Godin 2022a)—something quite similar to hyperobjects. In this section, I wish to draw attention to the work of Jue and Ruiz whose edited volume *Saturation: An Elemental Politics* (2021) outlines a theory of saturation and explores its applications. The concept of saturation as they define it is in line with new materialism, which will be discussed in the next chapter, through its privileging of relations over separate, distinct entities that may or may not have been thought of in conjunction without this relational focus (Jue and Ruiz 2021, 2;4). In Jue and Ruiz’s words, “what is perhaps most useful about saturation is that it can hold many different materials and abstract senses together” (2021, 3).

Saturated is therefore not synonymous with numerous, but refers to a maximum degree of absorption or integration of a thing into another thing, thus implying the presence of more than one body. The quality of being saturated may also

be referred to as a “thick distribution of many co-present elements” (Jue and Ruiz 2021, 2-3). The use of a marker of density (thick) rather than one of quantity (e.g. many) is particularly conducive to understanding saturation and how it may be of help in situations where a mass of things cannot be counted or identified—or only identified as a stranger—and the entities that constitute it are mixed, absorbed, diffused, vague, or otherwise deeply enmeshed (*ibid*, 1;3). In other words, saturation means we are no longer speaking about many things existing alongside each other in one place or one container, but things that have melted into each other and become thick, bloated, and dark with their shared presence, while also retaining something of their own materiality. I provide an example of this in “Monstrous Things: Horror, Othering, and the Anthropocene” (Godin 2022a), which discusses ghost nets not as a simple function of ‘fishing net + things’ but as an entity so saturated, so entangled, and so hybridised that it undergoes a process of othering and becomes akin to Frankenstein’s monster.

Another key aspect of saturation as defined in *Saturation: An Elemental Politics* has to do with water, and so does the project I present here. This is perhaps most evident in “Meeting Things: On Material Encounters Along the River Thames” (Godin 2022b) and its exploration of the phenomenon of saturated coastal landscapes, as experienced by mudlarks who carry out their foraging activities along rivers. In the paper, I approach the foreshore as a borderland and describe it as a crowded meeting place between land, water, and the underworld—an approach reminiscent of saturation as defined by Jue and Ruiz. Their definition begins with an understanding that that which is saturated is “soaked” and claims that saturation is intrinsically tied to “a coastal, or littoral, imaginary” that itself brings together “terrestrial, atmospheric, and aquatic phenomena” (Jue and Ruiz 2021, 7). Although saturation implies relationships and intimacies in its very creation, and therefore a degree of material activity, I do not understand it to be a philosophy of material *agency* per se. It does, however, lend itself well to asking questions about how things behave in a context of saturation and

how such contexts emerge in the first place, which may be at least partially answered by turning to vital materialism.

### 3.4. Vibrant Matter

In *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2010), Bennett outlines a theory of matter that advocates for greater political and ecological recognition of its active participation in the world. This influential volume explores a number of animacies beyond the human, collectively known as vital materialism, and is situated within the field of new materialism, which I will discuss shortly. What is most important to know at this stage is that this philosophy of materiality focuses on engagements, encounters, and entanglements with materiality—that is, the relational space between humans and nonhumans—rather than privileging discourse (Davis 2022, 7). In doing so, vital materialism rejects the “life/matter binary informing classical vitalism” (Bennett 2010, xviii). Although not always explicitly stated, the proposition that matter possesses vitality can be read in every aspect of my project, which uses it not as an argument to be made but as its very foundation. The notion of material excess as explored previously is woven through vital materialism in the sense that matter is said to always *exceed* human meanings, desires, and intentions (Bennett 2010, 20). The overlap between humans and nonhumans that Bennett explores is particularly compelling, especially its conclusion “that we are also nonhuman and that things, too, are vital players in the world” (2010, 4).

Bennett claims that it is fairly unproblematic to view the human as materially composed, giving the examples of minerals in bones and electrical activity in the brain, but that viewing matter as anything other than passive is significantly more challenging, yet constitutes a much-needed area of inquiry (2010, 10). That is not to say that all entities participate equally in Bennett’s political ecology, but that all materialities are participants in it, while also holding *different* types and degrees of power (2010, 108-109). Indeed, a common critique of materially-oriented approaches

has to do with a perceived flattening of power, which further implies a flattening of rights or importance, leading to the objectification of people as well as a fetishising of objects so that they can be one and the same. If I bring up this debate here, it is to disengage Bennett’s vital materialism from such dehumanising politics and stress that I do not interpret it as an excuse to shy away from power dynamics. Agency is not value, and we cannot claim that there is a direct correlation between vitality (or the degree to which something or someone can be said to be alive) and power. When talking about things in general in subsequent sections, it should therefore be kept in mind that what I am talking about is always an equality of *existence* and certainly not a levelling of differences in terms in value, power, or worthiness of concern and care (Witmore 2007, 547; see also Chapter 4).

### 3.5. Drift

Another research topic and way of thinking about materiality that I have found to be a great source of inspiration is drift matter, as defined by Pétursdóttir (see 2018 and 2010). The first part of the concept, *drift*—both a verb and a noun—is defined as “the deviation of an object from an anticipated and proposed course” (Pétursdóttir 2020, 87). Drift *matter* is used to speak of debris adrift, of “wood, plastic, seaweed and more” and implies a form of movement, pointing to that which travels through time and space, to “things from afar, vagabonds, braking on land and gathering” (*ibid*). This notion of movement as intrinsic to drift matter has implications for its origins, trajectories, and composition, which are obscured in such contexts (*ibid*, 94). The terminology employed here is also a nod to dark matter, which resists definition (Pétursdóttir 2017, 183)—we know what dark matter is definitively not, but we are not so sure what it actually is. Similarly dark things “may withhold much of their being” and appear at once familiar and unfamiliar (Pétursdóttir 2020, 91;96). The notion of withholding, of something being inaccessible, obscured, or otherwise ambiguous, yet still *present*, is a key one, and will be discussed in relation to object-

oriented approaches in the next chapter. Drift also comments on excess, which, as I have already discussed, is a recurring theme in narratives unfolding in the Anthropocene.

Indeed, to work with drift and to know drift, according to Pétursdóttir, is also to acknowledge its excesses—that is, the ability of things to wake up, so to speak, to travel, and to become unrecognisable, unruly, or otherwise changed (2020, 96). Drift matter as I understand it draws attention to things that “are thrown together” but “don’t just add up” and, in doing so, allow us to distance ourselves from both narratives of loss and of inception—what a thing used to be, what it used to do, who it belonged to, where it came from, where it was made, why it is no longer of service, and so on—and refocus our attention towards the encounter to generate other ways of knowing (Pétursdóttir 2018, 95; 2020, 92; see also Stewart 2008). This way of thinking about materiality, which calls for a greater level of tolerance for ambiguity, vagueness, and withholdings, may additionally be read as a form of commentary on what sorts of archaeological materials are cared for. Indeed, archaeological and heritage value commonly tend to be derived from the origins, contexts, cultural values, and belongings of things (Pétursdóttir 2020, 96). As we have seen, tracing drift is a much more challenging endeavour, raising questions about its feasibility, but also putting its relevance into question. Less care is afforded to such things beyond approaching them as “a fault and consequence of our failed policing” (*ibid*, 92). This, I believe, establishes a link between drift and waste—they may remain separate, potentially overlapping forms of materiality, but there are noticeable similarities in their perception and treatment insofar as they are both negatively defined in terms of human failures, as opposed to material dynamism and their generative potential.

### 3.6. Waste and Disposal

A third research topic from which I draw inspiration in my theoretical approach is waste and, to some extent, disposal. I am of course aware that waste and discard



studies are well-established, prolific, and stimulating fields in their own right—not merely a topic of interest (relevant texts include Armiero 2021, Hawkins 2018, Liboiron and Lepawsky 2022, Liboiron 2021, Rathje and Murphy 1993, and Weber 2021, among many others). I only skim the surface of issues such as the nature of waste, which more works have been written about than can be listed here (see, most notably, Douglas 1966/2003). Although my engagement with waste studies is superficial at best, waste is a category of matter that I do employ and as such it is worth defining what I understand waste, disposal, and waste management to be. Waste is commonly thought of in terms of what may be called “the functional paradigm” wherein matter becomes waste when it no longer performs its intended function, no longer performs it adequately, or a performance of its intended function is no longer required at all (Sosna and Brunclíková 2016, 4). While this definition is, based on my understanding of waste, accurate, it should also be extended to other forms of materiality that do not advance the project of (super)modernity, meaning that waste-making is not solely a human-driven process nor does it require human intentionality. Common themes in waste studies go well beyond intentional disposal and include topics such as “ambiguity, absence, hybridity, mutability, transformation and similar concepts that reflect resistance to the images of the world organised into right angles” (Sosna and Brunclíková 2016, 2).

Acts of resistance against the image of a perfectly organised, sanitised world include challenging the idea that waste is a category that is somehow final, immobile, inert, or otherwise represents a definite end—at which point it either stays where it is placed or disappears entirely (where to, we do not know). Indeed, waste is never final, and neither is its disposal (Hetherington 2004, 157). A more accurate depiction of waste is one that is dynamic and acknowledges that forms of constant management are needed, or else waste will escape. Hetherington offers a particularly compelling definition of disposal when writing that it “is about managing an ever-present potential absence such that that absence does not itself make an appearance as a visible agent” (2004, 171). Waste, then, does not in and of itself constitute an absence,

for, as we have already seen, matter has vitality (this becomes even more apparent when we consider the generative or life-giving powers of waste, from animals, bugs, and plants that feed on discards to human activities such as dumpster diving). The idea of disposal as rendering waste inert is therefore an issue of managing absence so that it remains absent, of always doing something so that nothing ever happens. Waste shows us that absence is not a form of inertia, but something much more dynamic and ongoing, something that needs to be continuously performed.

When the agency of waste makes itself known and the absence returns, we are confronted with something unexpected and shocking, something that haunts (Hetherington 2004, 170). While I also address hauntings, within the scope of this project I have chosen to associate waste with another creature belonging to the realm of horror: the zombie, as previously mentioned. I argue that “waste is zombie materiality, and the zombie is embodied waste” in an effort to capture the aforementioned returning absence, the shock of waste maintaining its vitality (Godin forthcoming). By evoking the zombie as both a literal and a metaphorical figure, I portray waste-returned as a disordering, dangerous undead force, and draw attention to its ability to threaten order (Douglas 2005 *cited in* Sosna and Brunclíková 2016, 4). That is not to say that all waste and all absences made present are inherently threatening—waste can in fact be nurturing, feeding or giving rise to new forms of life—but that the notions of vitality, agency, and lingerings can all be expressed through the category of waste due to its dynamism, unruliness, and relentless desire to escape and return unless rigorously managed. The two recurring themes I presented earlier—aftermaths and saturation—and the three topics of inquiry I have explored—vibrancy, drift, and waste—point towards one conclusion, which is that matter participates “in diverse social, economic, environmental and political relationships” (Sosna and Brunclíková 2016, 4).

## Chapter 4 — Archaeologies of Materiality

### 4.1. Thing Theory

Having dedicated the previous chapter to outlining ways of thinking about things that underpin this dissertation, I now turn to the more explicitly archaeological and material approaches that guide it. Once again, my goal is not to offer a review of all recent and historical developments in the field of materiality, but rather to situate the work presented in subsequent chapters as well as in the associated articles within the existing academic literature. This is why I begin with recent theory, from the late twentieth century specifically, and the tensions that led to the emergence of new materialism and other approaches that espouse related outlooks. I then delve into thing theory as it has been articulated by proponents of a flat ontology, focusing on symmetrical archaeology, Object-Oriented Ontology, and the ways in which such views on materiality intersect with posthumanism. I also reference weak theory and queer theory, which both have a strong influence on the theoretical underpinnings of my project, although they at times tend to be enacted in practice rather than stated in words. As such, they constitute *embedded* rather than overt theoretical approaches to be applied, but are arguably even more present than the archaeological theories presented here as they always precede them.

Too many scholars have pointed out the inadequacies and insufficiencies of a strict human versus nonhuman division to list them here. Ingold, among others, speaks of a disconnect in the humanities and sciences, said to have emerged as a result of the great divide between a material world that is intolerant of living organisms, and a human world that almost exclusively concerns itself with materiality in the form of finished products that can be of service (2012, 427)—or, I would add, with raw materials as well, to the extent that they could become finished products and generate capital. In light of this problem, Pétursdóttir and Olsen mourn the loss of what can be learned through direct encounters with things—a method which has largely fallen out

of fashion, as they point out. They instead advocate for “re-establish[ing] a trust in things and in experiences resulting from our mutual interaction” (Pétursdóttir and Olsen 2018, 101). Such a statement implies a phenomenological belief in the mutuality of interactions, which is in direct contradiction with the idea of a divide between the realm of people and that of materiality. Linguistic frictions are also at play here, given that the tenets of social constructionism, the universality of their application, and the privileging of linguistic and representation-based approaches to world-making have come under increased scrutiny in recent times (Sencindiver 2017).

#### 4.2. New Materialism

The study of things may not be conducted in the same way by all or done for the same purposes, and levels of interest vary greatly across the discipline. That being said, when it comes to the treatment of things in archaeology, the recent past has certainly witnessed a welcome shift or turn to things according to some (see, for example, Olsen and Witmore 2021; Olsen, Shanks, Webmoor, and Witmore 2012; Olsen 2010; Sørensen 2016a; Webmoor 2007; Witmore 2007) and a partial, contentious, or worrying return of materiality according to others (see, for example, McGuire 2021; Ribeiro 2016 and 2019; Van Dyke 2021). In any case, the late twentieth century saw the arrival of new approaches, a few of which I explore in subsequent sections. These emerged as reactions against the linguistic turn and as responses to post-structuralist theory, critiquing the inadequacy of their reliance on language, rejecting the language/reality dichotomy, and advocating for the reintegration of experience as a valid form of knowledge production (Alaimo and Hekman 2008, 2; Coole and Frost 2010, 2-3). Among them is new materialism, which is a profoundly interdisciplinary field of inquiry, employed by many disciplines including cultural studies, anthropology, archaeology, philosophy, and feminist studies, at the forefront of which we find scholars such as Bennett (2010), Barad

(2003, 2007, and 2012), and Braidotti (2013a and 2013b), to only name those I lean on the most.

The inquiries of new materialism seem to revolve around a definition of matter as lively, vital, and/or capable of agency. This allows new materialism to speak critically about the relationship between human and nonhuman, nature and the material, the role of materiality, the status of life itself, and other ethical, political, socio-economic, and geopolitical issues (Coole and Frost 2010, 7). While new materialism is both complex and broad in its inquiries and applications, we may summarise new materialist approaches by saying that they: claim that humans and matter are not ontologically distinct and that such a view is both untenable and counterproductive; largely refuse the view of things as passively awaiting linguistic and/or cultural interpretation; and attempt to account for a co-created world that, as Sencindiver writes in an encyclopaedic entry, leaves “neither materiality nor ideality intact” (2017)—or, in other words, comes into being through what has been referred to as interactions, relationships, entanglements, hybrids, and so on (Webmoor and Witmore 2008, 58). Although such a list is inevitably an over-simplification of several related approaches that have been much more eloquently explained in other texts, I nonetheless wish to bring attention to these three basic characteristics of new materialism since they provide theoretical grounds for my project. They will be drawn on extensively, both implicitly and explicitly, namely in relation to monstrosity, ecology, and queer theory.

#### 4.3. Weak Theory

To properly reflect and account for aftermaths, lingerings, accumulation, and saturation, the thing theory I adopt necessarily involves a high degree of tolerance for ambiguity and the unknown. Incorporating the notion of ambiguity into theory might seem at odds with the popular view that theories are a series of principles or systems of ideas intended to be applied to phenomena in order to explain them. Archaeology

may find itself in the middle of this interpretive dilemma: encountering the unknown and seeking ways to capture that moment on the one hand, and a desire to make it known, to make it make sense, on the other (Pétursdóttir 2012, 599). In addressing this problem, I am particularly enthused by the approach taken by Stewart (2008)—and also employed by Pétursdóttir and Olsen (2018)—stemming from the work of Kosofsky Sedgwick (1997) on queer readings of fiction. These works all employ weak theory—that is, a form of theory that allows itself to be swayed by what it encounters, and “becomes undone by its attention to things that don’t just add up but take on a life of their own as problems for thought” (Stewart 2008, 72). We can think of weak theory as the opposite of a strong theory that offers a system of reasoning, concepts, and principles that is then applied to and/or proven through examples (or, alternatively, disproven and swiftly replaced).

Stewart explains the possibilities afforded by weak theory by writing that “the point is not to judge the value of these objects or to somehow get their representation ‘right’ but to wonder where they might go and what potential modes of knowing, relating, and attending to things are already present in them” (2008, 71). While weak theory is not specifically intended to be used in archaeology and applied to its materials, the parallels are rather obvious. Weak theory addresses possibilities, accounts for ambiguity and vagueness, and does not see the unfinished, obscured, or unknown as antithetical to theorising (Steward 2008, 80-81). I argue that these aspects are in line with the project of new materialism since they leave room for various forms of becomings, attachments, and lingerings, choosing to focus on trajectories over final destinations (*ibid*). The weakness of weak theory is what makes it flexible, and enables actual phenomenological encounters to be incorporated into the process of theorising while also influencing it in return. In the field of archaeology, Pétursdóttir and Olsen speak in favour of forms of theorising that promote “theory as mobile, adrift” and which are able to encounter “things of different and often unexpected kind” while being “not unmoved by these encounters” (2018, 102). It is for these reasons that weak theory is particularly compelling to me.

#### 4.4. Symmetrical Archaeology

Following this brief journey into weak theory, I now introduce symmetrical and object-oriented approaches, which will be explored in this section and the next. Although these are not at odds with new materialism broadly speaking, the difference in labels indicates their special emphasis on embracing a less anthropocentric and more symmetrical view of humans and nonhumans—or, drawing on DeLanda, a flatter ontology (2002; see also Bryant 2011a)—including their potentially equal involvement in historical processes and the important roles they both play in them (Ingold 2012, 430). Olsen identifies an asymmetry in what could be described as social archaeologies, and that asymmetry resides in the ways in which objects tend to be viewed as embodying social relations and cultural meanings (2003, 94). Materiality, therefore, acts as a vehicle from which culture can be extracted, presumably leaving behind an ‘empty’ thing that has served its purpose as a container. In other words, things become stand-ins for cultural meanings, or “nothing but a thin transparent film situated between us and our culture” (Olsen 2003, 94). Agreeing with this critique, Witmore maintains that archaeologists do have a responsibility with regard to the production of narratives about the past and present, but that “we have also a responsibility to attend to other qualities of the material world” (2007, 554). Returning to the linguistic critique introduced at the beginning of this chapter, Witmore adds that “There is more to understanding than meaning” (*ibid*).

Symmetrical archaeology does not claim to be a new turn, a new approach, or a new discovery. Its proponents have described it as a loose notion and nothing new (Shanks 2007, 593), and as a principle or guideline but certainly not a “full-blown platform” (Olsen and Witmore 2015, 194). What it proposes is the addition of the symmetry principle to archaeological practice, in order to emphasise that humans and nonhumans, as well as past and present, “are thoroughly mixed ontologically” (Witmore 2007, 546; see also Latour 1991/1993 and 2005; Olsen 2003; Witmore 2006). This angle draws from Latour's earlier proposition of a symmetrical

*anthropology*, which serves to dismantle “the two Great Divides”: Us versus Them (or the West and the Rest), and Nature versus Society (or the nonhuman versus the human) (Latour 1991/1993, 95;99). As Latour writes, “Symmetrical anthropology must realize that the two Great Divides do not describe reality — our own as well as that of others — but define the particular way Westerners had of establishing their relations with others as long as they felt modern” (*ibid*, 103). Commenting on whether or not the principle of symmetry involves erasing differentiation, Latour adds that it is not about turning one's back on certain ways of organising the world, but about recognising divides as *one of many ways* of doing so, thus “believing neither in the radical distinction between humans and nonhumans at home, nor in the total overlap of knowledge and society elsewhere” (*ibid*, 101). Symmetrical archaeology embraces the same approach, believing that “symmetrical levelling is neither axiological nor ethical” in the sense that it does not strive for sameness, nor for extending equal value or equivalent ethics to all entities (Witmore 2007, 547).

Much of the aforementioned scepticism around symmetrical approaches and new materialism more generally has articulated itself around this point, most notably with regard to the implications of object agency (Ribeiro 2016 and 2019), and whether or not it is necessary to involve objects in the creation of an ethics of care (Van Dyke 2021). This leads us to wonder why such a levelling is desirable if it must be followed by a disclaimer of the ‘it's not what you think!’ variety. As the chapters in Part II of this summary will hopefully show, I am very invested in exposing how binaries and dualities are unproductive at best, and harmful at worse. Symmetrical archaeology actively works at demonstrating that an *a priori* divide between past and present is a modernist trope that is rather easily disproven by experience (Shanks 2007, 589), while the separation between object and subject is an equally unhelpful legacy from the Enlightenment (Witmore 2007, 252; see also Latour 1991/1993). The logic behind these claims is that the presupposition of a profound and irreconcilable divide between nature and culture, human and nonhuman, past and present, vital and dead, and so forth actually limits them, which prevents their differences from emerging, for they



have already been categorised (Olsen and Witmore 2015, 188). By acknowledging the potential for difference from the onset—that is, applying the principle of symmetry—it becomes possible to bypass the divides that stifle entities by “a priori subsuming them to an asymmetrical regime of radical divides” (*ibid*).

The foundational principles of symmetrical archaeology, according to Witmore, are as follows:

- Archaeology begins with mixtures, not bifurcations.
- There is always a variety of agencies whether human or otherwise.
- There is more to understanding than meaning.
- Change is spawned out of fluctuating relations between entities, not of event revolutions in linear temporality.
- The past is not exclusively past.
- Humanity begins with things (2007, 549).

While I do not directly address the first and final points, I believe the other guidelines are followed fairly closely in the work I present here, so much so that it can indeed be said to adopt a flat ontology. The rationale behind this is to reflect the “responsibility to the qualities of things, the textures, the properties of materials” that I introduced at the start of this section (Witmore 2007, 554). Part of that responsibility is also recognising a form of existence that is at the heart of object-oriented approaches, as discussed in the next section, which is the existence of things beyond the relational networks in which they are entangled (although, as I have already argued, these relational networks are also very important). As Olsen and Witmore write, “sometimes they just exist, non-relationally, and simply do not act at all” (2015, 190). I believe this withholding is noteworthy specifically because of the possibility of non-relationality, leading to the ominous sense that things are up to something they have not told us about, which I address in Chapter 6.

#### 4.5. Object-Oriented Ontology

Object-oriented approaches also claim that things are real beyond the investments humans make into them and beyond their potential for being vessels for culture, and maintain that this facet of their existence is largely inaccessible to us, existing beyond our purview and independently from our wills and desires (Kerr 2016). This outlook considers both humans and nonhumans as existing in the world, alongside each other, on the same footing. It is this equality of being to which the aforementioned ontological flattening refers. While I am aware that I am repeating myself, it should once again be said that the proponents of Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO)—just like those of posthumanism and symmetrical archaeology—maintain that they do not imply equality or sameness, but are intended to reflect an equal ability to exist while maintaining differentiation. As Bogost puts it, “all objects equally exist, but not all objects exist equally” (2012, 11). Turning to OOO, we see its emergence in the late 1990s, articulated by Harman. It is inspired primarily by Heidegger and phenomenology, but also owes some of its principles to Latour, from whom it departs by placing the hidden depths of objects at the centre of its theorising, rather than seeing materials as existing primarily in/through their relationships (Harman 2019a, 592; 2019b, 274).

Unlike symmetrical archaeology, which seems to view itself as more of an approach, OOO presents itself as an ambitious “new theory of everything” (see Harman 2018) outlining the being of all things and their relations (Pétursdóttir and Olsen 2018, 101). Harman identifies the most influential works to have grown out of OOO as Bogost’s *Alien Phenomenology, or What It’s Like to Be a Thing* (2012) and Morton’s *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World* (2013), as well as *The Democracy of Objects* (2011a) by Bryant, whose thinking later distanced itself from Harman’s OOO (Harman 2018, 9). Before looking at what it proposes, it may be worth looking at what OOO rejects. Of particular relevance to this dissertation is the rejection of the scientific proposition that “everything that exists must be basic

and simple” (Harman 2018, 29). Harman argues that the reduction of entities to their smallest components, to the claim that all is just atoms, precludes the phenomenon of emergence, which occurs when objects recombine and new properties emerge from their alliances (2018, 30; 2011b, 25). Making this irreducibility central to the definition of objects (as symmetrical archaeology also does), Harman writes that “An object is whatever cannot be reduced to either of the two basic kinds of knowledge: what something is made of, and what it does” (*ibid*, 257). This is one of the places where what I discuss somewhat departs from OOO: by naming this irreducibility at the point where the unknowable becomes frightening, and calling it the monstrous.

Given that this section is not intended to serve as a full review of OOO but as a background for the work I present, I will not do the theory justice, but instead focus on the areas that have inspired me and from which I borrow. Of the 7 principles of OOO provided by Harman, the following are particularly relevant:

- (1) All objects must be given equal attention, whether they be human, non-human, natural, cultural, real or fictional.
- (2) Objects are not identical with their properties, but have a tense relationship with those properties, and this very tension is responsible for all of the change that occurs in the world.
- (3) Objects come in just two kinds: *real objects* exist whether or not they currently affect anything else, while *sensual objects* exist only in relation to some real object.
- (4) Real objects cannot relate to one another directly, but only indirectly, by means of a sensual object (2018, 9).

The first principle—a rejection of anthropocentrism—seems like a given at this point, but it is interesting to note that Harman also accepts fictional entities as proper objects rather than purely cultural projections. While I may not directly refer to or employ the vocabulary Harman uses in principles two to four, these ideas are important in two ways. First, because objects are not reducible to their properties but exceed them and exist beyond them, they are not solely constituted through their

relations as correlationism, the philosophy of access, or actor-network theory may lead to believe (see Young 2020). There is something else, which brings me to my second point: OOO draws attention to another space that exists independently from real objects. While Harman refers to this encounter as occurring through sensual objects and properties, I speak of it in less material terms as a third space (Godin 2022a), a heterotopia or a borderland (Godin 2022b). Although the terminology is different, the concept itself is informed by OOO.

#### 4.6. Posthuman Approaches

Another perspective that influences the work presented here and situates itself in a space that cuts across the realms of the human and the nonhuman is posthumanism. It is perhaps best defined in contrast to humanist perspectives that view the person as an intentional, whole or non-porous, and autonomous actor. The *post* of posthuman not only indicates a response, locating it after humanism, but may also be thought of as *beyond*, meaning that part of our existence unfolds beyond ourselves. Indeed, a posthuman view sees actors as “distributed across a dynamic set of relationships that the human participates in but does not completely intend or control” (Keeling and Nguyen Lehman 2018, 5). The parallels between such a view and the Anthropocene as largely involuntary are numerous. Although not an archaeological approach at its core, posthumanism is a common theme in academic inquiries into the Anthropocene due to its ability to capture profusion that not only exceeds the human but becomes embedded with(in) the human. Such perspectives are also often encountered in works on new materialism, OOO, ecology, environmental humanities, studies of technology, and so on (Luciano and Chen 2015, 189).

Keeling and Nguyen Lehman outline the three central propositions of posthumanism: first, that the human is “physically, chemically, and biologically enmeshed and dependent on the environment”; second, that we are “moved to action through interactions”; and, third and last, that the individual possesses “no attribute

that is uniquely human but is instead made up of a larger evolving ecosystem” (2018, 1). While this does not necessarily make posthumanism a materially-oriented approach, it does portray the human—and, by association, the nonhuman—as always relational, always embedded, and always enmeshed with others. Unlike the approaches reviewed earlier, posthumanism does not seem to carve a special space for withholding, for things-in-themselves, hence why I do not embrace the third proposition in this dissertation. Nonetheless, what emerges here is a “new knowing subject” which itself is “a complex assemblage of human and non-human, planetary and cosmic, given and manufactured” (Braidotti 2013a, 12-13). One of the most compelling examples of this new subject is Haraway’s cyborg, which is “a condensed image of both imagination and material reality” intended to represent how “we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism” (2016, 118; see also Haraway 1991). Two additional bodies of posthuman scholarship are of particular interest for this project specifically: posthuman performativity as articulated by Barad (2003) and queer animacies as defined by Chen (2012), both of which approach posthumanism from a queer angle. Since I have explained elsewhere what these approaches are, I here only wish to highlight how they situate themselves within posthumanism as a way of grounding my work and explaining in what ways they guide me.

#### 4.7. Queer Perspectives

This brings us to theories that explicitly define themselves as queer, or employ notions of queerness. It may also be worth pointing out how such perspectives differ from the other approaches to materiality explored in this chapter. Like symmetrical archaeology, in accordance with the principles of weak theory, and in contrast to OOO, queer theory does not view itself as a proper theory, but as a movement or lens that opposes the dominance of the *normal* (Halperin 1995, 62), and which is never fixed or stable (Barad 2012, 29). Queer approaches often reference the order of things

and, while they may not mean *actual* things, the existence of this order in social life mirrors that of the order applied to materiality—and, if we collapse the divide between the two, it all becomes part of the same regime of ordering. While the rejection of *a priori* categorisation promoted by symmetrical archaeology, as well as posthumanism’s blurring of the human and nonhuman, are both echoed in queer perspectives, their theoretical groundings are different. The focus of queer approaches on the identification, recognition, and dismantling of normativity is not as present in materially-oriented theories, which similarly scrutinise dichotomies, but do not necessarily place them in a framework of dominance and oppression. This should not come as a surprise since the history of queerness is in heteronormativity and the construction of sex and gender, not in linguistic tensions or in the exhaustion of Marxism and other approaches. Queer perspectives do not emerge from a material problem, but from a confrontational positioning *vis-à-vis* normativity—this does not mean that its lens cannot be applied to material entities, and I argue that such an application gives us access to a rich archive that has much to contribute to archaeology (see Chapter 8).

The first approach I would like to highlight is that of Barad, who proposes a “posthumanist account of performativity” that questions the status of materiality as a given or a mere vessel, and allows it to be an active participant in the world’s “intra-activity” or its becomings (Barad 2003, 803;827). In a posthuman account of performativity, the primary units of the world are neither things nor humans, but dynamic phenomena that always involve multiple, entangled actors (*ibid*, 818). Their acts constitute the queer performativity of the universe and categorically reject a strict distinction between humans and nonhumans. In doing so, this approach joins many others in questioning the nature/culture binary (*ibid*, 827). It is also a new materialist perspective in that it doubts the ability of linguistic practices to fully account for pre-existing things. By focusing on actions and how they come together to create realities, Barad moves away from language as the primary form of representation (2003, 802). A materialist, posthuman, performative understanding ultimately aims to “develop

coherent philosophical positions that deny that there are representations on the one hand and ontologically separate entities awaiting representation on the other” (Barad 2003, 807).

Between the lines of these claims, there is certainly something to be read about nature and ecology—or, the space in which intra-activities are activated. Queer theory becomes particularly useful as we interrogate the concept of nature and how it relates to other entities. For this, I lean mainly on the writings of Chen (2012) on the topic of queer animacies (see Godin forthcoming for a full discussion). Luciano and Chen ask, “has the queer ever been human” (2015, 186)? Or has it always dwelled in the *post* of humanism? Indeed, as they rightly point out, a substantial number of texts in queer theory ponder the *nature* of the human and of queerness, the *naturalness* of the human and of queerness, and queerness’ relation to the notion of being (see Colebrook 2015; Giffney and Hird 2008; Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson 2010a; Seymour 2012 and 2013). It is not too much of a stretch, then, to turn the lens of queerness onto nature itself in order to come to an understanding of ecology as “a complex system of interdependency” (Luciano and Chen 2015, 188). The growing interest in queer ecocriticism we see today is believed to have emerged partly as a form of commentary on the climatic changes of the Anthropocene and as a response to widespread precarity.

New realities demand new modes of engagement between the human and nonhuman that can be said to be both posthuman and queer, by virtue of their emphasis on entanglements beyond the individual, on the spaces in-between, and on the concept of othering (Luciano and Chen 2015, 193). These approaches are uniquely equipped to capture the unintentional aspect of the Anthropocene and its material dynamism. Queer theory is embedded in the philosophies of materiality that I employ and explored in the previous chapter, as well as the archaeological approaches reviewed here. In developing a thing theory by drawing inspiration from others, my hope is to build a patchwork framework that is capable of learning through encounters with things and the mutuality of interactions, with respect for withholdings. This

makes it a materially-oriented approach because of its focus, and I believe this approach to be relevant due to the substantial material basis of our era, as described in Chapter 2. In rejecting the ontological distinction between person and materiality, I attempt to pay attention to things for their own sake, and ask them not just what they *mean*, but what they *do* and how much they *conceal*. If I am reluctant to definitively label my outlook, it is because my theory needs to remain weak if I am to accept ambiguity and vagueness not as flaws to be remedied, but as qualities to be worked with, as they are, so that we can move forward with an investigation of that which exists, yet cannot be fully grasped.

#### 4.8. Material Failure

Addressing the material dimension in relation to queerness more directly, we may say that queerness disrupts the proper, taken-for-granted order of things, metaphorically and literally (Ahmed 2006a, 565). Davidson and Rooney ask, “What are some of the discursive or material effects of recasting queer as either a turning toward or a turning away from certain objects, things or persons?” (2020, Introduction). Archaeology is no stranger to discourses around that which attracts or repels, inspires awe or disgust, evokes nostalgia or a desire to forget, and demands careful conservation or swift removal. While archaeology does celebrate successful objects whose purpose has endured by deeming them worthy of care and preservation, it often turns towards failed things as well; middens and landfills, the fragmented and incomplete, the abandoned and discarded, and that which no longer fulfils its intended role. This orientation becomes even more pertinent if we trace the beginnings of contemporary archaeology back to the garbology of Rathje and his contemporaries; to the idea that the present can be read in what it rejects, and that this reading of the unintentional and unwanted material record may be even more telling than that which is actively maintained and curated (see, most notably, Rathje and Cullen, 1993).



Although it is virtually never labelled as such, there is something undeniably queer to this practice, which seeks to also tell oblique stories of the every day, of what took place and was materialised, without necessarily belonging to a mainstream success story. It additionally acknowledges that failed things carry on in unwanted, unforeseen, and unintended ways, and that their unruly legacies impact the present and future. Despite the fact that it is rarely placed alongside queer theory, this archaeological orientation towards failure is further reflected in OOO as evidenced by Harman's take on the teachings of Heidegger, which I have not yet mentioned. The idea that "the thingness of the object is brought to our attention when it breaks" (Hall 2014, 160) is often cited as both an example of the orientation towards objects that this school of thought promotes to achieve a more symmetrical view of the world, and as a manifestation of object agency through its failure.

This may be why Heidegger's tool analysis is so present in Harman's earlier work, with emphasis on the places where Heidegger's work breaks away from that of his mentor, Husserl (Harman 2010, 17-19). This break centres around the hidden agency of things: for Husserl, the hidden world of the hammer, to name the most popular example, can be conjured up if one decides to look for it. For Heidegger and Harman, however, the "withdrawn reality" and "subterranean depth" of the tool do not make themselves known while the hammer is at work, but may reveal their existence in its failure to perform its tasks, such as when it breaks (Harman 2010, 19). Harman, therefore, concludes that the fact that things "sometimes generate obtrusive surprises proves that they *are not* reducible to their current sleek functioning amidst the unified system of the world" (2010, 20-21, emphasis in original). We may further argue that it is because of our closeness to the material dimension, because "our being-in-the-world is so enmeshed in networks of things" that we perceive these things as part of ourselves, and ultimately see through them "unless they call attention to themselves by breaking down, are in the wrong places or are missing" (Olsen 2003, 96).

In line with this, using the simple metaphor of the window, we may say that an approach not oriented towards things looks through them in order to see the person on

the other side of the glass; when the window gets filthy, it confronts us with its presence and asserts its ‘thingliness’ by coming into view rather than facilitating the viewing (Brown 2001, 4). Through this interaction, the window and the dirt both emerge as nonhuman actors that have material consequences. They do not merely conceal the person on the other side of the glass pane, but question what windows are and what they are for. Of course, we are not speaking of actual windows (although the obscuring may indeed be literal), but of the popular trope of objects-as-containers, in which human meaning is placed and later extracted, leaving behind an empty shell. This prompts discussion around the relationship between things, breakage, failure, and the natural, highlighting how, in the study of performativity, animacy, and agency “one cannot take for granted that all the actors, actions, and effects are human” (Barad 2012, 32). We may think of materially-oriented queer research both as a way to erode boundaries between actors and as a contributing factor to the end of naturalness, which I discuss in Chapter 7. This, in turn, make possible an exploration of the material relations that keeping such boundaries in place would otherwise conceal (Barad 2012, 31).

## Part II

## Chapter 5 — The Ungraspable

### 5.1. Transition

The first half of this summary article ended with praising approaches informed by posthumanism and queer theory for their ability to address the unintentional and the dynamic, both of which are intrinsic qualities of the Anthropocene, or Age of Things. I additionally hinted at my theoretical shyness and weak commitment to labels, claiming that they are largely incompatible with the sort of vagueness and ambiguity that working with unruly anthropogenic materials demands. This is what I want to turn to as we transition into Part II: that which cannot be grasped, yet needs to be worked with if we are to work in, and with the present moment. This marks a departure from the philosophical and methodological positioning established in Part I, whose role was to introduce the academic context in which I situate myself. Now, we turn to my own contributions, based on existing works, to the topics of horror and monstrosity, nature and ecocriticism, as well as queer ecology and theory. This is followed by a final discussion, which briefly reflects back on my doctoral project—that is, both parts of this summary, the three associated articles, and the fieldwork that preceded them.

Chapters 1 and 2 in Part I, respectively a contextualisation of my dissertation and an exploration of the Anthropocene, have already touched on the aforementioned phenomenon of the ungraspable. Indeed, I have described the Anthropocene as so profuse, so large, so complex, yet so diffuse and vague, that it is virtually (and increasingly) unthinkable (Thacker 2011, 1; Thomas, Williams, and Zalasiewicz 2020, Chapter 1). A material manifestation of this is to be found in Morton's hyperobjects, which evade the conventional categories of space and time by virtue of their size and distribution (see, among others, 2013). The ungraspable here emerges as a key element of the present moment, but also as something I actively choose to incorporate into my methods (which, tellingly, are non-invasive) and my interpretations (informed

by queer theory). I make it a central part of my argument to *not* make things graspable, to *not* deconstruct them into recognisable parts or categories, and to *not* remedy this so-called fault in their understanding. In the first part of this summary, I credited this approach to the discussion on the familiar and unfamiliar in contemporary archaeology, and to work on the notion of vagueness, both of which I will now look at more closely.

## 5.2. The Unfamiliar

The ungraspable, as I employ the term, has its roots in the idea of contemporary archaeology as alienation. There has been much discussion around the idea that turning the archaeological lens towards ourselves involves a distancing, “a case of making the familiar unfamiliar” (Buchli and Lucas 2001, 9). Buchli and Lucas argue that the archaeology of a more distant past involves encountering the unknown and domesticating it; encountering to present, from which we have no or minimal temporal detachment, becomes “almost a perverse exercise in making familiar categorisations and spatial perceptions unfamiliar” (*ibid*). However, it may instead be the case that this work of alienation does not need to be carried out so deliberately. Modern ruins, for example, may *seem* familiar, but their very presence, by virtue of existing outside of the order of things-for-us or things-as-usual, exposes “their conspicuously othered and transient mode of being” (Pétursdóttir and Olsen 2014, 12). Pétursdóttir argues that estrangement is not due to a temporal distancing; if that were the case, contemporary archaeology should present itself as evident, facing “considerably less strangeness to explain away” than its prehistoric counterpart, for example (2014, 336). As I hope to show with this dissertation, the strangeness of material legacies in the Anthropocene does not need to be made or worked at, but is an intrinsic part of things themselves.

To illustrate this tension between the familiar and unfamiliar, we may turn to the example of plastiglomerates—those rock-like masses, a bizarre assemblage of

natural debris held together by synthetic plastics that have moulded themselves around and through them. A particularly ambitious archaeologist with access to a laboratory might come across a plastiglomerate stranded on a beach, and embark on a journey to analyse all that constitutes it—sediments, driftwood, organic materials such as fish bones and algae, and plastics, among others. In the unlikely event that they were able to identify the chemical make-up and provenance of every bit of microplastics that constitutes the plastiglomerate, they would be able to produce a table detailing exactly what it is made up of, where those materials came from, who made them, and what their original uses were. We may then ask, what does this domesticating tell us about the plastiglomerate? It tells us about the journey of plastics and the processes of transformation they undergo. It gives us insight into how such materials degrade and recombine. It might also allow us to more effectively remove them from oceans in the future, or even prevent them from ending up there in the first place. But I ask again, what does this tell us *about the plastiglomerate*? About the experience of coming across one? Of it being a new, unintentional, nonsensical object? Do its parts reflect its sum, or does the latter exceed them? Perhaps understanding impossible materials like plastiglomerates for their own sake requires accepting “vagueness itself [as] an ontological fact” (Sørensen 2016b, 742).

### 5.3. Vagueness

Before turning to vagueness, a brief return to OOO is in order. “It seems to me that one of the greatest ethical challenges for thought is to encounter the world as being enough”, writes Bryant on the *Larval Subjects* blog (2011b), drawing on the concepts of over- and undermining articulated by Harman. This particular post is in dialogue with an earlier one made by Harman (2011b) on the *Object-Oriented Philosophy* blog, which acts as a synthesis of these two concepts as they have been articulated in various publications (see Harman 2011a and 2018, among others). Undermining refers to the idea that “the real action happens at a deeper level”

(Harman 2011b), which I have also called the ‘it’s all just atoms’ argument in the previous chapter. It implies the existence of a “primal whole” from which all is a derivative, giving a sense of shallowness to entities insofar as their current state is not real—it is always something else, the concatenation of smaller matter, always becoming but never simply just being (Harman 2011a, 25). This is in direct contradiction with the idea of irreducibility, which is central to OOO, but there is another extreme: overmining. Overmining is reminiscent of the archaeological debate around the potential of things to be more than vehicles for cultural meaning. Indeed, overmining removes vitality from objects (Harman 2011a, 24), “letting them exist only in their appearances, relations, qualities, or effects” (Bryant, Srnicek, and Harman 2011, 9). Here, there is no hidden depth, no withholding, nothing that materiality keeps for itself, thus contradicting the approaches to materiality I have presented in Chapter 4.

How, then, may we approach the unfamiliar without falling into the traps of undermining and overmining? Returning to my earlier example, how could we speak of the plastiglomerate without either concluding that it is just plastics and therefore not an *actual* thing, or exhausting its materiality through description, assuming that there is nothing more to it than the eye can see? To address this issue, I would like to turn to the notion of vagueness. It is defined by Sørensen as “a socially important yet academically largely overlooked aspect of human interaction with the world” (2016b, 741). In line with this, things that are vague are “phenomena without clear-cut or distinct boundaries” (*ibid*, 747). The way I understand and interpret it, the overarching argument made by Sørensen in this paper may be summarised as follows: vagueness constitutes a way of categorising the world, the things in it, as well as human experiences, and, as such, is real and matters—for archaeology and for any discipline seeking to establish certain facts (spatial, chronological, social, or otherwise), however, it constitutes a problem to be solved. In solving the problem of vagueness, something is necessarily lost, for it was not a fault of interpretation at all, but an interpretation in and of itself. Similarly, for Andersson, to accept “the incompleteness

of our knowledge is not to admit a defect in our faculty of seeing and understanding” but to acknowledge “the significance of incompleteness” (2014, 38). Because things “never speak in complete statements” (Andersson 2014, 37), something of them is always obscured, withdrawn, or withheld (as per the principles of symmetrical archaeology and OOO outlined earlier). Borrowing Bryant’s phrasing (2011b), it seems to me that to accept vagueness without attempting to overcome it also means *encountering the world as enough*.

#### 5.4. The Ungraspable

Another important element that is closely related to both the capacity of things to withhold and their vagueness is the ungraspable. What I call the ungraspable is characterised by the aforementioned vagueness and resides in-between, across, and outside of known categories and common-sense knowledge. I list all three transgressions because I worry that simply saying ‘in-between’ suggests a continuum or spectrum with two distinct ends, which are ordinarily seen as polar opposites. For example, we may picture the subject on the left, the object on the right, and everything in the world somewhere on that line, but *always on that line*—more like one or more like the other, but never anything else. I want to give things a chance to be on that line if that is where they belong, but also to be somewhere else entirely if this vagueness becomes them. While seeking only the ungraspable that resides outside of continuums sounds good in theory, I have found it simply impossible to do without first establishing some baselines from which it can depart. If materiality does not fit anywhere known, then the best we can do is describe it negatively, providing some context by stating where exactly in the known it fails to belong.

I do not believe that this removes such unruly materiality from the register of the ungraspable, but that it instead makes its “fuzzy boundaries” (Sørensen 2016b, 750) visible so that we may begin to work with this vagueness, employing “a methodology capable of embracing the erosion of clarity” (*ibid*, 759). To this end, I



draw from several oppositions and/or tensions in the texts associated with this dissertation: known and unknown (primarily Godin 2022a), nature and culture (2022a and forthcoming), life and non-life (2022a and forthcoming), inside and outside (2022b and forthcoming), as well as human and nonhuman (all research outputs). These are also present in the chapters that follow this one, and the notion of the ungraspable can be felt throughout my dissertation. Additionally, these are all categories that monstrosity likes to play with and subvert, so that the monster itself has grown to embody this challenging of divides and the resulting fuzziness. Such monstrous things, “unable to be properly ordered or classified”, go on to “defy prescriptive hierarchical values that demand the subordination of objects or inert matter to the all-powerful subject” (McDonald and Vena 2016, 203). In doing so, the monstrous thing also becomes “an intrinsic troubler of the modern project’s impulse to organize, [and] classify” (*ibid*).

### 5.5. Next Steps

This section is by no means an exhaustive exploration of the notion of the ungraspable, but it is my hope that its importance will be demonstrated and its meaning will unfold as we go on. It is the common thread that links other themes, topics, and things. For that reason, it feels necessary and relevant to let the reader know that, throughout this project, I remained concerned with how to get to and work with the ungraspable. How to approach it theoretically and methodologically, and what it could accomplish for contemporary archaeology. As stated earlier, Part II begins with the current chapter, introduces three more topics, and is followed by a final discussion that looks back on both Parts I and II. The first of these next chapters is about horror and monstrosity, with an emphasis on zombies—the creatures from Haitian vodou and later of films, but also zombie urbanism, zombie capitalism, and zombie-oriented ontology. It expands on the notion of the ungraspable and its links to the monstrous, specifically how it can represent impossible materiality and, in doing

so, allow us to work with that which resists and rejects definitions (Weinstock 2020, 4). I conclude by tying the zombie to the physical environment and ecology, which leads into Chapter 7 on the concept of nature and the usefulness of ecocriticism.

By bringing together material ecocriticism, speculative fiction, and storytelling, I aim to highlight their potential for dealing with this question of the ungraspable, via the monster. As this chapter explains, the act of looking at fiction and working with stories is not merely an act of abstraction—such an endeavour has a material basis, and material consequences. Indeed, “if we are after other futures, then the intersection of anthropology”—of which archaeology is a subfield in the North American tradition—“and SF [speculative fiction] offers practical and political resources” (Anderson *et al.* 2018). By concerning myself with ecocriticism, I further situate this work within the ecological discourses of the Anthropocene. I then conclude by addressing the nature/culture problem in relation to ecology. This allows me to transition into queer ecology, which opens Chapter 8. In it, I approach queer theory as more of a lens than a proper theory, which I believe to be appropriate since many have echoed the sentiment that there is nothing fixed in queerness, nothing it must imperatively mean, no essence to the label. It is dynamic and shifting, more akin to a way of seeing rather than a fixed set of ideas, methods, and analytical frameworks. In other words, queer theory itself is ungraspable, and that is precisely why it informs the entirety of my work. Part II ends with Chapter 9, a concluding section offering a brief final reflection on the notion of failure as it was introduced earlier and employed throughout this dissertation.

## Chapter 6 — Horror and Monstrosity

### 6.1. A Beginner's Guide to Monstrosity

I begin this chapter on horror and monstrosity with a question asked by a group of scholars collectively known as The Monster Network: “how can the monster lend itself as a thinking tool for grappling with *unruly* origins, *entangled* thinking and *haunting* concepts?” (2021, 143, emphasis mine). Or, in the present case, how can the monstrous account for a type of contemporary materiality that is too disruptive, too ambiguous, and too elusive to be subsumed under known concepts and categories? The kind of materiality that is thrown away but returns, outlives its usefulness but carries on, and belongs to the realm of things but acts with vitality? As I will show, the monster being a “loose and flexible epistemological category” presents us with an opportunity to think about the unthinkable, work with the ungraspable, and speak of what resists definition (Weinstock 2020, 4). Although I argue that monstrosity remains under-theorised and under-utilised in archaeology specifically, it of course appears in a wide range of other contexts and has been employed extensively by historians, media scholars, sociologists, and queer theorists, to only name a few (*ibid*, 2). Where I identify a gap in scholarship is in the application of monstrosity to the material realm, which I believe should follow from the recognition that the way we think about things has a material basis and material consequences.

The “dispersed nature of the scholarship” has been identified as one of the challenges of working with monster theory, which is always interdisciplinary and is further complicated by the fact that monsters are far from universal. The story of Frankenstein and his monster, to mention a particularly well-known example, has been read in a plethora of ways since its publication. Is it a warning against technology? A call for more responsible technologies in the wake of the First Industrial Revolution? A Romantic plea against interfering with nature? As Hammond argues, “whether such interpretations are ‘right’ or more true to the text is not at issue

here” (2004, 183). To place monstrosity somewhere, to attribute it to a single thing, is not within the realm of the possible or the desirable (The Monster Network 2021, 146). For that reason, monster theory is located nowhere and everywhere at once, pieced together across disciplinary lines so that it, itself, is also “a kind of monster” (Weinstock 2020, 2). Here, it might also be worth thinking about what a monstrous archaeology might look like. If, traditionally, the discipline operates based on some sort of categorising principle—some things are archaeology, while some other things are not or *not yet*—then an archaeology that is a kind of monster would include that which has not been widely and unequivocally accepted as worthy of inclusion.

In short, monstrosity is not to be found in any particular physical form or expressed through specific actions, but is always historical and contextual—a patchwork concept most identifiable through its *impact* (Mittman 2021, 6-7). If there is no such thing as a universal monster or the objectively monstrous, then all we can ask is: what does the monster *do*? In this work, I embrace the proposition that monsters represent, first and foremost, “threats to common knowledge” (Carroll 1990, 34). Through the act of making strange, unfamiliar, or shocking, the monster not only undermines the knowledge we take for granted, but also engages in a process of revealing the material conditions that underpin and uphold its production (Halberstam 1995, 6). Hence, the monstrous functions as a disruption and a destabilisation, creating a “sense of vertigo” that is interpreted as monstrous (Mittman 2012, 8). This ontological vertigo, stemming from ambiguity and subversion, then becomes embodied in the figure of the monster, which itself is “a remarkably mobile, permeable, and infinitely interpretable body” (Halberstam 1995, 21). The monster is also what we may call a “boundary figure” by virtue of its simultaneous occupation of multiple positionalities, as well as its ability to cut across categories and concepts (Lauro and Embry 2008, 90). To summarise, the monster gains the ability to threaten common knowledge through its ambiguous constitution and position as a boundary figure, and the resulting destabilisation is what the monster *does*.

## 6.2. Working with the Ungraspable

The first example I would like to bring up is borrowed from my first article (Godin 2022a), which discusses the monstrosity of waterborne and stranded debris, inspired by a ghost net—a commercial fishing net (in this particular case, a trawl), lost at sea (or in some cases, cut), which gathered driftwood, plastics, carcasses, and other materials during its travels before washing ashore. I argue that, once adrift, things become caught up in a process of othering that draws them further and further away from the category of objects-for-us, and into the realm of things for their own sake. In doing so, they escape our grasp and categorisation—their journeys having made them so slippery, so distant, so *other*, that they can no longer be rendered knowable and made to abide by the rules of the order of things. It should, however, be said that I am here speaking of a form of unknowability that pertains to classifications, but may not manifest itself equally across all individuals in a practical sense—the fisherman would obviously recognise a tool of their trade, even in its ghost form, but would probably also admit that it is no longer performing as a fishing net and can no longer return to being a fishing net. Although the notion of the ungraspable is experienced unevenly, the phenomena to which it refers share common grounds. Having become hybrids, agglomerates, and other types of strangers, these things are the new monsters of the Anthropocene, embodying the excesses and the unruliness of their time.

They function as described above: they challenge the known by making themselves unknowable, or by existing in the half-known, half-unknown, rendering them uncanny. And yet, they are relentlessly present and undeniably real in their materiality, asking us to find ways to think through the ungraspable if we are to think about the current epoch. The monster allows us to work with that which destabilises and resists definition for, as we have already seen, it does not need to *be* anything to be theorised. That being said, a new question emerges: given that materiality is real, why should it be approached from the angle of the monstrous, which cannot be said to be *tangibly* real, or real in a manner identical to what can be grasped? To answer this

question I rely on the teachings of The Monster Network, specifically the way in which they incorporate speculation into their methods and writing. They argue that monsters cannot be controlled or contained, and that “the ethical urgency is not to attempt such control, but to explore storytelling, poetry, speculative fiction and the queer kinships they invoke as a way in which we may follow the monster into the unknown in the hope of pushing the horizons of possibility, knowing that we may fail and that what materialises is something we did neither expect nor plan for” (The Monster Network 2021, 162). Although this passage deserved to be quoted in full, I will only return to the notions of failure and queer kinships in a later chapter, and here focus on what monster stories can tell us about materiality.

Drawing from the work of Haraway on storytelling and worlding—or, the cooperative yet conflicted practice of making worlds—The Monster Network view speculation as fundamental to creating, upholding, and envisioning worlds in *real* life. By turning to storytelling, the ways in which worlding operates can also be made visible (The Monster Network 2021, 149). This enables us to view them not as natural or inherent to the world, but as made and therefore capable of being remade. When materiality presents itself as ambiguous, inaccessible, or otherwise departed from the known and categorised, I argue that it becomes monstrous—although it remains the case that this monstrosity will never be distributed or experienced equally, for the known differs across individuals, time, and geographies, making monstrosity, in part, a matter of threshold. This does not make it less real, but it demands an act of speculation in order to be thought of, spoken about, and worked with. Storytelling is worlding, and worlding requires stories to be told. The monster presents itself as a challenge to this process—if the monster is the *other*, then its study can tell us about othering itself, and in doing so the monster ends up challenging its own structural exclusion (The Monster Network 2021, 158). We may therefore think of speculation as a process of making visible, as well as one that creates new imaginings which may (or may not) become realised in the form of new knowledge, which ultimately goes on to become the common knowledge mentioned earlier (*ibid*). Simply put, my argument

is as follows: it does not matter if monsters are *real*, for monsters can certainly be *realised* and *materialised*.

### 6.3. Monster Theory

Before turning to examples of how monsters can be materialised, I would like to open a parenthesis and present two influential bodies of monster theory. Cohen's seven theses (1996) and Kristeva's concept of the abject (1982) ought to be discussed since they are both commonly found in texts on horror and have influenced how we think about monsters. Cohen proposes seven theses explaining what monsters do in order to be constituted as monstrous, which I have listed in full and defined elsewhere (see Godin 2022a). I identify four areas where the concepts elaborated by Cohen have become foundational to monster theory: contextualisation, transgression, questioning, and social relevance. As Cohen states, "monsters must be examined within the matrix of relations (social, cultural, and literary-historical) that generate them" (1996, 5). Monsters resist classification, simplification, and definition, "demanding instead a 'system' allowing polyphony" (*ibid*, 7)—both in terms of their nature and the contexts from which they emerge. It is this hybridity and ambiguity that make the monster a transgressive boundary figure, or, in Cohen's words, a "harbinger of category crisis" (*ibid*, 6). As discussed earlier, category crisis leads to a questioning, establishing the monster as a figure that interrogates and problematises. According to Cohen, "monsters ask us how we perceive the world" but also prompt us "to reevaluate our cultural assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, our perception of difference, our tolerance towards its expression" (1996, 20). This investigation of othering through the monster also highlights the social relevance of working with monstrosity, which I will soon explore in relation to labour extraction and exploitation.

One facet of monstrosity which I tend to neglect as a result of my focus on materiality is its affective dimension—what does it do to the self and the mind? Kristeva offers abjection as an answer, informed by Freudian psychoanalysis and

Lacanian thought on aggression (Beardsworth 2004, 80). I find abjection particularly challenging to explain succinctly, and the volume of works postdating Kristeva's and attempting to translate, explain, and deconstruct the original suggest that I am far from alone in this. Perhaps abjection is an irreducible concept, one that cannot be captured in a sentence beginning with 'simply put' or 'to summarise'. In terms of affect, abjection goes deeper into the recesses of the mind than fear or disgust, and is more violent as well. It looms as a threat that exists "beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable" (Kristeva 1982, 1). As Kristeva argues, it is not the ugly, the unclean, or the uncanny that causes abjection. It is instead what troubles one's identity and world systems (*ibid*, 4). There are many similarities between abjection and othering, but unlike the uncanny that I previously described as half known and half unknown, the abject seems to increase the distance of othering so that an entity is not just away, but appears to exist somewhere else entirely.

We may say that the abject is not strangely familiar; it is only strange. It cannot be recognised as kin, or as within the realm of the known (Kristeva 1982, 5). Others have interpreted this as meaning that abjection is "a struggle with the instability of the inside/outside border" and that it "is above all ambiguity" (Beardsworth 2004, 81-21). Although the abject "does not have, properly speaking, a definable object", it has the ability to challenge us (Kristeva 1982, 1-2). The deject, defined as "the one by whom the abject exists", does not concern itself with identity—in the same way we must not ask *what* is a monster. All we can ask is *where* the deject is. Much like materiality adrift, Kristeva tells us that "the deject is in short a *stray*" and "on a journey" (*ibid*, 8, emphasis in original). Lastly, it should be noted that the approach I take is at odds with that of Buchli and Lucas, who maintain that the alienation brought about by contemporary archaeology is thorough enough to give rise to the abject (2001, 10-11). While I find their definition of the abject as "not simply the unsaid, but the unsayable – it lies outside the said, outside discourse" (Buchli and Lucas 2001, 12) extremely compelling and applicable to the materiality I concern myself with, I am more comfortable with the smaller distance afforded by the concept of othering. In other



words, I fully acknowledge the value of abjection and find it useful as a concept to think through, but I remain unconvinced that contemporary archaeology has the potential to achieve the degree of alienation it demands, nor should it. Moreover, I find the idea of profound and utter disgust incompatible with the sort of fascination that drives horror and, as Andersson writes, “Our attraction to the dark is not to be met with suspicion” (2014, 36).

#### 6.4. Zombie Cities

One straying creature that fascinates me above all others is the zombie, as a boundary figure straddling the realms of life and death, and with a much richer political, socio-cultural, economic, and ecological history than we may think. In my third article (Godin forthcoming), I question the inertia of discarded materiality, especially the kind labelled as waste and which poses an environmental threat in the midst of the material excesses of the Anthropocene. I argue that the idea of materiality as threatening, invasive, and evading its confinement is antithetical to the idea that it has died by virtue of no longer being of use to us. I offer a way around this problem of categorisation in the form of zombie materiality, which is intended to capture the moment when materiality outlives its own end and carries on outside of, or across the life/death binary. If declaring things as finished does not cause them to vanish or cease their activities, perhaps we should attempt to think differently about our relationship with these things, whether it is in their production, use, discard, or management. This is what I attempt to draw attention to by exploring the zombification of materiality. Although I locate this discourse within the horror tradition, the idea of working with zombies comes from elsewhere: urbanism.

Empty housing units abound as a result of the current devaluation of use value and the emphasis on asset value, creating an odd urban environment defined by the proliferation of new units that remain unoccupied (Soules 2021, 50). We may think of them as oddly pristine ruins—they cannot be said to be ‘alive’ as life does not occupy

them, so they must be dead, yet have never served their intended purpose as shelter or gone through the normal cycle of consumption. This creates new urban geographies dictated by the flow of capital, where growth and abandonment occur simultaneously in one space, departing from older paradigms wherein such processes occurred primarily in succession (Soules 2021, 75). Let us look at some examples from major cities around the world. In 2017, roughly 14% of all housing units in Manhattan, New York, were vacant. That same year in Paris, an astonishing vacancy rate of 26% was observed in arrondissements 1 to 4, which form its centre. Certain parts of central Vancouver reported the same percentage of empty condominiums. By analysing energy usage, 100,000 empty units were identified in the city of Melbourne in 2014. Barcelona reported the same number in 2016. In 2011, 59% of properties sold in the London boroughs of Chelsea and Kensington were acquired by overseas buyers who did not habitually reside locally, with most of these units intended to be investments or occasional secondary residences (Soules 2021, 53-54).

This phenomenon is known as zombie urbanism and should not be confused with ghost urbanism. The latter occurs when a project is *unsuccessful*, such as when levels of occupancy are much lower than expected or materials become too costly to continue, creating a ghost town (Soules 2021, 56). Instead, zombie urbanism is a special brand of success. Zombie units are owned and, although not used to house life, “serve three functions: as wealth storage, as speculative assets, and as secondary residences” (*ibid*, 52). It should be noted that we are here speaking of the super wealthy—a class which has grown tremendously during the ongoing pandemic—who do not buy housing units to be rented for profit or to cover the mortgage, but to materialise wealth through assets. Unlike ghost neighbourhoods which often look abandoned, unfinished, or otherwise not cared for, zombie areas are below capacity in terms of population density, but still give the impression of being oddly alive through forms of maintenance that ensure assets maintain or grow their value. Zombie urbanism leads to a state of in-betweenness, wherein neighbourhoods “are not dead, but they are also not quite alive” (Soules 2021, 51). What I find particularly

compelling here is the use of monstrosity to explain a phenomenon that is at once affective, material, economic, and social. It is zombie urbanism that, earlier in this project, led me to wonder: where else may we find zombies? How are they materialised? And what do they tell us about the Anthropocene?

### 6.5. Zombie Capitalism

“The figure of the zombie is an ideal figure to think through the relations between society and nature under capitalism from an eco-materialist perspective”, writes Oloff (2012, 31). For the remainder of this chapter, I would like to explore this statement by deconstructing it into four questions: what do we mean by zombies? What relations do we form with them? What do they have to do with capitalism? And what is their connection to ecology? First, it is important to separate the original Haitian zombie from the globalised zombie of Hollywood. The Haitian zombie is linked to vodou, not to a virus or an act of science or nature, and does not bite or consume flesh. A person is either resurrected as a zombie or turned while alive, through a process that removes the soul so that the body becomes empty, docile, and under the control of the vodou practitioner (Oloff 2012, 33). We are not looking at a bloodthirsty creature, but as an enslaved being, a victim of perpetual degradation and forced labour, of eternal exploitative capitalism (*ibid*, 34). Unsurprisingly, the Haitian zombie is a product of plantation economies, specifically the sugar cane monocultures of the Caribbean (Fehrle 2016, 531). This fundamentally ties it to the global expansion of capitalism, which depended on the exploitation of labour, and turns the zombie into a symbol of exploitative capitalism (Oloff 2012, 31). The zombie’s arrival into American cinema is therefore a colonial appropriation (Lauro and Embry 2008, 96).

The original zombie is less epistemologically flexible than the one popularised by film studios, but it is inseparable from capitalism and plantation ecology in ways that are radically de-emphasised, sanitised, and whitewashed in the contemporary, global zombie. The hugely popular zombie we now know may have become the

aggressor, but it does retain *some* of its original features, continuing to encode “radical transformations and subsequent degradations or exhaustions of extra-human environments and human labour” (Oloff 2012, 42). In post-apocalyptic scenarios, the zombie seems to appear as a punishment, a form of rebellion against the abuses of capitalism, the excesses of the Anthropocene, and environmental exploitation—we may here think of popular tropes such as viral weapons gone wrong, human test subjects escaping secret laboratories, the spread of toxic viruses or bacteria, or strange meteorological phenomena causing the dead to rise. These works can be perceived as a critique of capitalism, although Fehrle accurately notes that this occurs “often only unwittingly” (2016, 530). But, as I argue, in using the zombie figure at all, given that we must pay respect to its roots, we are *also* navigating issues of objectification of people (for labour extraction), objectification of ecology (for profit extraction), and things themselves, which, through cycles of demand, production, consumption, and discard, enable such a system to justify and perpetuate itself. If zombies are material(ised), then materials can be zombies, too.

An important dimension of both wasted, abandoned, or lost things and zombies is the affective one. On the big screen, people fear zombies, but in Haitian vodou, they fear becoming zombies (Oloff 2012, 33). What unites them is “primarily a fear of the loss of consciousness”, of becoming “unconscious but animate flesh” (Lauro and Embryo 2008, 89-90). This brings us back to two topics of importance: the debate around object-oriented approaches, which I addressed in the first half of this summary article, and the human-to-nonhuman binary, especially concerning the quality of being animate. One of the most common arguments articulated around materiality’s ability to contribute to world-making, to become an actor/actant of sorts, and to exert influence has to do with the topic of intentionality. This scholarship frequently draws from Gell’s 1998 *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*, in which actors are further divided into two categories on the basis of intentionality. Primary agents are intentional beings, while the agency of secondary agents is generated as a result of their enmeshment with other beings (Gell 1998, 20). This division is somewhat

reminiscent of the distinction Harman makes between real objects, which exist in their own right, and sensual objects, which only exist relationally (2018, 9; see Chapter 4). Regardless of these distinctions between beings, all kinds can be said to *do something*, to be agents in some way.

This topic has already been debated in archaeological theory, including in relation to symmetrical approaches, when denouncing the elevation of certain distinctions, namely that of the living and non-living, “to the point of fundamental ontological rifts” (Olsen and Witmore 2015, 189). While the notion of symmetry aims to approach entities without the presupposition of this fundamental rift (*ibid*, 188), others have argued that the extension of agency to all actors/actants renders it essentially meaningless due to a lack of differentiation (Lindstrøm 2015, 207). Although this leads to believe that Gell’s two-part agency theory could potentially emerge as a middle ground, it has additionally been argued that intentionality ought to be brought into the equation, for things can indeed appear to act, but cannot be said to have agency without intentionality (Lindstrøm 2015, 208;215; see also Sørensen 2016a, 116 for additional commentary). The critique articulated around ontological flattening also worries about slippery slopes and the possibility of objectification (Ribeiro 2016, 233). I personally am inclined to agree with Sørensen’s claim that it is the “non-neutrality of non-humans that scholars like Gell, Latour and the proponents of symmetrical archaeology ask us to appreciate” (2016a, 117). Furthermore, in the case of zombies, consciousness is perhaps even more relevant than intentionality when it comes to defining agency, and that is the crux of this particular debate: is consciousness—which is evident in humans, debated in other animals, and widely believed to be absent from materiality—a necessary pre-requisite for *animacy*?

If we ask the zombie, the answer is a resounding no. If we ask the monster theorist, the answer is that it is a bit more complicated than that, but still a no. Could the zombie, then, be a compromise, a way to settle this debate? The intricacies of this proposition are to be found in the boundary between object and subject, and how this relates to actants. A human body without consciousness does not automatically cross

over to the realm of things—as evidenced by the moral dilemma faced by most protagonists in the early days of a zombie outbreak—nor does it remain a subject—as evidenced by variations on the phrase ‘they are already gone’ or ‘they are no longer in there’ that abound in such works. The zombie instead “opens up the possibility of a negation of the subject/object divide” (Lauro and Embry 2008, 94). The possibility of overcoming the living/non-living ontological rift, of occupying the boundary itself, of sitting astride it, without falling to either side. The zombie reveals “the extreme proximity and interdependency of human life, non-human life and nonlife” (Giuliani 2020, 8). In doing so, it exemplifies an argument I (and many others) have made elsewhere: that all bodies are porous ones, and that, by extension, life and nonlife can also overlap, just like object and subject do (Godin 2022b). This emphasises the timeliness of discussing zombies now, not as an “archaic fantasy” but as “a reality deeply riven with a sense of moral crisis unleashed by a predatory modernity” (Palmié 2002, 66).

#### 6.6. Zombie-Oriented Ontology

Hordes of zombies moving through spaces for the public—cities, suburban neighbourhoods, shopping malls, hospitals, schools—is an aesthetic commonly encountered in the genre. It is said to represent a fear of the public realm “being invaded by pure necessity, or pure consumption” (Lauro and Embry 2008, 100), expressed through the zombie’s relentless drive to “devour, grasp, extract and expend” (Cohen 2012, 405). That is to say, a fear of becoming consumed by consumption, of the body having no free will beyond the desire for *more stuff*, mirroring the excesses of the Anthropocene through which it moves. But to desire, to need, and to consume is not to be dead, even if the body appears to be—it is to problematise death’s apparent permanence. The same can be said of things that die when they cease to be useful or wanted, but go on to refuse this death, roam the seas, escape from landfills, and fail to remain absent. This also has to do with vitality and animacy, which exist outside the

categories of life and death. Take, for example, the rotting of flesh, which here symbolises the decay of all things. It is an animated, lively process. “Decomposition is the thriving of bacteria”, thus making decay not an end, but an active, future-oriented, ongoing process (Cohen 2012, 407).

Most interestingly for our purpose, “the walking dead offer what might be called a ZOO, a zombie oriented ontology, which makes evident the object status of the body as a heterogeneous concatenation of parts (...) exerting their own will”, writes Cohen, referencing the approaches to materiality discussed earlier and drawing from OOO (2012, 407). The zombie makes salient the fact that bodies are porous, a Frankensteinian patchwork of human parts and vital nonhumans, which exert their own form of agency through animacy in order to function as complete wholes, while also withdrawing from us—after all, the zombie is unpredictable, unreasonable, unreachable, and unknowable. We are reminded, once again, that the zombie is a boundary figure that challenges common knowledge and binary oppositions—alive or dead, human or nonhuman, subject or object, worker or commodity, and so on. In carrying on beyond the event of death, “the zombie offers a vision of the afterlife that we have decided is otherwise impossible” (Cohen 2012, 405). The zombie here presents us with a solution to the problem outlined earlier in this chapter: how, or *through what*, may we think the unthinkable and materialise the impossible? This is where we may propose a zombie-oriented ontology, which complements object-oriented approaches.

Although torn from its birthplace and appropriated for entertainment, it would do a disservice to the zombie of Hollywood to view it as shallow or ahistorical. Indeed, it “continues to be a figure that encodes the degradation of workers and land under capitalism” (Oloff 2012, 42). Whether it is through plantation economies, zombie urbanism, or its cinematographic invasion of space, the zombie is tied to the physical environment, its commodities, the exploitation of bodies, and, more broadly speaking, to capitalism. Earlier I asked not what monsters *are*, but what they *do* and *conceal*. It is worth asking zombies the same question. In short, “the zombie shows us

something important about our current biopolitical, neoliberal, or existential situation” (Nealon 2014, Afterword). Returning to its origins in the Caribbean sugar plantations, we may argue that these monocultures not only played a role in the birth of modern capitalism, but were central to something much larger: an “epochal reorganization of ‘world ecology’” (Moore 2003 *cited in* Oloff 2012, 34). The zombie is not only the face of capitalist monstrosity, but that of a system that, since its inception, has fundamentally influenced the way humans, nonhumans, and nature interact, as well as their valuing and devaluing (Oloff 2012, 31). A zombie-oriented ontology additionally accounts for the collapse of the human into the nonhuman in the Anthropocene, as will be discussed in the next chapter, which is dedicated to nature, ecocriticism, and alternative ecologies.



## Chapter 7 — Ecocriticism and the Natural

### 7.1. The Ecological Connection

As seen in the previous chapter, the contemporary zombie has undergone several major shifts in its conceptualisation, which have also caused its relationship to ecology to change. I first looked at its birth and vodou origins, rooted in the colonial sugar plantations of the Caribbean and the exploitation of bodies and land, before discussing its appropriation and integration into American fiction, and concluding with its renewed popularity in recent times, largely as a result of ecological anxieties from living on a planet that is increasingly hostile to human survival (Oloff 2012, 32-33). As I hope to have shown, thinking with zombies both encodes “the rift between humans and their natural environment perpetrated by capitalism” (*ibid*, 31) and brings attention to the ways in which the human and nonhuman can collapse into one another under capitalism in the Anthropocene (Fehrle 2016, 532). One thing that has remained constant throughout the history of zombies is their connections to ecology, which is made evident when adopting a zombie-oriented ontology. This chapter explores such connections. It does so by focusing on four overlapping areas of inquiry: ecocriticism, the nature/culture binary, contemporary archaeology, and ecological archaeology.

I begin by looking at the interplay between speculation, storytelling, and material ecocriticism. Zombie narratives employ end-of-the-world (the ‘as we know it’ part is silent) scenarios in order to encode environmental collapse, and the broader notion of monstrosity functions similarly (Fehrle 2016, 530). Speculating about worlds populated by monsters and telling stories about monsters are forms of worlding that enable us to radically depart from the natural state of things—“the ordinary and the known”—and as such can generate new imaginings of, and for the future (The Monster Network 2021, 155). For the second connection, I turn to the recurring tension between culture and the natural. Ever since the Anthropocene was

first mentioned, a collapsing distinction between human and nonhuman, as well as a rejection of the nature/culture divide, have been heavily implied. This emphasises the notion of ecology as being about relationships, systems, and interactions, marking a departure from the category of nature as a form of environment we live *in*, but not necessarily *with*. As Fehrle eloquently argues, “if one erases the boundary between humans and non-human nature, every text is at some level about ecology” (2016, 532). Finally, I identify a third connection in the relationship between archaeology and contemporary climate narratives, which I view as a continuation of the same erosion of categories I have already mentioned. Borders between categories collapse, but so do the physical borders that contain materiality, as it finds itself leaking, leaching, escaping, and roaming. Lastly, I review some of the proposed areas where archaeology and ecology could meet and establish mutually-beneficial forms of collaboration.

## 7.2. (Material) Ecocriticism

The stories I speak of—whether they are about Frankenstein’s creature, zombies, or non-specific entities that we simply call monsters—are situated in the Anthropocene and reflect their era. Specifically, they reflect fundamental transformations in the ways humans relate to nonhumans, the environment, and nature, brought about by our current epoch (Bangstad and Pétursdóttir 2022, 3). The genres of ecological, environmental, and climate writing (for the page or the screen) are numerous and varied, but well-known—such writing is certainly not limited to certain special interest groups or movie buffs and literary critics. They include utopian and dystopian tales, post-apocalyptic and horror films, stories of large-scale disasters and impending planetary threats, many works within the popular thriller genre, and the more playful fake documentary or mockumentary, with or without an overt socio-political critique. They share many metaphors between them, employing phrases such as “tipping point, (...) time bomb, game over, code red” and so on (Houser 2022).

While those can be thought of as deliberate stylistic choices, ecocriticism—the interdisciplinary study of text and ecology—is able to further identify what has been described as “climate tics” (*ibid*).

Climate tics are less deliberate, appearing to “slip out” and tell us more about a general way of thinking than a writer’s personal style: these include hopeful endings, reminders of the ecocide in an otherwise unrelated plot line, and the “catalog of despair” or listing of all the wrongs of the world in one breath (Houser 2022). But why do we write about ecological crises? What does it accomplish? Turning to feminist research in speculative fiction, we see speculation emerging as an invaluable “resource for grappling with the (un)imaginable, be it monsters, realities or worlds” (The Monster Network 2021, 155). In this sense, speculative fiction is not so much a creative output as it is a form of research in and of itself—a method for thinking, a way of imagining otherwise. A key affordance of speculation is a form of estrangement, which we may understand as a shift in worldview, a decentering of the default that creates just enough distance to let us expose, rethink, and play with common knowledge by way of the monster. As members of the Monster Network put it, “in the speculative, monster as methods make worlds” because “storytelling *is* worlding” and because “worlds are opened up through storytelling and structural exclusions” (2021, 155-156; 158, emphasis mine).

I acknowledge that these are bold claims, and hear loud and clear the critique that watching a *Stranger Things* episode or reading a comic book from *The Walking Dead* series will not remove microplastics from the oceans. That being said, if the limits of imagination remain unchallenged, if we cannot envision anything past extractive/exploitative capitalism, then alternative ways of living and drafting policies cannot be brought into existence. The climate conventions of ecological writing are not direct action—and neither is this piece of academic writing—but they are “barometers of states of mind” that can tell us how environmental changes and ecological anxieties are lived with in the present, and may also go on to influence climate action (Houser 2022). Indeed, fields such as ecocriticism, political ecology,

and ecophilosophy or ecosophy have, in recent times, demonstrated their potential not only as metaphors or stand-ins for *real* realities, but as generating knowledge in which actual, realisable environmental interventions can ground themselves (Bangstad and Pétursdóttir 2022, 5). I would now like to reorient the discussion towards archaeology via material ecocriticism, in order to further explain how ecocriticism is able to bridge the realms of the discursive and the ‘real’, flattening or collapsing them into a coherent field of inquiry—not unlike what object-oriented approaches do with the human and nonhuman divide.

We may think of ecocriticism as fitting under the umbrella of environmental humanities, which are an interdisciplinary, fluid, hybrid, and evolving discipline at the intersection of the environment and all subjects in the humanities. They explore factors that are at play in ecological change, which Clark identifies as belonging to one or more of the five following categories: “material, cultural, psychological, legal and political” (2019, 111). It is of course the material variant of ecocriticism that is our main interest here. Reminiscent of monstrous methods, material ecocriticism is a patchwork of ideas, themes, and concepts, somehow held together, united in the materially-oriented belief that “non-human matter has an incalculable agency of its own” (Clark 2019, 111-112). In focusing on the material dimension of ecology, material ecocriticism aims to address and redress the problem of discourse versus action by merging them (Rust 2014, 550). It asks about the materialising effects of ecological discourses, and about the discourses around proliferating and persistent materials. Bodies—human, nonhuman, and otherwise—recur as a topic of interest within material ecocriticism as entities that are always relational and always enmeshed (Rust 2014, 550). While unruly materials may be said to also always be somewhat blurry, cutting across too many categories and too many registers to be fully *thinkable*, these bodies do produce what has been described as “coherent lines of events and effects, lines of consequence that can be traced as having their own logic, irrespective of human purposes or use” (Clark 2019, 124). The task of material ecocriticism, then, is to follow them on their path.

### 7.3. The Nature/Culture Conundrum

Having already followed the path of zombies in the previous chapter, this section follows that of Frankenstein's creature, as I have also done in more depth in my first article (Godin 2022a). There, I sided with scholars who see the being as *the* monster of modernity, as the symbol *par excellence* of the First Industrial Revolution and the fundamental changes it brought to the world, through its embodiment of scientific and technological anxieties (Hammond 2004, 184). The argument I made in the previous chapter—that it is not particularly important what interpretation of Shelley's tale is most true, for monstrosity is to be read in its impact, not in its nature—still stands, but I wish to expand on the sort of relationships to nature that have emerged from the creature's cultural legacy and lasting impact. That is, the stuff of ecocriticism. The tension between the categories of nature and culture, which the environmental humanities have been heavily invested in dismantling, is present throughout my project, but also a recurring theme of many monster tales, establishing an enduring link between the monster and nature. The Frankensteinian myth has been picked up in a plethora of ways that are sometimes at odds with one another: a Romantic outcry over the dangers of science (and a call for returning to a 'pristine' pre-industrial nature), a form of anti-genetic engineering advocacy (e.g. no to Frankenfoods!), and a warning against rejecting responsibility for the monsters we have created (e.g. making corporate waste and pollution an individual issue), to only name a few (Hammond 2004, 181-182; 185).

We see two main strands of arguments emerging around Frankenstein's creature: those that demonise technology as "messaging with nature" and imply that monsters are *unnatural*, and those that adopt a position of ambiguity, uncertainty, and scepticism in relation to the Anthropocene, implying that our relationship to progress can itself be monstrous (Hammond 2004, 194). The latter articulates doubts about the inherent goodness of progress and the alleged domination of humans over nature, preferring to see these hierarchies as deeply troubled and open for questioning. Latour

further explores this position of ambiguity towards the Anthropocene through the notion of environmentalism and the rise of post-environmentalism, both of which emerged precisely at the moment when we noticed the environment was disappearing. While the former is said to adopt a position of *abstinence*—we must disengage with nature so that it can no longer be harmed—the latter is the result of a breakthrough. This breakthrough “involves no longer seeing a contradiction between the spirit of emancipation and its catastrophic outcomes, but accepting it as the normal duty of *continuing* to care for unwanted consequences, even if this means going further and further down into the imbroglios” (Latour 2012, emphasis in original). Here, Latour refers to the great project of modernity: the idea that humans could be emancipated from nature. While this project has undoubtedly failed, Latour refuses to see this failure as belonging to the realm of horror:

The dream of emancipation has not turned into a nightmare. It was simply too limited: it excluded nonhumans. It did not care about unexpected consequences; it was unable to follow through with its responsibilities; it entertained a wholly unrealistic notion of what science and technology had to offer; it relied on a rather impious definition of God, and a totally absurd notion of what creation, innovation, and mastery could provide (2012).

The moral of the story, then, is not that nature should be left alone—an untenable position since, as it has been argued, nature and culture, or the human and nonhuman, have already collapsed into one another—but that certain ways of being, living, and doing create monsters (Hammond 2004, 186; 192). Not only are these monsters entangled with us, but we have certain duties of care towards them (Latour 2012). Whether this interpretation is *most* true is, again, rather inconsequential, but what I hope this discussion shows is that such stories are not outdated or superficial. They tell us something and highlight “the relevance and cultural politics of the myth” (Hammond 2004, 183). The same can be said of the aforementioned zombies, which contain a form of “ecological unconscious” that does not exist in a vacuum or solely

in the discursive realm, but establishes a connection between human devaluation (i.e. culture) and ecological devaluation (i.e. nature) (Oloff 2012, 32; 42). I have focused on the examples of zombies and Frankenstein's monster because they are boundary figures, cutting across multiple frontiers. The zombie transgresses subject and object positions by being both and neither at once (Lauro and Embry 2008, 90), while the creature embodies the entanglements of nature and culture into a cohesive whole. Both are in some sense improper or failing, and both are also about ecology.

When interrogating nature/culture boundaries, Haraway proposes that we “trope nature through a relentless artifactualism” (1992, 296). Given the ecocritical focus of this chapter, we may be tempted to think of artifactualism as abstract artefact theory, a realist branch of literary theory that believes characters to be real insofar as they have been created, akin to other cultural institutions that have been created and gone on to become real (marriage, currency, property ownership, and so on). In applying the concept to nature, however, I think Haraway might mean something slightly different: “that nature for us is made, as both fiction and fact” (1992, 297). If everything is entangled and created through “world-changing techno scientific practices by (...) collective actors”, we may conclude that nature as we know it did not manifest out of thin air—that it is not *inherent* (*ibid*). The very existence of nature involves relationships, which are not entirely human or nonhuman, that co-create artefacts. I see this erosion of boundaries as very material—and archaeological—not only in a metaphorical sense, but in the way it has been precipitated by an actual “lack of control over the human and non-human environment” and by “increasingly instable borders in an age of globalization” (Fehrle 2016, 527).

#### 7.4. Towards an Eco-Archaeology

It is my impression that, like other disciplines, archaeology has shown a growing interest in joining conversations around the Anthropocene, environmental transformations, and climate change. It increasingly wonders how a changing world

affects the practice of archaeology, as well as what kind of knowledge archaeology can contribute to this changing world (Pétursdóttir 2017, 175). But this concern with the environment is, of course, only new in its contemporary focus and not in its actual subject matter. Indeed, environmental archaeology has long aimed to understand how past societies impacted their environment, and how climate enabled and constrained them in return (Hudson *et al.* 2012, 313). The discipline has always nurtured its interests in geology, stratigraphy, and climate adaptation, further strengthening its engagement with the environment. However, as I also attempt to show in this section, there may be at least some value in divorcing contemporary ecological archaeology from a few of the tropes of environmental archaeology, not as a value judgement or commentary on their relevance, but simply because their aims are vastly different. It has been argued that an archaeology of climate change calls for “alternative ways of doing and thinking” (Pétursdóttir 2017, 177), which could include engaging with “issues of sustainability, justice, and the deconstruction of nature/culture dichotomies” (Hudson *et al.* 2012, 324). Before looking at the mutually beneficial relationship between archaeology and ecology—potential and realised—I take a brief detour and return to the object-oriented approaches discussed in an earlier chapter.

As Pétursdóttir writes, “archaeology is the discipline of resilient things, of stuff that remains” (2017, 178). More and more of this stuff remains in the Anthropocene, and proliferation leads to accumulation since things are shockingly resilient (even more so in the case of materials such as plastics, which are much less prone to degradation than organic materials). This resilience is nothing new, but the ever-increasing scale of the accumulation is. Object-oriented approaches are a way of recognising that things continue beyond their usefulness and human-measured lives, which evidently has an impact on the environment and, by extension, should also have an impact on ecological thought. Not placing things in anthropocentric boxes also influences the concept of materiality by creating an expanded view of what constitutes a thing. When materiality becomes at least partially, if not fully detached from social, cultural, and economic relations, when it is no longer obligated to tell us something



about someone, we “can critically account for nonhuman objects like climate change, energy production, and waste *in their material specificity*” (Collins 2021, 21, emphasis mine). Morton famously called objects of such incredibly vast dimensions and temporalities hyperobjects (2013). As stated earlier, I personally refer to materiality that is similarly diffuse and ambiguous, but perhaps more traditionally *thingly* than hyperobjects, in terms of the ungraspable, the unthinkable, or, simply, monsters.

This brings us to my next and final question: where and how can archaeology contribute to ecological discourses? In search of an answer I turn to a few texts, selected because of their different individual approaches, that have identified areas of potential research, existing scholarship, and obstacles that need overcoming (namely Briggs *et al.* 2006, Hudson *et al.* 2012, and Pétursdóttir 2017). These texts are united in their belief in the fruitfulness of an eco-archaeology, but also concede that some changes might be needed for the discipline to fully engage with climate disturbances and other contemporary environmental conversations. The first text, aimed at *ecologists*, identifies three areas where archaeologists may be of help:

1. Providing a long-term view of the environment;
2. Challenging the notion of pristine environments that serve as ecological baselines;
3. Reframing narratives of impact as not solely produced through human use, but through complex interactions (Briggs *et al.* 2006, 180).

The second, aimed at *climate change scholars*, proposes five areas in which anthropological archaeology could contribute new knowledge:

1. Generating stories of decline, collapse, and recovery in the deep past;
2. Rethinking nature and culture;
3. Using public archaeology to raise awareness;
4. Linking social justice and environmental responses;
5. Producing effective cross-cultural communication (Hudson *et al.* 2012, 313).

The third text, from the perspective of *contemporary archaeology*, lists the claimed significance of archaeology as located in four areas:

1. Providing expertise in nature/culture relations;
2. Adding a deep time perspective to the understanding of collapse and adaptation;
3. Using methods that are apt at reading both natural and human-made strata;
4. Commenting on the Anthropocene itself (Pétursdóttir 2017, 181-182).

Two elements recur in all three texts: the nature/culture binary and the *longue durée*. Since I have already discussed the former, I will here focus on the deep past. Archaeology may add to the time-depth of ecology by challenging the flawed idea that prehistoric populations, for instance, did not impact the environment, but merely lived alongside it. Ecology, in return, could enable archaeology to better understand how the environmental phenomena observed now may be related to events in the distant past (Briggs *et al.* 2006, 186). However, we may also view deep time as a problematic area in one of two ways: by arguing that it has not realised its full potential yet, or by claiming that it is in fact an obstacle. The former perspective maintains that “archaeologists deal with the past, usually the ancient past” and that, as such, find their scholarship incompatible with present-day issues—for it to be relevant, then, changes would need to be made to the discipline itself (Hudson *et al.* 2012, 317). The latter argues that it is precisely this recurring trope of archaeology-as-distant that is the issue and that may, to some extent, prevent archaeology from making meaningful contributions to ecology (Pétursdóttir 2017, 194). It will be no surprise that I embrace the second argument, and support the claim that “the irony of the Anthropocene is that it is born out of a condition where the past is not distant but haunting” (Pétursdóttir 2017, 194). The kind of eco-archaeology I employ is one that *also* concerns itself with longevity, as opposed to limiting itself to generating past analogues and/or ancient lessons for current issues.

The notion of disruption (to be endured or overcome) is another oft-mentioned area for collaboration, expressed through terms such as impact, collapse, decline,

adaptation, and so on. In climate change narratives, we may speak of resilience, or the amount of disruption a system can experience before reaching its breaking point, whatever that may look like (Hudson *et al.* 2012, 320). If we agree that the Anthropocene “has as much to do with the persistence of objects (...) as with change” (Pétursdóttir 2017, 195), maybe disruption is not as straightforward as it may seem at first glance. In adding monstrosity to the eco-archaeological discourse, I interrogate unwanted futures, but also deliberately fail to engage with narratives of resilience, of how we may *prevent* change. Perhaps I am, as they say, ‘reaching’ a little, but it seems to me that, in saying that archaeology can help understand the mechanisms of collapse, we are additionally suggesting that something can be learned from past collapses, and that what is to be learned is how to avoid them, and/or make nature-proof human systems that are adaptable or resilient to it. Within the scope of this project, I am more interested in imagining what may emerge from such failures than in seeking a better Anthropocene, and in investigating how persistence and change exist simultaneously rather than cyclically, through an expanded view of things and of archaeology itself. Such a project may be described as *queer*, and more specifically as belonging to its environmental branch: queer ecology.

## Chapter 8 — Queer Ecology and Theory

### 8.1. Queer Theory

In this chapter, ecology, as it has been explored in the previous one, is explicitly linked to queer theory in order to show how valuable their association can be. While the core aim of this section is to provide insights into queer ecology and its usefulness for contemporary archaeology, it begins by turning to queer theory itself: what does it mean, what does it do, and why is it of use to us? Here, I largely forego the history of queer theory as an academic movement in order to focus on its contemporary applications and explain what it means to conduct research queerly. Applying these principles to archaeological work, I then delve into material failure as it was defined in the final section of Chapter 4, based on the argument that queerness disrupts the proper order of things, and that this disruption has material and archaeological consequences. I subsequently turn to queer ecology, arguing that its focus on interconnectedness and entanglements is both what renders such an ecology queer and what makes it so effective for addressing our most pressing environmental issues. Lastly, I finally discuss the undercurrent of negativity that runs through my dissertation, tracing its origins back to the negative turn and antisocial thesis in queer theory, before concluding that the notion of failure that has emerged from these movements has much to offer to contemporary archaeology.

In terms of definitions, I am particularly fond of the one provided by Halperin in the early days of queer theory: “Queer is by definition *whatever* is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. *There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers.* It is an identity without an essence” (Halperin 1995, 62, emphasis in original). More recently, Barad, among others, has argued the same: “Queer is not a fixed determinate term; it does not have a stable referential context” (2012, 29). This may seem like an easy way out of a difficult situation—a definition by way of a non-definition—but I believe it captures the spirit of the ungraspable, in addition to

serving a political purpose. Indeed, “keeping queer permanently unclear, unstable, and ‘unfit’” is precisely what allows it to maintain its queer positioning, which is one of shifting non-normativity and opposition (Browne and Nash 2010, 7-8). Ahmed argues that the adaptability of queerness requires that we do not simply think of it as the *elsewhere* but as a fleeting space. Queer thinking or a queer approach, then, is an *orientation* towards that space (Ahmed 2006a, 565).

The search for queerness is therefore not so much a search for a space that exists (and that would cease to exist should queer ever become the norm), but a need “to listen to the sound of the ‘what’ that fleets” (Ahmed 2006a, 565). The vagueness of this *what*, although necessary, brings up another series of questions. One that often comes up concerns the relationship between queerness and LGBTQI+ identities. What use can queer theory be for research that does not specifically concern itself with gender identities, sexual orientations, non-heteronormative associations, and so on? This particular meaning of the word ‘queer’ is of crucial importance socially, politically, and historically, but it is not the *only* meaning. Here, we might want to trace the word back to its Greek roots, meaning “cross, oblique, adverse” (Ahmed 2006a, 565). It is because queer is adverse or oblique in relation to heterosexual and cis-gender identities that it has earned its label. That same logic can be extended to that which acts queerly with regard to the dominant and the normative, but is not directly tied to sexual practices or gender expressions. Of course, we run the risk of “placing different kinds of queer effects alongside each other” (Ahmed 2006a, 565), but perhaps that risk is inevitable if we are to think queerly on a broader scale.

## 8.2. Queer Research

When adapted to the realm of academic inquiry via queer theory, queer research is any type of work that is “positioned within conceptual frameworks that highlight the instability of taken-for-granted meanings and resulting power relations” (Browne and Nash 2010, 4). I also refer to these taken-for-granted meanings as

common knowledge or established categories, and their instability as the impossible, the ungraspable, and that which is vague. While we need to be careful *not* to define what it actually is or set its parameters, we may say that queer work is a work of destabilisation, and that its aim is to highlight both the construction of categories and their instability, for that which has been made can also be re-made. In my opening chapter, I spoke of the use of queer theory as a conceptual framework or lens, and of queer phenomenology as a method that “approaches the object that slips away” and constitutes “a way to inhabit the world at the point at which things fleet” (Ahmed 2006a, 544; see also Godin 2022b for practical applications of these principles). Furthermore, there is an interesting yet tumultuous relationship between queerness and nature—predominantly expressed through the rejection of heterosexist and reproductive concepts of nature and futurity—which is particularly relevant to the topic at hand.

That being said, we must be careful not to confuse this rejection of the natural with a desire for complete erasure, so that there are not only no *natural* categories but no categories at all. The former—the end of naturalness—is much more in line with the objectives of the branch of queer theory in which this dissertation situates itself. The same can be said of posthumanism more generally, which does not endeavour to “cross out all distinctions and differences” but rather to “understand the materializing effects of particular ways of drawing boundaries” (Barad 2012, 31). This is also related to the earlier conversation on symmetrical archaeology and OOO, where I made sure to point out that their proposition of a flattened ontology is not intended to imply sameness or equality in terms of ethics, but only in terms of existence (Bogost 2012, 11; Witmore 2007, 547). Because we do not erase uniqueness, we are further able to observe how effects (and indeed affects) are distributed unevenly (Ahmed 2006a, 565). To name an obvious example, it is widely known and accepted that climate change, waste containment failures, and natural disasters materialise differently in different places, and disproportionately affect certain populations.

### 8.3. Queer Ecology

In terms of its areas of interest, queerness, as we have already established, has a tradition of paying special attention to the natural. It aims to question, destabilise, and expose it—specifically the established categories of sex, gender, and sexuality (Seymour 2013, 28). As stated earlier, queer theory has picked up on this questioning and applied it more broadly: what does it mean to question *all* that is seemingly natural, and that is justified and upheld by a taken-for-granted logic of ‘this is the way it is’? Queer ecology asks questions about the naturalness of categories, and this involves interrogating the intersections of gender and culture, sex and nature, nature and culture, living and material, and the human and nonhuman (Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson 2010b, Introduction). It further emphasises connections, or what we may call an “ecological coexistence” (Morton 2010, 277), highlighting their complexity and how they are embedded in “multiple trajectories of power and matter” (Sandilands 2016). In doing so, queer ecology rejects human exceptionalism or anthropocentrism, and the idea that there is a natural world from which we are separate both in name and in flesh (Barad 2012, 30). It instead views ecology as “a complex system of interdependency” (Luciano and Chen 2015, 188).

The argument, then, is “not that ecological thinking would benefit from an injection of queer theory from the outside” but that “fully and properly, ecology is queer theory and queer theory is ecology: queer ecology” (Morton 2010, 281). Calling ecology intrinsically queer, however, does not guarantee that it will be viewed or approached as such. Seymour accurately points out that environmental issues are most commonly framed in a way that presents them as *beyond* gender and colour—what I think of as the ‘we are all in this together’ rhetoric, or the even more troubling ‘I do not see gender/colour/differences’ approach—and finds this both problematic and offensive (2013, 17). Not only do we know that environmental change, as previously mentioned, disproportionately affects certain geographical locations and peoples of specific socio-economic statuses, but Seymour also argues that a gender-blind and

colour-blind ecology “asks that we all be more like the white, straight, privileged men who have, historically, been at the forefront of environmental destruction in the first place” (2013, 17). In other words, *not* adopting a queer position in relation to ecology and erasing what it strives to expose may very well prevent us from addressing pressing issues that relate to oppression, the aforementioned unequal distribution of risk and responsibility, and the interrelatedness or ecological co-existence of entities (*ibid*).

#### 8.4. Collateral Gains

In light of what forms a queer ecology might take, we may also wonder what it could accomplish, what the next steps might be, and what conditions will need to be met to realise this ecological vision. To answer this query, I again turn to Seymour:

With a queer ecological perspective attuned to social justice, we can learn to care about the future of the planet in a way that is perhaps more radical than any we have seen previously: acting in the interests of nameless, faceless individuals to which one has no biological, familial, or economic ties whatsoever. This kind of action operates without any reward, without any guarantee of success, and without any proof that potential future inhabitants of the planet might be similar to the individual acting in the present—in terms of social identity, morality, or even species, if some doomsday predictions are to be believed (2013, 10-11).

We are faced with a way of conceiving ecology that is not tied to a primary relation of blood kin or to anyone known, and is consequently not bound to heteronormative forms of organisation and futurity in the form of one’s biological children, who are commonly referred to as ‘the future’ (see Edelman 2004 on futurity).



This is further amplified by the fact that “in virtually all respects, environmentalism’s gains are not direct but collateral—a term that we are accustomed to using to describe damage, not improvement” (Ensor 2017, 163-164). We should keep in mind the negativity of this proposition, which will be discussed later. For now, I want to draw attention to the indirect or *collateral* aspect of ecological intimacies. Simply put, Ensor argues that “we cannot save the earth” (2017, 163-164). All we can do is act in ways that will add up into something that materialises and goes on to become meaningful. This lack of certainty, this absence of guarantee, is reminiscent of the problem of the unintentional, which is at the heart of the Anthropocene. It displaces agency away from the individual to the aforementioned system of interdependency (Luciano and Chen 2015, 188) or ecological coexistence (Morton 2010, 277), in a more distributed model so that agency is not enacted unilaterally from the human outwards but with, alongside, and from nonhumans, to whom our planetary fate is tied (Ensor 2017, 163-164). What emerges from a queer ecology is the importance of what may be called “things that happen secondarily” and contrasted with the “primary relationships” that are at the heart of dominant paradigms of futurity (Ensor 2017, 164).

If primary relationships are strictly made up of the “biological, familial, or economic ties” that Seymour speaks of in the passage cited at the beginning of this section, then secondary relationships are those formed with “nameless, faceless individuals” (2013, 10-11). Once again, this reminds me of the main critique of flat ontologies, which worries that an equal potential for world-making and an equal capacity for agency might lead to sameness—to the transferring of human rights to things, and the objectification of humans (see Ribeiro 2016). I believe queer ecology and materially-oriented approaches can meet in this space, and are allies in both their *different* valuing of secondary relationships, and their outright rejection of their *undervaluing*. Indeed, proponents of queer ecology argue that it is in these “different paradigms of engagement (...) yielding different forms of benefit” (Ensor 2017, 164) that we can find new forms of ecological care, and that it is those queer values of

“caring not (just) about the individual, the family, or one’s descendants, but about the Other species and persons to whom one has no immediate relations” that “the most effective ecological values” are to be found (Seymour 2013, 27).

### 8.5. Introducing Negativity

If queer theory has so much to offer to ecology, and if a queer ecological perspective is so useful for contemporary archaeology, it seems suspicious that I have thus far spoken of it only theoretically, with virtually no examples to demonstrate its practical applications. It seems even more curious that it has not been widely and readily accepted as the new form of ecological care *par excellence*. The first issue can be partially explained by queer archaeology’s close ties to feminist archaeology, gender archaeology, and the archaeology of sexuality, as well as its widespread usage as a collective noun for these three branches. While such associations with women, gender expressions, and same-sex attraction in the archaeological record can indeed be described as queer due to their positioning in relation to male-dominated heterosexist narratives of the past, they also risk constraining the potential of queerness as an approach by limiting its breadth. Their much-needed inclusion greatly enriches the discipline and society at large, but I am not entirely sure that being labelled as queer directly benefits them (though it certainly does not take anything away), nor is it particularly useful for queerness to be defined as ‘feminism and its friends’ when it has rich meanings of its own that follow distinct trajectories.

As for the relationship between ecology and queerness, its slow growth may be attributed to the negative turn in queer theory—specifically the “anti-social thesis” (Seymour 2013, 5) and its view of material issues as “crude and pedestrian” (Halberstam 2006, 824). As I have argued earlier, the relationship between queer theory and the natural has always been a complicated one. This is further complicated by the antisocial trend, which may be at odds with the idea of collateral gains and secondary relationships as forming the basis of an effective ecological form of care.

We can trace the origins of the negative turn in queer theory back to Bersani, whose 1996 book *Homos* asked whether homosexuals ought to be good citizens, or if such a thing constitutes a stance of accommodation and ‘invisible visibility’ that works against gay ideals. While those familiar with queer literature will remark that such inquiries into “queer unbelonging” (Caserio 2006, 819) predate this work, Bersani is often credited as the founder of an *academic* tradition of queer negativity and antisociality (Ahuja 2015, 365-366).

Such ideas have since been expanded on by many, including Edelman in the 2004 book *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, which pushed the negative turn into Freudian psychoanalysis with the inclusion of the death drive—an irresistible pull towards the destruction of societal norms, towards the embracing of queerness as positioned against nature and desiring its end (Seymour 2013, 5-6). Edelman’s take on the negative turn clashes with queer ecology as I have described it not in its undoing of the natural, but in its rejection of sociality. While I understand the value of the death drive as part of a radical queer political project, it is at odds with the idea of building more ecological futures based on less anthropocentric queer entanglements. The political project of the antisocial thesis in queer theory further operates on a plane of existence that is largely unconcerned with the material dimension, placing individuals and their drives at the forefront, in ways that are incompatible with a materially-oriented archaeology. That being said, I have not described the antisocial thesis within the negative turn for my own amusement or because I had a bone to pick: I strongly believe that it can be useful for both ecology and archaeology, and that Edelman’s radical politics serve an important purpose.

## 8.6. Expanding Negativity

Reviewing Edelman’s *No Future* (2004), Halberstam writes: “The queer subject, he argues, has been bound epistemologically to negativity, to nonsense, to antiproduction, to unintelligibility, and—instead of fighting this characterization by

dragging queerness into recognition—he proposes that we embrace the negativity that we, as queer subjects, structurally represent” (2006, 823). In the antisocial thesis, we find a claim to unintelligibility not as an obstacle, but as a queer value to be nurtured—one which is expressed more strongly and explicitly than in the negative turn at large, which focused on the relationship between queer subjects and society. This claim is also integral to the study of unruly materiality. However, our earlier question remains: why has the renunciation of society, of the natural, and of dominant visions for the future proposed by the negative turn *not* led to the rise of queer ecology as a mainstream movement within queer theory? Why has it not led to “the renunciation of anthropocentrism and the adoption of biocentric or ecocentric viewpoints” that are both key elements of this new ecology (Seymour 2013, 6)? In other words, why has the rejection of the social at large resulted in embracing a small fragment of the social in the form of the individual, instead of something beyond the human?

Halberstam proposes that this problem is not inherent to the negative turn—within which I position my own project—but is a result of “the excessively small archive that represents queer negativity” (2006, 824). Its use in contemporary archaeology is therefore not at odds with the negative turn in queer theory, but instead constitutes an expansion of queer negativity itself. We see further expansions of this archive in politically-engaged academic areas such as anti-colonial scholarship, race theory, gender studies, and so on, but also in what Halberstam (borrowing from cultural theorist Stuart Hall) calls “low theory” (2011). Low theory seeks forms of knowing that “stand outside of convention understandings of success” (Halberstam 2011, 2) and rejects seriousness and rigorousness, which it views as “a form of training and learning that confirms what is already known according to approved methods of knowing” (*ibid*, 6). Low theory encompasses everything from punk music to cartoons, absurdist comedy, speculative fiction, and mythical creatures, and views these contributions as valid ways of being in the world, which in turn also makes them proper objects of study.

There is an element of irreverent playfulness to these inclusions into the queer archive—a subtle nod to a camp aesthetic that finds immense joy in deliberately questionable taste—which I argue extends to queer theory more generally. This argument is not revolutionary; the humour of the negative turn is widely acknowledged and its resignation to failure, deliberate or not, is met with a kind of cheerful nihilism which might actually make certain forms of queer ecological care possible. “Just as queers and queer theorists have embraced the inherent humor of existing nonetheless”, writes Seymour, “so might environmentalists and ecocritics” (2012, 59). This idea of existing nonetheless throws us back to zombie-oriented ontology, which concerns itself not with “the binary terms of living or dying, but the liminal futurity of somehow living on, using the hoarded and makeshift tools of the zombie archive to try to light an oblique path” (Nealon 2014, Afterword). After all, what is more antisocial than eating society? Not only have negativity and antisociality been reclaimed as part of the negative turn of late 1990s queer theory, but so has the concept of failure as a way of exploring less anthropocentric definitions of what it means to succeed in the Anthropocene (Seymour 2012, 60 and 2013, 5-6).

### 8.7. Queer Failure

“Failure, of course, goes hand in hand with capitalism” (Halberstam 2011, 88), and I have already tied the Anthropocene—both its materiality and its monsters—to it elsewhere (see Chapter 2 and Godin forthcoming). Indeed, for such politics to function, some must win while others lose, some must have while others want, and some will succeed while others will fail. Although we may like to think of archaeology as an equaliser due to its focus on narratives told through materials that can be freed from cultural hierarchies, it is also undeniable that archaeology is not the sole producer of narratives about the past, the present, and which inform the future. It does not record, research, or care equally either, from funding to conservation. “Losers leave no records, while winners cannot stop talking about it”, writes

Halberstam (2011, 88), “so the record of failure is ‘a hidden history of pessimism in a culture of optimism’” (Sandage *cited in* Halberstam 2011, 88). This record of failure is haunted by “the specter of the material” insofar as queerness and materiality have historically had a complicated relationship, but is so fundamentally tied to capitalism as well that it cannot help but be haunted by the things it has produced (Liu 2020, 31).

This failure, however, is not one that marks an end. It is a *queer* failure, which marks a new start in a negative realm. Let us return to the example of the Heideggerian hammer from Chapter 4, which revealed something of itself through its failure to perform its tasks. Earlier, I stopped this train of thought at the moment when the hammer breaks or fails, but the hammer certainly does not *end* in that pivotal moment. It can no longer effectively hammer, but it can still do many other things. As Ahmed argues, “the loss of the capacity to perform an action for which the object was intended is not a property of an object (...) but rather of the failure of an object to extend a body” (2006b, 49). When the hammer snaps in two, it breaks the connections between the handle and the head, and it additionally breaks the connection between the arm that hammers and the hammer that performs the action as an extension of that arm. But the break does not destroy its core materiality, which persists. We may be looking at a stick and a piece of metal, yet the hammer’s thingliness continues.

Returning to Ahmed’s queer phenomenology, what we see in this breakage is an emancipatory failure of orientation and cohesion, not of existence (2006b, 51). It is a disorientation, not an empty space. A queer failure, then, brings “object to life in their ‘loss’ of place, in the failure of gathering to keep things in their place” (Ahmed 2006b, 165). So how can queer failure aid in reframing the way we think about materiality, ecology, and the Anthropocene? Here, I would like to cite Halberstam’s answer: “the queer art of failure turns on the impossible, the improbable, the unlikely, and the unremarkable. It quietly loses, and in losing it imagines other goals for life, for love, for art, and for being” (2011, 88). If we need to reimagine the impossible, it is because current representations of our epoch struggle to fully account for the extent of its profusion, its unintended effects, and its destruction (Ahuja 2015, 370). In the

face of this contemporary negativity, antisociality, and failure, a model born out of these very conditions—that is, queer theory—may prove useful for rethinking the relationships within it (Davis 2015, 241).

It seems only fitting that I conclude this chapter with a quote from Seymour discussing Halberstam (2011), which captures the transformative potential of a queer ecological theory resigned to failure, yet committed to carrying on:

Just as queers and queer theorists have embraced the inherent humor of *existing nonetheless*, so might environmentalists and ecocritics. (...) [O]ne of the specific things that ecocritics might feel differently about is the specter of failure—the ideas that our work, for all its urgency and sincerity, will fall on deaf ears; that we will illuminate and transform nothing in the long run; that the very project of environmentalism, not just ecocriticism, will fail on a massive scale. I have proposed, more specifically, that we have a sense of humor about this specter of failure. And here, queer theory proves useful yet again. (...) Halberstam self-reflexively observes, ‘[a]ny book that begins with a quote from *SpongeBob SquarePants* ... runs the risk of not being taken seriously. Yet this is my goal. The desire to be taken seriously is precisely what compels people to follow the tried and true paths of knowledge production around which I would like to map a few detours’ (2011, 6) (2012, 59-60; emphasis in original).

As argued earlier, there may be more to learn through failures than there is in avoiding them by building a *better* Anthropocene that nonetheless remains anthropocentric, doomed to repeat itself. With the irreverent proposition of failing yet carrying on, queer theory mirrors the persistence of things. This is not unlike archaeology itself, which is occupied by the cycle of things and cannot escape the spectre of their failure. We may even boldly claim that it is as much the “discipline of things” (Olsen, Shanks, Webmoor and Witmore 2012) as it is the discipline of failure—of the stuff that has died, broken, been thrown

away, abandoned, discarded, or discontinued, but whose materiality carries on. What I find most compelling about such failure remains its possibilities, which offer a way out of the conundrum of attempting to grasp the ungraspable or define the impossible, as contradictory as this may seem, by projecting them into a negative space where their ontological vagueness is not only accepted but encouraged. Detours such as those of queer theory might be worth exploring, in an Age of Things that confronts us with failure and wants to know what we will do with these unwanted futures. Even to me, the possibilities that this creates for archaeology remain extraordinarily vague, which we may argue is precisely the point of queer theory.



## Chapter 9 — Concluding Remarks

### 9.1. Back to the Beginning

Conclusions are very convenient, but also very unsatisfactory—if I had been able to say what I wanted to say in a few paragraphs, I would have written a few paragraphs, not 500. That being said, I would like to reassure the reader that I do not mean to suggest that anything I have written about in this dissertation is particularly dense, complex, or obscure, nor that it is somehow irreducible. In fact, I believe the opposite to be true. It is my hope that I have written about things the only way I can understand them, and that is in a straightforward, accessible manner. For that reason, rather than reformulate the final paragraph of every chapter and call it a conclusion, I prefer to dedicate this section to tying loose ends. This endeavour takes the form of first bringing together the new ideas that have been explored in the previous chapters of this summary but not in my articles, and explaining how they all come together to form my dissertation. I then take a step back and reflect on how I may have contributed to the concept of unruly heritage, and how these contributions—combined with queer ecology and monster theory—have expanded contemporary archaeology through the inclusion of failure. The final section of this chapter ponders the relevance of my project, asking: why this and why now?

In the opening chapter, I stated that the themes that feature most prominently in my three project-related publications are monstrosity (Godin 2022a and forthcoming), othering (2022a), and ambiguity (2022a and 2022b). I further explained my intention to place my investigation of materiality within a queer theoretical framework, and to draw from a wide range of interdisciplinary conceptual frameworks including posthumanism, symmetrical archaeology, phenomenology, monster theory, ecocriticism, and environmental humanities. This section discusses the *additional* themes that have been explored in this summary article, and looks at how they contextualise, build on, and complement the three aforementioned ones—as expected,

the overlap is quite significant. The four main themes that have either been introduced or expanded on are: unintentionality (in relation to the Anthropocene), unintelligibility (in relation to both the Anthropocene and materiality), persistence (in relation to materiality specifically), and the ecological imagination (in relation to ecocriticism, horror, and queer ecology). These all contribute to the same research aim I began with, which is to build a more complex understanding of materiality in the Anthropocene via the notion of unruliness, and to locate this research within the material turn in the humanities.

### **9.1.1. Unintentionality**

Throughout this text, I have argued in favour of recognising the importance of the unintentional in many areas, all of which may be said to fall under the umbrella of the Anthropocene. When I speak of unintentionality, this includes first and foremost the unintentional, accidental, and unexpected character of our epoch itself, but it additionally refers to the unintentional trajectory of things, as well as the high degree of uncertainty associated with environmental issues and ecology more broadly. In relation to our times, unintentionality is directly related to the recognition of humans as a geological force, whose actions have consequences that “operate just as nonhumans would, independent of human will, belief, or desires” (Grusin 2017, ix). From this particular angle, the unintentional results in accumulation and saturation, which bring us to the topic of materiality. Things in the Anthropocene have become unintentionally excessive, but they are also unintentionally animated and vital (see Barad 2012 and Bennett 2010) in their ability to stick, accumulate in the present, free themselves from attempts at containment, and relentlessly return in increasingly foreign and monstrous ways.

This lingering of things combined with profusion has grown diagnostic of the Anthropocene, following the era-defining ‘accident’ that is the human geological footprint, which can be partly attributed to the Industrial Revolution as well as

extractive and exploitative capitalism. We certainly did not anticipate this volume of waste, this quantity of *stuff*, but it is undeniably here now. The planetary and geological consequences of this giant mishap are most evident in the environment, which prompts further uncertainty and does not act in opposition to unintentionality, but instead requires a healthy dose of it. Indeed, as argued in Chapter 8, ecological actions operate collaterally in the sense that their gains are never direct or immediate (Ensor 2017, 163-164), and are performed in the name of faceless individuals, most of whom we have no relation to, much less one that is primary or of kin (Seymour 2013, 10-11). The lack of certainty that surrounds ecological actions performed in the Anthropocene mirrors the unintentional character of the era itself, and both find themselves surprisingly at home within a queer phenomenological approach, as introduced in Chapter 1. Here, I am thinking of how the inevitability of the unintentional has made it so that any gesture is in some way indirect or *oblique*, and to that we may add Ahmed's claim that queer phenomenology allows "the oblique to open another angle on the world" (2006a, 566). In the case at hand, this other angle opens onto material unintelligibility.

### 9.1.2. Unintelligibility

Because every argument I have made has *also* been about the unintelligible, the ambiguous, and the ungraspable, this section will not list every instance in which I have deployed these terms but rather reiterate that unintelligibility is of the utmost importance. In Chapter 5, building on the familiar/unfamiliar discussion in archaeology (Buchli and Lucas 2001, 9) and the idea of vagueness as an ontological fact (Sørensen 2016b, 742), I gave the example of a plastiglomerate. As I explained, something of it would inevitably be lost if it were to be deconstructed into its parts, while nothing of significance would be gained *in terms of the plastiglomerate* (we may learn a lot about the trajectory of microplastics, for instance, but this would tell us about microplastics, not about plastiglomerates). This example was intended to

show that unintelligible things cannot be remedied through the study of their parts, for their vagueness must be accepted as fact. Their ambiguity cannot be divorced from what they are, for ambiguous *is* what they are. Archaeology is said to have a tradition of deriving value from the contexts, origins, and cultural associations of materials (Pétursdóttir 2020, 96), which I believe is to—at least partly—be credited (or blamed) for the impulse to deconstruct and disentangle, so that we may understand.

That being said, if the Anthropocene presents us with materiality we cannot readily understand, with things which have been othered and made monstrous, we must find ways to approach these things on their own terms if we wish to work *with* them, not just tame or neutralise them so that they can be reincorporated into the proper order of things. My first article (Godin 2022a) delved into processes of othering, which go on to create unintelligibility. In it, I used the example of ghost nets and their entanglements with plastics, driftwood, organic matter, and other nonhumans to illustrate how things adrift become *otherwise*, returning to us in forms that belong more to the realm of monsters than to that of objects-for-us. Ghost nets, through their alliances, also become detached from human narratives. Through this distancing emerges a form of unintelligibility, as well as a sense of vitality—ghost nets may not fulfil their work duties as fishing nets, but they certainly keep busy. In the article, I also built a bridge between unintelligibility and persistence, arguing that they go hand in hand with manifestations of monstrosity. If unruly things were quietly and passively unintelligible, they may indeed be said to have fallen out of the proper order of things, but if they are also monstrous, it is because they roam, haunt, and return—because there is a life force where none should be, and because it is obscured and beyond our grasp.

### **9.1.3. Persistence**

If the things I speak of are not part of the *proper* order of things, what *improper* order might they be part of? My answer to this question has been twofold. First, I

argued that the figure of the monster can allow us to work with unintelligibility, in order to investigate the phenomenon of enduring things. Second, I delved into queer theory as a way of accounting for things that have failed, yet carried on. Persistence, however, did not emerge as part of this project. It presented itself as a pre-condition, as the rationale behind it. I wanted to address this topic *because* things persist, outliving their own ends—after all, “archaeology is the discipline of resilient things, of stuff that remains” (Pétursdóttir 2017, 178). Archaeology deals with aftermaths and lingerings, or even hauntings, as discussed in Chapter 3, all of which are recurring themes in both my summary and articles—in my second paper, for example, I spoke of worlds below ground as “crowded” with that which has endured the passing of time (Ackroyd 2012, 1 *cited in* Godin 2022b, 27). Waste presents us with an example of this persistence in its failure to remain contained in landfills, and its refusal to accept that the act of being discarded should have brought it to an end and a state of inertia. Hetherington speaks of disposal as the constant management of absence in order to ensure that it remains absent, suggesting that materiality can both end *and* remain animated (2004, 171).

I further delved into the topic of persistence in Chapter 6 and in my third paper (Godin forthcoming), employing the figure of the contemporary zombie, which can be said to be embodied waste. The zombie blurs the categories of life and death, human and nonhuman, and animacy and inertia by virtue of its persistence (and persistent hunger). As a nod to OOO, I brought up zombie-oriented ontology, “which makes evident the object status of the body as a heterogeneous concatenation of parts (...) exerting their own will” (Cohen 2012, 407). This definition points to an accumulation, to a *concatenation* that takes on a life of its own, which draws on both the themes of unintelligibility and of persistence. I maintain that what makes unruly materiality so persistent is its failure—a failure to disappear, to be contained, to stay away, to be dead, but also a failure to be definable. This notion of failure is directly borrowed from queer theory, which views an existence in the *negative* realm as not only possible, but potentially highly desirable. Halberstam speaks of the rewards failure

can offer, viewing it as a way “to escape the punishing norms” that deliver us from unruliness and guide us towards orderliness (2011, 3).

#### **9.1.4. Ecological Imagination**

I realise that taking people theory (i.e. a queer theory of failure) and applying it to non-people materiality may raise some eyebrows, but it should be noted that queer theory has long been involved in the critique of naturalness, and that this same critique is more relevant than ever for anthropogenic ecologies wherein a strict human-to-nonhuman divide is no longer tenable (Lorimer 2017, 125-126). It is no wonder, then, that queer ecology has emerged and overtly rejected anthropocentrism, calling ecology “a complex system of interdependency” (Luciano and Chen 2015, 188). To reiterate, I embrace the proposition that “if one erases the boundary between humans and non-human nature, every text is at some level about ecology” (Fehrle 2016, 532). In that sense, there is no need to justify the *ecological* part of ecological imagination, but I do want to comment on the role of the imaginary and the rationale behind my use of it. As argued in Chapter 7, speculation and storytelling, which may be subsumed under the banner of ecocriticism, allow for new imaginings of the future—futures in which we may not strive for more Anthropocene in the hopes that we will get it right this time or that the issue was not enough Anthropocene, but futures in which a less anthropocentric form of eco-consciousness may be embraced.

Of course, I have not mapped a whole new planetary future as part of my dissertation, nor do I claim to know how to fix anything. My point is that, if we are to work in and with the Anthropocene, we will need to account for its unruly materiality while simultaneously enjoying the rewards failure has offered us. The fictional may offer us a space in which to do so. If fictional worlds provide us with a “resource for grappling with the (un)imaginable, be it monsters, realities or worlds” (The Monster Network 2021, 155), then fiction is not just a hobby; it is a method for working with the impossible, the unthinkable, and the ungraspable, with that which persists against

human wishes, taking on a life of its own. Horror is an affective genre that dwells in such liminality. It can emerge when we are no longer able to account for the vague sense that monstrosity is at play and must embody it in the figure of the monster in order to make it visible. Zombies, in particular, encode ecological anxieties brought about by the techno-capitalist systems of the Anthropocene and the increasing hostility of our planet (Oloff 2012, 32-33). This reality is certainly not fictional, and it is in essence profoundly material.

## 9.2. Contributions

In light of the themes explored in my dissertation, I would now like to reflect on my use of the concept of unruly heritage, what I added to it, and how this may have contributed to contemporary archaeology. First, we should look at how unruliness is defined. Olsen and Pétursdóttir argue that “the things turned to tend, generally, to be well-fitted and successful objects, rather than the surplus masses of stranded things constituting our unruly heritage” (2016, 43). As a reaction to that, Unruly Heritage (the project) endeavours to “explore alternative, less anthropocentric and more ecologically adept understandings of heritage”, which involves us becoming exposed “to the masses of neglected and unwanted matters passed on and lived with” (*ibid*, 39). This argument is echoed by Witmore in relation to symmetrical archaeology, who writes that such an archaeology “understands how human beings live *with* (to be distinguished from *in*) the world” (2007, 559, emphasis in original). The goal of understanding this is not to “suggest specific programs of action” but to explore the ways in which “accumulating assemblages of stranded things throw light on things’ unruly afterlife” (Olsen and Pétursdóttir 2016, 42). It is my hope that I have indeed turned to failed things rather than successful objects, and placed this inquiry within a materially-oriented, less anthropocentric framework, which was informed by ecology and delved deeper into the concept of an afterlife.

I have also attempted to convey the notion of having to live with unruly matter by employing monster theory, which is well-versed in all things neglected, unwanted, and othered that return, whether we like it or not. Indeed, as the second of Cohen's influential seven theses on monstrosity states, "the monster always escapes" (1996, 4). "No monster tastes of death but once", adds Cohen (*ibid*, 5). This is reminiscent of things' propensity for escaping, for their ability to taste many deaths or ends and still somehow carry on. This foray into horror is one of two major departures from the Unruly Heritage project, as defined by Olsen and Pétursdóttir (2016). Through this detour, I attempted to capture the impossibility of unruly things; the way they do not make sense, are not readily legible, and no longer fit in human-centred narratives. In other words, the way in which they are ungraspable. The monster was introduced as a way of working with this unintelligibility *without* making it legible. Monstrosity further served the purpose of conveying the notion of *inevitably living with* mentioned in the previous paragraph. Clark proposes the appellation "Anthropocene horror" in order to convey the constant sense of environmental threat experienced in our current era, but also the feeling of entrapment, of there being nowhere else to go, of the inescapability of the Anthropocene and its accumulating legacies (Clark 2020, 61;68).

The second major way in which I departed from the original project brief is through the inclusion of queer theory, which has taken several forms: queer phenomenology in terms of methods (Ahmed 2006a and 2006b), queer animacies as part of posthumanism (Chen 2012), queer ecology as a challenge to naturalness (Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson 2010b; Morton 2010; Seymour 2013), and queer failure as a way of naming the space unruly things occupy (Halberstam 2011). I believe the tense relationship queer theory has with nature resonates with the realities of the Anthropocene, in which we are increasingly aware that the boundaries between human and nonhuman bodies are porous, as I discussed in my second article on touching things recovered from the mud (Godin 2022b). As I explained in Chapter 8, there have also been tensions between queer theory and the material turn in the humanities, given that some branches of queer theory view materially-oriented



inquiries in ways that Halberstam has described as “crude and pedestrian” (2006, 824). To some extent, this explains why archaeology and queer theory have not been widely known to collaborate, except when we are directly addressing issues pertaining to gender, sex, and sexuality in the past. With this work, I therefore attempted to expand contemporary archaeology by making interdisciplinary connections with two incredibly rich bodies of scholarship—monster theory and queer theory—which I believe have not yet exhausted their potential for informing materially-oriented inquiries in the Anthropocene.

### 9.3. But Why?

This brings us to my final questions: why this and why now? To some degree this has already been addressed in my description of the Unruly Heritage project: it is relevant because the “mixed and messy” legacies of our current epoch are not always accounted for under mainstream definitions of heritage (Olsen and Pétursdóttir 2016, 38;39), and because one way to address this is to shed light on unruly things so that we may come to a more ecologically-oriented, less anthropocentric view of the present moment (*ibid*, 42). I also personally liked the idea of reading our era—this Age of Things—in what it rejects, in that which has failed. It is my opinion that, as failures continue to mount, we are increasingly forced to acknowledge that our escape route from Anthropocene horror, if there is such a thing, is unlikely to present itself as *more* Anthropocene, more nature-proof systems, and more human domination. Turning our attention towards failure seems like a timely endeavour, as the place it occupies continues to grow.

Providing a rationale for a turn towards negativity, failure, and monstrosity in archaeology seems to me like a particularly difficult task—not least because archaeology has undergone so many turns in recent history, it must be spinning by now. This is why I would like to end this dissertation by giving the floor to others with greater knowledge of how environmental outlooks and attitudes may be influenced by

such a turn. Seymour proposes “that despair and hope, gloom/doom and optimism are often merely different sides of the same coin, a coin that represents humans’ desire for certainty and neat narratives about the future” (2018, 3-4). Here, in this quote, we find practically all of the themes I hope to have addressed: the blurring of categories, being faced with unintentionality and unintelligibility while desperately seeking certainty, and the impossibility of neatness in the face of vague futures, as expressed through unruly material legacies. It has also been said that an overly optimistic approach to our ecological situation can lead to more destruction (the idea of a ‘better’ Anthropocene), in the same way that plunging into a pit of despair can put us in a state of crisis that prevents meaningful action (Seymour 2018, 10).

Queer failure is neither of these states: it is a habitable space in the negative realm, one which is neither guided by optimism nor by despair, but instead has escaped those “punishing norms” entirely (Halberstam 2011, 3). While such an approach is not commonly placed alongside archaeology, I do believe that it is highly compatible with the idea of unruliness and its material manifestations. I also think it is relevant now, precisely because we live in times of Anthropocene horror and because much of that horror is expressed materially. As Tidwell and Soles write: “Ecohorror highlights the strangeness and horror of living in the Anthropocene and of engaging in less-than-positive ways with the human world. It therefore has the potential to reinforce our fears and estrange us further from the nonhuman world. *But it might also do the opposite*” (2021, 14, emphasis mine). As I hoped to have shown through this project, horror does not further alienate us from the natural, the nonhuman, or the material world, but forces us to view it as non-optional—to view the Anthropocene as something that we cannot opt out of, as something that must be lived with, and which links bodies known and unknown. I remain convinced that the place failure occupies in the world will continue to expand, and that it will need to be accounted for *materially*. Contemporary archaeology, queer theory, and monstrosity should be up to the task.

## Article Abstracts

### First Article

Godin, Geneviève (2022a) “Monstrous things: horror, othering, and the Anthropocene.” *Post-Medieval Archaeology* 56(2): 1-11.

This article approaches the masses of discarded things washed ashore and roaming waterways as the new monsters of the Anthropocene. It explores the ways in which monstrosity and archaeology intersect, and how the genre of horror simultaneously emerges from and informs the current epoch. As they embark on their post-abandonment journey, things’ immense scale, spread, and refusal to serve as proxies for human narratives result in the impossibility of fully grasping and making sense of them. Combining archaeological approaches and queer theory, this article attempts to get to the heart of the inevitable, complex entanglements between people and monstrous Others.

## Second Article

Godin, Geneviève (2022b) “Meeting Things: On Material Encounters Along the River Thames.” *Journal of Contemporary Archaeology* 9(1): 23-38.

This paper is an exploration of the points of encounter that become visible through the practice of mudlarking – that is, the gathering of materials from the foreshore along the River Thames in London, England. I first examine the foreshore itself, as the meeting place between underworlds, liquid worlds and surface worlds, positing that it therefore constitutes a borderland. Based on fieldwork carried out in Rotherhithe and Greenwich, I further argue that the spatiotemporal dimension of experience is destabilised in such a location. Another point of encounter is identified as existing between the hand and the found thing, creating a form of tactile material intimacy and performative theorising. Lastly, I suggest that touching and holding are not passive acts, but an interlocking of porous bodies and a way to cohabit with things as they emerge from the mud.

### Third Article

Godin, Geneviève (forthcoming) “Zombie Materiality: Sea Foam, Ecocriticism, and Persistent Waste.” [Manuscript submitted for publication].

The containment and control of materiality labeled as waste is recognized as a pressing environmental issue, especially in relation to toxicity, bacteria, and threats to the human body. Building on this problem and approaching it from the perspective of queer theory, this paper highlights the shortcomings of conceptualizing materiality as lifeless following its disposal. It does so by calling attention to the ways in which it evades containment, entering a plethora of relationships with humans and nonhumans. Using the example of sea foam, which is incredibly lively yet primarily composed of decomposing matter, this work introduces the idea of a zombie materiality. Borrowing from the register of horror, zombie materiality presents itself as a way of capturing that which remains animated beyond its passing. In doing so, it foregrounds notions of unwanted and unintentional outcomes, thus nuancing conversations around ideal and wanted futures. The contemporary zombie emerges as a historically situated analytical tool, embodying a critique of the binary categories of life and death, animacy and inertia, and human and nonhuman. Through thinking with zombies, this paper offers an ecocritical outlook on contemporary material masses and the ways in which their conceptualization may ultimately hinder their management.

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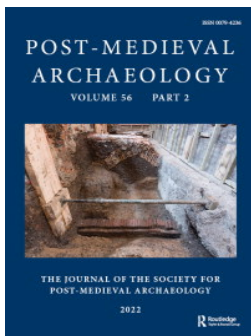
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# Appendices

# Appendix A



## Monstrous things: horror, othering, and the Anthropocene

Geneviève Godin

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# Monstrous things: horror, othering, and the Anthropocene

By GENEVIÈVE GODIN

*SUMMARY: This article approaches the masses of discarded things washed ashore and roaming waterways as the new monsters of the Anthropocene. It explores the ways in which monstrosity and archaeology intersect, and how the genre of horror simultaneously emerges from and informs the current epoch. As they embark on their post-abandonment journey, things' immense scale, spread, and refusal to serve as proxies for human narratives result in the impossibility of fully grasping and making sense of them. Combining archaeological approaches and queer theory, this article attempts to get to the heart of the inevitable, complex entanglements between people and monstrous Others.*

## INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2018, I encountered what appeared to be two stranded, entangled commercial fishing nets, commonly known as ghost nets (Fig. 1). They had recruited various pieces of plastic, driftwood, marine life, and unidentifiable agglomerates as companions over the course of their journey, coming together as a single entity. Approximately 20 m in length and beached in Ingólfssfjörður, a fjord in the Strandir region of the Icelandic Westfjords, the creature, from a distance, seemed too imposing, too peculiar, too repulsive, to have emerged from the sea. It appeared on the horizon as a mythic being, not as marine litter. A sea monster, it seemed.

The sea monster I stumbled upon was made up of things adrift—purposely thrown away, inadvertently lost, or otherwise abandoned—that, as they outlived their past roles and fell out of human networks of ordering, clung to the present with renewed vitality, failing to meet their end, to remain inert, to disappear. Such things are best described as ‘unruly’—a term borrowed from contemporary archaeologists Bjørnar Olsen and Þóra Pétursdóttir, who define unruly heritage as the ever-accumulating masses of

things, unintentional monuments, and involuntary memories of the current epoch that make the past neither distant nor ever truly gone.<sup>1</sup> Among these peculiar assemblages, I specifically concern myself with the debris found alongside waterways, including the ways in which it presents itself and what it has the potential to evoke.

The notion of monstrosity enters the narrative presented here through the impossibility of fully grasping, categorising, and making sense of such things. Their scale, spread, and fragmentation prevent us from understanding them as a whole, as a complete story to be read. They inevitably become the *Other*. While the idea of things as anthropogenic sea monsters is directly inspired by ghost nets, it is by no means limited to this specific type of materiality and extends to all things that have undergone similar processes of othering. The role of the ghost net is therefore to provide a departure point from which lingering material legacies can be explored in their monstrous forms. This paper focuses on such materials in a broad sense, and attempts to draw conceptual links between horror theory and archaeological works that explore spectrality, hauntings, lingerings, and so forth. Its aim is to propose a lens through which



FIG. 1

Ghost nets stranded in Ingólfssfjörður, Iceland (photograph by the author).

archaeology may begin to come to terms with the ungraspable—a theme which is intimately known to the genre of horror—and establish this impossibility as a category we may work with.

To this end, I touch on the history of horror and hint at the possibilities that may arise from thinking of discarded things as the new monsters of the Anthropocene. Horror is said to be an artistic reflection—whether it is visual, literary, or cinematographic—of contemporary societal anxieties. Gothic horror specifically was born alongside the Anthropocene and is rooted in concerns surrounding technology, the normative ordering of the world, as well as the limits of life and nature. Of particular interest are the themes of excess and ugliness, which are a strong undercurrent in many works of the genre, and seem particularly well suited to archaeological approaches investigating hauntings and attachments. I further explore these themes through the groundbreaking novel *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*, before reconciling the monster with contemporary archaeological theory.<sup>2</sup> As an analytical tool that directly engages with the unusual, the unwanted, and the unsightly, Jack Halberstam's

approach to queer theory is the lens through which I delve into the realm of failure, monstrosity, and being and living with strange material Others.<sup>3</sup>

### AN AGE OF THINGS

The present moment bears many labels, each highlighting a different facet, including Anthropocene, Carbocene, Capitalocene, and Ctluhucene, to name only a few.<sup>4</sup> The concept of the Anthropocene specifically attempts to put a name on the human-oriented character of the current era. Grounded in the earth sciences, the term originated as a means of capturing the idea of an Earth bearing humanity's footprint down to its geological core: *anthropo-*, relating to humankind, and *-cene*, denoting an epoch.<sup>5</sup> The Age of Humans, in which the increasingly unstable ecosystem is a direct result of our environmental impact. Having outgrown its origins, the term now permeates discussions in public and academic spheres.<sup>6</sup> As it gained in popularity, the Anthropocene also evolved into a catchall category. It has grown to encompass a wide range of activities and consequences such as a questioning of the human-nature divide, exploitative capitalism, climate change, environmental injustices, material excesses, rising sea levels, garbage patches, as well as the articulation of potential futures ranging from the utopian to the horrific, and inexorably torn between the promises of more technology and the romanticisation of a return to nature.<sup>7</sup>

It is difficult to put an exact date on the beginning of the Anthropocene. Rarely are geological epochs narrowed down to a specific moment. What is the marker of our geological footprint? The steam engine? The first nuclear weapon? The birth of the factory? The proposed dates range from 8,000 years ago, which marked the beginning of an increase in greenhouse gas emissions with the rise of agriculture, all the way to the start of the Atomic Age in 1945.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, many seem to agree that the Anthropocene emerged approximately 250 years ago, prompted by the First Industrial Revolution, marking the definite start of an environmental impact that could no longer be minimized, ignored, or attributed to chance.<sup>9</sup> Overlapping with the Age of Enlightenment, the early days of the Anthropocene also brought about an intense interest in matters of knowledge, nature, and science, in addition to a political and economic societal shift towards capitalism.<sup>10</sup>

One of the central constituents of the Anthropocene is an awareness of the geological role humankind is playing through perceiving ourselves as a geological force.<sup>11</sup> Its inception, then, may be more social than geological. This conversation also has serious political and ethical implications, as different start dates prompt us to distribute responsibility in various ways. Did early agriculturalists lay the foundations for the Anthropocene? Is political

conflict responsible for our current predicament? Is it the disembodied event of mass industrialisation's fault? Who witnessed this transition, and who contributed to it? At the heart of the Anthropocene is a paradox. It is both caused and perpetuated by surplus and excess yet brings about devastating losses—as highlighted by the fields of discard studies and extinction studies.<sup>12</sup>

The Anthropocene destroys and proliferates, impoverishes and saturates, makes and unmakes the Earth. Studies of it revolve around the destructiveness of our presence in terms of habitat and species loss, resource exploitation, no longer so natural disasters, and coastal erosion, but also engage with the unexpected abundance emerging from these losses. Landfills contaminate soil and water, garbage patches expand, and new species flourish amidst the damage. In *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, Anna Tsing explores the resilience of the sought-after matsutake mushroom, which grows in human-ravaged forests.<sup>13</sup> A sociological study of abundance in the Anthropocene has shown that bed bugs, hookworms, and various forms of bacterial life are now stronger than ever.<sup>14</sup> Neither bodies of work discuss loss and abundance in isolation but instead delve into the unexpected realities that emerge at the intersection of the two. The new worlds of the Anthropocene that, despite the name of the epoch, do not seem particularly concerned with humans.

If it is the First Industrial Revolution—the triumph of people over nature as part of Enlightenment thinking—that marked the beginning of the Anthropocene, it is rather ironic that it is now a loss of control and the rise of the non-human that either fuel it or mark the beginning of its demise. As strong as our desire to make the Earth belong to us and us alone might have been, it appears we now find ourselves unable to live in a world that is the direct result of this attempt at gaining control.<sup>15</sup> Things, material culture, and waste materials are arguably some of the most conspicuous non-humans in the Anthropocene—as evidenced by legacies that are so large, so excessive, so pervasive, that they can no longer be overlooked as they pile up in sites of discard and roam the seas. While most, though not all, non-human life suffers habitat and population losses, these inanimate yet vital Others appear to prosper and proliferate. They are characteristic of a materially saturated era, the Age of Humans, for which the name *Age of Things* might be more appropriate.

### THE HORROR CONNECTION

Horror fiction may find its root in folklore, but its current articulation, what we presently understand to be effective horror, conceivably emerged in the early gothic literary works of the late 18th century.<sup>16</sup> Gothic fiction rose alongside an increase in

technology and the first major wave of industrialisation, dealing with themes such as life and death, machine and nature, as well as desire and fear. The genre is in constant tension between good and evil, and breaks down this polarisation, in part by denying its audience a straightforward happy ending.<sup>17</sup> Most importantly, horror's monsters embody contemporary social anxieties.<sup>18</sup> The monster has been theorised as a creature bearing a message, its name originating from the Latin noun *monstrum*, formed on the root of *monere*, a verb meaning 'to warn.'<sup>19</sup> We see further evidence of this in how the frameworks of horror have shifted through time and space, continuously adapting. Their efficacy resides in their ability to harness contemporary societal worries, and reflect them back onto their audience to elicit affect.<sup>20</sup> Thus, gothic horror and the Anthropocene are twins, conceived by the same anxieties and born within the same historical moment.

Much of the features of gothic fiction and the Anthropocene are shared. Excess and abundance are central elements of both contemporary materials and the horror genre. The latter delves into desire and disorder, blurring the lines between the rational and the imaginary, and unfolds in a space of confusion and ambiguity.<sup>21</sup> Monsters—vampires, ghosts, zombies, werewolves, and a plethora of unnameable creatures—are reminiscent of stranded ghost nets and other waterborne debris. Neither alive nor dead, unrecognizable, misshapen, gazed upon with curiosity and a desire for the thrill of the uncanny, yet repugnant and feared, both dwell at the limits of the knowable and the possible.<sup>22</sup> In the absence of concepts that fully grasp such materials, the monster appears as a fair substitute. It has been argued that moving through the Anthropocene requires imaginative speculation, rather than retrospection. Conjuring up radically different worlds emerging from the failures of technology, progress, and socio-political systems is, in essence, an act of science fiction.<sup>23</sup> The present can similarly be processed through fictional worlds, employing the monster as a historically situated methodology and mode of thinking.<sup>24</sup>

Fiction occupies an interesting position, as it is fashioned by the collective imaginary but also has the potential for shaping it in return.<sup>25</sup> Horror tells us something about our world while doing something to it. Fictional content can and often does constitute cultural memory, although not always in a readily accessible, obvious manner. Indeed, works of fiction do not have to present a coherent, unambiguous narrative; their role, rather, is to serve as the concretisation of a set of discussions, questionings, and concerns, rooted in a specific moment and locale.<sup>26</sup> Discursively rendering the world through crafting narratives can serve both as a reflection of that world and as a sense-making device. In short, the monster tells us about what is happening, and about how we are processing those events. While, as a concept, it is



a cultural construction, the monster inevitably exceeds its discursive form as it escapes its own conceptualisations and captures more than its cultural presets.<sup>27</sup> If excess, ambiguity, and unintelligibility are determining factors in constructing the monstrous, as they are for ghost nets, then the world's masses of abandoned things may very well be the new monsters of the Anthropocene.

### MONSTER THEORY

Through their joint origins and concurrent growth, monsters and the Anthropocene were entangled from their inception. However, the argument has been made that there is more to this relationship, that they are not merely siblings, but that it is the monsters themselves that gave birth to modernity. Without the construction of monstrous Others, the rhetoric of the First Industrial Revolution would have had no ground to stand on.<sup>28</sup> The rise of biopower, as well as the apparatus of discipline that extractive capitalism and the ordering of a labour force demand, depend on the purposeful articulation of mechanisms of exclusion. Grounded in Michel Foucault's work, this perspective claims that the frameworks ensuring obedience rely on the establishment of normal and divergent behaviours—of the well-adjusted worker and the monstrous Other.<sup>29</sup> Without monstrous bodies, there can be no normal subjects. In short, there is no modernity without deviance and no order without chaos.

Having established a connection between horror and the present moment, I wish to further expand on what *makes* monstrosity. Building on the concept of the deviant subject, ugliness provides a good starting point. An ugly future comes as a challenge to the idea of a 'good Anthropocene,' drawing attention to the unavoidable abjection, destruction, and losses that populations are already experiencing and will continue to experience in the near future.<sup>30</sup> Ugliness is not a straightforward property or simply an aesthetic quality, nor does it reside in that which is labelled as unsightly. It instead emerges as 'a function leveraged to uphold notions of worth' through discourses of normality—that is, another mechanism for ordering.<sup>31</sup> The monsters of the Anthropocene are ugly, and this quality is in conversation with their excessiveness. Together, they weave a complex narrative of things that are warped, deviant, unruly, and, most of all, *over-exuberantly alive*.<sup>32</sup>

The monster has a legacy of being a mixed entity that can be traced back to the Middle Ages. In its different articulations, it has been a hybrid of human and non-human, sexes and species, half-alive and half-dead, and so on.<sup>33</sup> This is reminiscent of the peculiar assemblages one might find stranded on the shore: creatures taking up residence in tangled nets, algae wrapped around plastic containers, a deflated balloon inside a carcass. By appropriating this

liminal, in-between space, the monster is not a known entity as much as it is something that fails to be anything else.<sup>34</sup> In making this claim, I embrace a view of monstrosity that employs the figure of the monster as a 'loose and flexible epistemological category that allows us a space to define that which complicates or seems to resist definition.'<sup>35</sup> This is a view that resonates with both Foucault and queer theory by bringing processes of othering, transgressions of category, and the normative ordering of the world to the forefront.

Monstrosity makes limits visible while also undermining them, attempting to fracture the illusion of order through its elusiveness.<sup>36</sup> To this, I wish to add an element of wilfulness, and a refusal to be reincorporated into the structures of normativity. The monsters of the Anthropocene do not wish to be categorised, do not ask to be deconstructed into knowable parts, do not need to be redeemed. They exist negatively, standing in opposition to known cultural codes simply by virtue of being and of relentlessly remaining.<sup>37</sup> Three principles of monstrosity have been established so far: first, the monster is deeply embedded in the Anthropocene, and we might even suggest it is an integral part of its foundations; second, monstrosity is excessive, ugly, and disruptive; lastly, the monster is unknowable by design, always escaping cultural codes. In the following section, I turn to two different approaches to monster theory: Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's seven theses<sup>38</sup> and Bruno Latour's concept of care.<sup>39</sup>

### COHEN'S SEVEN THESES

Cohen's foundational 1996 essay is an attempt to read cultures through the monsters they engender. Also heavily inspired by Foucault's work on the construction of normal and deviant subjects, as well as the establishment of regulatory regimes grounded in this distinction, this essay represents a departure from the idea of monstrosity as a natural category.<sup>40</sup> In an effort to deconstruct monstrosity as something that is done as opposed to something inherent, Cohen lists seven characteristics that jointly constitute what we think of as monsters in the arts, but also how evil is constructed in the media more broadly.<sup>41</sup> Although this paper stands in opposition to Cohen's idea that monsters can be fully deconstructed and discursively rendered, as well as rejects the claim that they are purely symbolic representations of human culture, the seven theses prove useful as descriptive tools for demystifying what it is that makes them monstrous in the first place.

While not all will be discussed, the theses are the following:

- I. The monster's body is a cultural body
- II. The monster always escapes

- III. The monster is the harbinger of category crisis
- IV. The monster dwells at the gates of difference
- V. The monster polices the borders of the possible
- VI. Fear of the monster is really a kind of desire
- VII. The monster stands at the threshold of becoming<sup>42</sup>

As per Thesis I, Cohen's monster is a projection. It is something other than itself, existing only when looked at.<sup>43</sup> While I have already readily conceded that there is something of our anxieties, desires, and concerns in the figure of the monster, I here depart from Cohen by arguing that the monster is not just a projection of those sentiments. We may very well construct monsters in the stories we tell, but this relationship is far from unidirectional. If we accept that monsters are entities in their own right that exceed their discursive renderings, an actor-like agency follows, giving them the ability to evoke certain responses that are not solely the fruits of our psyche but a relational endeavour. Theses II to V further support the points I attempt to make with regards to othering and elusiveness. 'The monster always escapes' is a powerful statement that permeates much of monster theory.<sup>44</sup> The monster is free and will always free itself—parallels with what we may call queer failure will become evident in subsequent sections. Like things adrift, the monster will find itself elsewhere, transformed and unrecognizable, uncontained and uncontainable. It *wants* to leak, fracture, recombine, slip, and break away.

### LATOUR AND CARE

Cohen's Thesis VII makes a statement that is also found in Latour's work on the topic: 'Monsters are our children.'<sup>45</sup> The child demands care, and the plea is precisely this. 'Love your monsters,' writes Latour. 'We must care for our technologies as we do our children.'<sup>46</sup> We must do so because we are already inescapably entangled. For Latour, modern technology is a monster, both in its discarded state and in its active use. Latour's critique is located in the idea of modernity as proof of our full decoupling and detachment from nature—an ideal that has proven to be unattainable in the Anthropocene, as these very technologies destabilise the environment we were certain we had wrestled into submission, blurring the nature-culture divide.<sup>47</sup>

The issue is not that we have not cared sufficiently for the Earth, clarifies Latour, but that we did not care for technology and, upon witnessing its destructive force and monstrosity, abandoned it to itself.<sup>48</sup> In advocating for extending love to the monster, Latour

articulates a moral responsibility. Drawing on the story of Frankenstein, it is stated that it comes as no surprise that we have forgotten Frankenstein was the man—the doctor who created the monster—and not the creature itself. In confusing the two, we ignore the true morale of the tale: 'our sin is not that we created technologies but that we failed to love and care for them.'<sup>49</sup> Latour's final proposition is that the environmental crisis of the Anthropocene is not solely a crisis of Earth, technology, politics, or people, but a crisis of care as well; a crisis of not showing love and concern for non-human Others.

### FRANKENSTEIN'S CREATURE

The Anthropocene may be said to have led to a reconfiguration of what nature is, where it begins and ends, what kind of care should be extended to it, and whether anything can ever be truly natural. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* published in 1818 is the quintessential literary expression of the anxieties of the First Industrial Revolution—in the midst of which it was written—around the limits of nature and technology, humans and non-humans, and life and death. Victor Frankenstein's creature offers a metaphor for processing the blurry categories of what constitutes an orderly life and the monstrous qualities that can emerge from liminal spaces. Unlike horror tales that place death and loss at the forefront, Frankenstein's creature is born out of an obsession with life, not with its cessation. The monstrosity woven through Shelley's work does not necessarily stem from the threat of harm, although it is indeed present throughout and acted upon, but from an excess of life where none should be. Where it is simply not right or proper for life to dwell, and yet, it found a way—like things adrift from which we expect inertia, and that surprise and horrify us with their peculiar life force.

*Frankenstein* marks a shift in horror literature as one of the first tales to ground itself entirely in reality. The birth of the creature is, of course, an extremely unlikely event, but it does not involve supernatural elements *per se*. The creature fashioned in Doctor Victor Frankenstein's laboratory is pieced together from deceased bodies and brought to life through electrical current. The project was originally born out of Victor's research and concern with life itself, how it proceeds, where it resides, and how it endures. 'With how many things are we upon the brink of becoming acquainted,' asks Victor, 'if cowardice or carelessness did not restrain our inquiries?'<sup>50</sup> The doctor is asking this: how many things, how many non-humans may contain life, if only we were to let go of our preconceived notion that they must not? If, as Latour<sup>51</sup> suggests, we were to care sufficiently for them? What is of interest for this paper is how Frankenstein's creature challenges the

idea that the categories of natural and human-made can ever be disentangled.

A frequently encountered argument is that the creature is not monstrous because it is unnatural, but because it escapes all known categories and shocks Victor, prompting the doctor to abandon his most prized creation.<sup>52</sup> In its abandonment, the creature enters a space of failure. It is discarded without ever being useful, left to its own devices, to a life without upward mobility or possibility for normative success. Like anthropogenic debris, the creature will roam the seas and travel the Earth. In one moment it even declares, 'If I cannot inspire love, I will cause fear!'<sup>53</sup> If I cannot be absorbed into the proper order of things, I will be unintelligible and inaccessible. I will be monstrous. As the creature shifts from benevolent to murderous, Shelley conveys the rationale of the First Industrial Revolution: to make a better world with technology, to improve it with things. Shelley also foresees the paradox of the Anthropocene: that the abundance of materiality at our service would not be contained or tamed, that it would rise with life, and the impression of mastery over non-human nature would crumble to pieces, constituting an epoch's crisis.<sup>54</sup> In *Frankenstein*, the repulsive character of the creature is tied to a disordering force.

Ugliness is not inherent to the being, as some might argue it is not inherent to anything, but a dormant feature, its possibility brewing under every surface, reminiscent of things' ability to become unruly and places' potential for ruin.<sup>55</sup> The term 'ugly' first appears at a very specific point in the story. In its lifeless form, Victor did not describe the creature as repugnant as one would a broken thing, but rather as a prowess of science and knowledge as one would an object in working order. 'Its unearthly ugliness (...) almost too horrible for human eyes' only comes into being as the creature becomes incoherent—that is to say, as it first twitches with life, in a body where life has already left once and has no natural right to flourish again.<sup>56</sup> Ugliness and excess become enmeshed and indistinguishable in the creature, its body in pieces, containing too many others, leaking at every seam, misbehaving, nonsensical, and illogical. The greatest transgression in *Frankenstein* is a confounding of the order of things.<sup>57</sup> What is it about the object that we cannot aesthetically process and face, and that must be relegated to the world of monsters, we may ask?<sup>58</sup> But let us consider the opposite. If the unsightly and the elusive are best read through the discourse of monstrosity, why not apply it to the study of unruly archaeological things?

#### OTHERING AND MATERIAL ENCOUNTERS

The monstrous saturation of the current epoch, of this Age of Things, is one of its defining features. Things

are in abundance and things are leaking out, evading containment. It should come as no surprise that plastic adrift, for instance, has been described as an 'invasive species' since capitalism in its current articulation relies on overproduction.<sup>59</sup> Plastic as a species of its own is routinely presented as a threat of unnamed provenance, thus framing it as a wilful creature separate from its human creators. I contend that the Anthropocene in the material realm in the case at hand primarily expresses itself through two elements: the sheer volume of things, and their unruliness. From an archaeological perspective, it has been convincingly argued that the masses of discarded things in the Anthropocene find themselves 'out of hand' and 'out of context,' and are characterised precisely by their refusal to be properly contained, domesticated, and categorised.<sup>60</sup> The contemporary ordering of space demands cleanliness and order, yet the things themselves and their fragments form hybrids, agglomerates, and all sorts of creative alliances that defy material ordering.

This material disordering is further explored in the work of Tim Edensor in the field of industrial archaeology, through the messy relations between non-humans and humans experienced within the modern archaeological ruin. The ruin is a place of excess where things and spaces release energies, creating new multiplicities.<sup>61</sup> Edensor further maintains that, by existing beyond their use and ownership, such things interrogate the very notions of value, ordering, and non-human passivity. Not fitting into existing categories, discarded and abandoned things become detached from their former meaning and purpose.<sup>62</sup> They are no longer part of a human-oriented narrative in which their role is to be a useful object for us—one which is expected to behave in a stable, predictable, and consistent manner that works towards that goal, with its form and meaning intact. Their great escape makes things too deeply embedded in their own history to serve as mere proxies for our histories.<sup>63</sup> The human can no longer be read through this materiality, as it ceases to act as a stand-in for those who made, owned, and used it.

The unwanted things this paper concerns itself with are strangers. Debris adrift is subsumed under one name but contains multiplicities, unexpected and unknowable. It is the monstrous Other. In the case of waterborne debris, the metaphor of the perpetual stranger operates on another level as well, given that the problem of waste has been described as a problem of things not belonging where they are.<sup>64</sup> Such materials may wash up far from their point of origin, or stay embedded in the foreshore for centuries. In any case, they become disconnected from their previous lives, discarded in sites other than the ones in which they were used, re-emerging unexpectedly in confusing, unknowable, and at times ugly or shocking ways. That being said, the unrecognizable thing-stranger may present itself as detached from any

obvious narrative, but that does not mean the power of the non-human to evoke certain things has disappeared—the same can be said of monsters that retain the ability to frighten despite their unintelligibility.

While a familiar evocation may no longer be possible, the sensual quality of things can still trigger a wide range of emotions and involuntary memories by launching us into a space of the familiar made strange, through things' refusal to remain legible. Scholarship on attachments and lingerings can be helpful for understanding how evocations may still occur without narratives, in addition to providing insights into how things might return or remain to haunt us. In rejecting anthropocentrism, the emergence of object-oriented approaches has prompted debates around correlationism. The turn to things requires a reconsideration of where knowledge resides—can humans and non-humans only be accessed and known relationally, as they meet? Or can there be a thing-in-itself, individuals-in-themselves, and a third space where they encounter each other? The position put forth in this paper is the latter, locating the potential for evocation in three sites—the individual, the thing, *and* their point of encounter.

### AFFECTS AND HAUNTINGS

Anthropologist Yael Navaro-Yashin argues that the 'emotive energies' of things and places are produced and communicated relationally, through an interaction between people and their environment.<sup>65</sup> This claim is grounded in a study of the lingering spatial and material melancholic affects of the 1974 war in Cyprus, as they manifest themselves through the Turkish-Cypriots' relationship with spaces appropriated from the Greek-Cypriots and the materials they had to leave behind. As it becomes evident that the melancholy felt by the Turkish-Cypriots is grounded in a particular transposed reality, Navaro-Yashin further argues that things, places, and subjects must be read within the context of their own politics and histories.<sup>66</sup> Affect, from this widely shared perspective, does not reside in the thing itself, but requires a situated encounter between the human and the non-human for it to be co-created and experienced. Most importantly, it appears to be predominantly rooted in the human subject insofar as it requires its presence for affect to emerge.

An approach to the aftermath of things more in tune with the object-oriented methods adhered to here may be that of Edensor, as mentioned previously, who employs the concept of the ghost and its capacity for haunting to describe ruins as imbued with a peculiar life or afterlife force, rather than empty and inert. Such works tend to disembodify affect and locate it outside of the mind. Ghosts reside in the realm of the uncanny and are capable of

coming into contact with the individual, prompting memories and affect.<sup>67</sup> They emerge as a disruptive force that affronts our sensibilities as we move through ruins, and with which we can engage, but that does not reside primarily in the psyche.<sup>68</sup> Edensor's ghosts haunt the discards of modernity and take on a monstrous quality through the impossibility of completely severing our attachments to these unruly locales. Waterborne debris cares very little about its own abandonment, disrupting the order of things with its twofold transgression: it refuses its attributed passivity by sticking to the present, and makes itself unintelligible by taking on unexpected forms. Things such as ghost nets may not be ghosts in the sense of mere shadows of their former selves, and may instead continue to be actors even in their aftermath, but they nonetheless acquire the capacity to haunt, torment, and permeate place—an ability that is at home in the realm of monstrosity.

### THE QUEER LINGERING OF THINGS

Having established a link between monster theory and archaeological theory, I finally turn to the concept of failure as it has been articulated in the field of queer theory, specifically in Halberstam's body of work. The idea put forth here is that of a form of failure that does not mark an end. It is something else, something that carries on, akin to what has been labelled hauntings, affects, afterlives, aftermaths, and so on in archaeology. Failing to meet expectations presents itself as an opportunity for disrupting the logics of success. 'Under certain circumstances,' writes Halberstam, 'losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world.'<sup>69</sup> Failure is therefore not the cessation of life, but an escape from the ordering of the world. It is also a mechanism for disrupting seemingly clear boundaries. I contend that a material failure would blur the lines between successful objects and useless things, docile and haunting materials, as well as a normatively ordered world and one replete with unruly debris.

To a failure to be properly categorised we may also add a failure to disappear, to be discarded, and to not return. Disposal and abandonment are processes fraught with insecurities, which inevitably imply a form of care to ensure that all movement is stopped, afterlives are paused, and materials do not re-emerge.<sup>70</sup> Exploring the sociology of disposal, Kevin Hetherington writes that disposal is in essence about 'managing an ever-present potential absence such that that absence does not itself make an appearance as a visible agent.'<sup>71</sup> This is reminiscent of Edensor's work on hauntings, which suggests that ghosts will roam freely if they are not contained and if their absence is not continuously ensured. As it

returns, waterborne debris emerges as a form of present absence, as an absence that failed to remain one, escaping back into the realm of presence. As it does so, we are able to 'appreciate fully the agency of absence' as a form of queer failure characterised by motion rather than inertia, and which presents itself not as a void but as a habitable negative space in which unruly things can thrive.<sup>72</sup>

Within the field of environmental humanities, Nicole Seymour further argues that the kind of environmentalism the Anthropocene requires must also be queer, insofar as it ought to operate on a principle of caring for the Other beyond immediate gains, familial relations, and self-interest.<sup>73</sup> This Other includes non-humans—flora, fauna, ecosystems, things, and places—to which empathy needs to be extended with no promise of success or reward.<sup>74</sup> Based on this, I suggest that affects<sup>75</sup> or hauntings<sup>76</sup> come from a material failure that does not mark a disappearance, but a new beginning in a queer negative realm that does not revolve around successful categorisation and management. Failed things are ambiguous, elusive, and unruly, and it is from this multifaceted failure—failure to remain useful, to be properly discarded, to stay inert—that the haunting emerges. The responses they actively provoke—as they get in the way, mingle, destabilise, impose, contaminate, leak, exude—are reminiscent of a specific genre in the arts: that of horror, as the refuge of things and beings that are no longer, not quite, and always looming.

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

The anthropogenic sea monster of Ingólfsfjörður embodies an epoch characterised by excess and loss on a scale that is almost impossible to grasp due to its breadth and fragmentation. An Age of Things, masquerading as the Age of Humans, in which immense quantities of undesired and undesirable things outlast their own disposal, roam waterways, and saturate shores, refusing the fate envisioned for them. These agglomerations of unruly things are here to destabilise our notions of worth, disrupt the ordering of the world, and prove that the non-human will not disappear. They undergo processes of othering and return to us in shocking, unintelligible and useless forms, the only constant being their refusal to remain lifeless. In making their absences present, they reframe failure not as an end, but as an opportunity for new becomings, for new aftermaths as entities that evoke affect and haunt the present.

Parallels can easily be drawn between material othering, the genre of horror, and archaeological research on hauntings and lingerings. Monster theory has proven itself very capable of deconstructing monstrosity and bringing to light the places where it resides, one of which is undoubtedly the material

realm. I hope to have shown that it can manifest itself in things adrift—in ghost nets, certainly, but extending well beyond that as well—through their ability to continue prompting affect and roaming the world despite the end of their lives as useful objects-for-us, in spite of their detachment from any obvious human-centred narrative, and with great contempt for the order of things they have escaped. In embracing hybridity and fragmentation, unruly things simultaneously seek to be made monsters and reject the contemporary ordering of space—as defined in the field of industrial archaeology—which demands that objects remain properly categorised and in their rightful place. Like Frankenstein's creature, they confound ordering and defy categorisation, hence relegating themselves to the realm of monstrosity.

What labelling the discards of the Anthropocene as monsters does, then, is enable us to speak of that which defies definition, yet must nonetheless be lived with in an epoch of inescapable material saturation. The Other presents itself as compulsory, as an entity that will endure, regardless of human intentions. The genre of horror is often viewed as pure culture, while the field of archaeology has a strong material basis. Through an attempt at bridging the gap between the two, I hope to open up a conversation around how fictional discursive renderings of the world can in fact speak volumes about its contemporary material realities, highlight how absences made present are experienced, and explore the types of affective encounters they create. Monstrosity presents itself as a way of grappling with the ambiguous, the unintelligible, and the unknowable—that is to say, a way of living alongside the Other. The figure of the monster therefore gifts us with historically situated ways of thinking through, speaking about, and engaging with the impossible.

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Olsen & Pétursdóttir 2016, 38.

<sup>2</sup> Shelley 1869/1818.

<sup>3</sup> Halberstam 2011.

<sup>4</sup> González-Ruibal 2018, 12.

<sup>5</sup> Lorimer 2017, 131.

<sup>6</sup> Dalby 2016, 36.

<sup>7</sup> Lorimer 2017, 117-118.

<sup>8</sup> Lorimer 2017, 120.

<sup>9</sup> González-Ruibal 2018, 15.

<sup>10</sup> Bryant 2011, 16.

<sup>11</sup> Pálsson et al. 2013, 8.

<sup>12</sup> Giraud et al. 2019, 358.

- <sup>13</sup> Tsing 2015.  
<sup>14</sup> Giraud et al. 2019.  
<sup>15</sup> Hamilton et al. 2015, 10.  
<sup>16</sup> Grant 2010, 2.  
<sup>17</sup> Hubner 2018, 2-3.  
<sup>18</sup> Hellstrand et al. 2018, 144.  
<sup>19</sup> Stryker 1994, 247.  
<sup>20</sup> Grant 2010, 1.  
<sup>21</sup> Hubner 2018, 58.  
<sup>22</sup> Grant 2010, 4.  
<sup>23</sup> Lorimer 2017, 128.  
<sup>24</sup> Hellstrand et al. 2018, 146.  
<sup>25</sup> Erll 2008, 389.  
<sup>26</sup> Erll 2008, 396.  
<sup>27</sup> Nuzzo 2013, 57.  
<sup>28</sup> Rai 2006, 539.  
<sup>29</sup> Rai 2006, 540.  
<sup>30</sup> Dalby 2016, 33-34.  
<sup>31</sup> Rodrigues & Przybylo 2018, 2.  
<sup>32</sup> Rai 2006, 552.  
<sup>33</sup> Malatino 2019, 42; Sharpe 2007, 385.  
<sup>34</sup> MacCormack 2012, 257.  
<sup>35</sup> Weinstock 2020, 4.  
<sup>36</sup> Nuzzo 2013, 56; 61-62.  
<sup>37</sup> Rai 2006, 553.  
<sup>38</sup> Cohen 1995.  
<sup>39</sup> Latour, 2011.  
<sup>40</sup> Weinstock 2020, 26; 28-29.  
<sup>41</sup> Weinstock 2020, 25.  
<sup>42</sup> Cohen 1995, 4-20.  
<sup>43</sup> Cohen 1995, 4.  
<sup>44</sup> Cohen 1995, 4.  
<sup>45</sup> Cohen 1995, 20.  
<sup>46</sup> Latour, 2011.  
<sup>47</sup> Lorimer 2017, 127.  
<sup>48</sup> Latour, 2011.  
<sup>49</sup> Latour, 2011.  
<sup>50</sup> Shelley 1869/1818, 40.  
<sup>51</sup> Latour 2011.  
<sup>52</sup> Hammond 2004, 192.  
<sup>53</sup> Shelley 1869/1818, 115.  
<sup>54</sup> Stryker 1994, 248.  
<sup>55</sup> See, however, González-Ruibal 2019, 178 on 'engineered monstrosity.'  
<sup>56</sup> Shelley 1869/1818, 77; Gigante 2000, 569.  
<sup>57</sup> Malatino 2019, 43.  
<sup>58</sup> Gigante 2000, 568.  
<sup>59</sup> Wichter 2019; Edensor 2005, 61.  
<sup>60</sup> Pétursdóttir 2017, 196.  
<sup>61</sup> Edensor 2005, 124.  
<sup>62</sup> Edensor 2005, 123.  
<sup>63</sup> Pétursdóttir 2017, 199.  
<sup>64</sup> Pétursdóttir 2019, 8; see also Douglas 1996 on belonging.  
<sup>65</sup> Navaro-Yashin 2009, 1;14.  
<sup>66</sup> Navaro-Yashin 2009, 1;9.  
<sup>67</sup> Edensor 2004, 835.  
<sup>68</sup> Edensor 2004, 837.  
<sup>69</sup> Halberstam 2011, 2-3.

- <sup>70</sup> Hetherington 2004, 157.  
<sup>71</sup> Hetherington 2004, 171.  
<sup>72</sup> Hetherington 2004, 170.  
<sup>73</sup> Seymour 2013, 12-27.  
<sup>74</sup> Seymour 2013, 185.  
<sup>75</sup> Navaro-Yashin 2009.  
<sup>76</sup> Edensor 2004.

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## SUMMARY IN FRENCH, GERMAN, ITALIAN AND SPANISH

## FRENCH

**TITRE : Monstrosités : Horreur, Autrui, et Anthropocène**

RESUME : Cet article traite de la multitude de choses jetées, échouées sur le rivage et errant dans les cours d'eau comme étant les nouveaux monstres de l'Anthropocène. Il explore comment se croisent la monstrosité et l'archéologie, et comment le genre de l'horreur à la fois émerge

de l'époque actuelle et contribue à celle-ci. Alors que les choses jetées entreprennent leur voyage post-abandon, leur immensité et leur étendue, ainsi que leur refus de servir de substituts pour les récits humains, rendent leur pleine compréhension et toute intelligibilité impossibles. Combinant approches archéologiques et théorie queer, cet article tente d'entrer au cœur des enchevêtrements inévitables et complexes entre les gens et les monstres.

## GERMAN

**TITEL: Monströse Dinge: Horror, “Das Andere” und das Anthropozän**

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG : In diesem Artikel werden die Massen von weggeworfenen Dingen, die in Gewässern landen und angespült werden, als die neuen Monster des Anthropozäns bezeichnet. Es wird die Art und Weise aufgezeigt, wie sich Monstrosität und Archäologie überschneiden, und wie das Genre des Horrors gleichzeitig aus der aktuellen Epoche hervorgeht und diese prägt. Während sie sich nach dem Entsorgen auf ihre Reise begeben, führen ihre immense Anzahl, die Verbreitung und die Weigerung, als Stellvertreter für menschliche Erzählungen zu dienen, dazu, dass es unmöglich ist, Dinge im Anthropozän vollständig zu erfassen und zu verstehen. Dieser Artikel kombiniert archäologische Ansätze und Queer-Theorie und versucht, den unvermeidlichen, komplexen Verstrickungen zwischen Menschen und dem monströsen Anderen auf den Grund zu gehen.

## ITALIAN

**TITOLO: Cose mostruose: l'orrore, l'alterità e l'antropocene**

RIASSUNTO: Questo articolo affronta gli ammassi di rifiuti che giungono a riva e che vagano sulle acque in qualità di nuovi mostri dell'antropocene. Vengono analizzati i modi in cui la mostruosità si incrocia con l'archeologia, e come tale tipo di

orrore affiori simultaneamente a denunciare l'epoca in cui viviamo. Nell'intraprendere il loro viaggio dopo l'abbandono, l'enorme quantità di questi oggetti, la loro diffusione, l'impossibilità di supplire alla narrazione umana, sfociano nell'impossibilità di afferrarne il senso, o di dar loro un significato. Nel combinare approccio archeologico e teoria queer, questo articolo cerca di puntare al cuore di una questione inevitabile: il complesso intreccio tra gli individui e la 'mostruosità' dell'alterità.

## SPANISH

**TÍTULO: Cosas monstruosas: horror, 'otros' y el Antropoceno**

RESUMEN: Este artículo versa sobre la multitud de cosas descartadas llegadas a la costa y que vagan por las vías fluviales como los nuevos monstruos del Antropoceno. En él se exploran las formas en las que se cruzan dicha monstruosidad con la arqueología, y cómo el género de terror tanto nace como informa la época actual. La inmensa escala de estas cosas, su expansión y su rechazo a servir como representantes de las narrativas humanas las vuelve incomprensibles y sin sentido. Combinando enfoques arqueológicos y utilizando la teoría queer, este artículo intenta llegar al corazón de los enredos inevitables y complejos existentes entre las personas y los monstruosos 'otros'.

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# Appendix B

# Appendix C

**Zombie Materiality:  
Sea Foam, Ecocriticism, and Persistent Waste**

Geneviève Godin

**Abstract**

The containment and control of materiality labeled as waste is recognized as a pressing environmental issue, especially in relation to toxicity, bacteria, and threats to the human body. Building on this problem and approaching it from the perspective of queer theory, this paper highlights the shortcomings of conceptualizing materiality as lifeless following its disposal. It does so by calling attention to the ways in which it evades containment, entering a plethora of relationships with humans and nonhumans. Using the example of sea foam, which is incredibly lively yet primarily composed of decomposing matter, this work introduces the idea of a zombie materiality. Borrowing from the register of horror, zombie materiality presents itself as a way of capturing that which remains animated beyond its passing. In doing so, it foregrounds notions of unwanted and unintentional outcomes, thus nuancing conversations around ideal and wanted futures. The contemporary zombie emerges as a historically situated analytical tool, embodying a critique of the binary categories of life and death, animacy and inertia, and human and nonhuman. Through thinking with zombies, this paper offers an ecocritical outlook on contemporary material masses and the ways in which their conceptualization may ultimately hinder their management.

**Keywords:** materiality, ecology, zombies, queer theory, waste

## Introduction

Jess throws her ball into a thick layer of pulsing sea foam that immediately engulfs it (fig. 1). From the safety of the familiar shore and under the watchful eye of her human guardian, she dives in and out of the bubbly mass, tail wagging, scratching the ground. Chunks of foam animatedly fly off of her new playmate, carried away by the wind, while others cling to her fur. Jess does not seem to merely play *in* sea foam or *using* sea foam, as much as she appears to be playing *with* it, alongside its frothy materiality, as it plays right back with her. The landscape of the coast is inherently ambiguous, if not transgressive in its liminality—not quite water, not quite land, but an ebbing and flowing entity that defies borders. Life takes many forms by the sea and allows itself to animate a wide range of bodies. It is this kind of materiality that breaches traditional categories and taken-for-granted knowledge of what forms animacy takes that this paper concerns itself with, paying special attention to nonhumans that blur the distinction between animated and inert.



**Figure 1.** Jess playing in/with sea foam in Cornwall, England.

*Video originally posted on June 21st, 2021 by Twitter user Lego Lost At Sea (Tracey Williams), reproduced with permission.*

Inspired by the aforementioned sea foam anecdote, I establish what we may call 'zombie materiality' and explore its relevance for the field of environmental humanities, and for materially-oriented archaeological approaches more generally. Departing from this example and delving into the theoretical realm instead, I then propose zombie materiality as a way of stepping outside of environmental discourses around ideal futures to explore what unintended and unwanted outcomes may also unfold. It should be noted that the use of zombies and processes of zombification in this paper are, for the most part, not metaphorical. They are not stand-ins for other imaginings, concepts, or

environmental warnings. Zombie materiality is about the literal undead and the literal forms it may take, one of which is sea foam, which is here treated as a *thing*. This designation is derived from Graham Harman's object-oriented ontology, which differentiates between "real objects" that exist in their own right, regardless of whether or not they affect other entities, as opposed to "sensual objects" that exist only in relation to real objects.<sup>1</sup> My aim is therefore to attend to real animacy, real death, and real things, which retain their monstrosity. To this end, I adopt a multidisciplinary approach that grounds itself primarily in queer theory and new materialism, but also draws from waste studies and ecocriticism, particularly in relation to the genre of horror.

Based on these theoretical underpinnings, I argue that the contemporary figure of the zombie bears strong connections to ecology, materiality, and the unequal valuing of bodies under capitalism and in the Anthropocene. I progress toward this conclusion through a thematic investigation of zombie materiality—one which is not tied to a particular location or limited to sea foam—revolving around the following themes: the danger and toxicity associated with waste; the vitality, animacy, and performativity that enliven nonhumans; death and zombification; and what a materially-oriented ecology of the undead might look like. I begin by turning to narratives articulated around bodies of water that produce sea foam, and the ways in which they prompt conversations around the duality of dirty and clean, the mitigation of potential harm, and the notion of real and perceived toxicity. The conversation then transitions into matters of object agency, such as the kind enacted by toxins, from a posthuman perspective and with an orientation toward queer theory. It is queer theory's long-established critique of futurity, commentary on the death drive, and concern with ephemera that provide a point of entry into zombification, as a way of outliving endings and continuing to exist in the space between life and non-life.

Indeed, both in their contemporary manifestation and drawing from the Haitian Vodou tradition I later introduce, zombies are here understood to represent a refusal of death, a form of continuity that exists beyond and without life proper. When read in conjunction with anthropogenic materialities, the contemporary figure of the zombie gives birth to an undead ecology in which things unwanted, broken, and discarded outlive their own death. They continue to actively engage in relationships with the human, nonhuman, and the natural, thus also drawing attention to the shortcomings of modern systems of waste containment. I further argue that zombie materiality is a particularly powerful analytical tool given that the zombie is always embedded in power relations due to its historical roots, which are to be found in oppression, inequality, and the deliberate devaluing of lives and bodies under extractive capitalism. In working

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<sup>1</sup> Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, 9.

with zombies, I suggest a methodology that engages with posthumanism through an eco-materialist lens that is historically grounded and attuned to the complex entanglements between lingering material legacies, environmental issues around toxicity, and the ramifications of declaring only certain forms of vitality as properly living.

## **Sea Foam**

The process by which sea foam comes into existence and adopts the form we are familiar with is not exactly one of human-powered activities or intentions, but it is a process that nonetheless involves several components and mechanical force, resulting in the production of a new material that can be seen, touched, interact with other entities, and has certain material characteristics. Very simply put since this is not the focus of this paper, foam is a gas that has been dispersed in matter, such as water, but remains separated by thin liquid films. It is also important to point out that its formation is not entirely spontaneous. Sea foam can only occur under two conditions: first, the liquid cannot be pure and must contain surface-active components, whether these are organic or human-made; second, there must be sufficient mechanical force to inject gas into the water faster than the liquid films can drain, so that this gas then becomes trapped and stabilized.<sup>2</sup> This mechanical impact may be created by wind and waves, cascades and waterfalls, but also by structures such as dams and hydropower plants.

Through their interactions, these components give rise to an entirely new thing, with its own properties and affordances. What is of particular interest here is the peculiar collections of matter that constitute sea foam, the life stages these components are in during the process of object formation, and the ways in which they combine, holding on to each other, forming a cohesive, tangible zombie/thing. The aforementioned surface components are primarily dead matter or by-products of living matter. These include organic compounds, lipids, and proteins from decomposing terrestrial and aquatic animals, plants, phytoplankton, and microbial residues. Contributing to these decomposing masses are various industries including commercial agriculture, through traceable points of entry into bodies of water as well as diffuse or indirect water and soil pollution.<sup>3</sup> A closer examination of sea foam reveals various enrichments and a wide range of bacteria as well, the most common ones being actinomycetes and *microthrix parvicella*.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Schilling and Zessner, "Foam," 4357.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 4363-4364.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 4359.

Foam also forms alliances with various other components found in aquatic environments including nutrients, pesticides, heavy metals, carbons, and hydrocarbons. For this reason, it has been suggested that foam may act as a purifying device.<sup>5</sup> That is to say, a dirty and soiled material exuded by water, formed by it, in order to then be purged from it. Foam has been known to have toxic effects on humans and nonhumans alike, not as a result of its presence per se, but mainly due to its enrichments. Bubbles may burst, releasing bacteria, toxins, and pathogens. These may also enter the food chain, causing damage to species both in and outside of marine environments. Toxic effects may also be secondary, such as when foam dampens certain structures, which go on to develop mold. That being said, it can also provide an important source of nutrients and habitats for other organisms.<sup>6</sup> In any case, we can definitively say that it is through a combination of organic matter and inorganic components that sea foam acquires its stability—that is, the ability to cling and stick, as matter combines.

## **Danger**

As sea foam transitions from distributed products of decay, decomposition, and diffuse abjection to a tangible thing, it gains the ability to exist beyond bodies of water as a separate, independently animated entity, moving and pulsing as if alive—or, as what may be more accurately labeled ‘undead.’ This borrowing of a term closely associated with the registers of horror, fantasy, and science-fiction may provide a more accurate way of describing not only the substance itself, but the ways in which the public tends to apprehend sea foam. The year 2020, for example, began with spectacular images from the Spanish municipality of Tossa de Mar circulating online. As Storm Gloria hit the Catalan coast in mid-January, a thick layer of foam followed suit, making its way several kilometers inland.<sup>7</sup> The stronger the wind and the higher the waves, the more foam the sea made. It was presumed to be non-toxic, more mechanics than algae bloom. Videos showed residents of Tossa de Mar walking waist-deep in foam, shoveling and sweeping it back toward the coast as if it was snow, hoping to get rid of the invader before it could cause secondary structural damage.<sup>8 9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 4360; 4363-4364.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 4363-4364.

<sup>7</sup> Gregory, “Storm Gloria.”

<sup>8</sup> The Telegraph, “Sea foam.”

<sup>9</sup> CNN, “Sea foam.”

When foam came to the Netherlands in May of the same year, it showed a decidedly less playful face. A *phaeocystis globosa* algae bloom, four times denser than what had been recorded in the past decade, began to disintegrate. Viral infections were identified as the reason why cells began to burst, before being whipped up into foam by strong winds. A change in wind direction then caused this mass to move swiftly into Scheveningen Beach, a surfing destination in The Hague.<sup>10</sup> Five experienced surfers lost their lives as the foam built up several meters high and collapsed onto them, disorienting and trapping the group. In September 2020, two people and a dog were safely rescued from a Cornish beach by the Falmouth coast guard. They had gone to Porth Beach near Newquay to enjoy the morning weather when a thick layer of foam moved inland. The trio found themselves trapped under a bridge, and had to be rescued with the aid of a helicopter.<sup>11</sup> They had no way of knowing where the beach ended and the water began, how deep the foam would be if they stepped into it, and what it may conceal.

It may be speculated that sea foam alarms the public mainly because it is aesthetically unpleasant and this unsightliness is highly visible, as opposed to other invisible pollutants and contaminants that can be found in water. The issue of property damage is, of course, generally present when foam moves inland. Foam is also often assumed to be anthropogenic, emerging as a by-product of chemical pollution and detergents, even though we know that to be at least partially false. As a result, most research participants in various studies on its presence report being reluctant to approach sea foam due to its potential toxicity and the fear of falling ill, and tend to equate its presence with dirty bodies of water, dangerous human-made pollution, and landscapes of waste.<sup>12</sup> This definitively situates sea foam within the realm of the threatening and the dangerous from a human-centered perspective, and additionally places it in the realm of dirt and waste by virtue of its high material visibility.

## **Toxicity and Containment**

As seen in the cases above, the dangers of sea foam are not only ontological in its blurring of the animacy and inertia boundary through movement, nor do they exist solely in its actual or potential toxic harm, but manifest themselves onto shore and land as threatening forces that make actual attempts on the integrity of human and nonhuman bodies. We are, once again,

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<sup>10</sup> Holligan, "Surfing Tragedy."

<sup>11</sup> Becquart, "Urgent rescue."

<sup>12</sup> See: Mills et al., Pojasek and Zajicek, and Wilson et al. cited in Schilling and Zessner, "Foam," 4355-4356.



speaking of a *real* zombie with *real* consequences. Indeed, sea foam presents itself as an ambiguous, decomposing, monstrous hybrid on the move, casting doubt on the binary separation between life and death. Both in its actual form and in its labeling as “matter out of place,” it finds itself at home in the realms of dirt, waste, and toxicity.<sup>13 14</sup> The act of finding or making oneself out of place directly ties into narratives of control—or in this case, lack thereof—in relation to waste.

In the field of waste studies, this has articulated itself around concerns relating to strategies of containment in bounded spaces such as landfills, and unbounded ones including oceanic garbage patches, as well as the impossibility of hermetically sealing waste, for such a project must always fail. Whether that is through soil, air, or water, something of landfills will inevitably leak, be removed, blow away, leach, or otherwise cross the boundaries of its assigned landscape, entering nonhuman consumption economies such as those of bacteria.<sup>15</sup> To manage waste, therefore, is primarily to ensure the maintenance of absence.<sup>16</sup> Although containment and control are not at the forefront of this paper, they both introduce a key aspect of waste, which is that of temporality.<sup>17</sup> The assured evasion of waste and toxic matter unavoidably situates them in time, ensuring that their human-defined timeline is never *final*.<sup>18</sup> From the moment they are placed somewhere, the clock starts ticking. We may not know when, but eventually, they will attempt to flee.

Things are no strangers to embodying time’s passing as it is enacted on their very surface through aging and decaying, before being declared ‘dead’ and beyond repair when they consistently fail to give what is expected of them, ultimately leading to their disposal or ‘death.’<sup>19</sup> Materiality and its duration give a sense of time passed and time passing, and tend to be conceptualized as belonging either to the category of life (thing in use or in working order) or to the realm of non-life (thing discarded or broken). This narrative is profoundly disrupted through the act of evading confinement, of escaping from their final resting place, thus also evading non-life—a state that is intended to be permanent. In refusing to be left behind, such materiality challenges the very possibility of futures in which the excesses of the Anthropocene have been fully cleaned or put away completely.

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<sup>13</sup> Douglas cited in Viney, *Waste*, chap. 1.

<sup>14</sup> Sosna and Brunclíková, *Archaeologies of Waste*, 2.

<sup>15</sup> Hird, “Knowing Waste,” 457;465.

<sup>16</sup> Hetherington, “Secondhandedness,” 171.

<sup>17</sup> Pétursdóttir, “Anticipated futures,” 99.

<sup>18</sup> Hetherington, “Secondhandedness,” 157.

<sup>19</sup> Viney, *Waste*, chap. 1.

Toxins act similarly, in addition to being by-products of life or life-adjacent themselves, belonging neither to life nor to non-life, but to something that cuts across registers and straddles their boundaries.<sup>20</sup> The division between life and non-life, animate and inanimate, and vital and inert is indeed fragile.<sup>21</sup> Such categories are perhaps not as distinct as they may first appear—or perhaps they are more akin to the landfill, which inevitably fails to contain what seemingly belongs within its boundaries. I argue that sea foam as a thing finds itself in the middle of this ambiguity by virtue of belonging to none of these categories while being an amalgam of all, including reactive and non-reactive matter, toxins and organic compounds, bacteria and nutrients, and so on. A persistent, undead thing, existing in the aftermath of its non-life, and presenting itself as an animated zombified entity.

### **Vitality and Animacy**

While many theories and concepts can account for the strange positioning of materiality—zombified or otherwise—in relation to life and non-life, those I embrace may be said to belong to new materialism, which confers varying degrees of agency to matter<sup>22</sup> and distances itself from a view of things as vessels for culture.<sup>23</sup> From Jane Bennett I borrow the general idea that things possess a form of vitality (“vital materialism”), which runs through this text not as something to be proven or defended, but as a starting point to be built upon.<sup>24</sup> The concept of animacies as defined by Mel Chen proves particularly useful in this endeavor<sup>25</sup> and so do the writings of Karen Barad on the topic of queer critters, as well as their equally queer performances and intra-activities.<sup>26</sup> Before delving into how these approaches intersect with undead matter, it is worth briefly turning to queer theory itself, for it is the lens through which they are apprehended.

My use of queer theory begins first and foremost with the recognition that it “emerges from an understanding of queer life as precarious life.”<sup>27</sup> It speaks directly to that which is mutable, ambiguous, unknowable, unintelligible, and/or

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<sup>20</sup> Chen, “Toxic Animacies,” 279.

<sup>21</sup> Chen, *Animacies*, 2.

<sup>22</sup> Coole and Frost, *Introducing the New Materialism*, 7.

<sup>23</sup> Sencindiver, “New Materialism.”

<sup>24</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*.

<sup>25</sup> Chen, “Toxic Animacies.”

<sup>26</sup> Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity;” “Nature’s Queer Performativity.”

<sup>27</sup> Luciano and Chen, “Introduction,” 193.

uncategorizable in its being, performances, intimacies, and/or affiliations.<sup>28</sup> Queerness should here be understood as a way of capturing a vast range of subjectivities, alliances, and ways of life (or non-life) that unfold outside the normative, but are not constrained by the aforementioned binary categories of human and nonhuman, proper and improper, animate and inanimate, and so forth. Queer theory acts as a questioning, if not an outright rejection, of these binaries and a destabilizing force, defined by its shifting referential context and lack of fixed definition.<sup>29</sup> Queer modes of being, (non-)living, and affiliating can thus be articulated in conjunction with various nonhuman vitalities, and enable subjects and objects to mutually constitute each other for these modes reject the idea of a non-permeable boundary between them.

Based on an understanding that animacies contain many meanings that must be entertained at once and are too deeply intersectional to be fully defined or contained, the overview presented here is deliberately selective, and makes no attempt to provide a definitive definition or establish a fixed set of characteristics for these animacies. In the field of linguistics, animacy refers to the degree to which a noun is imbued with liveliness and perceived as sentient. However, as Chen argues, this semantic feature can open much broader conversations, many of which are highly relevant for the study of materiality, toxicity, and non-normative alliances.<sup>30</sup> In line with queer theory, animacy aims to undo binary systems that create artificial boundaries, in order to generate different, transgressive articulations of intimacy.<sup>31</sup> Although I view animacy as containing vital energies, it distances itself from more mainstream vitalism in its emphasis on dismantling the separation between organic and non-organic. Animacies embrace non-neutral affectivity "in relation to animals, humans, and living and dead things (...) shaped by race and sexuality, mapping various biopolitical realizations."<sup>32</sup>

Animacies are especially relevant within the context of cultural and biopolitical landscapes heavily influenced by 'unseen' environmental threats such as toxicity, which demand a reconfiguration of what bodies are considered proper or improper, bounded or porous, and animated or inanimate.<sup>33</sup> What we see here is not simply a matter of whether matter can be said to be alive or not, but an intersectional discourse that articulates queer associations and degrees of animacy in a space molded by race, sexuality, ecology, politics, and biopolitics,

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<sup>28</sup> Giffney and Hird, *Introduction: Queering*.

<sup>29</sup> Barad, "Nature's Queer Performativity," 29.

<sup>30</sup> Chen, *Animacies*, 2.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 9-10.

without necessarily requiring the presence of human bodies.<sup>34</sup> In establishing foam as a thing, this thing as vital, this vitalism as being at least in part derived from toxicity and the porosity of bodies human and nonhuman, as well as this entire endeavor as a queering of non-life, I argue that animacies are thus realized. Animacies, therefore, provide the framework through which improper, non-living, and nonhuman matter nevertheless becomes animated and forms relationships.

## **Performativity**

For the purpose of this paper, the notion of performativity—as defined in the work of Judith Butler, but specifically the posthumanist, queer variant articulated by Barad—is also key for highlighting the process by which matter reveals itself as shaped and constituted by animacies. I begin by acknowledging that practices of differentiation have materializing effects, and that analysis should begin prior to these walls being erected, before these differentiations are elevated to the point of “fundamental ontological rifts.”<sup>35</sup> Barad argues that queerness is not necessarily found in the deliberate dismantling of the nature/culture boundary, but is already *there*, “in the very nature of spacetime mattering.”<sup>36</sup> Through studying a range of queer critters—atoms, lightning, species of dinoflagellates, the neuronal receptors of stingrays, and academics—Barad establishes that there are certain things that cannot be accounted for by a classical ontology, here defined as the idea that entities have boundaries, and interact following a cause-and-effect chain of events through space and linear time.<sup>37</sup>

The above-mentioned queer critters, each in their own ways, do not conform to the rules of the universe, therefore performatively differentiating themselves from others through their very spacetime mattering, without human engagements or discursive renderings. Barad extends the limits of performativity—that is, beyond bodies constituting and materializing themselves into their supposed identities through discursive practices—by suggesting that matter itself is performatively materialized. That matter plays a role in its own mattering, in its own becomings, and in its “intra-activity.”<sup>38</sup> The goal here is—at least in part, and in line with the principles of new materialism—to articulate a critique of the power attributed to language by redirecting our attention toward

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<sup>34</sup> Chen, “Toxic Animacies,” 265;280.

<sup>35</sup> Olsen and Witmore, “Archaeology, symmetry,” 189.

<sup>36</sup> Barad, “Nature’s Queer Performativity,” 31;39.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 33;44-45.

<sup>38</sup> Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity,” 803.

practices and actions. In doing so, yet another binary opposition is contested: that of empty materiality awaiting representation on the one hand, and that which has been enlivened by cultural discourse on the other.

The posthumanist performativity thus proposed by Barad challenges notions of material passivity and the process of mattering as a given, by exposing the queerness of space, time, and mattering—not in what we make of it, but in its very nature, down to the atom. I see animacies as unfolding within this relational understanding of how matter queerly performs itself in the universe. What is perhaps most relevant for the case of sea foam is Barad’s claim that this work on queer critters shows “that all sorts of seeming impossibilities are indeed possible.”<sup>39</sup> This has serious implications for the notions of life and death, and where non-life or the renunciation of death may be made possible.

## **Death and Ephemera**

Before discussing the link between sea foam as a thing and the undead, I would like to take a brief detour to more explicitly establish connections between queer theory, queer critters, queer intimacies, and death or ephemera. Although we may argue that queerness itself remains somewhat under-theorized in mainstream death studies, notions of death—and ‘negative’ futures—do feature quite prominently in the genealogies of queer theory. Some of these roots are to be found in the theorizing of gender and sexuality through the 1980s onward, alongside AIDS activism. What is known as the ‘antisocial’ branch of queer theory also touches on the idea of queerness as a dead end of sorts, most notably through the works of Leo Bersani and Lee Edelman.<sup>40 41</sup>

In the 2004 book *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Edelman takes a stance against reproductive futurism, drawing from Freudian psychoanalytical theory and the death drive specifically, arguing that the figure of the queer is fundamentally incompatible with traditional conceptions of the future. What ensues is a critique of futurity as grounded in heterosexual reproduction and the protection of the mythical figure of the child above all else. While antisocial theory is worth mentioning and does influence my overall approach to queerness, what this paper looks at is perhaps more in line with queer *ephemera* than with the queer death drive—I do not speak directly of a rejection of futurity, but of a rejection of death; an unauthorized projection into the future, rather than an overt critique of the existence of that future.

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<sup>39</sup> Barad, “Nature’s Queer Performativity,” 25.

<sup>40</sup> Radomska, Mehrabi, and Lykke, “Queer Death Studies,” 86.

<sup>41</sup> Edelman, *No Future*.

Ephemera is of relevance for queer theory at large given that it “encodes within it the politics of fugitive (...) in so far as fugitive is not defined by temporality or the limits of time and space.”<sup>42</sup> For José Esteban Muñoz, ephemera refers to a way of discussing things whose ontology is queer, and which fail to “‘count’ as proper ‘proof’” as a result of it.<sup>43</sup> I argue that sea foam, as materiality presenting itself as queer ephemera, contributes to the practice of making queer worlds, acknowledging the world as already queered, and looking at what this queering does.<sup>44</sup> I further propose that the ephemerality of death is best embodied in the figure of the contemporary zombie. Although not listed by Barad, zombies also seem to perform as queer critters, both in their animacy and their ambiguous temporal positioning in relation to non-life.

## **Zombification**

In their 2014 edited volume *The Year’s Work at the Zombie Research Center*, Edward P. Comentale and Aaron Jaffe offer a comprehensive account of zombie theory. They define a zombie—the actual being, not the adjective metaphorically transposed to other situations—as an animated corpse, belonging to the realm of the abject. It preys on the living, and infects through biting and scratching (although in some cases all beings are already infected and zombification is only a matter of time, not of circumstances). The zombie stops at nothing to display its hostility, yet is mindless. It assembles in masses, moving as one, and these masses can be eliminated without remorse.<sup>45</sup> The contemporary zombie as an automated, animated corpse is a fairly new creature that, in most accounts, is primarily traced back to George A. Romero’s 1968 film *Night of the Living Dead*.<sup>46 47 48</sup> Although a renewed interest in the genre has been observed over the past two decades or so, the figure of the contemporary zombie as a toxic threat to social order can be said to have remained largely unchanged.

It must, however, be acknowledged that the origins of the Hollywood zombie are to be found elsewhere entirely, far away from the movie studios. In Haitian Vodou, the zombie is not a bloodthirsty predator, but an eternal enslaved being, resurrected by a Vodou priest in order to extend labor extraction and the

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<sup>42</sup> Russell, “Ephemeraphilia,” chap. 14.

<sup>43</sup> Muñoz, “Ephemera,” 6.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>45</sup> Comentale and Jaffe, “Introduction.”

<sup>46</sup> Moore, “Don’t take orders,” 301.

<sup>47</sup> Rutherford, *Zombies*, chap. 1.

<sup>48</sup> Ruthven, “Zombie Postfeminism,” chap. 10.

exploitation of human bodies into eternity.<sup>49</sup> Both types of zombies have no memories of their previous lives, no consciousness, no free will, and a limited capacity for speech and communication. The working zombie of Haitian Vodou is as much of a threat as that of Romero, but a radically different one.<sup>50</sup> The folkloric creature may be harmless and docile, but the fear of becoming a zombie is just as great as the fear of being devoured by one. Both yield similar outcomes wherein the flesh of one is consumed by the hunger of another, metaphorically for the former and literally for the latter.

The shift from zombie-as-prey to zombie-as-hunter has been theorized as a reflection of a broader societal shift toward a humanist model in which free will is at the forefront.<sup>51</sup> That being said, I argue that the reframing of the zombie in Western media is not only a passive product of its time, but also an obscuring of its origins. With *Night of the Living Dead*, the zombie is deliberately de-racialized and whitewashed, and a reframed version of non-life devoid of the enduring legacies of slavery—and thus also of white guilt—is presented to audiences. Having obscured its own origins, this new figure of the zombie places emphasis on threats to social order and to the collective by surrendering to the body's most primal urges, while simultaneously concealing the fact that the living have and continue to act upon those same urges with impunity. That is not to say, however, that the new zombie does not have relevance in today's cultural landscape as a result of its immense popularity, and that this relevance is not worth investigating.

Indeed, the figure of the zombie has expanded its reach to a wide range of disciplines since its reinterpretation—zombie ideas that live on despite mountains of contrary evidence, zombie computers under the remote control of hackers, zombie neighborhoods in which housing units are owned yet unoccupied, and zombie insects controlled by parasites behaving in ways not conducive to the insect's own survival, to only name a few.<sup>52</sup> Most prevalent in television, film, and comic books from the early 2000s onward is the pathological zombie, the viral human-nonhuman hybrid that feeds into concerns around contaminants and outbreaks, protection against risk, and emergency preparedness.<sup>53</sup> In those narratives the zombie becomes a significant threat when the post-apocalyptic world takes hold—institutions and infrastructures collapsing as social decay spreads, much like the virus itself.<sup>54</sup> Their many uses

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Moore, "Don't take orders," 301.

<sup>51</sup> Ruthven, "Zombie Postfeminism," chap. 10.

<sup>52</sup> Rutherford, *Zombies*, chap. 1.

<sup>53</sup> Sattar, "Zombie Performance," chap. 7.

<sup>54</sup> Moore, "Don't take orders," 302.

as metaphor beg the question, “what makes zombies so symbolically flexible?”<sup>55</sup> One possibility is that, in its ambiguity and unknowability, the zombie calls into question the very categories it fails to fall into.

These categories include what it means to be human or nonhuman, what the conditions for life or death are, what bodies can engage in vitality or performativity, between what kinds of matter can animacies emerge, and what epistemologies and ontologies underlie these assumptions.<sup>56</sup> Jack Halberstam argues that, due to its roots, the zombie presents itself as a form of Afro-pessimist spectacle, within which humans are asked to imagine their own survival, find pleasure in envisioning futurity, and do so while enacting white racial fantasies of both adversity and longevity.<sup>57</sup> The zombie also serves as a critique of the human, as opposed to an emptied human or the embodiment of a void. It has been argued that zombies are not so much ready-made metaphors as they are “a sticky surface,” nonhuman things that “in their dumb plasticity (...) allow us to travesty death.”<sup>58</sup> Unlike other undead beings such as vampires, which look entirely human, death clings to the zombie, and is relentlessly performed.<sup>59</sup> The zombie is not so much *revived* as it is *undead*—we do not see a return of life, but a renunciation of death; that is, an embracing of non-life.

## **Undead Matter**

Who gets to live, what is allowed to be animate, what forms life might take, and, returning to queer ephemera, what serves as proper proof of life, are central to the figure of the contemporary zombie, drawing heavily from its Haitian roots and the (de)valuing of certain lives. I propose that these aspects of the zombie have implications for both materiality and ecology. As previously argued, materiality is inexorably situated in time, and time is enacted onto it. Time is reflected in its cycles of use, from its creation to its failure, but beyond that as well, as it decays, releases matter back into the world, forms new alliances, and evades containment. Matter past its time and prime is therefore not an example of death as inertia, but of un-death, of the ephemerality of the event of death. “To be undead is just to continue with more ending,” as the “un- weirdly turns subtraction into addition.”<sup>60</sup> In other words, undead is not to be

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<sup>55</sup> Comentale and Jaffe, “Introduction.”

<sup>56</sup> Moore, “Don’t take orders,” 305.

<sup>57</sup> Halberstam, *Wild Things*, 166.

<sup>58</sup> Comentale and Jaffe, “Introduction.”

<sup>59</sup> Moore, “Don’t take orders,” 302.

<sup>60</sup> Comentale and Jaffe, “Introduction.”



alive again, nor is it to be less than dead. It is not to have been redeemed and reincorporated into the properly animated, but not the opposite either.

Undead matter, in the superfluity of its prefix, therefore represents a lack of non-life, a rejection of not living, an excess of death which ultimately animates it. We do not see a proper return of matter in such cases, or even a wanted return, but that matter nonetheless persists. Toxins-rich, polluted sea foam is not a long-lost friend; it is death that did not accept its place, materiality that refused to stay put, and this vitality makes it dangerous. It is then that the zombie becomes a useful figure, embodying what happens when we move beyond the binary of life and death, and enter “the liminal futurity of somehow living on, using the hoarded and makeshift tools of the zombie archive to try to light an oblique path”<sup>61</sup>—a path which I argue is increasingly relevant in an era of environmental crises and uncertain futures. It is particularly telling that, in mainstream Western cultural imaginaries, the nonhuman is not afforded the possibility of an afterlife in the religious sense, thus drawing a line between nonhumans and humans around death.<sup>62</sup> Zombified things prompt a shift in mindset away from seeing materiality as having an end, toward a view of materiality as uncontainable and thus unable to be captured by the event of death.

As seen previously, materiality adopts a rather fluid position in relation to life and death, as well as the animate and the inanimate. It does not fully die, and, when labeled as such, escapes. It therefore problematizes definitions of life that revolve around presence and absence, movement and inactivity, or associations and solitude. The zombie, both literal and symbolic, allows us to think about death not as an end, but as a process that defines itself in relation to others; a form of positionality that emphasizes animacies, has materializing effects, and which can further be queered by situating it beyond the constraints of linear time and bounded space.<sup>63</sup> I have already alluded to the materializing effects of practices of differentiating, binary categories, and death as an end, but have thus far not directly addressed what these effects are. The link between zombies and waste materials does not necessarily need to be established, for I argue that they are one and the same.

Waste is zombie materiality, and the zombie is embodied waste. To die and become undead is also to become less human, more thing, to angle oneself toward the posthuman once the consciousness and intentionality that defined the individual as an actor is gone. The zombie contains many elements of what psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva calls an “abject object”—matter that is revolting and

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<sup>61</sup> Nealon, “Afterword.”

<sup>62</sup> Radomska, Mehrabi, and Lykke, “Queer Death Studies,” 84.

<sup>63</sup> Radomska, Mehrabi, and Lykke, “Queer Death Studies,” 89-90.

elicits fear by confronting us with the inevitable truth that we, too, produce waste, entangle with waste, and will become waste.<sup>64</sup> While I believe the zombie differs from the abject insofar as it is not entirely foreign or undefinable, nor does it elicit only disgust or repulsion<sup>65</sup>, its framing as abject remains remarkably similar to the public perception of sea foam as described earlier. Zombies, like toxins or the dead matter that constitutes sea foam, are animated waste that spreads of its own accord. If the nonhuman's trajectory is not defined by the human construction of death, then it cannot be killed—or rather, does not care much about having been killed, for that killing is more discursive or symbolic than anything else. The act of defending the human against threats is grounded in neutralizing those threats, but that which has no proper life cannot be threatened with its end.<sup>66</sup>

### **Eco-Materialism**

Reiterating my earlier comments on the impossibility of full material containment in landfills following disposal, we see that even matter labeled as dead does not see this labeling as an obstacle to its participation in various environmental, social, bacterial, economic, cultural, and political relations.<sup>67</sup> This reality further strengthens the position of the contemporary zombie as a figure capable of exposing how it is not sufficient to label matter as dead for it to be gone. Zombie materiality—like sea foam, which is pronounced dead but does not see it as an obstacle to carving an oblique route for itself—carries on, and in doing so highlights nonhuman and posthuman persistence. If materiality is only defined in relation to its former function and usefulness (i.e. the cultural dimension), and if it derives its liveliness from those it served, then its posthuman return presents itself not only as unexpected and unwanted, but as unnatural as well.<sup>68</sup>

Zombie materiality can therefore be said to breach nature—a breach that I propose is in line with the posthuman project, insofar as it highlights how humans and nonhumans are mutually constituted and can easily 'cross over'. This outlook, in and of itself, is of course not entirely new. Bruno Latour's examination of the anthropological tradition within the context of modernity similarly denounced the great divide between nature and culture, thus attempting to remedy a chasm between the human and the nonhuman that does

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<sup>64</sup> Kristeva cited in Rutherford, *Zombies*, chap. 5.

<sup>65</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 1;5.

<sup>66</sup> Lauro and Embry, "Zombie Manifesto," 88.

<sup>67</sup> Sosna and Brunclíková, *Archaeologies of Waste*, 4.

<sup>68</sup> Pétursdóttir, "Anticipated futures," 92.

not reflect reality.<sup>69</sup> Expanding this argument to the environmental realm, it has been proposed that if the boundary between humans and nature falls, and if we accept human and nonhuman matter as being one and the same, then everything is, in some sense, already about ecology.<sup>70</sup> It is here that the link between zombies, materiality, and ecocriticism (defined as a culturally and politically-situated analysis of our relationships with the environment) finally emerges.

This paper joins other texts in suggesting that the figure of the zombie is an ecological one, tied to capitalism as a regime that attempts to control nature and which is fundamentally connected to the environment.<sup>71</sup> <sup>72</sup> The zombie, as a colonial cultural appropriation taken from Haitian Vodou, cannot be disentangled from the expansion of global capitalism.<sup>73</sup> It carries a legacy of labor exploitation, dehumanization, and people being categorized as less than human and seen as closer to nature than other bodies. This legacy is intrinsically tied to the ecology of its birthplace, originating specifically in the sugar cane plantations of the Caribbean.<sup>74</sup> <sup>75</sup> To summarize, the zombie confronts us with two different, yet related fears: the fear of being dehumanized and becoming more nonhuman-like (similarly to the Haitian zombie, cursed into eternal servitude), and the fear of nature refusing its own devaluation and overpowering humans (through viral outbreaks, leading to societal decay).

In eliciting those fears, zombies highlight discomforts around certain bodies and their perceived liveliness, what counts as proper ways of living or proofs of life, and the constant, real threat of the nonhuman breaching the human's boundaries through toxins, viruses, bacteria, and so on.<sup>76</sup> Although varied in its manifestations, the effects engendered by the zombie seem to consistently revolve around anxieties relating to "a loss of control over the human and non-human environment," forcing us to acknowledge "the increasing instability of borders, be they national, physical, or social."<sup>77</sup> I argue that the dialectical destabilization the zombie stands for is always embedded in power relations of oppression and the unequal worth of bodies, and that those relations are necessarily environmental as well. Thinking with zombies provides both a

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<sup>69</sup> Latour, *We Have Never Been*, 101;103.

<sup>70</sup> Fehrle, "Zombies," 532.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> Oloff, "Greening the Zombie," 31-32.

<sup>73</sup> Lauro and Embry, "Zombie Manifesto," 96.

<sup>74</sup> Oloff, "Greening the Zombie," 42.

<sup>75</sup> Fehrle, "Zombies," 531.

<sup>76</sup> Lauro and Embry, "Zombie Manifesto," 102.

<sup>77</sup> Fehrle, "Zombies," 528.

historically situated means of imagining posthumanism, and an eco-materialist perspective on the categories of human and nonhuman under capitalism.<sup>78 79</sup>

## Concluding Remarks

Zombie materiality represents the liveliness of waste materials from a queer posthuman perspective, existing beyond the cultural and discursive constructs of life and death. It is embodied, mobile waste that invades, soils, toxifies, spreads, leaches, and infects in a literal or metaphorical sense. Things that have undergone processes of zombification contain some elements of the abject—that is, matter that repulses while also reminding us of our relationships with waste, whether that is its production, our entanglements with it, or the inevitability that we will one day become it.<sup>80</sup> Most importantly, zombie materiality falls into the register of the uncategorizable, thus calling into question the ontological and epistemological basis for the creation and upholding of the categories it escapes.<sup>81</sup>

I define the zombification of things as the process by which they escape their own death by performatively un-dying, and continuing to engage in animacies<sup>82</sup> and intra-activities<sup>83</sup>, which are expressed materially and ecologically. Sea foam is far from the only thing that can be interpreted as a contemporary zombie, but it is perhaps one of the most literal embodiments of it, as it is primarily composed of dead matter and its by-products, behaving as if fully alive. It does so in its movements, but also in the way it forms relationships with various enrichments, be they toxic, bacterial, pathological, human-made, or otherwise. Foam, like the zombie, is post-death matter that is on the move, traveling as a horde, acting as one unified decomposing, mindlessly driven mass. Both are formed through a transgressive act of blending categories that ought to remain separate, breaching traditional ontologies and the laws of nature, thus making the zombie an ecological figure as well.

Out of place, out of time, and out of death, sea foam as zombie materiality exists as an undead entity, enlivened with the power to elicit fear, enact threats, consume the flesh of places, people, and micro-organisms, but also engender the kind of transgressive pleasure and survival fantasies that are to be found in media representations of the horror genre. As previously argued,

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<sup>78</sup> Lauro and Embry, "Zombie Manifesto," 91.

<sup>79</sup> Oloff, "Greening the Zombie," 31.

<sup>80</sup> Kristeva cited in Rutherford, *Zombies*, chap. 5.

<sup>81</sup> Moore, "Don't take orders," 305.

<sup>82</sup> Chen, *Animacies*; "Toxic Animacies."

<sup>83</sup> Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity."

the zombie does not mark a return to life, but rather a renunciation of death and the continuation of its participation in various economies, despite its existence having been declared complete.<sup>84</sup> The borders are porous between humans and nonhumans, and the contours of the categories governing this divide are fuzzy. Nonhumans live inside our bodies, and we encroach on their realm constantly, attempting to enact control over nature. Maybe it is when we are both zombies that we are most posthuman, that we truly meet in the middle.

In linking materiality, zombification, and ecocriticism through a posthuman queer perspective, I ultimately aim to offer a critique of the permanence of death, thus problematizing the notion of finitude and emphasizing the persistence of things. The fundamental argument expressed here is very simple: removing things and attempting to contain them does not kill those things. It fails to do so for the human construction of death is not performatively rendered as inertia, absence, and isolation in the ecological realm. Death, in that sense, is ephemeral. Zombie materiality and undead ecology do not see it as the end, for things do not disappear once they reach the final stage of their human-measured lives. Something of this vital undead materiality inevitably escapes, carving a new path for itself, and creating unintended futures. By embracing the queer ephemeral politics of the fugitive and the improperly living, zombie materiality therefore rejects the boundaries of space, time, and conventional ways of expressing animateness and registering as alive.

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<sup>84</sup> Sosna and Brunclíková, *Archaeologies of Waste*, 4.

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