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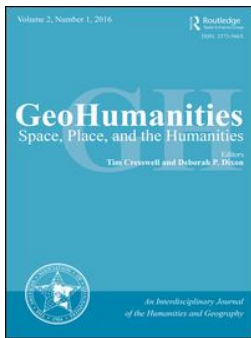
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Ecological Attunement in a Theological Key: Adventures in Antifascist Aesthetics

Claire Blencowe

University of Warwick

This article embarks on adventures in search of antifascist aesthetics—an excursion born of despair at the increasingly racist, anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim poison of our political ground. It asks whether ecological attunement can provide a counter to such capitalist sorcery and barbarism. The article draws on feminist philosophy of science, new materialism, and ecofeminism. What, it asks these guides, can ecological attunement offer to the task of composing antifascist, anticapitalist political subjectivity or shattering the reality principle of the “no alternative”? Among the responses to that question are certain ideas that we might call theological figurations—figures that open onto the theological task of questioning the value of values, and the political task of mustering spirit. Centering on an attempt to think with Stengers, the article turns to three such figures: the enchantress, the witch, and the intrusion of Gaia. It asks how these figures might succeed and fail in speaking to a popular politics that could lift our despair. **Key Words:** *ecofeminism and ecology, Isabelle Stengers, popular politics, racism, spiritual activism.*

Isn't it obvious that nothing less than our wildest dreams will enable women to rise from the depressing depths of the current military-industrial political impasse?

—Rosemont (1998, lii)

This article was conceived amidst the despair that followed the 2015 UK general election. The Conservative Party victory, after five years of Conservative policy that had undermined the decent living of the majority while enriching an elite, confirmed (yet again) the vanquishing of propoor egalitarian politics in UK elections. More dismal still was the rise of anti-immigrant and xenophobic rhetoric to which the election bore witness, with the far right UK Independence Party (UKIP) gaining 14 percent of the English vote (if only one actual member of Parliament) and all the mainstream English parties attempting to “out UKIP” each other during the campaign (BBC 2015). Although various forces fostered this, there is much agreement that an anxious, disaffected, post-industrial working class seeking some kind of

antiestablishment political representation was part of the UKIP success story. Similar arguments have since been made about the success of Donald Trump in the United States. At the time of writing, a new proimmigration, antiausterity Labour Party leader has opened up new channels for the English left. Before that surprise event (which might well have become a brief exception, or implosion, by the time of publication), the Green Party seemed to have become the only audible voice of propoor politics and decent living standards in elections in England.¹ A tale was told of the “Green Surge” as an alternative to UKIP (Harris 2014): that the disaffected masses who despair of mainstream politics might invest their affections in the affirmative politics of ecological life quality and diversity rather than the scapegoating, rank-closing racism of the Right.²

However unrealistic it might have been, the Green Surge story resonates with the claims of Klein (2015) and others that impending environmental catastrophe and emergent ecological ways of seeing might come to the rescue of anticapitalist and propoor popular politics, a politics that is otherwise drowning in hegemonic market fundamentalism. Connolly (2014) claimed that environmental and ecological imaginaries can breathe new vitality into a left that has not recovered from the loss of its affectively invested industrial base. Of course, the argument is not only that environmentalism can rescue anticapitalism, but also that anticapitalism is rendered vital by actual and impending environmental catastrophe. The strain on space and resources created by global warming is already generating intense currents of war, appropriation, and compulsory migration. These conditions are such that what is tolerable calls for egalitarian revolutions in production and distribution and tremendous care for human life. The Marxist claim that capitalism inevitability creates its own destruction is resuscitated in the warnings of climate scientists—but without the promise of a communist afterlife. An urgent about-face from the perpetual pursuit of growth that capital demands figures as a final hope for survival. It is this urgency and insistence that the Greens, Klein, Connolly, and many others hope will revitalize peoples’ movements. Stengers (2015) recalls Luxemburg’s early twentieth-century claim that the world faces an ultimatum between socialism and barbarism—and poses the question of how, in our own catastrophic times, we are to resist the coming barbarism. “Barbarism” here is certainly not the Other to Western civilization, but is rather “the perpetual state of war that capitalism makes rule” (Stengers 2015, 23). Stengers suggests that the catastrophic consequences of global warming prefigure—or rather constitute—an intensification of capitalist barbarism. She also suggests, though, that climatic catastrophe renews the possibility of resisting the (always barbaric) capitalist rule. Against the “infernal alternatives” of capitalist sorcery—that render thinking impossible—climatic catastrophe imposes an objection: In the face of events like Hurricane Katrina, we have no choice but to think, which is to resist capitalism. The demand created by our material conditions appears in these analyses as a kind of spiritualizing adrenalin shot that might kick-start an otherwise moribund anticapitalist politics.

In her discussion of capitalist barbarism, Stengers does not mention race and racism—although she does point to the denigration of indigenous knowledges and explicitly situates the ambition of her current work among efforts to “decolonise thought” (Stengers 2012). Race and racism, however, are central to the dynamics of capitalist sorcery and barbarism that she alludes to. The pursuit of profit and development without limit produce inequalities, dispossession, and violence, which operate through technologies of racism, denigration, and militant policing. These have been variously collectively named slavery, colonialism,

barbarism, state racism, fascism, and policing the crisis (Orwell 1941; Luxemburg 1967; Linebaugh and Rediker 2000; Benjamin 2002; Foucault 2003; Du Bois and Edwards 2007; Hall et al. 2013). Since the dawn of imperial capitalism, peoples' movements have posited solidarity, equality, and common ownership as the means to escape capitalist violence. Since the dawn of imperial capitalism, racism has been deliberately cultivated by plantation owners, colonial governors, politicians, and police to break solidarities, divide and rule, and scapegoat. The triumphalist claim of the neoliberal era, that "there is no alternative," is the silencing of peoples' movements and has been attended by intense waves of racism—concentrated in the United Kingdom today around the figures of the migrant, the scrounger, and the Muslim. Policing capitalist states produces racism as Stuart Hall and many others have shown. Everyday racism also produces the perpetuation of capitalist order. In relation to the reorganizations of labor that prefigure submissions to the "no alternative" of economic growth, Stengers (2015) writes, "What presents itself as a logical consequence ... has been fabricated by multiple processes of so called rational reorganisation that in the first place aimed at sapping or capturing the capacities for thinking and resisting of those who were apt to do so" (55). Such fabrication, however, is not only effected through rules and knowledge. The material articulation of differentiated capacities and threats to differently racialized bodies invests such logics in the somatechnics that matter fear, attachment, and joy. We might imagine a million microfascisms (Deleuze and Guattari 2004), reverberating through the petty investments of everyday embodiment, but ready to resonate together, to build to certain crescendos, and make certain silence. We might also listen out for the sorrow songs that fill such silence; to meet, with Sylvia Wynter, those "genres of the human" that already flourish beyond the world of man (Weheliye 2014). Attending to racism and fascism in the matter of capitalist order places aesthetics, the organization of experience, at the center of concern.

This article embarks on an adventure in search of antifascist aesthetics. I use the term *adventure* advisedly, self-critically, with all the awkward overtones of the problematic, whistle-stop, gaze. It is beyond the scope of this article, but also my own expertise, to compose an evaluation of the political credentials of the Green Movement or ecotheology. Rather, the article might be seen as field notes from an excursion—a trip born of despair—in which I, unrealistically, seek escape routes and a different type of silence. My own perspective is rooted in critical theory and political history; I come to ecological imaginaries as an outsider. Chasing theological threads, I wonder whether ecological "attunement" (Brigstocke and Noorani this issue) might really be a serious opponent of capitalist sorcery, especially as figured in the anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim poison of our ground. To search for antifascist aesthetics—the politicization of art that might counter the aestheticization of politics (Benjamin 2002)—is to search for the space to breathe (Fanon 1963).

My adventures commence, as all must, from the place that I happen to begin, in step with the spirits that brought me. So I turn to feminist philosophy of science and new materialisms. What, I ask these guides, can ecological attunement offer to the task of composing antifascist, anticapitalist political subjectivity or shattering the reality principle of the "no alternative"? Among the responses to that question are certain ideas that we might call theological figurations—figures that open onto the theological task of questioning the value of values, and the political task of mustering spirit. Centering on an attempt to think ecofeminism with Stengers, I turn to three figures: the enchantress, the witch, and the intrusion of Gaia.

FIGURE 1: THE ENCHANTRESS

Long-standing traditions of ecofeminist thinking have associated the disenchantment or profanation of nature (and the feminine) with a kind of technocratic barbarism that equates progress and development with control (Shiva 1993). As Shiva explains, this technological idea of progress promotes monocultures of the mind that centralize power, accumulate wealth for elites, and impoverish ecosystems and social systems in a common move against diversity.

Ecofeminist thought associates a proliferation of technocratic rationality and hierarchical, centralizing, domination and exploitation with a destruction of theology—or rather, with the destruction of theological diversity, and the promotion of an extremist monotheism that defers to God the Father, or His secularized incantations: technology or the market (Szerszynski 2008). These monotheistic (anti)theologies model the sacred on the exploitative will of the colonial, patriarchal subject.

For Gebara it is a

hierarchical, dualistic, and patriarchal world-view that creates the dichotomies of God/creation, mind/body, men/women, and culture/nature. Within such a framework, God is modelled after the male ruling class, is outside of nature and controls the whole universe. Anthropocentrism coupled with monotheism allows Christianity ... to destroy other religious expressions ... and to marginalise women's claim to sacred power. (Pui-Lan 2008, 205)³

Ecofeminism looks to something like a resacralization of nature and the feminine as a means to resist both environmental and social degradation—holding nature not only as an object of respect and intrinsic value, but also as a source of wisdom on which we can model human relationships. Biodiversity is the genius of nature. The marvelousness of nature—wonder at the infinite variety of forms and force of creativity that is arrived at through scientific and practical engagement with the forces of earth and life—constitutes a kind of immanent spirituality, where the divine is love, attraction, and the miraculous powers of creating and sustaining life—a divinity that is utterly earthly.

Insofar as Marxism and Western feminism have placed faith in the progressive force of technological domination, or equated freedom with the transcendence of material necessity, they have, according to ecofeminists, participated in the profanation of nature and the destruction of real creativity, enrichment, and sustenance of life.

Bennett (2001, 2009) sounds a resonant note with ecofeminism when she called forth “the enchantment of modern life.” She is writing in the context of Anglo-American philosophy and critical theory, wherein the idea of nature is associated with all the essentialisms and is thoroughly deconstructed. So she does not write of nature as enchanting or wise. She does, however, write against the technologistic pessimism of critical theory and the notion that the modern world has become, or has to be, disenchanted.

The submission of critical thought to an image of the modern world as despirited and rationalizing constitutes, she suggests, a kind of giving up on politics—“an attitude of emotional detachment that grounds itself in a false sense of both historical fatalism and ontological determinism, and fosters sentiments of alienation, hopelessness and ingenerosity in its exponents” (Saraka 2000). Sober pessimism, however lucid, remains insufficient “to the enactment of ethical aspirations.” Instead of this, and in line with the attitude of ecofeminism, Bennett seeks to

advance the affective force of moments of wonder as a source of energy that might propel ethical generosity.

For Bennett, wonder, mystery, and affective movement are to be found not only in the splendor of biodiversity, but in the vibrancy of matter and material systems in general. She wonders at the dizzying complexity and surreality of bureaucracy (as captured by Kafka) as well as at dancing bodies, mediated spectacle, and “inanimate” material things as much as at forests and critters. To see the liveliness of things is to cultivate capacities for affirmation: capacities that might dissipate dispirited atmospheres and engender new political energies.

Bennett (2001) presents enchantment or wonder as the experience of being “struck and shaken by the extraordinary that lives amid the everyday” (2). This experience might descend on individuals unawares, or might be cultivated through deliberate strategies. Enchantment combines “a pleasurable feeling of being charmed [by an] as yet unprocessed experience,” as well as “a ... feeling of being torn out of one’s default sensory-psychic-intellectual disposition. ... The overall effect of enchantment is a mood of fullness, plenitude or liveliness, a sense of having had one’s nerves or circulation or concentration powers tuned up and recharged—a shot in the arm, a fleeting return to childlike excitement about life” (5).

Bennett (2009) concludes her book *Vibrant Matter* with her own version of the Nicene Creed.⁴ She declares:

I believe in one matter-energy, the maker of things seen and unseen. I believe that this pluriverse is traversed by heterogenities that are continually doing things. I believe it is wrong to deny vitality to nonhuman bodies, forces, and forms, and that a careful course of anthropomorphization can help reveal that vitality, even though it resists full translation and exceeds my comprehensive grasp. I believe that encounters with lively matter can chasten my fantasies of human mastery, highlight the common materiality of all that is, expose a wider distribution of agency and reshape the self and its interests. (122)

* * *

Does this figuration—this call to enchantment—speak to the despair with which this article began? Does it make more plausible the green alternative to UKIP story?

What emerges from the feminist figure of nature or matter as enchantress is an aesthetic centered on affirmation, diversity, and interconnection. This aesthetic affirms the immanent creative capacities of earthly entanglement; the life-sustaining force of diversity, encounter, and difference; the mystery, wonder, and extraordinariness of everyday life, the material, the here and now. It offers a vibrant affirmative aesthetic that is attentive to the emotional life of political action, and to the capacity of connection, space, and encounter to foster positive affect. It fosters a beautiful vision.

Shiva’s enchantment with nature is grounded in the concrete limit experiences and everyday finitude of agrarian peasant life and collaborative science. It conveys a fulsome and charged political sense of spirituality. It is less clear, however, that enchantment with matter posited in more abstract terms, as in Bennett’s vital materialism, musters quite the same grip. There is something ethereal in Bennett’s materialism; it is as though we are suspended in a strangely innocent positivity, admitting only optimistic energy. As Saraka (2000) has argued, Bennett seemed reluctant to also “affirm the existence of what remains painful, dangerous, or problematic in life and society.” Without a grounding in struggle and

experimentation with the limits of life, an affirmative spirituality of vital difference has less affect. Perhaps its movement is too close to the progress dreams of technocratic development to speak to the painful problematics of racism, *ressentiment*, and wounded attachment that bind affects to UKIP and their ilk.

Moreover the idea of enchantment per se as redemption seems to assume that the spiritual problem at present is one of lack—a lack of chants. This ignores the existent positivity, the siren songs, of our enemies. But it is hard to trust that enchantment will—in and of itself—be enough to launch an escape from the present given that we are already enchanted—we are already subjects of the capitalist religion: spellbound by technology, economy, and there-is-no-alternative (TINA) syndrome (Shiva 1993); passionate, insufferable, adherents of puritan programs of austerity and economic redemption (Konings 2015).

So ecological attunement as enchantment might furnish us with beautiful diversity, affirming visions, and wisdoms that inspire us, that are immensely powerful when rooted in earthly experience, but that can come to feel insubstantial when too much abstracted. Such enchantment might not be enough to lift despair in the face of fascism. A production of subjectivity that could do so might demand a more carnivorous, cannibalistic diet (Césaire 2012).⁵

FIGURE 2: THE WITCH

Stengers has mounted a defense of ecofeminist activism vis-à-vis the charge of essentialism, arguing that what is significant in the feminist spirituality of nature is not belief (essentialist or otherwise) but practice—practical crafts and technologies for transforming attention. The example that she frequently came back to when discussing such activism is Starhawk (Stengers, Massumi, and Manning 2008; Pignarre and Stengers 2011; Stengers 2012).

Starhawk is a witch of the neopagan Reclaim craft. She is an ecofeminist, peace activist, permaculturalist, and author. Her numerous books include *The Spiral Dance*, *The Earth Path*, *The Empowerment Manual*, *The Fifth Sacred Thing* (a novel), and *The Last Wild Witch* (a children's story). She has been a leading figure of the Goddess movement—a mostly North American revival, or reclamation, of pagan and wiccan traditions through which, she says, “Mother Goddess is reawakening and we can begin to recover our primal birth right, the sheer, intoxicating joy of being alive” (Starhawk 1999, 39).⁶ Starhawk sees the rise of the Goddess as fundamentally political and socially transformative. “The symbol of the Goddess conveys the spiritual power both to challenge systems of oppression and to create new, life oriented cultures” (35). She associates the Christian suppression of Goddess religion with the establishment of both patriarchy and capitalist exploitation.

In her activism and training courses Starhawk makes use of mythological symbols, rituals, and the techniques of magic—which she defines as “the art of changing consciousness at will” (Starhawk 1999, 38, citing Fortune) and “of sensing and shaping the subtle, unseen forces that flow through the world, of awakening deeper levels of consciousness beyond the rational ... [awakening] long-forgotten powers of the human mind” (37). The techniques of magic “are used to create states of ecstasy ... [and] union with the divine” as well as “material results, such as healing, since in the Craft there is no split between spirit and matter” (38). Much of her writing for groups concerns the creation and control of energies, emphasizing the creativity of play and miracles of faith. Much of her writing for individual well-being and learning concerns how to

become grounded in the rhythms of nature, which she has translated into a spiritual version of permaculture training.

Stengers wrote *Capitalist Sorcery: Counter Spells* as an attempt to contribute to the continuation of the anticapitalist/antiglobalization movement that had found great force in the act of shutting down the World Trade Organization meetings in Seattle. She was particularly taken with Starhawk's essay on the event and was among those inspired to write translations of the essay.

What [Starhawk] said in that essay was that [although the event was just a beginning] ... it was a beginning we should celebrate, because this kind of event is just too precious not to take sustenance in the fact that it occurred. The idea of making joy the marker of an ontological processuality is one of the meanings of the sorceresses' Goddess who, they say, is everywhere that joy, invention, and connection are. When new possibilities of thinking and acting appear, it is an ontological, or cosmological, event that we must learn to celebrate, even if it's precarious, or precisely because it's precarious. Joy is immanent to a situation, and guarantees nothing. (Stengers, Massumi, and Manning 2008)

For Stengers, the point of relaying the insights of neopagan witches is not to declare or spread belief in the Goddess; rather, it "is daring to recognize that their practices have made 'witches' capable of propositions that often seem ... to be more alive and more relevant than our own" (Stengers, Massumi, and Manning 2008).

In addition to the power of magic and joy, a key theme that is born by the figure of the witch for present anticapitalist activism is that of identification with the victims of capitalist enclosures. Feminist historian Federici (2005) makes the case for the importance of the early modern witch hunts as a key event in capitalist history. In the "burning times," hundreds of thousands of people (the majority of whom were women) were burned as witches, condemned as such by judges in specially appointed courts of law.⁷ The way that this event has failed to enter political consciousness, to disappear into a hazy mythical or medieval past, is—for Federici—a symptom not only of our blindness to women's history, but also to the ongoing foundation of capitalism on the appropriation of human bodies and reproductive capacities.

The burning times coincided with the rolling out of enclosures, the establishment of mercantile capitalism, the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the colonization of the Americas. Federici argues that the witch hunt was one of the most important events in the development of capitalist society and the formation of the modern proletariat. The "unleashing of a campaign of terror against women, unmatched by any other persecution, weakened the resistance of the European peasantry to the assault launched against it by the gentry and the state, at a time when the peasant community was already disintegrating under the combined impact of land privatisation, increased taxation, and the extension of state control over every aspect of social life" (Federici 2005, 165). Images of devil worship, witchcraft, cannibalism, rampant sexuality, and savagery were inscribed in law. They reverberated back and forth between the policing of the European peasantry (especially women) and of indigenous people and Africans in the American colonies, where the idea of indigenous people as devil-worshipping cannibals—fit for Christianization or annihilation—hailed genocidal force.

On the one hand, Federici situates the witch hunts within the long history of capitalist divide and rule and scapegoat tactics. Witch hunts introduced fear and suspicion into communities,

breaking solidarity, and especially breaking solidarity between men and women. She stresses that rebellious peasant community leaders were very often women, and their authority was undermined at this time—with men being encouraged to fear the power of women and to use violence to control them.⁸

On the other hand, Federici situates the persecution of witches and magic within the rationalizing requirements of capitalist ontologies—establishing rational control over bodies, especially women’s bodies and their reproductive capacities. The body as a receptacle of magical powers, which had prevailed in the medieval world, had to be destroyed, she maintains, so that labor power could live. “Eradicating [magical] practices was a necessary condition for the capitalist rationalisation of work, since magic appeared as an illicit form of power and an instrument to obtain what one wanted without work, that is a refusal of work in action” (Federici 2005, 142). These tactics have reappeared throughout capitalist history, with real and metaphorical witch hunts accompanying each new act of enclosure, primitive accumulation, and intensification of work culture.

In identifying as witches, Starhawk and others profess solidarity with the victims of this long violent history of enclosure—wherein fear and division are deliberately cultivated to undermine community; rituals and traditions are destroyed to break powerful connections to land; and noncapitalizable ways of peasant living are rendered shameful or illegal. We can still smell the smoke in our nostrils (Starhawk 1999). Federici points to the persistence of literal witch hunts into the present era, accompanying acts of enclosure in Nigeria, Brazil, and elsewhere. Starhawk and Stengers take the term in a more metaphorical sense. They intend not only to take witch hunters as the enemy, but also to recognize and resist the ways that we ourselves can be drawn into such tactics. “Learning to smell the smoke is to acknowledge that we have learned the codes of our respective milieus: derisive remarks, knowing smiles, offhand judgments, often about somebody else, but gifted with the power to pervade and infect—to shape us as those who sneer and not among those who are sneered at” (Stengers 2012).

* * *

On our matter of despair? The witches weave a marvelous yarn. The image of burned grandmothers, alongside “enslaved ancestors” (Benjamin 1968, 252), is powerful politicizing fuel for the spleen. The language of commons and enclosure has found significant resonance in recent years, in activist circles at least, animating attempts to fight back against the global onslaught of neoliberal privatization (Kirwan, Dawney, and Brigstocke 2015). The figure of the witch, and the memory of the burning times, can highlight the connection between the age-old capitalist acts of appropriation and the sorcery that is the deliberate cultivation of racism, division, and religious persecution. The story of the witches highlights the centrality of these to battles against privatization and the barbarity of capitalist rule. It also provides a powerful plane of immanence—a technical field for subjectification—that connects people (especially women) across social divisions, through the affirmation of everyday arts of self-health care, healing, and practical wisdom.

The aesthetic of association and joy explodes through the images and practices of witchcraft. Crucial here is a celebration of humor and recognition that serious insight and politics very often arrives through play and make believe. Techniques of magic, as play, often involve letting go, not only of the self, but its very sense of reality. The craft is an

associative and creative art, carried out in covens or cells and often by firelight, but it isn't all that cozy. Powers of connection are accompanied by more strange and creative acts of disintegration.

So there is something powerfully disruptive, mobilizing, connecting, and division-overcoming in the political imaginary and craft of these witches. Starhawk is a tremendously powerful ecofeminist activist. Nonetheless, I suspect that there are limits to her appeal and resonance among mass working-class politics. As she herself is the first to caution, she and most people in the Goddess movement are white and middle class. The race and class situation of the movement creates barriers to participation. The residential courses that she runs in permaculture, group leadership, and spirituality carry prohibitive price tags. More importantly, the whole aesthetic of the movement—the make-do-and-mend Earth Mother attire—cannot, whatever the intention and despite all the exceptions, escape the excluding play of status distinction in a world in which working-class and black culture are associated with brand-name clothing, conspicuous consumption, and smarts.⁹ Perhaps most important of all is the absence of the industrial working class from the narrative that is told by these witches. When the narrative of contemporary environmentalist activists, academics, and feminist science is linked to the experience and struggle of peasant and indigenous movements, the experience of industrial and postindustrial working classes and a 500-year history of exploitation and resistance seems somehow to fall out of view.

We might do well to situate the neo-pagan movement as but one part of a wider and more diverse striving for alternative, magical, humanism. Another part is articulated by Wynter (1995). She—like Fanon—argues that the alternative to the secular rationalism of Western reason is not the more-than-human, but precisely humanity, the humanity of those people who have been othered by Man. The lived experience of being human and being not-Man cultivates a double consciousness that is psychologically painful, but that can also afford insight and power against the spell-casting tectonics of Man. Whereas secular (and thus Judeo-Christian) reason has disenchanted the religions of the earth, she claims, freedom requires the disenchantment of secular reason and Man himself.

The human that enters this doubly disenchanted world would not be despirited, however. Attending to the genres of the human beyond the world of man illuminates for Wynter (1995) the magic of the human:

Human beings are magical. Bios and Logos. Words made flesh, muscle and bone animated by hope and desire, belief materialized in deeds, deeds which crystallize our actualities. ... And the maps of spring always have to be redrawn again, in undared forms. (35, drawing on Césaire)

The cyborg, which Haraway (1991) has offered as an alternative to the Goddess, could be thought of as another striving for magical humanism, one that emphasizes our mixedness as well as our industrial technical composition. Although Stengers wanted to defend Starhawk from Haraway's implicit slight and the charge of essentialism, that is no reason for us to let go of the cyborg or its affirmation of impurity and technologized capacity. Witches and cyborgs (and "cyborgian goddesses"¹⁰) might enter into the spiral dance as fellow magicians.

FIGURE 3: THE INTRUSION OF GAIA

In *Catastrophic Times: Resisting the Coming Barbarism*, Stengers (2015) invites us to name the catastrophes of climate change “the intrusion of Gaia.” With this she suggests that the inescapability of climate events introduces a new transcendence into experience. Climatic catastrophes intrude on and transfigure our human world, Goddess like, coming from outside and beyond the realms of human knowledge and control. This new and ancient transcendent, she suggests, might disrupt the otherwise overwhelming force of that other great transcendent force of our times: economic growth or Mammon, which so despotically determines values and lives.¹¹ In classical mythology, Gaia—or Terra—is the primal earth mother, who precedes and gives birth to all the gods of the pantheon. In the 1970s, Lovelock took her as namesake for the phenomenal interconnectedness of the earth’s systems: the dense and unpredictable assembly of relationships among all living things, oceans, the atmosphere, climate, and more or less fertile soils. In naming these Gaia, he illuminated the interconnected and historically bound nature of all these processes and affirmed the folly of all efforts to manipulate any one earthly aspect in isolation. Stengers wants to carry forward this sense of Gaia as something that holds together, while firmly rejecting Lovelock’s assumption that Gaia holds like an organism or on the model of health. She intends to arrive at a politics that is entirely different to Lovelock’s Orwellian prescriptions, which would “restrict human occupation to small geographic islands subject to heavy environmental surveillance” (Hird 2010, 68). For Stengers (2015), Gaia is not a normalizing organism, but a chaotic and unknowable force that responds and transforms in unpredictable and unstable ways. She responds to interference, she is “ticklish ... and that is why she must be named as a being” (32), but she does not do so to reestablish a previous state of normalcy or health. Gaia perpetually transforms and will persist long beyond any human interference. “We may ... precipitate global heating, but we are not capable of extinguishing the bio sphere altogether: Gaia is indeed a ‘tough bitch’” (Hird 2010, 62, citing Margulis, 1995). Gaia does not need saving or conserving. It is we humans and fellow critters who need saving from her.

Gaia is well named, Stengers (2015) claimed, because Gaia was once honored “as the fearsome one.” She was addressed by peasants “who knew that humans depend on something much greater than them, something that tolerates them, but with a tolerance that must not be abused” (32). If she was a mother, she was “an irritable one, who should not be offended”—coming from a time before the “cult of maternal love” (32). Today, imprudently, “a margin of tolerance has been well and truly exceeded ... And the response that Gaia risks giving might well be without any measure in relation to what we have done, a bit like a shrugging of the shoulder provoked when one is briefly touched by a midge” (33).

The intrusion of Gaia is spiritualizing, or theologizing, in the sense of bringing transcendence into experienced reality (or positing an alternative transcendence to the already ubiquitous transcendent economic growth). The transcendent exceeds our self-projection and poses questions to which we cannot but respond. Capitalist sorcery binds us into destructive torrents of action through TINA syndrome (Shiva 1993) and the specter of infernal alternatives (Pignarre and Stengers 2011) where the constant retort to any protest is “Yes, it’s unfortunate, but if we stop doing this we will cause this other calamity.” The fabrication and montage of such alternatives constitutes a sorcerer’s attack “that captures the capacity to act, imagine, exist and struggle” (Pignarre and Stengers 2011, 39). The intrusion of Gaia can break this sorcerer’s spell.

The catastrophic scale of impending and actual events is such that it becomes newly possible to refuse—to say, I’m sorry but we simply *must* do something differently now (Stengers 2015). As Klein (2015) asserts, it changes everything.

It is this refusal that, for Stengers, creates the possibility of resisting the coming barbarism. Stengers celebrates the arts of composition, assembling around a problem, engaging experimentation, and creating artefacts. It is in such experimentation that anything akin to genuine enlightenment might reside. The intrusion of Gaia opens up possibilities to recoup energies and arts of experimentation from the teeth of economic growth and its despotism. Part of such opening up is a reclamation (reactivation) of modes of living, knowledges, and practices that have been denigrated and annihilated in the name of economic growth, reason, or progress. The idea that we can make do without artefact—that our very freedom is a becoming free from artefacts—has been, she says, naught but a foolhardy belief that we no longer have to pay attention to the forces amidst which we reside. The intrusion of Gaia dispels that myth. There is an effect, or possibility, of decolonizing thought—namely the thought that artefact and belief are superstition, or regression, and to be feared.

There is something potentially spiritualizing in the intrusion of Gaia and the responses it might provoke. Indeed we could argue that there is a sense in which confrontation with catastrophe is intrinsically spiritualizing. Chaos, death, and intolerable conditions call forth creative and collective agency—dancing through ruins, singing through anger, demanding what is impossible, moving to avenge. Meaning is rendered immanent in matters of survival. There is a common sense in the assertions of liberation theology, Marxist philosophy, and anticolonial theory that the spirit moves amongst the damned.

Becoming attuned to the catastrophes of climate change—becoming able to witness the spectacular tragedy wreaked by no longer freak weather events, the disorientating *longue durée* of toxicity, or the speculative projection of a silent spring or sea—can be seen as a spiritual, or spiritualizing, practice. The sheer affront, not only to life itself, but also to the apparent justice that can make life tolerable, catapults us into the kind of disassociation and fragmentation from which spiritual consciousness and activism can emerge.

Anzaldúa (2015) writes of light in the dark. In the suffering and disruption of disorientating illness, an earthquake, and a terrorist attack, she recounts the emergence of perception, consciousness, and spiritual activism. Chaotic disruptions, violence, and death catapult us into states of disassociation and fragmentation that make it possible to “revise reality,” to enter processes of healing, and see in terms of new wholes (17–21). “Spirituality,” she writes, “is an ontological belief in the existence of things outside the body (exosomatic), as opposed to the belief that material reality is a projection of mentally created images” (37). No wonder, then, that radical disruptions and intrusions open up spirituality. “Spirit,” she adds, “represents the zest for living—the energizing power for life ... the inner voice, the electrical charge, that says, ‘I’m going to do it. I *will* do it’” (Anzaldúa 2015, 38). No wonder, then, that pressure on life—suffocation, suffering, and violence—provokes spirit. The collectivization of the “going to,” the “will” in the face of its impossibility is what Fanon (1963) calls revolt and Foucault (1981) called political spirituality. The amalgamation of spiritual practice (which cultivates perception) with political technologies (which collectivize) is what Anzaldúa called spiritual-activism. In narrating the intrusion of Gaia, Stengers can be seen as engaged in the cultivation of such spiritual-activism, political spirituality, or revolt ... a spiritualization not through enchantment and attunement so much as through provocation.

We should not confuse the intrusion of Gaia with divine violence. Gaia is not the righter of wrongs; she does not distribute justice. Gaia's response is indiscriminate and most often affects most harshly people and others that are in no way to blame (Stengers 2015, 33). Gaia is a totally indifferent deity. If (and it is an *if*) there is something akin to actual divinity in Stengers's vision, it would not be in the action of Gaia, but rather in the action of people and matter, assemblages, responding to the problems posed by Gaia—the coming together, becoming unsettled, forced to think, the entry into experimentation. Following Whitehead, we might say that God is existent in the creative expectation of positivity, “the thirst for some novelty” (Stengers 2011, 525), that constitutes the sociality that is being. God, or a movement toward God, might be present in the refusal to accept that “there is no alternative” and in the capacities to assemble to respond.

We have then another aesthetic or ethic of association—but it is, here, an aesthetic that relishes disruption and ambiguity. Stengers foregrounds the capacities of catastrophe to engender new forms of consciousness, perception, and agency. There is “light in the dark” (Anzaldúa 2015). It is clear, however, that this agency is not straightforwardly “good.” Chaos spiritualizes, but all manner of spirits roam. There is dark in the light. To resist barbarism, the no-alternative, the with-us-or-against-us, is to step away from insufferable self-righteous certainties into the space of ambiguity—breathing space—to embrace faculties for composition and experimentation. It is not to be good, but to take up the knowledge that “good does not exist without evil,” nor “pleasure without pain, love without hate” (Anzaldúa 2015, 32) or cure without poison (Stengers 2015). In Stengers's terminology, it is to take up “the art of the Pharmakon,” administering drugs that can cure and can poison and that we can never really know in advance.

* * *

To return to our problem of despair ...

The intrusion of Gaia seems to evoke, then, a kind of pragmatist political spirituality: the art of the Pharmakon, the creative and indeterminate assemblage of people around problems and courageous attitudes of genuine experimentation (the thirst for some novelty). It points toward a powerful reimagining of the task of scientists and activists in the cultivation of an ethos that could escape the capitalist sorcery of infernal alternatives. Indeed, it is to scientists and activists that Stengers is most explicitly addressed in this text. She frequently refers to the successes of the anti-GM protests, and drugs user movements, where people who are not academics have challenged the received, capitalized, scientific Truths. With the idea of the art of the Pharmakon, she speaks to the dilemmas of how scientists and activists are to act without falling into the traps of becoming “responsible governors.”

From the perspective of our *own* (not Stengers's) problem, however, such a pragmatist political spirituality as the immanent experimental pragmatic response to problems does seem limited. Participation with it is limited to those who have some capacity to enter into problems. In her diagnosis of the human condition in modernity, Arendt (1958) argued that really it is only scientists who have the opportunity to engage in properly political—creative—action in the modern context, as the public spaces of creativity beyond science have been taken over by the despotism of economy, normalization, and mere survival. Of course, Stengers is engaged in challenging such exclusion and her cosmopolitical visions have inspired and provoked the

opening up of science and experimental practice to wider publics. Mass exclusion from science and experimentation does persist, however. In any case, the exclusion from science is not the only, or most important, exclusion at work in this matter.

The experience of alienation, associated with periods of enclosure and as much with deproletarianization and postcolonial states as with industrialization and colonialism, engenders a condition of separation from shared sense (Read 2011; Blencowe 2013; Noorani, Blencowe, and Brigstocke 2013; Blencowe, Brigstocke, and Noorani 2015). This is not the condition of the vanquished or disenfranchised (who know what is wrong with the world but not how to change it). Alienation is a condition that is profoundly manifest in a sense of not even knowing or being able to say what is wrong, what matters, what is the real. UKIP, Trump, and their ilk are mastering arts of speaking to this condition. UKIP offer *nothing* in the way of problem-solving capacity—indeed, they wear their technical incompetence and political inexperience as a matter of pride. What they do offer in abundance is vengeful narrative that composes shared sense. Naming immigration and Islam as problems does nothing to empower anyone or solve anything, but it does have a disalienating effect for some. Rankine (2015) claims that the role of art is to name problems. Perhaps, then, we should see UKIP as enchanting artists—attaching problems to names and luring alienated subjects into a fantastical sense of the real.

Can the intrusion of Gaia counter such spells? If the intrusion of Gaia offers a political spirituality of problem solving, then its reach seems to be limited to activists, scientists, and concerned citizens; categories of people that are immensely important, but that also exclude. But this foreboding figure—this indifferent, intolerant, chaotic Mother Earth—might open out additional directions. This theological figure might also comprise a powerful, unearthly image, provoking experience of dissociation, composing a montage with life.

The image of Gaia as an indifferent and unpredictable deity who intrudes in, interrupts, our reality—and a seemingly spiritual embrace of encounter with chaos—resonates with the aesthetic tradition of montage, embracing the creative shock of discord. Although this echoes the machismo of the modernist avant garde, it resonates more powerfully still with shamanic arts of healing. Shamanic practice is not simply so many techniques for resolving problems, or normalizing states, but is often aimed to provide healing when the source of illness is unknown and unnamed (Taussig 1986; Anzaldúa 1987, 2015; Margree 2004). This is achieved through the composition of spaces and relations of trust, but also through the immersion of subjects in strange and disorienting visions, alternate realities, and the edge of psychosis. Trance states are cultivated through ritual, music, chants, dance, and drugs—composing a surreal montage with life. The sick might look to trance visions for revelations of truth—but the shaman knows that there is no truth to find. The shaman knows that it is not in discovering the truth that our healing lies (Taussig 1986). The healing power of the shaman derives from the capacity to exist between alternate and contradicting worlds, to resist the resolution of reality into a singularity—resisting the impression that the world could be monopolized by any single set of knowers (Anzaldúa 2015). Often healing is achieved through accepting into the self the shadows and projections, the othered evils, that have been created through our own and others' fears, judgments, and attempts to control (Starhawk 1999; Anzaldúa 2015). These healing arts do not assume a subjectivity floating free of limits, but incorporate insight into the powers of trickery and slippage that can encounter, embrace, and disrupt the unknown.

Instead, or alongside, the tradition of Whitehead and Dewey, we might think of Stengers and the theological figures that her writing invokes as part of a long-standing antifascist

aesthetic tradition of montage and healing arts. The intrusion of Gaia is a surreal and chaos-inducing image. In terms of aesthetics, this resonates with practices of surrealism. Although this might be art, it does not attempt to name a problem or represent truth, but rather to compose spaces of immersion, disorientation, trance, and energy, through which new (and old and silenced) compositions of bodies and powers might emerge. Surrealism aims at movement, not narration. Stengers (2012) does briefly discuss surrealism in her essay “Reclaiming Animism,” when she addressed early twentieth-century European approaches to the experience of magnetism-induced trance. Deriding the appropriation of trance by the narratives of Science (with a capital S), which directed attention to “natural or supernatural” causation rather than to the effects of the trance itself, Stengers notes that surrealists offered a different approach. For Breton, she writes, “the point was not to verify what magnetized clairvoyants see, or to understand enigmatic healings, but to cultivate lucid trances (automatism) in the milieu of art, with the ultimate aim of escaping the shackles of normal, representational perception. The milieu of art would explore the means to ‘recuperate our psychical force’” (Stengers 2012). Stengers describes Breton’s efforts as “interesting” and wonders what practical knowledge of trances might have been cultivated and sustained in such art. She pulls back from Breton, however, on the grounds that he is “appropriating” trance for art rather than reactivating trance as practice in and of itself. Breton was guilty, she states, of “a typically modernist triumphalism,” endorsing a modernism that would “sneer” at supposed “superstition.”

In her rightful resistance to the modernist sneer and fear of regression, Stengers risks introducing a new (or old) sneer of her own—a sneer at modern proletarianized subjectivity. Drawing on Wynter, Gilroy (2015) insists that it is wrong, in our enthusiasm to be done with the evils of colonial humanism, to dismiss all the counterhumanisms that have grown up through the experience of living with and contesting colonialism. To do so is to dismiss great traditions of antiracist struggle and solidarity and at the least it seems perverse to do so on the supposed grounds of anticolonialism. A similar case can be made about modernism; that it is problematic to dismiss modernism per se simply because we want to be done with the triumphalism of a sneering elite. Popular modernisms have been composed in resistance to, and often joyful abandonment of, avant garde pretension.¹² At the least we might recognize that in dismissing modernism we risk dismissing the forms of life that have been composed through modern industry, technology, and architecture—the proletariat, the cyborg, and perhaps even the witch and the shaman.¹³ The others to the sneering, colonial, Scientistic, bourgeois elite are not simply the precolonial, but also all those egalitarian forms of life that have been cultivated in opposition and resistance to those sneers, alongside and through engagement with the mechanics of modernism and the violence of accumulation and industry.

The characterization of surrealism’s relationship with magic as appropriation, or of its modernism as triumphant, is far from obvious if we look beyond Breton to the broader surrealist movement. For example, we might look to Césaire, a surrealist poet and teacher who was writing in Martinique around the time of World War II and who cultivated a surrealist community in relay with Breton, her husband, and others. She, with other surrealist women, is credited with making ecological concerns central to the movement—wherein “*wild* has always been a term of the highest prestige” and nature, wildlife, and wilderness have been compelling themes (Rosemont 1998, li). Using the forms of surrealist art and an implicit dark humor to get

around the colonial censors, she and fellow writers drew on African tradition and imagery alongside that of modernism to critique the colonial condition and cultivate anticolonial poetics. Although she did call for a “new art,” this was an art that would leave man “fragile and dependent” while opening up “unsuspected possibilities ... in the very spectacle of things ignored and silenced” (Césaire 2012, 17). This is art as entry into the “realm of the strange ... the marvellous, and the fantastic, which people of a certain taste hold in contempt” (17). Her relationship to African tradition is consciously ambiguous, and it can no more be said that she appropriated magic for art, than that she appropriated art for “the magic of the mahoulis ... drawn from the very well spring of life ... mettle of our metal, our cutting edge of steel” (38). Her spirit is evoked in Scot Miller’s (2009) “Afro-Surreal Manifesto,” which affirms (or demands) that:

Afro-Surrealists restore the cult of the past. We revisit old ways with new eyes. We appropriate 19th century slavery symbols like Kara Walker, and 18th century colonial ones like Yinka Shonibare. We re-introduce “madness” as visitations from the gods, and acknowledge the possibility of magic. We take up the obsessions of the ancients and kindle the dis-ease, clearing the murk of the collective unconsciousness as it manifests in these dreams called culture. (Scot Miller 2009)

Whatever art annuals might declare, the surreal is a popular form. The surrealism of the Césaires fed into Negritude and helped shape the aesthetic of Black Power and Afro-futurism as well as Afro-surrealism, feminism, and punk. The surreal is manifold, and this is less about intellectual lineage than it is about art and aesthetic form as expression of, and response to, common experience. As Scot Miller (2009) claims that “all ‘others’ who create from their actual, lived experience are surrealist, as per Frieda Kahlo.”¹⁴ Proletarian surrealist modernism infuses global dance culture, from ska to punk to drum’n’bass to grime. Dance culture, like carnival, cultivates experiences that intertwine aspects of live montage—mind-altering substances, music and crowds, clashing images, immersion, confusion, and joy. Alongside popular religious movements that emphasize immersive experiences, dance, and spirit healing, we can see such space as existent sites of popular healing, dancing toward the recomposition of matters in every sense. What’s more, such spaces have been among the most radically inclusive and generative of antiracist spirit. The promise (or not) of the intrusion of Gaia for a popular politics that could face our despair might rest on the capacity of this image to compose or resonate within such spaces; to collaborate in the creation of wholly new and old magical resonance machines.

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NOTES

1. The story in Wales and particularly Scotland is different—where Plaid Cymru and the Scottish Nationalist Party (SNP) articulated strong antiausterity positions. In the 2015 election, the SNP won fifty-six out of fifty-nine parliamentary seats in Scotland.
2. In the event, the Greens maintained their one member of Parliament and achieved 4.2 percent of the English vote. It was less than the polls had predicted and hardly the great salvation story, but a significant gain for them nonetheless. The subsequent rise of Jeremy Corbyn to the Labour Party Leadership has, for now at least, rather undermined the Green momentum.
3. Gebara (1999) put forward a new understanding of Jesus. Jesus is not the powerful Son of God who dies on the cross and is resurrected as our king—but rather Jesus is the symbol of the vulnerability of love and compassion:

Jesus does not come to us in the name of a “superior will” that sent him: rather he comes from here: from this earth, this body, this flesh, from the evolutionary process that is present both yesterday and today in this Sacred Body within which love resides. It continues in him beyond that, and it is turned into passion for life, into mercy and justice. (Gebara 1999, 190)

4. The Nicene Creed is a widely used Christian statement of faith. It begins, “We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible”
5. Suzanne Césaire: “Martinican poetry will be cannibal or it will not be.”
6. The full passage reads:

Mother Goddess is reawakening, and we can begin to recover our primal birthright, the sheer, intoxicating joy of being alive. We can open new eyes and see that there is nothing to be saved from, no struggle of life against the universe, no God outside the world to be feared and obeyed; only the Goddess, the Mother, the turning spiral that whirls us in and out of existence, who winking eye is the pulse of being—birth, death, rebirth—whose laughter bubbles and courses through all things and who is found only through love: love of trees, of stones, of sky and clouds, of scented blossoms and thundering waves; of all that runs and flies and swims and crawls on her face; through love of ourselves; life-dissolving world-creating orgasmic love of each other; each of us unique and natural as a snowflake, each of us our own star, her Child, her lover, her beloved, her Self. (Starhawk 1999, 39)

7. Witch hunting reached its peak between 1580 and 1630 (Federici 2005).
8. For example, Federici (2005) claimed, rape was effectively legalized at this time.
9. For an ethnographic material on the way that the antibrand make-do-and-mend aesthetic of dominant figures in Occupy London was excluding and difficult for some working-class participants, see Burgum (2015).
10. See Puar (2012).
11. See also Goodchild (2002).
12. “Afro-Surrealists,” insisted Scot Miller (2009), “distort reality for emotional impact. 50 Cent and his cold monotone and Walter Benjamin and his chilly shock tactics can kiss our ass. Enough! We want to feel something! We want to weep on record.”
13. Writing in relation to Colombian Amazonia, Taussig (1986) argued that contemporary shamanic arts of healing should be understood as rooted within the thoroughly modern, and modernizing, history of colonialism, developed in response to colonial practices of terror. If witchcraft as we know it has been cultivated through the struggles of enclosure as Federici (2005) argued, then this, too, might be understood as a modern response to the modern formations of violence. Given their mastery of discord, shock, traversal, and montage, and of the significance of artefacts of shamanic healing and ritual for all the iconic figures of modernism, why shouldn’t shamans and witches be considered the very masters and progenitors of modern art? If so, art becomes modes of living, not a sequestered or “for itself” domain.
14. Frieda Kahlo is widely regarded as one of the great surrealist artists, but she said, “they thought I was a Surrealist, but I wasn’t. I never painted dreams. I painted my own reality” (quoted in “Mexican Autobiography” 1953).

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CLAIRE BLENOWE is Associate Professor of Sociology and Co-Director of the Social Theory Centre in the Department of Sociology, University of Warwick, Coventry, CV4 7AL, United Kingdom. E-mail: c.blencowe@warwick.ac.uk. Her research interests include histories of political thought and power relations, biopolitics, Christianity, the sociology of political spirituality, and authority.