

Encountering Agency with Decolonial Thought, New  
Materialism, and *The Vegetarian*

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## ABSTRACT (Academic)

In this thesis, I bring into conversation two political theoretical frameworks -- decolonial thought and new materialism -- with the South Korean novella *The Vegetarian*. I suggest that the novella, especially through its protagonist, performs a form of agency which calls for a reading that hinges not on the pursuit of definitive analysis but on the recognition of a personal, affective interaction with violent status quo sensibilities. I demonstrate that there exist understandings of agency within decolonial thought and new materialism which could be attuned to this call. I suggest a method that relies upon two thinkers in these frameworks for reading the novella, and after reading the novella through this method and transparently reflecting on my own role in these texts' encounter, I demonstrate that this way of simultaneously reading the novella and the theoretical texts has the capacity to affirm the open and uncertain mutual changes that happen at their encounter.

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## ABSTRACT (General Audience)

In this thesis, I bring into conversation two political theoretical schools of thought -- decolonial thought and new materialism -- with the South Korean novella *The Vegetarian*. I suggest that the novella demonstrates a unique agency which calls for a reading that is centered not on the pursuit of definitive analysis but on the recognition of a personal, affective interaction with status quo violence. I demonstrate that there exist understandings of agency within decolonial thought and new materialism which could be attuned to this call. I suggest a method that relies upon two thinkers in these frameworks for reading the novella, and after reading the novella through this method and transparently reflecting on my own role in these texts' encounter, I demonstrate that this way of simultaneously reading the novella and the theoretical texts has the capacity to affirm the open and uncertain mutual changes that happen at their encounter.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

In the western philosophical tradition agency is considered to be an attribute of rational human beings. This understanding of agency is also often linked with the notion of “power,” i.e. the ability to direct the actions of others. The South Korean novella *The Vegetarian* challenges these notions of agency, and demands instead the recognition of an agential capacity that is not closed in the logos of rational thought, intentionality, hierarchies of reason, or even linear cause and effect.

Originally published in Korean in 2007, Han Kang’s novella *The Vegetarian* was the recipient of the 2016 Man Booker International Prize following its 2015 English translation. *The Vegetarian* is told in three parts, each from the perspective of a different speaker reflecting on the protagonist Yeong-hye’s transition into what initially appears to be vegetarianism. Part one, told from the perspective of Yeong-hye’s husband Mr. Cheong, offers a back and forth between Mr. Cheong’s resentful perceptions of Yeong-hye’s transition into veganism and Yeong-hye’s own nightmares. These five nightmares are the only sections narrated by Yeong-hye in any of the three parts of the novella, and are violent recollections and visions. As Mr. Cheong develops stronger feelings of resentment toward his wife for what he perceives as her sudden apathy toward her obligations to him, he becomes regularly sexually violent with her and simultaneously fearful of her as “utterly unknowable.”<sup>1</sup> His fear prompts him to contact Yeong-hye’s family, who attempts to coerce her into giving up her veganism. This culminates in force-feeding her, to which Yeong-hye reacts by attempting suicide and cutting open her wrist. At the hospital, Mr. Cheong’s feelings

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<sup>1</sup> Han Kang, *The Vegetarian*, trans. Deborah Smith (New York, Hogarth, 2015), 33.

of disgust toward his wife continue to grow, and part one ends as he tries to make sense of witnessing Yeong-hye topless in the hospital's courtyard having just bitten into a small white bird.

Part two, *Mongolian Mark*, is told from the perspective of Yeong-hye's brother in law – her sister In-hye's husband – who is left nameless. This part follows his growing obsession with the birthmark on Yeong-hye's buttock, and increasingly with Yeong-hye herself in his search for what he understands as a “deep” and “private” intimacy for his filmmaking. His obsession pivots the narrative away from the fear in part one and toward sexual desire, all against the backdrop of disappointment with his own wife, work, and self-image. He convinces Yeong-hye to play a nude role in his filmmaking: first a solo session in which he paints intricate flower designs on her (which elicits a strong positive reaction from her), and later with a male partner to simulate (with the hope of eventually carrying out) sex acts. Following Yeong-hye's rejection of him at the end of this second session, and taking a cue from her positive reaction to the painted flowers, her brother-in-law has a peer paint flowers on him. He goes to Yeong-hye's apartment, where they have sex on film. As he falls asleep, Yeong-hye remarks that this experience revealed to her that her nightmares may have been caused not by eating meat, but by something much deeper inside herself, of which she is no longer scared. They both awake to find In-hye sitting quietly, having seen the footage and called emergency services. In-hye's husband attempts to jump off the balcony but is restrained, and both he and Yeong-hye are taken to psychiatric hospitals.

Part three takes place over the course of just a few hours, as In-hye makes her way to the psychiatric ward to visit her sister, who is understood to have become unstable. Yeong-hye is now mostly mute, having previously communicated that she no longer needs to eat or talk as she has metamorphosed into a tree. She is frequently found bearing her breasts to the sun, or trying to stand on her head like she imagines trees do. In-hye reflects on the unknowability of her husband, on the

violence of her childhood with her sister, on questions of sanity and insanity, and on the morning she almost committed suicide. She reflects on the lingering and seemingly-psychological wound from a polyp she had removed from her vaginal wall. Between these reflections are interactions with the doctor and nurses in the hospital – in which it is suggested that Yeong-hye may suffer severely from schizophrenia and anorexia and may soon die from malnutrition – as well as interactions with a silent Yeong-hye. In the final scene, as the doctors attempt to force feed Yeong-hye through a tube in her nose, In-hye reacts viscerally and interferes to stop the process, and they both leave the hospital in an ambulance.

### ***The Vegetarian Space-time***

The novella was initially published in its original Korean in three separate parts corresponding to the parts summarized above. While, according to Han, the novella was initially received in 2007 as “very extreme and bizarre,” following its 2015 English translation *The Vegetarian* gained international attention for its complex exploration of patriarchy, bodily autonomy, meat, and mental illness. Following this translation to English (nine years after its original publications, though it had in this time been translated into Japanese, Chinese, Vietnamese, Polish, Spanish, and Portuguese)<sup>2</sup>, it was awarded the Man Booker International prize, and Han and her translator shared the £50,000 prize.

Frequently, mainstream conversations surrounding *The Vegetarian* understand the novella as a “singular indictment against Korean society or patriarchy,” a perspective which Han disagrees with, suggesting that she was more inspired by “universal” themes of violence.<sup>3</sup> Even so, perhaps

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<sup>2</sup> Peschel, Sabine, interview with Han Kang. “Korea's Kafka? Man Booker winner Han Kang on why she turns a woman into a plant.” Deutsche Welle, (2016): <<https://www.dw.com/en/koreas-kafka-man-booker-winner-han-kang-on-why-she-turns-a-woman-into-a-plant/a-19543017>>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

by virtue of its international recognition only through the channel of English-translation, mainstream conversations surrounding the novella outside of Korean literature circles often relegate its themes strictly according to the positionality of its author, thus bypassing analyses that could take up the challenge to think through its violence as “universally” insidious or even as emergent within international contexts. In fact, Han has noted that an important trigger for *The Vegetarian* was poet Yi Sang’s words: “I want to believe that humans should be plants.”<sup>4</sup> For Han, this embodies Yi’s navigation of the violence of Japanese imperial occupation of Korea and the possibilities for existing otherwise through a wholesale renunciation of human violence. Despite this, the success of *The Vegetarian* (in translation) is often discussed as a unique triumph for Korean literature,<sup>5</sup> and as such the novella’s international “space-time” is often bracketed in favor of analyses that seek to understand its success as the obvious conclusion of a linear development within Korean society.<sup>6</sup> Thus through these very complex channels – its three-part publication, its late English translation and international success, and the positionality projected onto this success through mainstream discussions as a result of its intrigue beyond Korean literature circles – made accessible and thus possible my own reading of *The Vegetarian*.

Yeong-hye’s transformation embodies a form of rejection, which many interpret as a quest for innocence or female rebellion.<sup>7</sup> Yet rather than a quest for innocence, I argue that Yeong-hye’s transformation embodies a rejection of the particular sensibilities which orient her oppression. I

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<sup>4</sup> “Interview with Han Kang,” *The White Review*, Sarah Shin, [2014] <http://www.thewhitereview.org/feature/interview-with-han-kang>

<sup>5</sup> Licher, Veronika. “Publishing in South Korea in 2016: ‘The Vegetarian’ of Han Kang Vitalizes the Korean Book Market.” *Publishing Research Quarterly* 32, no. 4 (December 2016): 297–300.

<sup>6</sup> Montgomery, Charles. “Korea: A country of one’s own? Thoughts on Han Kang’s Booker victory.” The author suggests that the key to its “victory” ought to be understood as directly stemming from Kim Sejong’s creation of the Korean alphabet. <<http://www.ktlit.com/korea-a-country-of-ones-own-thoughts-on-han-kangs-booker-victory/>>

<sup>7</sup> Stobie, Caitlin, “The Good Wife? Sibling Species in Han Kang’s *The Vegetarian*,” *Isle: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 24, no. 4 (2017): 789.

argue that this oppression is enacted both within the story and through a reading of *The Vegetarian* that fails to recognize the agential capacities which Yeong-hye embodies. By disrupting orientations towards time, borders, directionality of effect, and perspective, the novella offers an invitation to witness and enact a particular form of agency which brackets demands for intentionality or rationality.

In this project, I try to take up this invitation. Through a disorientation of the senses, the novella invites the reader to be challenged in a way that opens the possibility of an agency not closed in the logos of knowability, and that cannot be simplified as an issue of sanity versus insanity. In chapter 2, I locate tools for taking up this challenge by engaging with two theoretical frameworks – decolonial thought and new materialism – first independently and then within their complex encounter, as summarized below.

### **Theories at their Encounter**

Decolonial thought rejects the epistemological demand to operate from a position relative to Anglo-European thought.<sup>8</sup> It invites a radical break from the knowledge-making practices that constitute Western hegemonic modernity, thus rethinking the sensibilities that shape those practices from the perspective of the lived experience of coloniality. Through this “epistemic disobedience,” decolonial thinkers assert coloniality as constitutive of modernity,<sup>9</sup> and as such pursue ways of knowing which are not committed to “join the storytelling” of modernization.<sup>10</sup> Decolonial thinkers rethink the very sensibilities which inform knowledge and knowledge-making

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<sup>8</sup> Hamid Dabashi and Walter D. Mignolo, *Can Non-Europeans think?*, (London, Zed Books, 2015), xxiii.

<sup>9</sup> Weihua He and Walter D. Mignolo, “The Prospect of Harmony and the Decolonial View of the World: An Interview with Walter D. Mignolo by Weihua He” *Marxism and Reality* 1, no. 4 (2012): 110-120.

<sup>10</sup> Dabashi and Mignolo, *Non-Europeans*, xxi.

practices in light of how those sensibilities have historically been (and continue to be) enforced.<sup>11</sup> In chapter 2, pulling from Alejandro Vallega's thorough analysis of decolonial thinkers, I organize my exploration of the internal debates and developments within decolonial thought based on those sensibilities – in particular temporality and spatiality/borders. I identify a particular trajectory of thought which reorients these otherwise naturalized sensibilities in a way which produces a distinct understanding of aesthetics and agency.

Decolonial aesthetics embraces “bodily experience,” affect, and sensibility as entangled with knowing or knowledge-making.<sup>12</sup> As such, some decolonial thinkers locate liberatory capacities in aesthetics which provide “another way of thinking, another way of developing life” than those sustained by western-hegemonic sensibilities.<sup>13</sup> By outlining the debates internal to the development of liberatory decolonial aesthetics, I argue that Maria Lugones's conceptualization of agency captures how exactly this understanding of aesthetics is agential. Departing from western conceptualizations of agency as “potent intentionality” in which individuals act within “ready-made hierarchical worlds of sense,”<sup>14</sup> Lugones suggests that agency is rather an ongoing and relational *doing*, a “more contained, more inward, sense of activity of the self in metamorphosis.”<sup>15</sup> I suggest that Lugones's understanding of the move to embody sensibilities, affective practices, and knowledges that reject the demand to be legible or put to work by modernity makes clear the agential capacity of the decolonial approach to aesthetics. By

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<sup>11</sup> He and Mignolo, “The Prospect of Harmony,” 113.

<sup>12</sup> Vallega, Alejandro, *Latin American Philosophy from Identity to Radical Exteriority* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 198.

<sup>13</sup> Vallega, Alejandro, “Exordio / Exordium: For an Aesthetics of Liberation out of Latin American Experience,” *Symposium: Canadian Journal of Continental Philosophy* 18, no. 1 (2014): 100.

<sup>14</sup> Lugones, María, “From within Germinative Stasis: Creating Active Subjectivity, Resistant Agency,” in *EntreMundos/AmongWorlds: New Perspectives on Gloria E. Anzaldúa* ed. Ana-Louise Keating and Chela Sandoval (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 86.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

“concoct[ing] sense away from the encasement of dominant sense,” such as orientations of temporality or spatiality, decolonial aesthetics re-imagines agency as at once deeply internal (through a felt sense within one’s body) and utterly relational.<sup>16</sup> Decolonial agency is a transformative, dynamic, recurrent activity hinging on internal multiplicity which can be enacted through aesthetic encounters.

Following this exploration of the relevance of decolonial aesthetics for my analysis, the next section of chapter 2 turns to exploring new materialism in an effort to identify trajectories of thought attuned to the decolonial sense of agency described above. New materialists often pull significantly from poststructuralism while exploring what they suggest is matter’s often-neglected role in historical processes.<sup>17</sup> Such commitments often manifest in distinctly post-humanist and anti-anthropocentric considerations. I identify a central ontological schism among new materialist thinkers, i.e. the tendency to put matter and the non-human at the center of their ontological position while nevertheless relegating the relevance of matter to its metaphorical usefulness for understanding human experiences. New materialist thinker and quantum physicist Karen Barad explains that this “representationalist” approach to the role of matter subscribes to the dichotomy of “representations,” or known entities, and “knowers,” thus failing to break away from the fundamental question of the *accuracy* of representations. Relying on Barad, I argue that this disables thinkers from pursuing questions of the truly active role of matter in historical processes outside western hegemonic signifiers.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>17</sup> Coole, Diana. “Agentic Capacities and Capacious Historical Materialism: Thinking with New Materialisms in the Political Sciences,” *Millenium* 41, no. 3 (2013): 454.

I then follow Barad's ontology of becoming, in which the "primary ontological units" are "phenomena" rather than "things."<sup>18</sup> Phenomena for Barad are particular instances of relations, or "intra-actions." Intra-action ontologically differs from interaction in that the former suggests that that which is relating does not pre-exist this relation – the relation itself produces that which relates, and thus "reality is not composed of things-in-themselves or things-behind-phenomena but 'things'-in-phenomena."<sup>19</sup> Barad coins the term "onto-epistemology," asserting that ways of being and processes of knowledge-making necessarily "become-together" – that is, they constitute one another in the same move. Following from the criticism of representationalism, this concept denaturalizes ways of knowing in a way that uniquely positions Baradian new materialism to engage with the decolonial project.

Organizing the exploration of this trajectory of new materialist thought along the lines of conceptualizations of temporality and spatiality, I discuss how through very different vocabularies the two frameworks are exceptionally mutually attuned. To this end, I consider Barad's concept of an "agential cut," which asserts the "contingent iterative performativity" of all differentiations.<sup>20</sup> This departs from the classic understanding of agency described above, in that Barad suggests that agency is not something an entity can *have*, but rather is 'doing'/'being' in its intra-activity."<sup>21</sup> This disables, again, the presumption of entities which pre-exist their relations, in that entities come to exist only through their relations. As such, relations are constraining but not determining, and so this very dynamism is agency for Barad. I explain how this understanding of agency is

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<sup>18</sup> Barad, Karen, "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter," *Signs: Journal of Women and Culture in Society* 28, no. 3 (2003): 818.

<sup>19</sup> Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity," 817.

<sup>20</sup> Barad, Karen, "Diffracting Diffractions: Cutting Together-Apart," *Parallax* 20, no. 3 (2014): 173.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

attuned to that described by Maria Lugones, in particular the connections in terms of its dynamic and recurrent emergence within relations.

### **Affective Engagement as Methodology**

At the end of chapter 2, I explore a method for engaging with the novella that I argue emerges at the encounter of decolonial aesthetics and new materialist performativity: affective engagement. In other words, I use the vocabulary of “affective engagement” to encompass my use of the *intra-action* of the methods for reading texts provided by decolonial aesthetics and new materialist performativity; I pull from Lugones’s methodology of a “coalitional journey” in which she engages personally and intimately with Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* by recognizing the text as “alive – enacted as it is told” in order to “feel drawn by its call without conflating understanding and mimesis.”<sup>22</sup> With this in mind, I rely upon new materialist “performativity” by considering Barad’s engagement with the rippling effects of agential cuts – that through differentiations, every resulting concept “is haunted by its mutually constituted excluded other.”<sup>23</sup> Contingent iterative performativity involves “continual reopening and unsettling of what might yet be, of what was, and what comes to be,” because intra-action assumes that nothing remains the same after relations.<sup>24</sup> This allows the possibility of an aesthetic intra-action that is open to reciprocal-becoming, unsettling the possibility of a knower/known dichotomy, and thus freed from the necessity to uncover *truths*. Taken together as methods-at-their-encounter, an affective engagement is what I suggest as a way of making sense of how these methods exist within a conversation, each offering vocabularies for thinking through how to

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<sup>22</sup> Lugones, “From within Germinative Stasis,” 86.

<sup>23</sup> Barad, Karen. “Quantum Entanglements and Hauntological Relations of Inheritance: Dis/continuities, SpaceTime Enfoldings, and Justice-to-Come,” *Derrida Today* 3 no. 2 (2010): 253.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 264.

engage with a text in a way that recognizes the performative effects of its reading and the inherent indeterminacy of the encounter between the texts, as well as between the texts and the reader.

In chapter 3, I demonstrate how an affective engagement with the novella, which relies upon the decolonial “coalition journey” and new materialist performativity, can make possible an enactment of the agency in *The Vegetarian* by embracing the possibility for contingent performative intra-action. I show that through this method I am able to read the novella in a way that is open to the possibility of reciprocal-becoming, unsettling the distinction of a knower/known dichotomy, and thus freed from the preoccupation with representation and interpretation; in other words, to perform a collective aesthetic intra-action that is open to an agential sense outside of the logic of agency afforded to the western “subject.” After performing this affective engagement, I facilitate an encounter between this engagement and the texts involved in the creation of that method.

To reiterate, *The Vegetarian*, decolonial thought, and new materialism all communicate particular expressions of agency that push beyond the standard western understanding of the term, such as agency as an attribute of cognition and rationality. I suggest that these three conceptualizations are speaking to each other more than is typically noted. However, facilitating their mutual consideration is not a straightforward matter: seeking to understand the novella through theoretical analysis risks rendering it merely an “example,” or an object of study which can be truly *known*. I suggest that all three, individually and then simultaneously, provide tools which offer vocabularies for engaging the three together, “through one another,” in a way that does not hinge on westernizing hierarchical analysis. If their encounter within the phenomenon of this project is an embodiment of performativity, then the relation itself changes that which is being related within the phenomenon of their encounter.

As explained, the conceptualizations of agency that these three perspectives embrace transcend hierarchies of sense, cognition, and rationality. But even further, these understandings of agency are at the core of each perspective's respective commitment to an "onto-epistemology" – that is, that the very process of knowledge-making is always also a process of mattering (creating material reality). By facilitating the phenomenon of their encounter, this project itself embodies an intervention in which these perspectives come to matter reciprocally; these perspectives become-together, in that decolonial thought in its encounter with new materialism is unique from decolonial thought outside of this phenomenon, and so on. The suggestion is that if we take seriously these ontologies' shared notions of things coming to exist only within their relations, the perspectives are co-constitutive and their mutual encounter is the phenomenon within which this co-constitution occurs.

This co-constitution is central to the resulting affective engagement, and so deserves further explanation. As detailed above, to facilitate the three-way encounter, I begin with the theoretical frameworks. I do so because these frameworks' mutual consideration is not a given – there are many spaces in which their broad assumptions have the potential to be hostile to the other's onto-epistemology. By starting from the broad theoretical traditions and going narrower, this exercise allows me to think through their varied trajectories of thought *with the other in mind*, which makes possible not only an elaboration of the conceptual fibers which connect them, but how those fibers come to exist. In other words, chapter 2 is not just an exercise in illustrating an affinity between two radically different theoretical frameworks; the texts are alive, "enacted as they are told," and respond to the call of the other. For this reason, it is important to understand the method of "affective engagement" as the manifestation of their encounter, the enactment of the very agential capacity which makes possible the phenomenon within which these texts intra-act. This method

makes possible an encounter with *The Vegetarian* that does not render it merely an example of theoretical principles, and is the manifestation of a reading of decoloniality *through* new materialism and vice versa.

Thus, in the first section of chapter 3, I perform an affective engagement with the novella, logging a pre-rational walk-through of the ways in which the novella invites a disorientation of the senses, while taking seriously my own role in the production of these disorientations. I show that by using this method, I am able to “face the novella” in our encounter. In “facing” it, I mean to be responsive to its call, and to “open oneself up to indeterminacy in moving towards what is to come.”<sup>25</sup> It is to embrace the disorientation and “risk oneself” in the possibility of making/being-made through engagement with the novella. This shapes the analysis that follows the affective engagement. I demonstrate that the preoccupation to *know*, or to uncover the truth of Yeong-hye’s condition, is hostile to the effort to “face” the novella; it renders the novella and Yeong-hye herself representations which are closed to the possibility of becoming-with the reader. This preoccupation disconnects the reader from any felt responsibility over reading and enacting the text and the effects thereof. I show that through *disorientation of the senses* through aesthetic intra-action, troubled directionality of the “gaze” in the novella invites the reader to recognize and be responsive to one’s active role in the intra-active enactment of the text. In other words, the very onto-epistemological concepts which allow a mutual consideration of the two theoretical frameworks in chapter 2 manifest as a method for facing the novella, and are present in that novella’s enactment of its own agential capacity – its demand that we face Yeong-hye, or take her at her word, thus embracing the possibility of indeterminacy.

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<sup>25</sup> Barad, “Hauntological Relations,” 264.

I ultimately demonstrate in chapter 3 that by using the method of the affective engagement that manifests at the theoretical encounter in chapter 2, I am able to face the novella, and in particular Yeong-hye, thus performing a collective aesthetic intra-action that is open to an agential sense outside of the logic of agency afforded to the western “subject;” if agency is the dynamism that is “‘doing’/‘being’ in its intra-activity,”<sup>26</sup> then the affective engagement enables a disorientation of the senses that creates an attitude open to this dynamism. Finally, the reciprocity of this encounter shines once again: in a double and concurrent movement, I argue that the theoretical encounter which made possible my facing the novella was simultaneously facilitated by the novella’s call to be “enacted as it is told.”<sup>27</sup> In other words, this project is a four-way conversation between decolonial thought, new materialism, *The Vegetarian*, and myself, which by being read through each other were always already in relation.

### **Transparency**

As discussed, central to facilitating this encounter is an exploration of the space-time of the novella, of decolonial thought, and of new materialism. Taking seriously the proposed entanglement of knowledge-making practices and the creation of material reality, it is not irrelevant what space-time I as the facilitator and engager occupy within the phenomenon of this encounter. This project is above all else an embodiment of *performativity*: agency emerges at the very encounter that makes up this project. Through the performance of these intra-actions, no constitutive part remains the same, including myself. However, a biographical description of myself as the facilitator may not be necessary for an exploration of the space-time that I bring to

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<sup>26</sup> Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity,” 827.

<sup>27</sup> Lugones, “From within Germinative Stasis,” 86.

this encounter. Rather, I suggest that through the affective engagement itself, I “risk myself”<sup>28</sup> by revealing the very orientations which I had previously taken for granted, the sexualizing perspective I bring to and project onto my encounter with Yeong-hye, and what troubles me. In other words, taking seriously a level of transparency with regard to my not being a non-entity in this relation, I suggest that the very orientations toward time, space, mental illness, and sex, among other things, which for me *required* an attitude open to disorientation, are in fact in themselves not neutral or universal at all – but rather perhaps *universalizing* in their commitment to modernity. The novella itself exposes my “biography,” as it were, and makes impossible my status as a non-entity.

By virtue of this transparency, the particular forms of analysis performed in this project also reveal the process by which I as a facilitator am changed by this encounter. Rather than purporting to already have the capacity to read texts *through* each other during the analysis of the two theoretical frameworks in chapter 2, I present the candid process by which I came to recognize that method. As such, chapter 2 performs a much more direct and analytical method, as well as concrete conclusions with regard to the encounter between the two theoretical frameworks. Chapter 3 pivots toward a much more open-ended analysis as it embodies the shift toward an affective engagement and an analysis which relies upon this engagement. As such, this project does not aim to accomplish generalizable conclusions. In fact, my very interpretation of the novella does not profess to be necessarily correspond to Han Kang’s intentions. Rather, as an embodiment of performativity, this project embraces the open-ended analysis that necessarily emerges from the encounter.

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<sup>28</sup> Barad, “Hauntological Relations,” 264.

There are several theoretical implications of this project. First, a thorough look at the precise conditions for a simultaneous consideration of decolonial thought and new materialism that takes seriously both the respective frameworks' broad goals as well as the particular orientations which inform those goals can make their future mutual encounters more accessible. A simultaneous analysis of these two seemingly radically different theoretical frameworks can provide a map for navigating the potentially messy intersections in their encounter, such as navigating post-humanism in a decolonial context, or thinking through western orderings of scientific knowledge. Further, this exercise strengthens each framework by virtue of providing a space for these texts to face "a world alien to [their] initial composition."<sup>29</sup>

Further, this project does not merely attempt to unpack and analyze the form of agency at the core of the encounter between decolonial thought, new materialism, and *The Vegetarian*; by consciously performing the aesthetic sense central to this conceptualization of agency (in other words, by attempting to transparently attend to my active role in the encounter), this project takes steps to embody that very agential capacity by itself being a performance, thus participating in the broad set of projects committed to dismantling the assumed dichotomy of knower and known within academic knowledge-making.

As such, this project takes a somewhat anti-scholarly position, in that by bracketing the need for concrete answers and instead functioning as a performance that is open to indeterminacy it departs from the demand for conclusive analysis. For this reason, throughout this project the language is purposefully tentative in order to maintain the possibility of the texts' openness. I suggest that this is not a failure of the project to make meaningful its analysis, but rather a reading that transgresses disciplinary boundaries. The audience for this project is therefore not necessarily

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<sup>29</sup> Dabashi and Mignolo, *Non-Europeans*, 43.

thinkers within political theoretical or literary analysis. Rather, I sacrifice to some extent disciplinary legibility in order to emphasize the stakes of the phenomenon of this encounter: to open up the text for Yeong-hye and affirm her dynamism. I argue that for the duration of the performance that is this project, making possible a transgressive reading of the novella that takes Yeong-hye at her word must suffice.

## Chapter 2

### Theoretical Frameworks in Conversation

The following section is an investigation of what I argue is a mutually attuned approach to recognizing agency within two radically different theoretical frameworks: decolonial thought and new materialism. I begin by presenting the broad debates and varying commitments within each framework in order to identify which precise trajectories of thought to pursue. Once this is accomplished, I organize my analysis of each framework's respective conceptualization of agency based on their particular orientations toward temporality and borders – that is, time and space. Organizing along spatial and temporal orientations serves a double purpose; first, a precise exploration of each framework's approach to temporality and borders makes clear the direct conceptual fibers that repeatedly connect and reinforce their possible mutual consideration. But further, that they in fact repeatedly and reciprocally connect and reinforce specifically in terms of temporal and spatial orientations indicates a significant mutual attunement to a reconceptualization of the very sensibilities which orient “western instrumental rationalism,” which they both problematize. As explained below, these sensibilities often function at a pre-rational level and “delineate possible ways of existing” and knowing.<sup>30</sup> I argue that both trajectories of thought importantly embrace this co-constructive relation between ways of existing and ways of knowing.

After teasing out the connections between these trajectories of decolonial and new materialist thought, I facilitate an encounter between the resulting conceptualizations of agency each trajectory produces. I suggest that Maria Lugones translates the project of liberatory

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<sup>30</sup> Vallega, *Latin American Philosophy*, 100.

decolonial aesthetics into a potent conceptualization of agency, embodied by her notion of a “coalitional journey.” I also argue that this understanding of agency is attuned to Karen Barad’s notion of “performativity.” Finally, I propose the methodology of an “affective engagement” which results from the encounter of the “coalitional journey” and “performativity,” and explain how such a method can pave the way for a reading of *The Vegetarian* that is open to the possibility of reciprocal-becoming, unsettling the distinction of a knower/known dichotomy, and thus freed from the preoccupation with representation and interpretation.

### **Decolonial Thought**

The Bandung Conference of 1955, a meeting of 29 Asian and African states condemning neocolonialism and its various economic manifestations, marked a self-conscious genesis in an epistemology that reflected the global praxis of decolonization.<sup>31</sup> Decolonial thought as a political theoretical framework takes up the challenge to reject the demand to operate from a position relative to Anglo-European thought.<sup>32</sup> This involves a radical break from the knowledge-making practices that reinforce Western hegemonic modernity, thus rethinking the sensibilities that shape those practices from the perspective of the lived experience of coloniality – a practice which Walter Dignolo calls “epistemic disobedience.”<sup>33</sup> Through epistemic disobedience decolonial thinkers recognize coloniality as “constitutive of modernity,”<sup>34</sup> thus underlining the need for an epistemology that is not meant to “join the storytelling” of modernization<sup>35</sup>. In this way, this framework unpacks the ways in which ontologies and the sensibilities which inform them have

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<sup>31</sup> He and Mignolo, “The Prospect of Harmony,” 111.

<sup>32</sup> Dabashi and Mignolo, *Non-Europeans*, xxiii.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, xxi.

<sup>34</sup> He and Mignolo, “The Prospect of Harmony,” 111.

<sup>35</sup> Dabashi and Mignolo, *Non-Europeans*, xxi.

historically been (and continue to be) enforced through epistemologies that emerge out of affective negotiations with lived experiences.<sup>36</sup>

Though in several ways decolonial thought embraces much of the project of postcolonialism, including the genealogical analysis of westernization and the production of the “other,” decolonial thought departs from these projects both in terms of geopolitical enunciation and radical divorce from the particular conversations which Western European political thought take up – which postcolonial thinkers, rather, seek to occupy and make richer. While postcolonialism is often situated specifically in response to the imperialist exploits of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, decolonial thought pushes geographically and temporally beyond postcolonialism by taking up ways of thinking that existed before, and were shaped by, the 1500s Spanish conquests in the Americas<sup>37</sup>, and by situating the intellectual and practical project of decoloniality in the Bandung Conference of 1955.<sup>38</sup>

Beyond the geographical and temporal point of reference, decolonial thinkers also suggest that postcolonialism tends to maintain a central relation with western hegemonic thought (i.e. “the postcolonial needed the postmodern”), while decolonial thinking both emerged prior to postmodernism, and fundamentally rejects the *terms* of political theoretical thought as it is conceived within western European thought.<sup>39</sup> Further, decolonial thinkers seek to dispel the notion of “culture” because “culture is precisely a key word of colonial discourses classifying the planet...according to a sign system (language, food, dress, religion, etc.) and ethnicity (skin color, geographical location).”<sup>40</sup> That is, decolonial thinkers reject the very terms and signifiers which

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<sup>36</sup> He and Mignolo, “The Prospect of Harmony,” 113.

<sup>37</sup> Vallega, *Latin American Philosophy*, 2.

<sup>38</sup> He and Mignolo, “The Prospect of Harmony,” 111.

<sup>39</sup> He and Mignolo, “The Prospect of Harmony,” 117.

<sup>40</sup> Mignolo, Walter. *Local Histories, Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 15.

assume a “zero-point” of discrete actors – in other words, which assert the pre-relational existence of entities that reflect the signification and classification of the now-hegemonic system<sup>41</sup>. This enables decolonial thinkers to pursue ways of thinking which radically delink from the terms of western European political thought by rejecting the assumption of universal operation along western hegemonic lines.

As a framework rooted in the 16<sup>th</sup> century conquests of the Americas and intellectually in the Bandung Conference, decolonial thought, especially as it has manifested in Latin America, has developed significant internal and self-reflexive debate. In the 1920s, José Carlos Mariátegu drew a connection between coloniality and capitalism, thus sparking an understanding of “dependency theory” which would be central to the Bandung Conference discussions.<sup>42</sup> The debates internal to decolonial thought would, however, reflect variable perspectives with regard to issues of cultural identity, authenticity, and negotiation with “world systems theory,” debates which culminated in what Alejandro Vallega describes as a “path from identity to liberatory and decolonial thinking.”<sup>43</sup> Early thinkers, including notably Leopoldo Zea, pushed beyond the expectation to contribute to western philosophical thought in favor of seeking an “authentic” Latin American philosophy.<sup>44</sup> Salazar Bondy, in his rejection of the notion of “authenticity” in Latin American thought given the irreparable effects of colonialism which produced what he termed a “colonized culture,” introduced another challenge to decolonial thought – thinking through the effects of colonialism without submitting to the western colonizing notion of a “single world history of thought and the hope to become a part of it.”<sup>45</sup> To confront this authenticity debate, Ernesto Mayz Vallenilla

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<sup>41</sup> Vallega, *Latin American Philosophy*, 174.

<sup>42</sup> He and Mignolo, “The Prospect of Harmony,” 115.

<sup>43</sup> Vallega, *Latin American Philosophy*, 3.

<sup>44</sup> Vallega, *Latin American Philosophy*, 4.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

introduced the concept of a “split sense of past” in the Americas, thus foregrounding decolonial thinker’s complex relationship with temporality. However, many decolonial thinkers suggested that this perspective too was limited in its subscription to the “western tradition’s aim to situate existence in terms of a single original totality” – that is, a universal notion of having an “identity” which renders Latin American identity the negative of the universal, and thus utterly relative.<sup>46</sup>

These early internal debates help demonstrate the radical commitment to delinking from hegemonic ways of knowing. Relying upon these early debates, Walter D. Mignolo among others have since turned toward what he calls an “enactive epistemology” which operates through simultaneously “saying *for*” and “saying against” – thus not focused primarily on active distancing from hegemonic epistemologies but on cultivating ways of knowing grounded in subaltern knowledge and a disinterest in modernity. This is achieved by “presupposing an awareness of and a sensibility for” coloniality,<sup>47</sup> incorporating the material conditions of concrete lives and the ways in which those lives produce change outside of the legibility of hegemonic epistemology<sup>48</sup> thus emphasizing “performance and transformation” in knowledge-production.<sup>49</sup>

### *Decolonial Space-time*

As discussed above, decolonial thinkers emphasize the orienting effects of modernity on the very sensibilities which inform knowledge-production. Decolonial thinkers explore “temporality as the product of particular orderings of power and knowledge,” and in turn explore conceptualizations of time which can inform a radical delinking from those hegemonic orderings.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>47</sup> Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs*, 26.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>50</sup> Vallega, *Latin American Philosophy*, 101.

Aníbal Quijano, in his exploration of modernity and its racial and economic manifestations as fundamentally rooted in colonization in the 1500s, expands greatly on Vallenilla's concepts of Latin American temporality. He unpacks the particular role colonization played in the western hegemonic understanding of linear time, in which the present came to "belong to western instrumental rationalism" while "all other ways of knowing are left in the past in terms of a binary system of epistemic prejudices" with the future as the "burden of the task of western thought."<sup>51</sup> The continuous reiterative reinforcement of this conceptualization of temporality as a single linear timeline is the "coloniality of time."<sup>52</sup> Quijano suggests that Latin American lived experiences demonstrate multiple overlapping ("ana-chronic") temporalities which embody "simultaneous asymmetry."<sup>53</sup> "Ana-chronic time" enables a transformation of history into an open and "fecund lived time-space of concrete practices and ordering that require specific response to their distinct or singular manifestations."<sup>54</sup> In thinking through a notion of temporality that takes "experiences such as subjectivity, culture, and the configuration of a people as fluid, migrating, and transformative movements," decolonial thought takes on the possibility of history as never-closed, and the continual dynamic engagement with that which is inherited as meaning-making, thus producing and reinforcing ways of being.<sup>55</sup> Alejandro Vallega further explains:

"what in Europe is seen as stages left behind in a system that develops into capitalism, in Latin America appears as various vertical levels of exchange and power all at work simultaneously ... no form is transformed into another, but rather many forms remain active and non-dialectically at play without possible resolution into one form of capital production."<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Vallega, *Latin American Philosophy*, 115.

<sup>55</sup> Vallega, *Latin American Philosophy*, 174.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 114.

Beyond the general rethinking of history for places outside of the hegemonic narratives, ana-chronic time radically rethinks the nature of *relations*; by undoing the possibility of discrete and developing snapshots in time, the assumption of “overlapping, encroaching” temporalities renders time “always already exposed to otherness.”<sup>57</sup> Relational movement defines time. Thus, instead of the “transcendental intuition of the ego cogito,”<sup>58</sup> time is understood to only-ever occur within relations, and these relations can be understood outside of hegemonic orderings of power.<sup>59</sup> If hegemonic time (especially as it manifests in epistemologies) emphasizes “denotation and truth,” a decolonial notion of time (and the resulting epistemology) emphasizes “performance and transformation.”<sup>60</sup> Recall the decolonial rejection of a pre-relational point, a point rife with hegemonic signifiers, from which to situate all analysis, as discussed above; in the same move, decolonial thinkers reject adding movement *to* a pre-relational point, focusing instead on *the movement itself*.<sup>61</sup>

As a perspective which emphasizes *geopolitics* as it illustrates the physical space in which coloniality is enacted and persists, but which rejects the signifying, classifying, and dichotomizing concept of borders central to modernity, a decolonial perspective on space is complex. Enrique Dussel introduces the concept of “exteriority” as a way to conceptualize the radical delinking at the core of decoloniality. Relying upon world-systems theory, Dussel advocates for the particular ways philosophical thought may manifest from the periphery. Dussel was criticized for his dependence on “conceptual rationalism and ... historical/ana-dialectic critique,”<sup>62</sup> in that his

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>58</sup> Vallega, Alejandro, “Displacements – Beyond the Coloniality of Images,” *Research in Phenomenology* 41, no. 2 (2011): 208.

<sup>59</sup> Vallega, *Latin American Philosophy*, 102.

<sup>60</sup> Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs*, 26.

<sup>61</sup> Vallega, *Latin American Philosophy*, 174.

<sup>62</sup> Vallega, *Latin American Philosophy*, 7.

suggestion reinforces the idea of a static “people” in the periphery and fails to engage with the “space-time” of radical exteriority. Yet Quijano’s challenge to Dussel’s employment of dependency theory – that exteriority to capitalism and coloniality is impossible because “the system of domination is the matrix in and from which any claim to identity may occur” – presents, as Vallega explains, a seemingly irreconcilable understanding of the possibilities for exteriority from a “totalizing system.”<sup>63</sup> This debate produced a shift in decolonial thought with regard to exteriority away from “systems, rational ordering, and a logic that requires determination” toward an increased interest in “fluid ambiguity and transformative movement.” As Vallega further explains,

“if one takes experiences such as subjectivity, culture, and the configuration of a people as fluid, migrating, and transformative movements, then it is possible to begin to think from a sensibility oriented by total exteriority, in critical engagement with a system that not only situates the excluded but is itself dependent on the excluded and the radical exteriority of the excluded. Neither in nor out but instead located *in the movement* of such differentiations, this is the space for a Latin American thought that unsettles the static coloniality of power and knowledge.”<sup>64</sup>

This debate therefore helps to clarify the particular understanding of space as it exists in the space-time of what Walter Mignolo terms the “colonial difference.” The colonial difference is “not a fixed geopolitical place ... but a consciousness of the fluid geopolitical space-time that marks knowing and inter-subjectivity under the coloniality of power and knowledge.”<sup>65</sup> By emphasizing the fluidity of the “space” of the colonial difference, and through a reading of Gloria Anzaldúa’s work on “borderlands” as “vague and undetermined places created by the emotional residue of an

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 140, emphasis mine.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 23.

unnatural boundary,”<sup>66</sup> Mignolo develops an epistemology of “negotiations and transformations, of contaminations and disseminations that make it impossible to situate knowledge in one time or space, autonomous and untouched by its pluritopic and plurivalent contexts.”<sup>67</sup> As Mignolo suggests, this reconceptualization of the spatial dimension of borders from “discrete entities” to “moments of a continuum in colonial expansion and in changes of national imperial hegemonies” radically breaks away from the spatial epistemology of the modern world system.<sup>68</sup>

### *Decolonial Aesthetics*

Mignolo’s problematization of the very terms of spatiality in decolonial thought is part of his greater discussion of the reciprocal relation between ways of knowing and being. In his book *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking*, Mignolo investigates the relationship between coloniality and epistemology, detailing how the different conceptualizations of knowledge-making reinforce (and are reinforced by) the imaginary of the modern colonial world system.<sup>69</sup> As such, temporality and spatiality are relevant to Mignolo’s investigation in that these senses as they are conceived through western hegemonic orientations constitute the imaginary of the colonial world system.

This emphasis on the possibilities of reinforcing or delinking from modernizing imaginaries through a reorientation of the senses is central in decolonial aesthetics. Alejandro Vallega explains this reorientation of aesthetics as a turn from what he describes as its Kantian iteration as the science of taste and beauty towards a reworking in terms of the ancient Greek

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<sup>66</sup> Lugones, “From within Germinative Stasis,” 87.

<sup>67</sup> Vallega, *Latin American Philosophy*, 179.

<sup>68</sup> Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs*, 33.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

understanding relating it to “bodily experience,” affect, and sensibility as it is entangled with knowing or knowledge-making.<sup>70</sup>

Pulling from Enrique Dussel and Aníbal Quijano, Vallega explains that “before rational arguments there are experiences and practices at physical and affective levels oriented by distinct senses of temporality which frame the projective horizon for knowledge.”<sup>71</sup> As such, the pre-rational, pre-reflexive senses of temporality and spatiality represented in “western instrumental rationalism” (which Walter Mignolo among others have termed “the coloniality of being”) orient and “delineate possible ways of existing,” a crucial notion in decolonial thought as demonstrated by the radical rejection of these sensibilities explored above.<sup>72</sup>

A liberatory decolonial aesthetic, therefore, represents “configurations of beings, concrete experiences, and possibilities in a fecund movement of distinct and yet interlaced experiences, memories, histories, hopes, desires, and their articulations in forms that remain beyond westernizing comprehension.”<sup>73</sup> Building on the fundamental entanglement of possibilities of thought and knowledge-making with the lived experiences which inform decolonial ontologies, aesthetics for many decolonial thinkers is a crucial dimension in the project of liberation “at the social, political, normative, conceptual, and ideological levels.”<sup>74</sup> Aesthetics embody a transformative<sup>75</sup> pursuit of “another way of thinking, another way of developing life than the one developed” through modernizing logics.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Vallega, *Latin American Philosophy*, 198.

<sup>71</sup> Vallega, “Exordio / Exordium,” 126.

<sup>72</sup> Vallega, *Latin American Philosophy*, 100.

<sup>73</sup> Vallega, “Exordio / Exordium,” 139.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>75</sup> Rivera, Omar, “Epistemological and Aesthetic Dimensions of Transmodernism: Linda Martín Alcoff’s and Alejandro Vallega’s Readings of Enrique Dussel” *Inter-American Journal of Philosophy* 8, no. 2 (2017): 52.

<sup>76</sup> Vallega, “Exordio / Exordium,” 132.

Often enacted through visual arts, liberatory decolonial aesthetics also takes the form of stories – both prose and poetry.<sup>77</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa emphasizes the “shamanistic” and transformative effects of stories on storytellers, listeners, and readers, and identifies their ability to disrupt western colonizing sensibilities as central to the overall project of decolonization.<sup>78</sup> This transformative capacity demonstrates the possibility of decolonial aesthetics functioning as a site in which the powerful reworking of agential capacities within decolonial thought manifests. Maria Lugones, whose contributions investigate the ways in which coloniality articulates gender and sexuality, explains the “interactive” nature of “meaning-making,” and that “the conceiving as well as the taking up and carrying of meaning requires a collectivity, however disorganized or open-ended that collectivity may be.”<sup>79</sup> In other words, Lugones among others suggests that meaning is not something which is “out there,” waiting to be uncovered, but rather is created through relational encounters.

As Mignolo suggests, the departure from a “hegemonic epistemology with emphasis on denotation and truth” toward “subaltern epistemologies with emphasis on performance and transformation” is central to the decolonial project.<sup>80</sup> Through an elaboration of identities-in-process, Lugones identifies a “double movement of oppression and resistance” in which colonized identities are “other than what the hegemon makes” those identities. In emphasizing that agency is enacted not by individuals in isolation but through relations, Lugones highlights that within the colonial difference, non-incorporation enables agential and resistant action even without the “maximal sense of agency of the modern subject.”<sup>81</sup> In other words, by embodying alternative

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<sup>77</sup> Vallega, “Exordio / Exordium,” 138.

<sup>78</sup> Anzaldúa, Gloria. 1987. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1987), 88.

<sup>79</sup> Lugones, “From within Germinative Stasis,” 97.

<sup>80</sup> Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs*, 26.

<sup>81</sup> Vallega, *Latin American Philosophy*, 191.

sensibilities, affective practices, and knowledges that reject the demand to be legible (and thus unable to be put to work) by modernity, “the restitution of knowledge occurs within the colonial world system, in spite of the system, and in a movement that exposes and arises from modes of knowledge that are not determined by the system.”<sup>82</sup> Lugones emphasizes that resistance and oppression are both “ongoing” rather than ever “accomplished,” and this double movement manifests in an particular identity: “as she is resisting ⇔ oppressing, she is both the one resisting and the one being oppressed,” which exist “within very different logics.”<sup>83</sup> Aesthetics for decolonial thinkers offers a chance to perform this relational meaning making at a pre-rational level that is not constrained by western hegemonic signifiers. Through aesthetic encounters, the distinction between “the knower and the known” can be transcended as the encounter produces reciprocal changes in all entities of the encounter.<sup>84</sup>

In Lugones’ reading of queer Chicana thinker Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, she builds on this notion of agency, especially as it is distinct from the western understanding. Agency, she elaborates, must focus on “a more contained, more inward, sense of activity of the self in metamorphosis.” She continues: “like in a cocoon, the changes are not directed outward, at least not toward those domains permeated by the logics of dominations.”<sup>85</sup> In this way, she especially troubles the understanding of agency as “potent intentionality” in which individuals act within “ready-made hierarchical worlds of sense.”<sup>86</sup> This notion of “sense” is, again, central here: when an entity “concocts sense away from the encasement of dominant sense,” such

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 176.

<sup>83</sup> Lugones, “From within Germinative Stasis,” 90.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>85</sup> Lugones, “From within Germinative Stasis,” 86.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 86.

as orientations of temporality or spatiality, they are rejecting the very logic of their domination. She elaborates:

[...] the one who feels the possibility of self-control is not an agent in the western sense because her intentions are not part of any status quo. Her meaning, the control of meaning, the scope and tenor of her possibilities are ahead of her and within an ancient history of violent struggle. Even though every move she makes will have a status quo interpretation that reads her as an alien, an outlaw, reduced, her meaning co-opted in the direction of servility or incompetence, those interpretations do not hold her captive. She cannot act, but she is active, a serpent coiled.<sup>87</sup>

Lugones explains that the possibility of such activity is found at the pre-rational level, internal to one's felt sense of being, from within one's "multiplicity" – that is, "to sense, perceive, relate, know within the flesh."<sup>88</sup> Through this felt sense within one's material body, one is able to conjure the possibility of transformation within (a metamorphosis) while "sensing the outside." This transformative, dynamic, recurrent, internal and reciprocal multiplicity is for Lugones an agential capacity.

In her encounter with Anzaldúa's texts, Lugones performs what she calls a "coalitional journey." As she explains, this is an exercise in engaging with the text in a way that does not hinge on an attempt to uncover its static truths. She challenges the distinction between herself as the knower and the text as that which can be known, instead recognizing the text as "alive – enacted as it is told."<sup>89</sup> As such, her coalitional journey is a very personal engagement with the text: she suggests that coming into "intimate relation" with Anzaldúa's work in itself "enacts" the text, making meaning with it. Further, the journey is reciprocal, in that by "feeling drawn to" and

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>89</sup> Lugones, "From within Germinative Stasis," 86.

responding to the texts “call,” Lugones is herself changed by the encounter.<sup>90</sup> Her conceptualization of agency as transformative and internal allows her to be open to a pre-rational “brooding of [her] own metamorphosis,” in which one’s transformations need not be legible within “ready-made hierarchical worlds of sense.”<sup>91</sup> For Lugones and Anzaldúa, this is a form of resistance against western modernizing domination.

In this section I investigated some of the internal developments in decolonial thought, and how some trajectories within the framework culminate in an agential approach to aesthetics. In the next section I examine new materialism in an effort to identify the particular trajectories of thought within the varied framework which are most attuned to the decolonial sense of agency described above.

## **New Materialism**

New materialism emerged at the juncture of scientific critical and ecological feminism, poststructuralism, classical materialism, and diverse pursuits in political theory, geography, quantum physics, biology, and architecture, among others. Most directly, that which has emerged as a self-conscious new materialist framework is often understood as a way of embracing poststructuralist critique while thinking through matter’s active role in historical processes, pushing beyond what is perceived as an inability to escape linguistic and cultural explanations.<sup>92</sup>

In addition to this renewed emphasis on matter, many new materialists also emphasize non-anthropocentrism and the “primacy of *process*”<sup>93</sup> in ontological considerations, though the ways in which the diverse assortment of new materialist thinkers make sense of these concepts varies

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>92</sup> Coole, “Agentic Capacities,” 454.

<sup>93</sup> Massumi, Brian. *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 8.

radically. For example, in spite of the emphasis on matter which has come to define new materialism, some trajectories of thought within the framework reveal an “implicit reinscription of matter’s passivity.”<sup>94</sup> I suggest that this is a result of a tendency to understand the notion of the “vitality” of matter, the agency of non-human actors, and the “entanglement” of worldly entities as *metaphors*, thus re-committing ones perspective to the notion of linguistic representation, albeit one that aims to take the nonhuman into ethical consideration. Jane Bennett’s notion of “vibrant matter” exemplifies this position.

In her exploration of the vitality of matter and the nonhuman in both *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* and in the text’s companion article “The Force of Things: Steps toward an Ecology of Matter,” Bennett is interested in the tendencies, forces, and trajectories of “things” (which range from worms, to trash, to energies) as they exist outside of their relationship with humans.<sup>95</sup> Motivated by a serious concern in the intersection of anthropocentrism, capitalism, and earth’s degradation, Bennet suggests “bracketing the question of the human” in order to examine the lively activities of those nonhuman entities which are so often evaded in serious political thought.<sup>96</sup> In doing so, she hopes to cultivate a sense of interconnectivity and empathy between humans and these entities that can inform considerations of the ethics of climate crises going forward.

These meditations of the active role of worms, or the “thing-power” of trash, ultimately reinforce anthropocentric and largely Western-European conceptualizations of agency. In a move to overcome the potential misunderstanding that in bracketing the human she is no longer interested in the stakes of the diverse human experience, Bennet repeatedly suggests that matter is

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<sup>94</sup> Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity,” 809.

<sup>95</sup> Bennett, Jane, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), viii.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, ix.

only affective insofar as humans cultivate an internal ability to recognize and attribute meaning to that matter. In building a notion of “thing-power materialism,” the energy of matter becomes relevant only insofar she is able to visually translate its existence to the broader socio-political context from which it emerges.<sup>97</sup> In her reflection on a political ethos of worms, for example, Bennet poses the following reflections:

“Even if a convincing case is made for worms as active members of, say, the ecosystem of a rainforest, can worms be considered members of a public? What is the difference between an ecosystem and a political system? Are they analogs? Two names for the same system at different scales? What is the difference between an actant and a political actor? Is there a clear difference? Does an action count as political by virtue of its having taken place “in” a public? Are there nonhuman members of a public? What, in sum, are the implications of a (meta)physics of vibrant materiality for political theory?”<sup>98</sup>

These are all interesting and provocative questions, but importantly they reveal something central to Bennett’s approach: her embeddedness in a very specifically anthropocentric way of recognizing vitality. Consider further her concept of “thing-power,” which she explores through reflections on trash: to have “thing-power” means something “commands attention, exudes a kind of dignity, provokes poetry, or inspires fear.”<sup>99</sup> Confronting trash on the street, she reflects on the power of each object to command attention as an assemblage:

“For had the sun not glinted on the black glove, I might not have seen the rat; had the rat not been there, I might not have noted the bottle cap, and so on. But they were all there just as they were, and so I caught a glimpse of an energetic substantiality possessed by each of these things, things that I generally saw as inert.”<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Bennett, Jane, “The Force of Things: Steps toward an ecology of matter.” *Political Theory* 32, no. 3 (2004): 348.

<sup>98</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 94.

<sup>99</sup> Bennett, “The Force of Things,” 350.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 350.

She meditates on Thoreau's practice of "the discipline of looking always at what is to be seen" and the resulting ability to take in that which these objects express. Further, her elaboration of the effect of "American materialism" (that is, the need to continuously purchase, own, and toss-out objects) is telling: "the sheer volume of products, and the necessity of junking them to make room for new ones, devalues the thing. It disables and obscures thing-power." Herein lies the issue: Bennett's understanding of the vitality of matter wholly hinges upon the ability of humans to make sense of it. Rather than pushing beyond linguistic representation and cultural grids, she appears to position her nonhuman subjects firmly on that grid.

While Bennett's position attempts to recognize the active role of materiality, her approach nevertheless suggests an understanding of nonhuman matter as *metaphors* for better understanding classical western-European political questions. By situating physical processes only in terms of their metaphorical usefulness for human experiences, Bennett subscribes to the distinct existence of a "known" entity, a representation, and a "knower," thus maintaining the fundamental question of the accuracy of representation that afflicts some trajectories of poststructuralism.<sup>101</sup>

In "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter," Karen Barad describes what a break from this form of "representationalism" can look like, and why it is central to an understanding of the active materializing role of matter. She suggests a pivot away from a "representationalist belief in the power of words" toward a "performative understanding of discursive practices." Drawing from Michel Foucault, Barad explains that discourse differs from linguistics in that it is "not what is said; it is that which constrains and enables that which can be said. Discursive practices define what counts as meaningful statements." In lieu of words as representations of reality, the shift toward material-

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<sup>101</sup> Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity," 804.

discursive practices – which relies on Foucault’s discursivity while emphasizing the nonhuman – trades being and representing for doing, practicing, and relating: performativity. Further, the “primary ontological units,” or that which is *doing*, is “phenomena” rather than “things.”<sup>102</sup> Phenomena for Barad are particular instances of relations, or “intra-actions.” Intra-action ontologically differs from interaction in that the former suggests that that which is relating does not pre-exist this relation – the relation itself produces that which relates, and thus “reality is not composed of things-in-themselves or things-behind-phenomena but ‘things’-in-phenomena.”<sup>103</sup>

Consider the pivot toward an epistemology which emphasizes “performance and transformation” over “denotation and truth” in decolonial thought as discussed above. This pivot at the core of decolonial thought captures Barad’s move to depart from representationalist accounts towards performativity. I argue that following this particular trajectory of new materialist thought which rejects representationalism and embraces an ontology of becoming is essential for highlighting the concurrences of decolonial thought and new materialism. As made clear through Jane Bennett’s work, a representationalist new materialist perspective fails to break away from the presumption of entities which pre-exist their relations, thus subscribing to what Brian Massumi calls the “positionality model” in which change and movement can only occur upon an established cultural grid, implying the stasis of the grid itself – a grid which as discussed above inherently hinges on western-hegemonic signifiers.<sup>104</sup> Thus recognizing the schism between Jane Bennett’s approach to new materialist thought, which relies upon representation and western human signifiers, and Karen Barad’s approach, which focuses on relations, is crucial for exploring the

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<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 818.

<sup>103</sup> Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity,” 817.

<sup>104</sup> Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 71.

encounter between new materialist and decolonial thought, in that it makes clear the extent of the commitment to forego positionality in favor of movement, as I further explain below.

### *New Materialist Space-time*

A focus on movement and “modification,” rather than “essence”<sup>105</sup> shifts the essential question away from “how there can be change given positioning,” to “the wonder that there can be stasis given the primacy of process.”<sup>106</sup> In other words, indeterminacy and multiplicity take ontological priority.<sup>107</sup> Barad’s term “intra-action” helps to elaborate this concept: as explained above intra-action differs from interaction in that it does not presume the prior existence of its relata. Rather, that which intra-acts is produced through the very phenomenon of their intra-action – they are “phenomenal.”<sup>108</sup> Further, the rejection of the existence of relata “prior” to their intra-actions should not be taken as an “assertion of a time sequence,” but again as a matter of “ontological priority.”<sup>109</sup> In fact, the concept of linear and continuous temporality is significantly complicated by this ontology, as perhaps most clearly explained through Karen Barad’s explanation of an electron-leap, in which an “electron is initially at one energy level and then it is at another without having been anywhere in between.” She elaborates:

“Quantum ‘leaps’ are not mere displacements in space through time, not from here-now to there-then, not when it is the rupture itself that helps constitute the here’s and now’s, and not once and for all. The point is not merely that something is here-now and there-then without ever having been anywhere in between, it’s that here-

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<sup>105</sup> Coole, “Agentic Capacities,” 452.

<sup>106</sup> Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 7.

<sup>107</sup> Barad, “Hauntological relations,” 263.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 261.

<sup>109</sup> Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 8.

now, there-then have become unmoored – there’s no given place or time for them to be.”<sup>110</sup>

This is a radically nonlinear and “dis/continuous” understanding of temporality that not only disrupts the notion of a past and future which “sit[s] still” out *there*, but as such disrupts the claim of the “present” to the here and the now.<sup>111</sup> The past and the future “are iteratively reconfigured and enfolded through the world’s ongoing intra-activity. There is no inherently determinate relationship between past and future.”<sup>112</sup> Recall the decolonial concept of ana-chronic time, in which “time” and history are open, “always already exposed to otherness” through the iteratively overlapping temporalities<sup>113</sup> – that is, time only exists within relations as it is performed and transformed.<sup>114</sup> In Barad’s terms, decolonial thinkers embrace an ontology of becoming as it manifests in the performativity of intra-actively produced phenomenal time.

Through “practices of spacetimemattering,” time *and space* are intra-actively produced.<sup>115</sup> Like time, space does not exist as a “determinate given” or “universal outside of phenomena.” Spatiality, especially in terms of material and conceptual borders and interior/exterior dichotomies, necessarily introduces the centrality of “agency” for this ontology. Barad offers the concept of “agential separability,” which she describes as the process throughout the making of space-time in which “‘part’ of the world makes itself differentially intelligible to another ‘part’ of the world and through which local causal structures, boundaries, and properties are stabilized and destabilized.”

<sup>116</sup> This is achieved through an agential cut – or a contingent separability of bodies *within phenomena*. These cuts produce that which is otherwise assumed to be stable universal bodies in

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<sup>110</sup> Barad, “Hauntological Relations,” 248.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 268.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 261.

<sup>113</sup> Vallega, *Latin American Philosophy*, 115.

<sup>114</sup> Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs*, 26.

<sup>115</sup> Barad, “Hauntological Relations,” 261.

<sup>116</sup> Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity,” 817.

space – the entities which make up the “objects of inquiry” in representational frameworks. What is essential is the understanding that these cuts and measurements happen, again, *within certain phenomena*, in order to make meaningful “the boundaries and properties of the ‘components’ of phenomena.”<sup>117</sup> This complicates any notion of an absolute exteriority or interiority, in that borders and boundaries are “enacted” and contingent rather than static, thus they are always open and never stable.<sup>118</sup> Recall the discussion of “radical exteriority” among decolonial thinkers. To reiterate, this conceptualization of exteriority pivots away from an understanding of inside/outside dichotomies grounded in “systems, rational ordering, and a logic that requires determination,” toward a focus on the very *movement* of differentiating the “included” and “excluded.”<sup>119</sup>

Barad explains that “this dynamism *is agency*. Agency is not an attribute but the ongoing reconfigurings of the world.”<sup>120</sup> These “cuts” do not “mark some absolute separation but a cutting together/apart – a ‘holding together’ of the disparate self.”<sup>121</sup> This not only involves differentiating of different bodies (that is, each cut necessarily produces exclusions which constitute its existence – “every concept is haunted by its mutually constituted excluded other.”<sup>122</sup>), but even *internal* to the body and to any “self;” if an agential cut occurs within one phenomena and is contingent on that particular phenomena, then there is a “material multiplicity of self, the way it is diffracted across spaces, times, realities, imaginaries.”<sup>123</sup> Identity is not fixed, but a “contingent iterative performativity”<sup>124</sup> which radically complicates notions of cause and effect in terms of what produces a body; rather than a “relation of absolute exteriority between a ‘causal apparatus’ and a

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 815.

<sup>118</sup> Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity,” 816.

<sup>119</sup> Vallega, *Latin American Philosophy*, 140.

<sup>120</sup> Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity,” 818, emphasis mine.

<sup>121</sup> Barad, “Hauntological Relations,” 265.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 253.

<sup>123</sup> Barad, “Diffracting Diffractions,” 175.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 173.

‘body effected,’” the notion of *exteriority within* suggests that “the apparatuses of bodily production (which are themselves phenomena) are (also) part of the phenomena they produce.”<sup>125</sup>

To clarify, this dynamism – the contingency of this separability on cuts within certain phenomena, depicts the notion of performativity that clarifies agency for Barad. Agency is not something an entity can *have*, but rather is ‘doing’/‘being’ in its intra-activity.”<sup>126</sup> It is an enactment, not an attribute. This is agential because:

“[...] intra-actions are constraining but not determining. That is, intra-activity is neither a matter of strict determinism nor unconstrained freedom. The future is radically open at every turn. This open sense of futurity does not depend on the clash or collision of cultural demands; rather, it is inherent in the nature of intra-activity—even when apparatuses are primarily reinforcing, agency is not foreclosed.”<sup>127</sup>

It would be insufficient for the takeaway from this in terms of conceptualizing borders and boundaries to be merely that these marks, material or conceptual, are produced and open to change. Rather, what Barad calls “memory” – that is, “the pattern of sedimented enfoldings of iterative intra-activity” – is “written into the fabric of the world. The world ‘holds’ the memory of all traces; or rather, the world is its memory (enfolded materialization).”<sup>128</sup> What is important is an examination of “the practices through which these differential boundaries are stabilized and destabilized.”<sup>129</sup> I suggest that this also constitutes the project of decoloniality. For example, this examination is embodied in the “coloniality of time” – a negotiation with the ways in which colonial activities continuously reinforce modern conceptualizations of time. Therefore, as the coloniality of time is an examination of the practice through which the differential boundaries

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<sup>125</sup> Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity,” 826.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 827.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 826.

<sup>128</sup> Barad, “Hauntological Relations,” 264.

<sup>129</sup> Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity,” 808.

produced by the coloniality of power are stabilized and destabilized, the “colonial difference” is the decolonial conceptualization of an agential cut – a contingent identification which makes meaningful the determination of modernity and coloniality without yielding to its logic.

### **Affective Engagement**

As outlined above, there are many mutually reinforcing conceptual fibers between decolonial thought and new materialism. Both frameworks emphasize a transformative, dynamic relationship between ways of knowing and ways of being: Walter Mignolo and Maria Lugones emphasize the ability of this recognition to denaturalize hegemonic epistemologies and bear witness to the role this relationship has historically played in reinforcing colonial logics. Through Karen Barad’s notion of onto-epistemologies she questions the idea that anything exists outside of relations. Both frameworks problematize inside-outside dichotomies conceptually and materially, as well as linear temporalities. The sensibilities which demonstrate the intersections of these ontologies emerge through particular negotiations with ways of knowing, material-discursive practices which make meaning-making differentially possible. Not only do the shared senses of temporality and borders help to illustrate the significant ways in which these trajectories are mutually attuned, but the very attunement on the sensory level – and as such the possibility of rejecting the very logic of representationalist and modern-colonial ways of knowing and being – constitutes an agential capacity.

These approaches to knowledge-making and the orientations towards the senses that emerge from them culminate in mutually attuned conceptualizations of agency that challenge its understanding as an attribute of cognition, rationality, and intention. They co-opt the term, and challenge the anthropocentric and western hegemonic conceptualization which historically

emphasizes the same attributes afforded to the human and the masculine.<sup>130</sup> Rather than surrendering to a modern-colonial representationalist account, which would involve the effort to attribute these traits of the western modern subject to nonhumans or other-humans in order make-legible these forms of existence, agency is reconceptualized not as an inherent quality but rather an emergent capacity which disrupts the requirement for intentionality in favor of a “more partial, contextual, and provisional” agency.<sup>131</sup>

Central to the two notions that emerge from the resulting respective conceptualizations of agency – Lugone’s “coalitional journey” and Barad’s “performativity” – is the transformative, indeterminate, and dynamic understanding of material and conceptual entities at their encounter. Within the phenomena of their encounter, these very notions are changed – as “worldviews in collision ... neither remain the same.”<sup>132</sup> The process of knowledge-making, in this case in terms of facilitating a mutual consideration of the frameworks, also creates a unique reality through intra-action. Facilitating an encounter between decolonial thought and new materialism is not just an exercise in illustrating an affinity between two radically different theoretical frameworks; the texts are alive, “enacted as they are told,” and respond to the call of the other. In other words, they are changed by their encounter.

Therefore, a method emerges though their encounter: that of an affective engagement. Lugones’s “coalitional journey” describes the process of “coming into intimate relation with” a text, recognizing that text as “alive.” This makes possible an engagement with the text that embraces the possibility of a reciprocal effect with that text, in the simultaneous making of the text’s meaning and one’s own sense of being within that encounter.<sup>133</sup> With this in mind, I rely

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<sup>130</sup> Coole, “Agentic Capacities,” 457.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 458.

<sup>132</sup> Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs*, 8.

<sup>133</sup> Vallega, *Latin American Philosophy*, 100.

upon Barad's notion of performativity: through differentiations, every resulting concept "is haunted by its mutually constituted excluded other."<sup>134</sup> In terms of encountering texts, this understanding of performativity offers a way to read texts intra-actively "through one-another, enacting new patterns of engagement, attending to how exclusions matter."<sup>135</sup> Contingent iterative performativity involves "continual reopening and unsettling of what might yet be, of what was, and what comes to be," because intra-action assumes that nothing is given or remains the same after relations.<sup>136</sup> Taken together, these approaches allow the possibility of an aesthetic interaction that is open to reciprocal-becoming, unsettling the possibility of a knower/known dichotomy, and thus freed from the necessity of denotation. At the intersection of the coalitional journey and performativity is the method of "affectively engaging" texts, which I argue comes to exist through the encounter of the two theoretical trajectories of thought specifically in the phenomena of their encounter I am facilitating. I unpack what this method consists of below.

My effort is not only to "respond to the call" of decolonial thought and new materialism, but also of the novella *The Vegetarian*. Thus far I have sought to respond to what I understood as the demand of both frameworks for a precise mutual simultaneous consideration that takes very seriously the processes by which they developed certain mutually attuned trajectories of thought. Their encounter demanded precision because, as demonstrated above, the connections between these frameworks are complex and often fraught with contexts and interpretations that can be hostile to one another's broader goals. If we take seriously the very onto-epistemologies that make up this encounter, it becomes clear that by facilitating that encounter the trajectories which intra-act change and are changed. The method which I will describe below as an "affective engagement"

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<sup>134</sup> Barad, "Hauntological Relations," 253.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 243.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 264.

is not merely a combination of the decolonial coalitional journey and the new materialist performativity insofar as such a combination assumes these to continue to be discrete. Rather, an affective engagement emerges as the manifestation of their encounter, the enactment of the very agential capacity which makes possible the phenomenon within which these texts intra-act. It is the enactment of a coalitional journey and performativity in the context of theoretical analysis within the phenomena of their encounter. The perspectives come to matter reciprocally, and thus “become-together” in that decolonial thought in its encounter with new materialism is unique from decolonial thought outside of this phenomenon, and so on.

Yet even further, this encounter was not carried out in a conceptual vacuum freed from the call of the novella, but rather specifically and transparently responded to its call; their mutual simultaneous consideration – that is, the act of reading the texts through one another above – was enacted with the novella in mind, and as such the theory was read “through” the novella. If decolonial thought and new materialism demanded precision in their encounter, then the novella demands an affective engagement. By affective engagement, I mean a method which enables a reading of *The Vegetarian* that is always open to the reciprocal transformative effects of that reading, both on the enactment of its own agential capacity and on that which is used to read it (in this case, myself and the theories which guide this reading.) An affective engagement involves transparently logging the effects of reading the text on one’s own senses while presupposing coloniality and the possibility of a reciprocal becoming with the text, thus disrupting the definitive distinction between the reader and that which is read. In logging a pre-rational walk-through of the ways in which the novella invites a disorientation of the senses while taking seriously one’s own role in the production of these disorientations, an affective engagement embraces the possibility of making/being-made by encountering the novella. It is a material-discursive practice which in

its “ongoing rupturing” enables un/conscious responsiveness to the “indeterminacy in the nature of being/becoming.”<sup>137</sup> In other words, an affective engagement performs the “continual reopening and unsettling of what might yet be, of what was, and what comes to be” – indeterminacy without the burden of uncovering truths of representation determined by colonial logics.<sup>138</sup> An affective<sup>139</sup> engagement disrupts the knower/known relation in reading the novella, and invites a disorientation of the senses that may conceive sense away from the narrative which is offered.

This methodology is grounded in the effort to take the novella at its word – that is, to “face” the novella’s indeterminacy not as an obstacle but as agential in itself.<sup>140</sup> Barad elaborates on the notion of “facing” a text:

“[it is] not to entertain or reconstruct some narrative of the way it was, but to respond, to be responsible, to take responsibility for that which we inherit (from the past and the future), for the entangled relationalities of inheritance that ‘we’ are, to acknowledge and be responsive to the noncontemporaneity of the present, to put oneself at risk, to risk oneself (which is never one or self), to open oneself up to indeterminacy in moving towards what is to-come. Responsibility is by necessity an asymmetrical relation/doing, an enactment, a matter of différance, of intra-action, in which no one/ no thing is given in advance or ever remains the same. Only in this ongoing responsibility to the entangled other, without dismissal (without ‘enough already!’), is there the possibility of justice-to-come.”<sup>141</sup>

As such, to take the novella “at its word,” or in Lugones’s terms to “be drawn by its call,”<sup>142</sup> is to face it as not merely an “object of study”<sup>143</sup> or illustration of the theoretical perspectives discussed

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<sup>137</sup> Barad, “Hauntological Relations,” 264.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 253.

<sup>139</sup> Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 33.

<sup>140</sup> Barad, “Hauntological Relations,” 268.

<sup>141</sup> Barad, “Hauntological Relations,” 265.

<sup>142</sup> Lugones, “From within Germinative Stasis,” 86.

<sup>143</sup> Ramos, Juan, *Sensing Decolonial Aesthetics in Latin American Arts*, (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2018), 29.

thus far, but to embrace the possibility of reciprocal dynamic and iterative configurations and perform a collective aesthetic intra-action that is open to an agential sense outside of the logic of western hegemonic maximal agency. Emulating Lugones's reading of Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* and Barad's reading of Michael Frayn's play *Copenhagen*, I perform my own affective engagement with *The Vegetarian* in chapter 3.

## **Conclusions**

In this chapter I followed the internal debates within two distinct theoretical frameworks, decoloniality and new materialism, in order to identify the particular trajectories where these positions are mutually attuned in terms of their onto-epistemological orientations. I then showed that these orientations with regard to temporality and borders reveal the strength of their encounter, in that these orientations manifests a mutually attuned ontology and sense of agency. By thinking through these debates in order to identify the precise connections between these frameworks, each constituent of encounter reciprocally acts on the other. The result is a method which manifests at their intersection and makes possible an engagement with *The Vegetarian* that brings it into a conversation with these frameworks. In the next chapter I will perform this affective engagement in order to enact the agential capacity at the core of the novella. Doing so will further illustrate the reciprocal transformative intra-action that enable the engagement, and will thus have implications for the effect of the novella on the theoretical frameworks themselves.

### Chapter 3

#### *The Vegetarian, Agency, and an Affective Engagement*

In the previous chapter, I engaged with two theoretical frameworks – decolonial thought and new materialism – independently and then within their complex encounter in order to facilitate their mutual simultaneous consideration. In doing so, I proposed a method for engaging *The Vegetarian* in a way that responds to its challenge to be open to the transformative dynamic effects of disorientation. I call this way of reading the novella “affective engagement.” In this chapter, I perform that affective engagement with the novella, thus transparently logging my own response and disorientation. Following this engagement, I facilitate a conversation between my encounter with the novella and the two theoretical frameworks at their encounter. Karen Barad and Maria Lugones offer potent vocabularies through their onto-epistemologies for redefining agency away from its western-hegemonic conceptualizations of rationality and intention, instead positioning agency as the always-present iterative process of intra-activity that enables metamorphosis through a reorientation of the senses. By situating *The Vegetarian* within this particular sense of agency, I suggest that the novella is part of this conversation. In doing so, I achieve two things: I am able to intra-act with the novella and thus enact the agential capacity at its core by making sense *with* the novella through the vocabularies offered by the theoretical frameworks in their encounter. I then demonstrate the ways in which the novella and those theoretical frameworks are co-constitutive within the phenomena of their encounter.

As discussed in chapter 1, the affective engagement that follows embodies an open-ended intra-action that requires that I “risk” myself in becoming-with the novella within the phenomenon

of our encounter. In other words, in what follows, my becoming-with reveals the position from which I engage by exposing the very orientations that I have internalized as natural and as such that which can be disoriented. As such, I assert that these orientations are not the default but rather representative of my position within this encounter. The affective engagement that follows is not an effort to uncover the accurate interpretation of the text (and, in fact, challenges the existence of a universally “accurate” interpretation), but rather seeks to open up the text in a way that is open to taking Yeong-hye at her word.

### **Affective Engagement with *The Vegetarian***

“*Hand, foot, tongue, gaze – all weapons from which nothing is safe.*”<sup>144</sup> This is the penetrating violence of *The Vegetarian*. In part one, I follow the perspective of Mr. Cheong, and I am comfortable. I can play the neutral role: through his observations I can witness his malice, plainly laid out like a bait I’m happy to catch. I can also join him in watching his wife, Yeong-hye, in her transformation into a vegetarian. As she changes from merely unfamiliar to “utterly unknowable,”<sup>145</sup> I feel privileged to know her better, as I have access to her nightmares.

**Mr. Cheong, pg. 25:** “*...this agonizing dream, from which I was shut out, had no way of knowing and moreover didn’t want to know...*”

**Mr. Cheong, pg. 33:** “*What shadowy recesses lurked in her mind, what secrets I’d never suspected? In that moment, she was utterly unknowable.*”

**Mr. Cheong, pg. 52:** “*...this woman...*” “*...this strange, frightening woman...*”

**Mr. Cheong, pg. 59:** “*I thought to myself: I do not know this woman. And it was true.*”

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<sup>144</sup> Han, *Vegetarian*, 41.

<sup>145</sup> Han, *Vegetarian*, 33.

In these moments, I feel I can rejoice in the ease of knowing Yeong-hye better than him, understanding her more fully, and witnessing Mr. Cheong's evil. I have an impulse to scorn Mr. Cheong for refusing to try to hear her, and I sit comfortably apart from him. I am the Neutral Observer.

But outside of the brief moments in which Yeong-hye expresses herself, I am witnessing her wholly through her husband. Page after page he and I scrutinize her, and his gaze becomes mine. When she speaks, I listen, but when he speaks I listen too. This catches me off guard – isn't his evil so obvious, isn't he so plainly an unsympathetic narrator? But in my need to contextualize her dreams, I watch her with him. I watch her as she tosses out expensive food; I watch her as she lets her husband be late for work; I watch her sitting at home topless; I watch her at the dinner table with her husband's boss, in which I, not she, am part of the discussion which scrutinizes her. I hear Mr. Cheong:

**Mr. Cheong, pg. 17:** *"Are you crazy?"*

**Mr. Cheong, pg. 18:** *"Have you lost your mind?"*

**Mr. Cheong, pg. 18:** *"You've completely lost it."*

And I watch.

Perspectives unsettle, and function as wordless accusations; through the eyes of Mr. Cheong, I witness – and participate – in the violence that resides in one's gaze. Through the dark fear of the unknown, and through vicious erotic desire, I join Mr. Cheong and In-hye's husband, as well as seemingly endless other observers, in watching Yeong-hye through suspicious eyes, wavering on the possibility that she is "insane." Seemingly the only break from occupying this gaze is through her five nightmares, where I am able to begin to try to face Yeong-hye.

**Yeong-hye, dream #4, pg. 50:** *“I remember the two eyes that had watched me, while the dog was made to run on, while he vomited blood mixed with froth, and how later they had seemed to appear, flickering, on the surface of the soup. But I don’t care. I really didn’t care.”*

Only I have access to this nightmare. But what at first felt like the key to my status as a neutral observer – an escape from Mr. Cheong’s violent perspective – now feels like an accusation. But if the nightmare has the cadence of a memory, it has already happened. For what can I be accused?

I sit with the accusation, and with the possibility of the violence I’ve already committed – that I’ve seen the eyes mixed with blood and vomit and froth and didn’t care.

**Yeong-hye, dream #1, pg. 19:** *My clothes still wet with blood. Hide, hide behind the trees. Crouch down, don’t let anybody see. My bloody hands. My bloody mouth. In that barn, what had I done? [...] My face, the look in my eyes... my face, undoubtedly, but never seen before. Or no, not mine, but so familiar... nothing makes sense. Familiar and yet not... that vivid, strange, horribly uncanny feeling.”*

This fear of the violence that she may or may not have committed, of being watched, and of recognizing/not-recognizing the face which may or may not be hers – the distinction between her fears and my own becomes blurred the further I read.

**Yeong-hye, dream #3, pg. 35-36:**

*[...] Murderer or murdered .... hazy distinctions, boundaries wearing thin. Familiarity bleeds into strangeness, certainty becomes impossible. Only the violence is vivid enough*

*to stick. [...] A hazy feeling I can't pin down ... but remembered as blood-chillingly definite. [...] Murderer or murdered, experience too vivid to not be real.*

I begin to hear the demand to grab onto the vivid nightmares, far more vivid than anything within Mr. Cheong's gaze. That I have access to these nightmares is not a privilege which renders me neutral, but a blurring of the distinction between my reading of the novella and the novella itself. I am being asked to participate in a novel that is already written, even if I can't change the plot. I want to hide crouching behind the trees with Yeong-hye, but also from her. I don't feel Mr. Cheong's fear – that of the unknowable. Instead, I feel caught in the act of committing a violence I don't recognize.

Yet once outside of these vivid disorienting nightmares, I return to my unidirectional gaze and once again I join Mr. Cheong and the other observers – I watch with disgust as she holds the small bird she's bitten in the courtyard, baring her breasts.

This uncanny sense of participation does not emerge through any direct breaking of a literary fourth wall, but rather through the beginnings of Yeong-hye's rejection of the very imaginary in which my gaze resides. I begin to recognize this embodied relation which "precedes the intentionality of consciousness"<sup>146</sup> more fully in part 2. I feel my gaze undergo a transformation here. As I follow Yeong-hye's brother-in-law's gaze, my gaze becomes a sexualizing weapon, and she is no longer the object of fear and contempt but that of sexual desire.

**B, pg. 64:** *"The thing he'd been searching for was something quieter, deeper, more private."*

The shift to B's perspective is at first a welcome one – anything to distance myself from Mr. Cheong's and his influence over my own. But soon the violence of this new perspective sinks

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<sup>146</sup> Barad, "Hauntological Relations," 265.

in, and Yeong-hye's visions are nowhere to be found. I can no longer locate her demand of a different logic within the words of her nightmares.

I watch Yeong-hye as her brother-in-law watches her and wants her, as he recalls images of her eating or lounging absently. These images feel invasive, but not necessarily because they are sexual; rather, these feel invasive because they are quiet.

But he has moments of clarity that are like gasps. These interrupt his gaze and my own.

**B, pg. 78:**       *“It was the quiet tone of a person who didn't belong anywhere, someone who had passed into a border area between states of being.”*

He sees her briefly, not through conscious effort, but because her very existence seems to occupy such a disruption. I feel protective – I don't want her to strip naked for him and bare her Mongolian mark. But when she does, another disruption:

**B, pg. 90:**       *“It called to mind something ancient, something pre-evolutionary, or else perhaps a mark of photosynthesis, and he realized to his surprise that there was nothing at all sexual about it; it was more vegetal than sexual.”*

How did Yeong-hye so wholly change the very terms of their encounter? How does she reorient the trajectory of the gaze back onto her brother-in-law, and back onto me? There is a shift in its directionality, like a light diffracting off a prism.

As he paints Yeong-hye's body with flowers and films it, there is a simultaneous sense of overwhelming sensuality and invasion, but the invasion is flipped through this diffraction of the gaze. In this moment Yeong-hye most directly affects and infects those observing her – her brother-

in-law and myself – by disrupting the very sensibilities which oppress her. By occupying her vulnerability while nude in a way that utterly transgresses the identity that is imposed, she disrupts even the obsessive projection which has plagued her brother-in-law. She is “armored by the power of her own renunciation” of the logic of the violence, and for him, it is “so intense as to bring tears to his eyes.”<sup>147</sup>

**B, pg. 91-92:** *“Every time the brush swept over her skin he felt her flesh quiver delicately as if being tickled, and he shuddered. But it wasn’t arousal; rather, it was a feeling that stimulated something deep in his very core, passing through him like a continuous electric shock.”*

In experiencing this with and through her brother-in-law, I am able to make sense of the power of the nightmares in part 1. The vivid depictions produce disorientations to the very distinctions between watcher and watched, happened and happening. The story is “enacted as it is told,”<sup>148</sup> and as such I was never a neutral observer. Yeong-hye’s identity is not fixed but a “contingent iterative performativity” and as such change can be affected on this story that is already-written.

**B, pg. 92-93:** *“This time she looked at him and laughed. Her laughter was faint but lively, seeming to reject nothing and be surprised by nothing.*

*Only then did he realize what it was that had shocked him when he’d first seen her lying prone on the sheet. This was the body of a beautiful young woman, conventionally an object of desire, and yet it was a body from which all desire had been eliminated. But this*

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<sup>147</sup> Han, *The Vegetarian*, 94.

<sup>148</sup> Lugones, “From within Germinative Stasis,” 86.

*was nothing so crass as carnal desire, not for her – rather, or so it seemed, what she had renounced was the very life that her body represented. The sunlight that came splintering through the wide window, dissolving into grains of sand, and the beauty of that body that, though this was not visible to the eye, was also ceaselessly splintering... the overwhelming inexpressibility of the scene beat against him like a wave breaking on the rocks, alleviating even those terrifyingly unknowable compulsions that had caused him such pain over the past year.”* (emphasis mine)

We are breathless in this sensual climax, witnessing for a moment Yeong-hye’s capacity to operate utterly “outside of the bounds of sense of the status quo” by physically occupying a transgressive sense of existence.<sup>149</sup> We want to look away. It is, as he suggests, “overwhelmingly inexpressible” – this is not a matter of rethinking but of embodying a disruptive sense. The protectiveness I felt over her for her Mongolian mark and nudity is shattered, because she has changed the terms of their (and our) encounter. In the same move as her reorientation of the directionality of the gaze, she is making herself “against the logic, the sense, the weight of oppression” through an “inward sense of activity of the self in metamorphosis. It is not expressed to us because it doesn’t have to be – the changes are not directed outward because they need not be made legible. Her reorientation of the violence of one’s gaze, wordlessly and without “perspective,” is part of her metamorphosis; embodying such a metamorphosis makes possible that flip, and the very enactment of that embodiment is made possible as the text is read.

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<sup>149</sup> Lugones, “From within Germinative Stasis,” 95.

**B, pg. 94:** “*And yet she didn’t look at all pitiful sitting there; instead, it made her appear uncommonly hard and self-contained, so much so that anyone watching would feel uneasy, and want to look away.*”

For the first time in the story, *we want to look away.*

In this moment, when I can no longer bear to look at her, there is a chance to face her – to simultaneously risk myself in my own becoming within our encounter while making-meaning with the novella; the novella, its characters, and myself come to matter together within the particular phenomena of our intra-action. In reading and enacting her metamorphosis, I begin to “sense, perceive, relate, know within the flesh” this transformation. This becoming-together importantly contradicts the possibility of my own identification as a “knower” to the novella’s “representation” of the characters. I cannot “stand in a relation of absolute externality to the ... world being investigated—there is no such exterior observational point;”<sup>150</sup> in this case, this world is the lived experience within the fiction. I am changed by the novella as I make meaning with it. And within our intra-action she becomes (constantly and recurrently) within a different imaginary, a space she makes apart from the “terms of her oppressors” for a different kind of sense.<sup>151</sup>

But soon the “miracle of that afternoon” is over – he aches with desire, violent sexual fantasies, and regret for not taking advantage of the situation. Her brother-in-law falls away, back into the logic that exists outside of that which Yeong-hye embodies. The contrast is jarring. I try to believe I can stay in that moment and continue to face her.

Outside of her performance of renunciation, her brother-in-law resumes his vicious erotic projection. Such is the complexity of her eventual intercourse with him; she continues to occupy

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<sup>150</sup> Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity,” 828.

<sup>151</sup> Lugones, “From within Germinative Stasis,” 89.

her disruptive sense, while he operates to some extent under a logic closed to that disruptive sense. But this does not render her wholly a victim to his oppression; even after their initial intercourse – which, in the dark, at first seems too devoid of the sensuality of their painting encounter to be a performance of Yeong-hye’s transgression – Yeong-hye examines the flowers on his body in the light, claiming once again the power to make a new sense. This complexity is the double movement of her resistance:

“as she is resisting <= >oppressing, she is both the one oppressed and the one resisting. The one resisting and the one oppressed exist within very different logics, within very different worlds of sense. She is multiple as reality is multiple.”<sup>152</sup>

She is, just as her brother-in-law observed, “ceaselessly splintering,” operating not in terms of the “maximal agency of the western subject,”<sup>153</sup> but rather “fomenting her potential self.”

This splintering – the subconscious recognition of the possibility for liberation through living transgressively via the multiplicity of dynamic identity – is central to Yeong-hye’s metamorphosis. As her brother-in-law observes to himself during a conversation with Yeong-hye, she had a “quiet tone of a person who didn’t belong anywhere, someone who had passed into a border area between states of being.”<sup>154</sup> Occupying a “borderland” – being a “borderdweller” – results in an “awareness of intimate terror” and a

“struggle *within* intimate terror. The borderdweller comes to understand, through a jarring, vivid awareness of being made into more than one person, that the encasing by particular systems of meaning is a process one can consciously and critically resist or accept. The borderdweller sees in this process that the encasing can be resisted through the development of alternative meaning systems.”<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Lugones, “From within Germinative Stasis,” 90.

<sup>153</sup> Vallega, *Latin American Philosophy*, 194.

<sup>154</sup> Han, *The Vegetarian*, 78.

<sup>155</sup> Lugones, “From within Germinative Stasis,” 88.

But rather than a “seeing” and “knowing” that is defined by the western rational conceptualization of knowing, “the knowing is from within our bodies, its senses felt from within when sensing the outside.”<sup>156</sup> This sense comes from a germination; the awareness and the terror come from under one’s flesh, within one’s bones.

Their encounter is at once pure and ugly. Yeong-hye offers a lucid reflection, eclipsed with her brother-in-law’s internal interruptions in his attempt to stay awake. There is a choice here: read through him or leave him behind; her words without his interruptions are an invitation to take her at her word:

**Yeong-hye, pg. 122:**

*“Will the dreams stop now?”*

*“It’s different every time. Sometimes it feels very familiar, other times I’m sure I’ve never seen it before. There are times when it’s all bloody... and times when it looks like the face of a rotting corpse.”*

*“I thought it was all because of eating meat.”*

*“I thought all I had to do was to stop eating meat and then the faces wouldn’t come back. But it didn’t work.”*

*“And so... now I know. The face was inside my stomach. It rose up from inside my stomach.” “But I’m not scared anymore. There’s nothing to be scared of now.”*

She physically locates her affliction inside of her, and it’s difficult to separate the notions of something emerging from within and something entering by force. “*Murderer or murdered*” –I

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<sup>156</sup> *ibid.*, 98.

bear witness and participate in the simultaneity, the double movement which constitutes her metamorphosis.

As she transgresses the borders between the human and the nonhuman, Yeong-hye is remaking the very “boundaries that delineate the differential constitution of the ‘human,’” thus rejecting the notion of the human as “fixed.”<sup>157</sup> The rippling reactions we witness – the intimate terror she takes on in occupying this borderland between categories – reveal the “practices through which these differential boundaries are stabilized and destabilized.”<sup>158</sup> Yeong-hye transgresses the very senses of existence which enact borders and exclusions, delimit where the “human” ends and the “nonhuman” begins.

Thus, by recognizing my own role in the enactment of both her oppression and her transgression, and as such occupying that “that vivid, strange, horribly uncanny feeling” in the blur between Yeong-hye and myself, I am able to face her, to take her at her word, that her metamorphosis into a tree-like being is not a metaphor or representation, but a deeply internal reality.

**Yeong-hye, dream #5, pg. 56:**

*[...] The thing that hurts is my chest. Something is stuck in my solar plexus. I don't know what it might be. It's lodged there permanently these days. Even though I've stopped wearing a bra, I can feel this lump all the time. No matter how deeply I inhale, it doesn't go away.*

“*Murderer or murdered.*” In witnessing these hazy distinctions I too feel a sense of invasion.

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<sup>157</sup> Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity,” 828.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, 808.

I feel my final grasps to hold onto forms of “westernizing comprehension”<sup>159</sup> through In-hye in part 3; the intense disorientation of temporality and tense, and In-hye’s recurring aching to “know” – whether to know her husband or to know her sister – develop a frenzied frustration in which both In-hye and I try to grab onto any evidence of a rational imaginary that could finally reveal the truth of Yeong-hye’s condition and undo our own metamorphosis. “*Familiarity bleeds into strangeness, certainty becomes impossible. Only the violence is vivid enough to stick.*”<sup>160</sup> If through Mr. Cheong I was caught watching, and through In-hye’s husband I fought to face Yeong-hye, then through In-hye she and I inhabit Yeong-hye’s terror.

**In-hye, pg. 156:**      *“If only one’s eyes weren’t visible to others, she thinks. If only one could hide one’s eyes from the world.”*

This fear of being known, infects this lonely, frenzied, final act. She and I are disoriented and frustrated, as the approximately two hours of hospital visit come to contain years of nightmarish struggling. I’m now acquainted with the “probing gazes, that mix of suspicion, caution, repugnance and curiosity”<sup>161</sup> which afflict In-hye here – by enacting them myself. The line of what is “insane” and what isn’t has become blurred. In the hospital, the doctor uses the words “anorexia” and “schizophrenia”<sup>162</sup> – words which can’t explain it but which she and I are asked to believe. The images of Yeong-hye in a headstand, legs spread wide, and the other patients’ taboos, tempts me to trust them, and tempts In-hye too.

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<sup>159</sup> Vallega, “Exordio / Exordium,” 139.

<sup>160</sup> Han, *The Vegetarian*, 35.

<sup>161</sup> Han, *The Vegetarian*, 130.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

The medicalization of Yeong-hye's condition, though ever-present throughout the novella, cloaks part 3 in particular – final pieces of bait to *know* and to *correct* through western medicine's diagnosis. But these possibilities are never so beyond our grasp as here; as In-hye continually seeks out this possibility, its very logic continually cracks and Yeong-hye's creeps in. "Anorexia" and "schizophrenia," when spoken, float incomprehensibly before falling with a thud, their crude effort toward wholesale explanation jarring and misplaced against the backdrop of Yeong-hye's and In-hye's living nightmares.

In-hye's violent, disorienting flashbacks, the frenzied changes from lucid thoughts to dreams, frustrate us both. We oscillate constantly between the possibility of facing Yeong-hye in her metamorphosis and seeking the "truth." Is she just crazy? (Which she?) In-hye reflects on the silence that disables knowing.

**In-hye, pg. 137:**        *"Had she ever really understood her husband's true nature, bound up as it was with that seemingly impenetrable silence?"*

**In-hye, pg. 136:**        *"...they were both baffling to her in exactly the same way. They were both descending further into silence."*

Even a zelkova tree in the hospital's front garden seems to communicate with her, but "it is reticent, and keeps its thoughts unspoken."<sup>163</sup>

Jumping wildly around in time and tense, In-hye reflects. In the resulting disorientation, she begins to feel the possibility of facing her sister without the promise of knowing. In-hye's logic cracks and she begins to absorb Yeong-hye's.

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<sup>163</sup> *ibid.*, 140.

**In-hye, pg. 184:**       *“The more time went by the less she thought of it as something sexual. Covered with flowers and leaves and twisting green stems, those bodies were so altered it was as though they no longer belonged to human beings. The writhing movements of those bodies made it seem as though they were trying to shuck off the human.”*

Both Yeong-hye and In-hye repeatedly endure deeply internal physical afflictions, sensed not only within the mind but within their very bodies – the mind/body distinction thus blurring perpetually. Wedged deep inside, the lump in Yeong-hye’s chest and the polyp in In-hye’s vagina seem to have been absorbed from elsewhere and have lingered, or else also simultaneously to have emerged from within.

In-hye’s reflections repeatedly reveal that even before any absorption of a conscious reason or rationality from her sister, she has physically absorbed the *sense* behind Yeong-hye’s metamorphosis, thus herself transforming. The polyp stuck to In-hye’s vaginal wall, the bleeding, and the remaining wound seem to be one manifestation of such an internalization.

**In-hye, pg. 142:**       *“In-hye’s body had jerked violently, as if she had been the one receiving the blow.”*

These moments of understanding through blurred distinction are scattered, sometimes incomprehensible, and grounded less in rationality than a felt sense. As such, even as In-hye has not decided to face her sister, her scattered fearful reflections seem to mirror my own from part 1: a sort of fear in having been caught, of having one’s gaze diffracted onto oneself, of being asked to bracket the impulse to understand and instead orient oneself along a felt sense of being.



Reflecting on the violence of their childhood, In-hye outlines the very different paths the sisters took in navigating this violence:

**In-hye, pg. 163:**       *“[Yeong-hye] has merely absorbed all her suffering inside her, deep into the marrow of her bones. Now, with the benefit of hindsight, In-hye could see that the role she had adopted back then of the hard-working, self-sacrificing eldest daughter had been a sign not of maturity but of cowardice. It had been a survival tactic.”*

Once again, the options are laid plainly: to watch, know, and survive within a logic that makes impossible the making of oneself “against the logic, the sense, the weight of oppression,”<sup>166</sup> or to “risk oneself (which is never one or self), to open oneself up to indeterminacy in moving towards what is to-come.”<sup>167</sup> The latter is the root of Yeong-hye’s metamorphosis, and in In-hye’s and my own effort to be responsive to her within her own sense of existence rather than the logic of her oppression, she induces the very same metamorphosis in us.

Yeong-hye and In-hye initially occupy very different terrorized selves: Yeong-hye “feels the possibility and the terror of resistance” and we witness this terror in her becoming throughout the novella. In-hye is initially “under someone else’s control and thus gives up her ability to choose, accepting to serve instead.”<sup>168</sup> In Lugones’s terms both of these terrorized selves are dynamic, containing the ongoing potentialities of becoming otherwise, which constitutes their agential capacities. But there is a cut, and it is “to feel the terror,” which is “already an activity against the sense of those who exercise control over and against her.”<sup>169</sup> We witness In-hye, while

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<sup>166</sup> Lugones, “From within Germinative Stasis,” 86.

<sup>167</sup> Barad, “Hauntological Relations,” 264.

<sup>168</sup> Lugones, “From within Germinative Stasis,” 90.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

not yet able to “renounce the life her body represented,” had felt that terror and thus was already in the process of metamorphosis. It is this possibility of metamorphosis, and the genesis of the making of new sense, which allows In-hye to begin to absorb the world of sense occupied by Yeong-hye’s body, the cold moisture of the mountain path, and the vegetation.

**In-hye, pg. 187:**       *“It’s come back to her, all of a sudden; the mountain path she walked down, early that morning. The dew that wet her sandals had chilled her otherwise bare feet. There had been no tears, nothing like that, because at the time she hadn’t understood. She hadn’t understood what the cold moisture had been trying to say, as it drenched her battered body and spread through her dried-up veins. It had simply leached through into her flesh, down to her very bones.”*  
(emphasis mine)

Linearity and intentionality are thus troubled. I watched Yeong-hye through Mr. Cheong in part 1, not yet able to face her, and committed violence toward her. Yet as I read and enacted her vivid senses, I absorbed them. In the disorientation of the logic of reader and read, knower and known, human and tree, I undergo my own metamorphosis. In the final scene, in the ambulance clutching Yeong-hye and looking to the trees, there is no more frustration or urgency to construct a completed narrative, but an openness to indeterminacy.

### **Making Sense**

To gaze at Yeong-hye, that is, to watch with suspicious eyes and seek final certainty of how her actions represent mental afflictions, is to rob her of the indeterminacy of her

“being/becoming.”<sup>170</sup> It is to insist that she is static and operating along the logic of the here-now. But rather than a matter of knowing/not-knowing, to encounter Yeong-hye “in the flesh,” to face her and take her at her word, is to bypass the violent gaze. This means to read Yeong-hye without hope for certainty. It is to allow her disparate self, as she fractures within and beyond the logic which she rejects, to “speak to us as co-existing multiplicities,”<sup>171</sup> to hear what she says as “she is fomenting her potential self, the creation of a counter-universe of sense in which she can engage her potential fully,” without hope to co-opt this sense into a hegemonic narrative of certainty.<sup>172</sup>

The violent manifestations of hegemonic imaginaries afflict the sisters, and they sense it in their bodies. Recognizing the lump and the polyp as real, rather than as “representations” of violence-internalized made possible a reciprocal metamorphosis. In recognizing them as real, the lump and polyp further disorient the sense of inside and outside, as physical manifestations of both invasion and metamorphosis-from-within.”<sup>173</sup>

Rather than suggesting that Yeong-hye’s actions “represent” the agential capacity at the intersection of decolonial thought and new materialism, I suggest that the intra-action between the novella and, in this case, myself, *performs* this agency. It is the reciprocal capacity within this enactment for both my reading/gazing to participate in the story’s becoming, and the story to embody a “distinct aesthetic sense of existence that operates underneath the rational” and orients my physical and affective experiences.<sup>174</sup>

I have thus far discussed my own role in this enactment, and the strategies for facing Yeong-hye and as such the novella. This makes possible an attentiveness to the reciprocal side of

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<sup>170</sup> Barad, “Hauntological Relations,” 264.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, 264.

<sup>172</sup> Lugones, “From within Germinative Stasis,” 95.

<sup>173</sup> Vallega, *Latin American Philosophy*, 115.

<sup>174</sup> Vallega, “Exordio / Exordium,” 137.

this intra-action, that is, how the novella participates in my own becoming by reorienting the senses at the core of physical and affective experiences of myself and the other characters. These are not two distinct sides of a reciprocal interaction but rather co-constitutive – they become together-apart. But importantly, this intra-action does not end at that between myself and the novella. I showed that the preoccupation to *know*, or to uncover the truth of Yeong-hye’s condition, is hostile to the effort to face the novella; it renders the novella and Yeong-hye herself representations which are closed to the possibility of becoming-with the reader, thus freeing the reader from the responsibility of attentiveness to the effects of the enactment of the text. The disorientation and troubled directionality of the “gaze” in the novella invites the reader to recognize and be responsive to their intra-action with the text.

By approaching the text not as an “example” or “object of study” but rather as a constituent within a broader ongoing conversation, this engagement is open to the indeterminacy of the text – its different meanings within different encounters. Just as facing Yeong-hye required a relational approach, the very act of meaning-making with the novella requires a relational encounter that does not hinge on control through application and analysis.<sup>175</sup> The affective engagement made possible this meaning-making, and the encounter between decolonial thought and new materialism produced this method – the theories offered vocabularies for thinking with the novella. But further, the novella in its demand for such vocabularies reciprocally makes sense of the theory.<sup>176</sup> In chapter 2 I argued that in a double and concurrent movement the theoretical encounter which could make possible my facing the novella was simultaneously facilitated by the novella’s call to be enacted as it is told – as a text that is “alive.”<sup>177</sup> Within this encounter, decolonial thought, new

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<sup>175</sup> The connection between theoretical application/interpretation of art and novels and “control” is explored by both Massumi (2002, pg. 17) and Ramos (2018, pg. 5, 38).

<sup>176</sup> Ramos, *Sensing Decolonial Aesthetics*, 29.

<sup>177</sup> Lugones, “From within Germinative Stasis,” 86.

materialism, *The Vegetarian*, and myself, are always already in relation because the pursuit of these encounters was always done with the other texts in mind – texts which changed through their very mutual consideration. Rather than texts-in-themselves or texts-in-conversation, their encounter embodied texts-in-phenomena.<sup>178</sup> In facing the novella, or in Lugones’s terms to “be drawn by its call,”<sup>179</sup> I embraced the possibility of reciprocal dynamic and iterative configurations and performed a collective aesthetic intra-action between the novella, myself, and those theoretical frameworks that was open to sense outside of the logic of western hegemonic maximal agency.

The disorientation of the senses through the aesthetic intra-action – such as a disorientation of linear effect and separability in *The Vegetarian* – manifested in my own internal germination toward an attitude that was open to the dynamism of that intra-action. That perspective is the reciprocal manifestation of my own agential capacity within our relation, as it comes to exist through my intra-action with the texts. However, this personal, relational indeterminacy also makes difficult a comprehensive logging of the effects of my intra-actions with the texts, and as such being open to the text’s indeterminacy also involves an openness to the uncanny effects this intra-action. Further, just as my own intra-action with the novella was made clear through this affective engagement, the novella also intra-acts with the very theoretical frameworks which informed the method. Within the phenomena of their encounter, these entities become-together. Decolonial thought within this project is distinct from decolonial thought otherwise, and so on; this framework, along with new materialism, *The Vegetarian*, and myself, are produced in this iteration by the encounter.

As discussed, decolonial thought and new materialism are changed by virtue of their intra-action, which occurred through my response to the call of the novella, in its facilitation with the

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<sup>178</sup> Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity,” 817.

<sup>179</sup> Lugones, “From within Germinative Stasis,” 86.

other in mind. But further, this three-way encounter instills a presupposition of “an awareness of and a sensibility for” coloniality in new materialism and *The Vegetarian*.<sup>180</sup> It re-centers the context of imperialism at the core of the violence behind Yi Sang’s “I want to believe that humans should be plants,” and puts a name to the logic behind the senses which Yeong-hye rejects. In presupposing coloniality, decolonial thought makes clear the *violence* of representationalism and the origin of this violence. As such, instead of understanding the distinctions in trajectories of thought within new materialism as only ontological mechanics, decoloniality emphasizes the concrete ways of being which orient the senses behind these distinctions, and outline the interests served by these orientations. As such, presupposing coloniality in *The Vegetarian* exposes the western modernizing impulse to medicalize, making possible a bracketing the question of sanity/insanity. By reading the novella – which is not explicitly about colonial violence – through the lens of coloniality, alternative orientations toward space, time, and agency that break from those which have been historically oriented by modernizing logic emerge. The new materialist meditation further denaturalizes western modernizing sensibilities while also revealing their power in western academic pursuits. The novella adds weight to the affective experience of departing from hegemonic logic by inducing an embodiment of that departure within the reader in relation to Yeong-hye and In-hye through a disorientation of the directionality of gaze and the linearity of effect. In demanding my own intra-action with its text, the novella made possible a retrospective recognition of my role in the encounter of the theoretical frameworks. Paralleling the disorienting possibility of my own ability to affect a novella which has already been written, the novella brings to life the always-already co-constitutive relation between itself and those theoretical frameworks – all texts which are already written, but which only come to matter within their relations. And

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<sup>180</sup> Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs*, 26.

*within this project* – the phenomenon of their encounter – they always-already exist in relation to each other.

This culminates in a transparent recognition of the co-constitutive power of mutual simultaneous consideration in the very act of knowledge-making. I “risked [my]self”<sup>181</sup> in the indeterminacy of the novella, and in particular my relation with Yeong-hye, by revealing the very orientations which I had previously taken for granted. Then by embracing the possibility that my reading the novella enacted the text, the theoretical texts which engage the novella risk themselves in the possibility of making/being-made through this engagement. Thus, just as I attempted to be responsive to that which I inherited from *The Vegetarian*, through a recognition of the “risk” of this “becoming-together” the texts (decolonial, new materialist, and the novella) and myself gain within the phenomenon of the encounter an attentiveness “to respond, to be responsible, to take responsibility for that which we inherit (from the past and the future), for the entangled relationalities of inheritance that ‘we’ are.”<sup>182</sup>

## Conclusions

In this project, I facilitated an encounter between decolonial thought, new materialism, and *The Vegetarian*. I suggested that the novella, especially through its protagonist, performs an agential capacity which calls for a reading that hinges not on the pursuit of definitive analysis but on an affective responsiveness to sensibilities outside of the legibility of hegemonic sense. I demonstrated that there existed conceptualizations of agency within decolonial thought and new materialism which could respond to this call. In facilitating an encounter between the theoretical frameworks, I precisely identified where the mutually attuned trajectories of thought are located

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<sup>181</sup> Barad, “Hauntological Relations,” 264.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, 264.

within their broader frameworks, while demonstrating role of their respective approaches to space and time in their mutual simultaneous consideration.

This focus on the senses which orient ways of being contributed to the method which culminated at the encounter of the two frameworks; relying on Maria Lugones's concept of a *coalitional journey* and Karen Barad's *performativity* I suggested the method of an affective engagement with the novella. This method involved transparently logging the effects of reading the text on one's own senses while presupposing coloniality and the possibility of a reciprocal becoming with the text, thus disrupting the definitive distinction between the reader and that which is read.

In my affective engagement with the novella, I traced Yeong-hye's metamorphosis and my own. Through shifting perspectives, vivid imagery, and an openness to the possibility of my enactment of the text "as alive," I attempted to respond to the call to take Yeong-hye at her word. The led to a bracketing of the will to "know," and at a critical moment breaking away from the violent gaze which I was prescribed. In doing so, I underwent a parallel metamorphosis with Yeong-hye and her sister, allowing her to change the very terms of the reading, and as such enact her own transformation outside of the bounds of hegemonic senses of legibility. In other words, through our relation as it existed itself in relation to decoloniality and new materialism, the text and I made meaning which enacted an agential capacity outside of the logos of rationality and intentionality.

This affective engagement embodies not only the sense of agency at the core of the novella, but also that at the core of the encounter between decolonial thought and new materialism. Through the call of the novella these frameworks encountered one another, and through that encounter their mutually attuned sense of agency emerged. That agency – and the very orientations toward space,

time, and knowledge-making at its core – was embodied through the enactive reading of the novella. The very conceptual fibers which connect the theoretical frameworks are embodied by an affective reading of the novella, and so I argued that these texts and the novella were always-already reciprocally making meaning together. Through a transparent on my own role in these texts' encounter, the capacity for these texts to make meaning together is freed from the constraints of intentionality and cause and effect.

### *Limitations and Further Inquiry*

As discussed above, a transparent reflection of my own role in the facilitation of the encounters within this project is onto-epistemologically a part of this project. This project began through an interest in the disorienting effects of *The Vegetarian* and the unorthodox role of the perspective-less protagonist. The rippling effects of action without intention, taken with the rejection of the human body and occupation of alternative sensibilities, initiated an interest in pulling from new materialism and decolonial thought. This introduced the issue central to chapter 2: the capacity for new materialism and decolonial thought to be considered alongside one another in a way that does not do violence to either framework's goals or assumptions, thus producing the thorough mapping of at what onto-epistemological points their mutual consideration becomes fraught or demanded. Upon discovery of the particular trajectories of thought within each framework which are most attuned, there emerged within both reflections on how to encounter texts, whether through aesthetic encounters or otherwise. Along these same lines, each framework emphasized the inseparability of epistemologies and ontologies, thus simultaneously demanding transparency in the very project of their mutual consideration and making clear their reciprocal-becoming within this context.

On a theoretical account, in the interest of precision, this project ultimately identifies few thinkers which fully fall into the trajectories of thought that are isolated as mutually attuned. Further inquiries can unpack the extent to which adjacent thinkers within these frameworks hold up the onto-epistemological notions that I identified as crucial to the encounter between the two frameworks.

Similarly, the role of feminist thought and of Michel Foucault in the encounter of the frameworks deserves further analysis. A significant factor that differentiates Maria Lugones and Karen Barad from the theoretical frameworks to which they contribute is the feminist perspective that helps shape their very ontologies. Relying upon the conceptualizations of the coloniality of power at the core of decolonial thought, Lugones develops a theory of the coloniality of gender, which emphasizes the role of “living bodies as the site for the resistance and undoing of the coloniality of power and knowledge”<sup>183</sup> and developed the understanding of agency within coloniality that I highlighted above; Karen Barad develops much of her ontology by grounding her work in particle physics in ethical questions regarding queerness, gender, and bodies, often pulling from Donna Haraway’s work in critical feminist studies; the novella contains obvious themes of gender violence, within which emerge quieter meditations on the (non)human body and the coloniality of senses which orient that very gender violence. Though feminist thought is therefore implicitly present in this project, further explicit reflection of this factor could strengthen the connections between these texts.

The connections between both isolated trajectories of thought and Foucault’s work ought not be ignored. Walter Mignolo, in his development of his theory of the decolonial connection between epistemology and ontology, discusses the role of Foucault’s reflections on disciplinary

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<sup>183</sup> Vallega, *Latin American Philosophy*, 195.

and subjugated knowledges, which though did not presuppose coloniality, influenced Mignolo's own reflections on the possibilities of decolonial thought.<sup>184</sup> Karen Barad's notion of "material-discursive practices" elaborates on Foucault's understanding of discursivity to consider matter's active role in historical processes.<sup>185</sup> As such, further inquiry can consider the connections forged through Foucauldian analysis, as well as the ways in which these trajectories of thought depart from his work.

As noted in chapter 1, one possible limitation of this project is its departure from a disciplined pursuit of generalizable political conclusions. However, in my effort to take seriously the onto-epistemologies of both trajectories of thought explored in decoloniality and new materialism, as well as in an effort to "face" Yeong-hye, this tentative approach is central to the project embodying the performativity that makes the constitutive intra-actions agential. This is accomplished through a reading that transgresses the boundaries of the relevant disciplines, but as such the conclusions of this project are not generalizable. However, this is not to say that it therefore lacks political implications. By staying with the onto-epistemologies pursued by the theoretical frameworks, and as a result performing the very agential capacity at the core of their encounter, this project is one possible performance of what the political stakes behind those onto-epistemologies look like in a transparent knowledge-making practice. Further, I suggest that it is "enough" that this project enabled what Barad terms "justice-to-come," or which I have frequently referred to here as an "opening-up," for Yeong-hye; if for the moment that is the phenomenon of this encounter she can be taken at her word, then I suggest that the demand for generalizable conclusions be bracketed.

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<sup>184</sup> Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs*, 20.

<sup>185</sup> Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity," 819.

This project therefore has implications for the continued mutual consideration of decolonial thought and new materialism. By taking seriously the possible points of friction between the two frameworks – especially in a way which presupposes coloniality and the notion of an onto-epistemology – future interest can focus on thinkers who fall along the trajectories of thought identified here. Further, through an effort to account for my own role in the meaning-making of the texts involved here, this project participates in the broad set of efforts committed to dismantling the assumed dichotomy of knower and known within academic knowledge-making.

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