The Longing for the Material

It does appear that on many, many different human attributes—height, weight, propensity for criminality, overall IQ, mathematical ability, scientific ability—there is relatively clear evidence that whatever the difference in means—which can be debated—there is a difference in the standard deviation and variability of a male and a female population. And that is true with respect to attributes that are and are not plausibly, culturally determined. [. . .]

So, I think, while I would prefer to believe otherwise, I guess my experience with my two-and-a-half-year-old twin daughters who were not given dolls and who were given trucks, and found themselves saying to each other, “Look, daddy truck is carrying the baby truck,” tells me something. And I think it’s just something that you probably have to recognize.

—Summers

I want to begin with these remarks by Harvard’s president, Lawrence H. Summers, to the NBER Conference on Diversifying the Science and Engineering Workforce in January 2005 that seem to biologize abilities and inclinations among men and women. Not surprisingly, such comments provoked outrage among scholars in and outside of the sciences who assume that such differences are constructed not born. My own reaction to these statements was more ambivalent, as I remembered my tendency at a certain moment in feminist theory—I am thinking of the early 1990s—when I was attempting to forge a compromise between poststructuralist critiques of identity and a desire to “recover” a materiality for the oppressively marked body in relation to discourse. The poststructuralist standpoint suggested that the experience of being marked and the sense of identity it produced were as provisional as any other mediation. For this reason, even though feminists could benefit from its attention to the contingencies of signification to challenge normative constructions of essence and identity, the posthumanist milieu that accompanied this standpoint also vexed a politicized recourse to personal experience to attest to collective
histories of persecution and marginalization. In response to suggestions that identity was always already malleable, I found myself wanting to insist that, for some groups, it may be overdetermined by alienating instances of being denigrated as different by others. While this overdetermination can be concretely demonstrated from persisting domestic and global socio-economic inequalities, its painful affective legacies are more difficult to ground. This difficulty embroiled me in a series of affect recovery projects, trauma studies among them, as a way of recuperating the historical reality of experiences that mark identity—a reality that I believed I had lost when I invested in deconstruction.

I have previously argued that trauma studies might be viewed partly as an effort to assert the materiality of the afteraffects of collective histories shaped by oppression in response to the deconstruction of the ontological and empirical bases of identity politics (see Ball). My turn toward trauma in the 1990s was indexical of an investment among other cultural and literary critics who affirmed the “irreducibility” of the affective residues of persecution by endowing them with the status of “materiality.” It has recently struck me that this strategy is melancholic in its organization. While it appears to be oriented by loss, it actually indicates a preoccupation with a metapsychological idea of loss that stands in for an absence of certainty. By extension, current academic melancholy fixates on affect as a figure for the foundational presence of an experience that has been reified or disavowed by dominant discourse including the postmetaphysical critique of identity and origin. This melancholy confuses the finitude and alterity of affect with a shortfall in its materiality. The attendant assumption is that this shortfall might be redressed by investing affect with an embodied and/or historical materiality.

I want to suggest that this melancholy may be connected to the ways in which the protocols for validating evidence in mathematically grounded sciences have increasingly come to goad research in the humanities, where a less empirically reproducible mode of inquiry reigns. The economic and social value of scientific production has spurred the rationalization of research among faculty and graduate students, who find themselves increasingly against the wall in the struggle to justify funding to support their work.

Another contributing factor is the self-consciousness critics absorbed from poststructuralist criticism, which has exacerbated a sense of disciplinary “lack” or science envy among humanities scholars vis-à-vis their colleagues in the physical sciences, engineering, and medicine.
The rhetorical emphasis of poststructuralism converts any object of disciplinary discourse into a “text,” which has propelled the exportation of literary approaches into other fields (though not without resistance). One might speculate, then, that the longing for the material may derive, in part, from current theories of discourse, signification, and knowledge that have enunciated the contingencies of object constitution itself. The desire to define affect as a material object in its own right hovers around the coveted “hardness” of the empirical objects that orient physical sciences. The “materiality of affect” thus reverses the free-floating disposition of theories that break down disciplinary boundaries in the course of highlighting the power relations involved in positing truths.

My evidence for a wider institutional investment in affect recuperation derives from the coincidence between the emergence of trauma studies in the 1990s and a proliferation of anglophone Benjamin criticism in North America. Walter Benjamin’s project entails a mode of affect retrieval to the extent that it promotes an affective animation of bypassed possibilities latent in the wreckage of capitalist exchange in order to activate their utopic potential. The dialectical image is Benjamin’s heuristic for awakening a “primitive” faculty for correspondences between the phantasmagoric world of commodities and an urhistorical nature with which modern subjects have lost touch. The issue for Benjamin is how to stir up “a knowledge of the past that is not yet conscious” in order to open a porthole for revolutionary redemption (“N” 3).

Benjamin’s messianic revision of Marxist dialectics is particularly attractive at this juncture because it appears to offer a “materialist” model for redeeming affect from and for history. However, this suggestion is itself overdetermined because I am hereby announcing my capitulation to a contemporary fetishism of Benjamin among cultural critics, which shows little sign of abating anytime soon. The academic cult that has grown up around the exiled and suicided figure of Benjamin suggests that the simultaneous emergence of trauma studies and a second wave of Benjamin criticism in the 1990s was more than coincidental. Benjamin fetishism is symptomatic of a libidinal economy among academic critics who have institutionalized a melancholic captivation with loss as an object of inquiry.¹

Such a coincidence also points toward converging commitments across the Marxist and poststructuralist-psychoanalytic “divide” to establishing a materiality for the affect that attends memories of oppression. To call this coincidence a symptom of critical melancholy is not, however, to
adumbrate Benjamin’s value for cultural and literary studies or to dismiss the rich body of criticism his writings have sparked. The contemporary fascination with Benjamin in North America was nurtured by seminal prior work among the founders and core contributors to *New German Critique* after it was inaugurated in 1973–74 to become one of the most prominent anglophone venues for the dissemination of Critical Theory and the German sociological tradition at that time. This “first wave” of introductory articles in the 1970s and 1980s has inspired an extraordinary proliferation of Benjamin scholarship from the 1990s to the present.²

The issue I wish to open up here is how Benjamin conceptualizes affect recovery as a “materialist” project within and beyond a melancholic configuration that mistakes a discursively produced absence for a loss. What becomes clear from a review of secondary criticism on Benjamin as well as from his own writings is that his materialist model of affect reclamation does not necessarily provide an effective departure from a melancholic poetics of the dehiscent historical referent. Writing about Benjamin, Max Pensky suggests: “For the melancholic who is able to recover from the paralytic, illogic thrall of loss—who can sublimate it—meaning translates into the continually frustrated fascination with the rifts and discontinuities that remain in the proliferation of signs” (28). His observation invites a critical reflection not only about Benjamin’s melancholy but our own. The question is whether glorifying Benjamin’s model of affect redemption “after” poststructuralism does not inadvertently mire cultural critics in a “paralytic, illogic thrall of loss” that then leads us to assert the affective motility of interpretation as a “materiality” that must and can be reclaimed.

In what follows, I begin by exploring the “materiality of affect” in feminist negotiations with poststructuralism and then I briefly illuminate their phenomenological precedents in one of Jacques Derrida’s readings of Edmund Husserl, which provides a telling example of a disavowed affect recovery project. The impetus of my subsequent turn toward Benjamin is to flesh out what is ideologically at stake in the understanding of materiality implied by his Jewish-messianic and primitivist revision of historical materialism. My question is, what do critics take on or elide when we commit to this model of affect recovery because it seems to fulfill our longing for the material?
**Affect That Matters**

In the context of a “poststructuralized” feminist theory, what I am calling “the longing for the material” designates a desire to “recuperate” the affective register of the body and sexual difference within the parameters of a commitment to dispense with biologist and metaphysical notions of essence. To illustrate the melancholic structure of this commitment, I want to return to Rosi Braidotti’s 1993 article “Embodiment, Sexual Difference, and the Nomadic Subject” as an example of the feminist negotiation with poststructuralism that I found convincing at the time of its publication. Braidotti asks what “can motivate today a woman’s choice of/for philosophy” in light of the intrinsic link between philosophy and discursive power? She lauds Deleuze and Irigaray, who, in different ways, provide an answer to the extent that “they focus on the ‘desire for philosophy’ as an epistemophilic drive, i.e., a will-to-know that is fundamentally affective. In other words, they build on the logo-philic side of philosophy and remind us that philosophy used to signify the love of, the desire for, higher knowledge” (6). She goes on to define “the affective substratum” as

*a force capable of freeing philosophy from its hegemonic habits. Affectivity in this scheme is prediscursive: there is such a thing as a prephilosophical moment in the establishment of a philosophical stance, a moment in which one chooses for philosophy. This prephilosophical moment of desire is not only unthought, but it remains nonthought at the very heart of philosophy, because it is that which sustains the very activity of philosophizing. [. . .] In other words, we are left with the problem of what is ontologically there but propositionally excluded by necessity in the philosophical utterance. There is the unspoken and unspeakable desire for thought, the passion for thinking, the epistemophilic substratum on which philosophy later erects its discursive monuments. I am interested in this substratum and how it can help us to dislodge the monuments. (6, my emphases)*

Braidotti suggests that a prediscursive “bodily substratum” persists in the “epistemophilic” motivation of thought that patriarchal philosophy negates. She therefore argues for a distinction between thinking and a philosophy that is incapable of addressing “the very questions that [she] sees as central: the female subject, in the framework of the feminist project
of sexual difference” (5). In foregrounding the importance of a “prephilosophical” desire for knowledge as an affective component of philosophy, Braidotti not only constitutes the agency of feminism as a “theoretical and political practice of sexual difference.” She also configures this praxis as a conscious affect recovery project that “aims to locate and situate the grounds for the new female feminist subjectivity” (5). This praxis is, perhaps predictably, attached to the body, though not in Summers’s sense of “innate” differences:

The body, or the embodiment of the subject, is a key term in the feminist struggle for the redefinition of subjectivity; it is to be understood as neither a biological nor a sociological category, but rather as a point of overlapping between the physical, the symbolic, and the sociological. In other words, the starting point for feminist redefinitions of female subjectivity is paradoxical; it is a new form of materialism that nonetheless inherits the corporeal materiality of the poststructuralists and thus places emphasis on the embodied and therefore sexually differentiated structure of the speaking subject. (7)

In the act of distancing herself from essentialist understandings of the body that reduce it to biology, Braidotti posits a notion of materiality that is mediated through a Lacanian emphasis on the “sexually differentiated structure of the speaking subject,” an emphasis she attributes to poststructuralism. Since she does not explicitly account for this mediation, the “corporeal materiality of the poststructuralists” remains undertheorized. What precisely is “corporeal” or “material” in the poststructuralist examination of sexual difference and how does it relate to affect?

The same year that Braidotti’s “Embodiment, Sexual Difference, and the Nomadic Subject” appeared in press, Judith Butler published Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex, which critiques a conflation between the presumed “irreducibility” of the sexed body and materiality in definitions of feminist praxis. “Even as the category of sex is always reinscribed as gender,” Butler observes, sex is still treated as “the irreducible point of departure for the various cultural constructions it has come to bear. And this presumption of the material irreducibility of sex has seemed to ground and to authorize feminist epistemologies and ethics, as well as gendered analyses of various kinds” (28).

Butler questions the logic that posits materiality as a “sign of irreducibility” and that excludes sex, but not gender, from the process
of construction. “What does it mean to have recourse to materiality,” she writes,

\[\textit{since it is clear from the start that matter has a history (indeed, more than one) and the history of matter is in part determined by the negotiation of sexual difference. We may seek to return to matter as prior to discourse to ground our claims about sexual difference only to discover that matter is fully sedimented with discourses on sex and sexuality that prefigure and constrain the uses to which that term can be put. Moreover, we may seek recourse to matter in order to ground or to verify a set of injuries or violations only to find that matter itself is founded through a set of violations, ones which are unwittingly repeated in the contemporary invocation.} (29)\]

Butler is, in part, responding to the anxious flurries precipitated by her earlier \textit{Gender Trouble}, which some critics accused of embracing radical constructivism. Butler criticizes a desire to take recourse in a materiality that “prefigures” discourse in order to protect the reality of a history of violations. The concept of materiality cannot be employed to this end, as Butler points out, because it is a “fully sedimented” notion that has been “founded” through the very violations it would ground and that is subject to historical transformation and normative overdetermination.

I want to highlight Butler’s use of the term \textit{sedimented} here, which attests to the phenomenological lineage in the deconstruction of the opposition between identity and difference. I have already connected the melancholic climate among humanities scholars with the poststructuralist attention to the historicity of interpretation that subtends any attempt to treat meaning and identity as abiding “substances” or essences. Another way of understanding this standpoint is in Derrida’s work, which lays bare the metaphysical or “ontotheological” presuppositions that propel a desire to discover the \textit{eidos} or intersubjective essence of an object of inquiry beyond the incidentals of lived experience that affect its constitution. Husserlian phenomenology, according to Derrida, pursues the transcendental conditions of the experience of sense. It thereby capitulates to a melancholic longing for rigor, which spurs critics to justify the objects and methods of their interpretations through a show of scientific exactitude and by endowing them with a metaphysical invariability.

Husserl’s \textit{Origin of Geometry} concerns, in Derrida’s words, the “ideal objects of science,” “their production, by identifying acts, as “the
same,’ and the constitution of exactitude through idealization and passage to the limit—a process which starts with the life-world’s sensible, finite, and prescientific materials” (25). The ultimate aim, however, will be to move beyond the origin of the ideal Object of geometrical sense to the “genesis of the absolute (i.e., ideal) Objectivity of sense” (62–63). In a larger context, Derrida’s reading of Husserlian phenomenology constructs it as a philosophical science of the given, an investigation of what is present with sense in consciousness (noema) and how it is experienced as such (noesis). The aim of the phenomenological reduction (Epochê) is to determine the invariant conditions of this experience of presence-in-sense by bracketing out the so-called “natural attitude”: a naive everyday sediment of beliefs.

In the Origin of Geometry, Husserl comes to acknowledge that the natural attitude constitutes the horizon of any response formulated in language to a phenomenon or idea. Derrida’s interrogation of Husserlian phenomenology therefore targets precisely its ability to perform a reduction whereby it excludes the historicity of its own methodological intervention. In identifying the ways in which historicity is itself transcendental in Husserl’s own terms, Derrida affirms that sedimented belief can never be bracketed out through a phenomenological reduction.

Derrida’s 1962 commentary on Husserl’s Origin of Geometry renders explicit the moments when Husserl undoes the opposition between the transcendental and the historical by foregrounding the delay that must transpire between the “origin” and the writing of the “before-time” of its subsequent transmission as an eidos—an essence that guides potentially infinite intuitions of it. The very notion of this before-time, as Derrida stresses, exposes the belatedness of the act of positing an idea as an origin. This “reactivation” depends on how a tradition is framed so as to maintain its connection to the horizon of current concerns. The emphasis on the singularity of originating idealities is, thus, a paradoxical avowal of their historicity, of the delay between the horizon of their emergence and the moment of Rückfrage, of the inquiry that looks backward through tradition to reconvene their consciousness and sense as origins. The desires of the present moment at once shape and are shaped by the horizons of such reactivations that sediment an idea over time. Its investment in securing the transcendental conditions of a first sense beyond or before its adumbration through the “seduction of language”3 is what renders Husserlian phenomenology melancholically divided in its core: it demonstrates a longing to reconvene an affective presence in the inaugural intuition of an eidos before its dissemination.
I have touched on Derrida’s reading of Husserl because I see it as a critical anticipation of Braidotti’s notion of an epistemophilic drive. On an epistemophilic level, the criterion of irreducibility in Braidotti’s essay functions along the same lines as an *eidetic* (a structural invariant of appearances) in Husserl’s *Origin of Geometry*. Its apparent constancy is an effect of its idealization and transmission as an intersubjective touchstone of disciplinary rigor. Braidotti fallaciously associates the apparent irreducibility of a transcendental claim with relative constancy and constancy with materiality. This fallacy elides a tension between her poststructuralist recognition of the contingencies of signification that determine an experience of embodiment and her feminist investment in a sexually differentiated body that mediates all significations and that therefore serves as their ground.

Butler’s deconstruction of the conflation between the “irreducibility” of sexual difference and “materiality” eclipses Braidotti’s desire to place feminist critique under the rubric of a “new form of materialism” that recovers affect as the “bodily substratum” of thought. This agenda naturalizes a presumed link between affect and the body recoded as “materiality.” After Derrida, Braidotti’s longing for the material recalls an ontotheological desire to recuperate an embodied *feeling of presence* from its exoteric expressions in speech, texts, and the world beyond them. Such a desire is also inadvertently phenomenological in positing affect as an “irreducible,” which is to say, a *transcendental* condition for the experience of knowledge.

To associate the “irreducibility” of a transcendental claim with the “invariability” of material objects is to forget that this metaphorical correspondence involves a determination of value. Value is differential for Derrida as it is for Ferdinand de Saussure, but whereas Saussure’s lectures construct this differentiality as negative, Derrida underscores the ways in which it is, at once, positive and negative, which is to say, not necessarily positive or negative. From a Derridean standpoint, the delimitation of a concept’s identity depends on and thus inscribes within it the notion of the “outside” or set that it does not include. The trace is a figure for this inscription by negation that nevertheless retains a “positive” agency to the extent that its foreclosure codetermines the provisional identity and intelligibility of a concept. This trace is always potentially productive insofar as it might be recognized (rendered active) in successive contexts of interpretation. When negated traces are recognized as “positivities,” their value as such is contingently posited rather than given. Affect is involved in the desire
that motivates the act of positing such a revaluation as “real.” This understanding of valuation as affective investment leads to the question I wish to pose about affect recuperation as a means of fulfilling a critical longing for the material. Can the result of a positive revaluation of a negated trace be defined as a “materiality”? And how can a retroactive investment in it be considered a “materialist” practice?

This is the challenge of Benjamin’s Jewish-messianic revision of dialectical materialism, which has, for three decades, been characterized as a form of “redemptive criticism” following Jürgen Habermas in 1972 and Richard Wolin in 1982. Wolin observes that, for Benjamin, the act of redemptive critique “is a work of remembrance: it is a process of preserving the truth content or Idea of a work from the ever-threatening forces of social amnesia to which humanity has over the ages become inured” (45). This characterization lends a melancholic cast to what can only be a doomed attempt to protect ideas from social entropy. Yet, apart from Pensky, cultural critics following the first wave of anglophone Benjamin criticism have sometimes taken Benjamin’s own melancholic longing for the material for granted in their celebrations of his prescient analyses of the decline of experience in late capitalism.

Pensky argues that much of Benjamin’s materialist work “was the attempt to articulate a methodology that could appropriate the mode of insight peculiar to melancholy subjectivity while avoiding its paralyzing affect” (xi). One of the questions I draw from Pensky is whether Benjamin’s dialectical image achieves the postmelancholic “objectivity” that he claimed for it (237). In highlighting certain moments of Benjamin’s reception in what follows, my aim is to problematize the understanding of materiality at stake in his dialectics of affect recovery. The concept of the material undergoes various permutations in Benjamin’s writings as it is complicated by a Jewish-messianic anticipation of impending destruction with its correlate rejection of concrete politics in favor of critique. My contention is that the “postmelancholic” efficacy of the dialectical image derives from its emplotment of affect. This emplotment hinges on the logic of the uncanny to shock messianic pessimism into its potential for revolutionary redemption. What is remarkable about Benjamin’s approach is that he transcends the pessimism that stems from the dilemmas of the Jewish messianic tradition only by means of another form of melancholy—what I would like to characterize as his primitivist longing to reconvene a pre-rational “mimetic faculty” for sensing metaphoric correspondences. The faculty that allows the petrified past to reawaken and gaze back through
the language of its ruins might be recovered by the modern subject in flashes, during passive, precognitive states of distraction that weaken the selective and reifying barriers of the perceptual conscious. Such states comprise the condition for the uncanny resurgence of a “lost” and therefore unfamiliar mimetic relationship with nature. Benjamin’s deployment of the uncanny is primitivist, I will argue, because it rehearses his investment in a spiritual communion with things, which is ideologically fraught from a postcolonial as well as a feminist perspective. The Freudian lineage of the uncanny aesthetically recodes an oscillation between an infantile pre-Oedipal desire to return to the womb and an Oedipal castration anxiety that estranges it. In Benjamin’s writings, this anxiety is deflected through a messianic-primitivist longing to renew the former wholeness of nature by resurrecting its power to reciprocate a human gaze and with it the utopian content of the past. Following Miriam Hansen, I suggest that human intimacy is the displaced object of Benjamin’s desire to empower nature to return his look. It is his “epistemophilic” craving for an affective reciprocity with nature that defines Benjamin’s longing for the material as a desire to transcend reification. Ultimately, then, I want to reflect on the institutional implications of constituting Benjamin’s model of affect redemption as a genre of interpretation. How does it fulfill or fail to fulfill a critical longing for the material?

*Benjamin’s Messianic Materialism,*
*or Affect Lost and Redeemed*

More than three decades ago, Gershom Scholem observed that the New Left often adumbrated Benjamin’s Jewish mystical writings that seemed to destroy a continuous line of Marxist development in his thought (37). Yet Pensky rightly recognizes that the value of the dialectical image depends, in the end, on whether we accept its “underlying theology” (237). I would like to begin with this “theology” because it establishes key elements in Benjamin’s emplotment of the dialectical image as a “materialist” venue of affect recovery.

Anson Rabinbach identifies four different strains in the ambivalent heritage of Jewish messianism. First, the messianic concept is intimately connected with a longing to *restore* “a golden age before the Fall” that lies in the past and yet also presages a different future. Second, the original content of the past, replete with its utopian potential, is the *material* basis for a new vision (84). Third, because this utopian promise of a
future fulfillment encompasses all that “can be hoped for in the condition of exile but cannot be realized within it,” Jewish-messianic redemption involves a total break with the past and never “an event produced by history” (85). Jewish messianism therefore favors an apocalyptic negation of the status quo, which not only opposes the optimism of evolutionary and teleological histories of progress but inextricably binds history to “violence and catastrophe” (87). Fourth, an ethical dilemma hereby arises between the prospect of liberation and the superfluousness of any action that would hasten it. This dilemma gives Jewish messianism an “ambiguously pessimistic cast of mind, a contempt for the present in anticipation of the future that will displace it.” A profound ambivalence is manifest in Benjamin’s writings between humble patience and liberatory expectation, between doom and hope, contemplative inaction and action (87).

This ambivalence comes to the fore in Benjamin’s writings prior to and following his first encounter with Ernst Bloch (two decades before he drafted “Theses on the Philosophy of History” in Paris in the spring of 1940), his flight to Lourdes with his sister, and his suicide in Port Bou, Spain. Between “On Language and Such and the Language of Man” (1916), the “Theologico-Political Fragment” (1919), “The Critique of Violence” (1920–21), “The Task of the Translator” (1923), and “On the Mimetic Faculty” (1933), Benjamin’s “weak” messianism reveals itself in his Kabbalistic views of language and the power of naming. It also informs his Sorrelian privileging of an anarchic divine intervention that would wipe out the legally sanctioned violence of the state and the law in “The Critique of Violence” and “The Theologico-Political Fragment.” In these two essays, Rabinbach observes, the messianic idea stands outside of and opposed to any “immanent historical activism that might bring it about,” but especially “the reformism that would replace one form of state power with another.” This topology places Benjamin’s sensibility into tension with the radicalism of the German Spartakists and the revolution of 1918–19. Benjamin’s response was to reject politics and to locate redemption not in the time-space continuum of history but in language as a “nonviolent sphere of human accommodation” (119–20).

In keeping with the Kabbalistic tradition of Jewish messianism, Benjamin sees language as a resource of meanings that lend themselves to esoteric and allegorical methods of detection. Though human language fails to deliver “objective” meaning, Pensky notes, poetic language can partially indicate it. Writing thus retains the power to liberate language from the instrumentality of communication and thereby reveal its spiritual
content from a paradoxically negative experience of the limits of words whence the “‘magic spark between word and deed can arise’” (Benjamin qtd. by Pensky 58; Benjamin, Briefe 127).

Like Rabinbach, Pensky emphasizes the esoteric ethos of the messianic standpoint that spurs Benjamin to embrace a “spiritual politics” that rejects conventional values and anticipates a completion of the process of destructive exclusion “that society itself had already begun” (40). This abstraction subordinates the pragmatic form of politics to intellectual intuition, which leads Benjamin to reject both Zionism and the youth movement. Rabinbach and Pensky concede that Benjamin’s messianism risks falling prey to a melancholic quietism that abandons the prospect of meaningful concrete action in the present beyond critique. Benjamin’s revolutionary agenda is thus in tension with his “uncompromising” insistence on the abstraction of the political while his earliest works and letters attest to its restricted range and an attendant mournful attention to the “imperiled contents” of human experience (Pensky 42). From this standpoint, as Pensky observes, critique is not merely “an ersatz form of praxis” but the only historically possible form of meaningful action. This outlook isolates Benjamin from his peers and renders the critic’s stance toward the past ambivalent. A totalizing liberal vision of historical continuity, harmony, and progress has to be rejected if the critic is to acquire insight into the utopian promise “buried in the heart of the present” (Pensky 44).

Pensky sees a “postmelancholic” potential in this heuristic, which simultaneously solicits a heightened receptivity toward the “trash of history” and its active messianic transformation. However, it is not clear from the early writings how this relatively passive receptivity enables or legitimates the active constructive dimensions of Benjamin’s approach “as more than a merely arbitrary arrangement of fragments according to the empirical will, the ‘authentic experience’ of the historical critic” (45).

Pensky’s suspicion about the arbitrariness of this messianic configuration is notable because it attests to his own longing for an empirically irreducible ground. This longing initially compels him to interrogate the role of the subject in the act of construction, which is to say, the question of whether the materialist historian “makes” or “finds” dialectical images (224). The implication is that “making” such images is arbitrary whereas “finding” them is not. Yet, ultimately, Pensky comes to acknowledge that the dialectical image is “neither arbitrary nor objective” since its putative objectivity is “held in the same suspension as the oppressed past
from which it springs” (247). I now want to demonstrate how this suspension is enmeshed in an ideologically “arbitrary” primitivism. Messianic agency assumes its materiality as an animist refraction of thing knowledge that arises “unbidden” during moments of cognitive regression. A revived ability to reciprocate the sentience of things is thus essential to Benjamin’s emplotment of the dialectical image that hinges on a movement between two melancholic longings: a Jewish-messianic desire to make whole what was destroyed by the “storm winds of progress” and a primitivist impulse to resuscitate a devolved intimacy with nature.

**Benjamin’s “Materiality”: Between Messianism and Primitivism**

The melancholic motif of decline and loss intersects with an equally prominent motif of regression to a prerationalized consciousness throughout Benjamin’s writings. Language for this “consciousness” is a greenhouse of “nonsensuous similarities” that permit glimpses into the wholeness of natural history from the remains of a reified “second” nature, the precipitate of rationalization. In keeping with Marx, both Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno insist on a rigorously dialectical understanding of the opposition between nature and history as an antidote to mythical thinking. Natural history is not confined to the natural world since it encompasses capitalist formations. As Benjamin stresses, there is “[n]o historical category without natural substance; no natural substance without its historical filter” (qtd. by Buck-Morss 59; *Das Passagen-Werk* 1054). While he will distinguish between a spiritualized nature that precedes the Fall and a profane nature that follows it, both intermediate the trajectory of natural history whose relics are “precursors of the present” that may reemerge as its estranged prototypes of utopian potential (Buck-Morss 219). The temporal dynamism of natural history is therefore a corrective to the teleological presupposition that historical developments are irreversible, which is pivotal to the messianic-primitivist convergences that determine materiality for Benjamin.

What should be disconcerting for contemporary critics following the postcolonial critique of anthropological discourse is how such mystical and theological motifs are inextricably bound up with what I would like to call Benjamin’s primitivist melancholy about the decline of a mimetic faculty as a medium of nonhuman knowledge. Benjamin’s writings about translation and language convey a Kabbalistic longing for
the prelapsarian agency of Adamic naming—before the fall condemned language to communicate something other than itself and exiled human-kind to exteriority and imitation.\textsuperscript{14} This absent agency (represented as a loss) is inseparable from Benjamin’s desire to recapture an outlived animist relation to nature as a Baudelairean openness to correspondences. After Judeo-Christianization and industrialization, materialist hope lies in this dormant “prehistorical” openness. Its residues are the material of a nonteleological dialectic that is revolutionary because it reverses the civilizing sublimations, which calcify perception, silence nature, and dissemble its truth.\textsuperscript{15}

Scholem notoriously remarked in his letter of March 30, 1931, an “astonishing incompatibility” between his friend’s “real” Jewish-messianic and his “pretended” “Communist” modes of thought, which, he maintained, tainted Benjamin’s keenest moral insights (\textit{Walter Benjamin: The Story} 285). Rabinbach, in contrast, observes that what links Benjamin’s “materialistic period” with his “theological” one is his view of the modern world as archaic, “not in order to conserve the traces of a purportedly eternal truth, but rather to escape the trance like captivity of bourgeois immanence” (122).\textsuperscript{16} My contention is that Benjamin props the project of messianic redemption on a form of “affirmative” (Caygill 32) or “enlightened” (Hansen 186) barbarism.\textsuperscript{17} Redemption becomes “barbaric” in returning to a precognitive, prelapsarian, and thus “primitive” mode of perception that blurs the boundaries between the perceptual-consciousness and the unconscious. Benjamin’s “primitivist melancholy” manifests itself in his longing to restore a degenerated animist intimacy with things, which is at the core of his figuration of both materiality and materialism.

My understanding of Benjamin’s primitivism is indebted to Christopher Bracken’s interpretation of the mimetic faculty as a \textit{participatory} theory of meaning, which locates the materiality of objects in their capacity to know themselves and in the human ability to absorb this knowledge. In correspondences, the self-knowledge congealed in the names of things radiates onto other things and thereby suspends the boundaries between knowing and being known (327). Border crossings that permit human participation in thing knowledge are what lend the mimetic faculty its material agency.

Though the mimetic element “flits past” in a flash in the “coherence of words and sentences,” language remains, for Benjamin, “the highest level of mimetic behavior and the most complete archive of nonsensuous similarity” defined as concepts recurring across different languages.
Language is “a medium into which the earlier powers of mimetic production and comprehension have passed without residue, to the point where they have liquidated those of magic” (“On the Mimetic” 556). A messianic reawakening of quiescent possibilities is thus imbricated in an anthropological notion of the *spiritual substance* that permeates words and things in the “primitive mind” (Bracken 556). This “substance” is, in practice, the affect or sentience that the historical materialist invests in commodities as objects of natural history. A genuinely revolutionary materialist reading practice is therefore “primitive” in Benjamin’s sense because it animates similarities as magical forces in the language of things. The task of the historical materialist is, as Bracken stresses, a mode of magical critique that is performative rather than constative (531): it must spark the silence of fallen nature and divine its transformative promise as a revolutionary hope.

Benjamin’s primitivist longing to awaken the restorative energy of nature is inseparable from a Kabbalist hermeneutics surrounding the “supra-essence” of names. Names and their anagrams retain a singular importance as emblems of a whole—the sound of every syllable (and even the typography of a letter) emanates spiritual meaning. As Carol Jacobs observes, the entirety of language and not just particular elements are onomatopoetic for Benjamin: such sensuous residues convey the power of language to *make names* and thereby make itself, “each instant anew” (54). A mystical notion of materiality thus attaches to the grapheme as a “bearer” of a divine agency that unites the natural and the spiritual. This mystical notion of materiality informs Benjamin’s investment in unleashing a mimetic faculty that regenerates a creative synergy between words and things.

The materiality that Benjamin attributes to the spiritual meaning of the grapheme is not only definitively opposed to Saussure’s view of language as “a system of arbitrary and conventional signs” (Hansen 197). In restricting meaning to language rather than consciousness, as Bracken notes, Benjamin also revises Husserl’s theory of the intentional process. Intention for Benjamin resides in the magical power of names as “that part of the object, its self-knowledge, that finds itself reflected in the word.” Hence, while for Benjamin “every statement is a statement of something,” it does not require consciousness in either a Husserlian or a Kantian sense (Bracken 525–27). Benjamin contrasts the dialectical image with phenomenological essences, as Pensky observes, because the latter “lack historical reality.” They are “conjured up” by a falsely inflated
autonomous subject whose will appropriates the elements of “inner or past experience” (Pensky 216).

This departure from the Husserlian emphasis on intentionality is also overt in the pyrotechnical imagery with which Benjamin evokes the respective effects of the mimetic faculty and the dialectical image. Benjamin asserts that the “mimetic element in language can, like a flame [der Flamme ähnlich], manifest itself only through a kind of bearer. This bearer is the semiotic element. Thus the coherence [Sinnzusammenhang] of words or sentences in the bearer through which, like a flash [blitzartig], similarity appears” (“On the Mimetic” 355; “Über das mimetische” 98). Notably, Benjamin’s use of similes—“like a flame” (der Flamme ähnlich) and “flash-like” (blitzartig)—simultaneously explains and enacts a mimetic recognition. The form poetically simulates linguistic correspondences and thereby produces the very coherence it describes while emphasizing, to the point of circularity, a fusion between the mimetic and the semiotic. This fusion reflects Benjamin’s dialectical synthesis of primitive animism with Jewish messianism. It conjoins what Scholem has highlighted as Benjamin’s desire for Tikkun, to mend the “broken vessel” of Being, with his Marxist commitment to a dialectic that engages with the wholeness of natural history. A messianic agenda to repair the world by reawakening bypassed possibilities thus coincides with Benjamin’s primitivist desire to heal the rift between human and nonhuman nature through a reattunement to the languages and knowledges of things.

The “flash” of the mimetic in the semiotic that fosters the coherence of words and sentences resonates with the “blasting” imagery Benjamin employs in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History” to characterize the effect of a messianic happening. It is in the “Theses” of 1940 that Benjamin for the last time articulates the shock effect of the dialectical image that emerges in the standstill of “now-time” (Jetztzeit). In Thesis XVII, Benjamin reiterates an insight (put forward in his 1937 essay on Eduard Fuchs) about a strong kinship between now-time and the Marxist dialectical method that treats the concrete particular as a sublation of the social and historical forces that determined it:

*Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration [Konstellation] pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad. A historical materialist approaches a historical subject only where he encounters*
it as a monad. In this structure, he recognizes the sign of a Messianic cessation of happening, or, put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past. He takes cognizance of it in order to blast [herauszusprengen] a specific era out of the homogenous course of history—blasting [sprengen] a specific life out of the era or a specific work out of the lifework. As a result of this method the lifework is preserved [aufbewahrt] in this work and at the same time cancelled [aufgehoben]; in the lifework, the era; and in the era, the entire course of history. The nourishing fruit of the historically understood contains time as a precious but tasteless seed. (“Theses” 263; Gesammelte 1:2, 703).22

Here, in a nutshell, is the strangely circuitous plot of Benjamin’s messianic-materialist dialectic that entails two “stops.” First, thinking comes to a halt in a tension-saturated configuration (von Spannungen gesätigen Konstellation). This constellation crystallizes a monad as the microcosm of the lifework and its era, the dialectical cancellation of the continuum from which it emerges. The monad is a materialist rune, an Aufhebung of the whole of history from an emblematic yet concrete moment of decay. It is the sign of and vehicle for a second “stop”: the “now-time” of a messianic cessation of happening defined as a “revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past.”

The concept of now-time refers, as Sigrid Weigel paraphrases it, to “a structure of time which is blasted out of the continuum and which places the subject in the attitude of messianic intensity, in the midst of the unredeemed world, in the midst of the profane” (157). Hence the paradox of a revolutionary cessation needs to be read in light of Benjamin’s pessimistic rejection of pragmatic action that he inherits from the Jewish-messianic tradition. For if time is figured as a “tasteless seed” contained within historical understanding, it is because the experience of now-time arises from the interior suspension of empty waiting—the attitude of resignation that voids the ideal of progress in anticipation of a messianic destruction of the current order. Such human patience mimics nature’s mute sorrow, yet it is also the affective kernel of a materialist blast that springs the promise of different beginnings overlaid by catastrophic events.

This messianic patience is the melancholic precondition of and critical foil to an animist reactivation of an eroded relationship with nature before the onset of the civilizing process, which is to say, with nature before “the fall.” As the essay “On the Mimetic Faculty” suggests,
such a reactivation is crucial to the ability to see similarities as the conduit of linguistic coherence. Once mediated messianically, so to speak, this mimetically based coherence might be read not only as a figure for a reawakened intimacy between the self-knowledge of humans and things but also for a coalescence between times—for the moment when the utopic content of bypassed futures unexpectedly becomes available for redemption from the caesura of Jetztzeit. Reciprocally, there is a primitivist dimension to the suddenness with which thinking constellates a “moment pregnant with tensions.” It is the shocking impact of the dialectical image, the abruptness with which it flashes up, that endows this monadic structure with its agency. This “first stop” is thus “unbidden,” as Pensky has characterized it, which is why it wields the power to shock thought. In the dialectical image, Pensky notes, it is as if a “primal event” has been “carried over from the pagan context of nature into the Jewish concept of history” (218). What remains unspoken in the “Theses” is the aesthetic basis for this unexpected standstill in which a “pagan” nature and a messianic theology suddenly and dialectically converge.

This basis is implied by connecting Benjamin’s ambivalent observations about the withering of aura as a result of expanding industrial forms of production in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Production” (1936) and “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” (1939). Mechanical reproduction hastens the senescence of the social imbedding of tradition through rituals and the generative, wisdom-bestowing agency of storytelling. While Benjamin seemingly mourns the loss of the latter, he also celebrates the democratization of art’s accessibility and the emergence of a new kind of distracted perceptual task-solving among film audiences that might foster unconscious revolutionary potential. States of cognitive regression facilitate an enchantment with the detritus of capitalist development to animate the possibilities it contains.

Yet, while Benjamin happily does away with the aestheticist aura of art for art’s sake and the realm of beautiful semblances, he holds onto nature’s aura, which, as Hansen suggests, provides a crucial bridge between natural history and the messianic standpoint (186). A materialist awakening to correspondences transpires in the experience of natural aura as the effect of

the transposition of a response common in human relationships to the relationship between the inanimate or natural object and man. The person we look at, or who feels he is being looked at,
looks at us in turn. To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return. (“On Some Motifs” 188)

In the eleventh “motif” on Baudelaire, Benjamin portrays the auratic experience of nature as an “anticipated reciprocity of the gaze” between subjects and objects, which also “corresponds to the data of mémoire involontaire” (“On Some Motifs” 188). Remembrance “in the Proustian as well as Freudian sense” is, as Hansen stresses, “incompatible with conscious remembering (Erinnerung) which tends to historicize, to fixate the image of memory in an already interpreted narrative event (Erlebnis)” (200). Hence the concept of mémoire involontaire is opposed to historicism, which, as Benjamin asserts in Thesis XVI, culminates in universal history by giving us the “‘eternal’ image of the past.” Historical materialism, in contrast, “supplies a unique [einzig] experience with the past” (“Theses” 262; Gesammelte 1:2, 702), which affiliates it with Benjamin’s description of the experience of nature’s aura as a “unique phenomenon of distance, however close it may be [als einmalige Erscheinung einer Ferne, so nah sie sein mag]” in the “Work of Art” essay (222 and 245n5; Gesammelte 1:2, 479). The unbidden quality of mémoire involontaire is thus allied with Benjamin’s emphasis “on the momentary, epiphantic character of auratic experience” that distinguishes Jetztzeit (Hansen 189n13). Hansen links the suddenness of mémoire involontaire to “a ‘bodily,’ to some degree absent-minded ‘presence of mind,’” which she designates as its prerequisite (200); nevertheless, the experience of aura in natural objects is “neither immediate nor ‘natural’ (in the sense of mythical),” because it “involves a sudden moment of transference, a metaphoric activity” (188).

Hansen’s qualification suggests that the “suddenness” of messianic materialist insight be treated as an aesthetic effect of transferring the aura of nature to historical phenomena. However, the implication of the essay on the mimetic faculty is that this transference is at once natural and immediate since it irrupts nonvoluntarily from the urhistory of cognition. The key to the flash-like advent of mémoire involontaire and the messianic constellation is an unexpected resurgence of the mimetic faculty that reanimates the creative and spiritual force of the past by investing it with the aura of first nature. The immediacy of messianic insight is a concept beholden to Benjamin’s narrative about the deterioration of a mimetic faculty as both the prehistorical source and vehicle of metaphorical
transference. This source is tapped in states of cognitive regression where first and second nature, unconsciousness and consciousness, coalesce. Such states soften the defenses that normally foreclose an affective reciprocity between humans and things.

Benjamin’s primitivism also propels his revaluation of spectator passivity in the context of the “Work of Art” essay. This essay translates the “dreamy recalcitrance” that he blames on his mother in “A Berlin Chronicle” into an affirmation of distracted immersion among film spectators. Film’s ability to simulate such a state endows it with the power to mobilize the otherwise refractory and exhausted masses to “tackle” difficult and important tasks of apperception that arise “at the turning points of history.” “Such tasks,” Benjamin insists, “cannot be solved by optical means, that is, by contemplation, alone. They are mastered gradually by habit, under the guidance of tactile appropriation.” Hence the “distracted person, too, can form habits. More, the ability to master certain tasks in a state of distraction proves that their solution has become a matter of habit.” While art covertly controls “the extent to which new tasks have become soluble by apperception,” it is film above all that makes cult value (and its attendant aura) “recede into the background” precisely because it “requires no attention” (“Work” 240).

One of the reasons that Benjamin should seem bizarre from a contemporary perspective is that he attributes a revolutionary potential to spectator distraction. In this respect, Benjamin seemingly distances himself from his exiled Frankfurt School colleagues, who repudiate mass culture because it instrumentally diverts attention from real needs, weds passive consumers to the comfort of repetitive grids, and thereby neutralizes critical reflection. For Benjamin, such reification in modern experience coincides with the decline of aura in the case of cult objects and paintings. The apperceptive task-solving power of film consequently derives from its opposition to the contemplation of paintings as a venue of public withdrawal. The “spectator can abandon himself to his associations” before the painting but not the movie frame: “No sooner has his eye grasped a scene than it is already changed. It cannot be arrested” (258). The viewer’s process of association is “interrupted by their constant, sudden change. This constitutes the shock effect of the film, which, like all shocks, should be cushioned by heightened presence of mind” (258). What is puzzling about these assertions is their implication that the effect of montage might override the moment in the dialectical image when “thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions” and
The Longing for the Material

thus shocks it into a messianic standstill. For if a spectator’s process of association is constantly interrupted, then how can thought recognize the cessation of happening in which a redemptive illumination takes place?

One answer to this question is that Benjamin implicitly endorses a bourgeois division of labor between the “dreaming collective,” on the one hand, and the historical materialist, on the other. Such a division is less categorical than it appears, however, in light of his performance of nostalgia and commodity fetishism in “A Berlin Chronicle,” *One-Way Street*, and throughout the *Passagen-Werk*, where phantasmagoric insights disrupt his class-compliant immersion in everyday urban life. In addition, his celebrations of Baudelaire, Proust, surrealism, hashish, and awakening attest to an abiding fascination with subliminal states wherein conscious discipline egresses into unconscious response and the artist seeks “the totemic tree of objects within the thicket of primal history” (“Dream Kitsch” 4). Benjamin consequently endorses the subliminal operations of film whereby “the camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses” (“Work” 237). If Proust becomes a model for the dialectical materialist, according to Benjamin, it is because he begins his life story with an awakening—when consciousness has not yet surmounted the surreal idiom of dreams. Benjamin speculates that if awakening were the “synthesis” that emerges from a dialectic between the “thesis” of dream-consciousness and the “antithesis” of waking consciousness, then it would be “identical with the ‘Now of recognizability’ in which things assume their true [wahre]—surrealistic—face [Miene]” (*Das Passagen-Werk* 579; “N” 3). Eclipses of consciousness animate things as rebuses of “true” perception. It enables border crossings between commodity fetishism and the “mythic rhythms” it unconsciously generates, between the instrumentality of technical production and the unfulfilled potential of its rubbed past.

Benjamin’s modernist investment in the estranging effects of such border crossings distinguishes his affect-recovering aims from a phenomenological desire to secure the transcendental conditions of conscious knowledge. It is also what renders his affect recovery project critical in an aesthetic as well as a phenomenological register. Earlier, I criticized Braidotti for constructing sexual difference as a material locus of affect. This construction sidesteps the lessons of Derrida’s critique of Husserlian phenomenology in capitulating to an ontotheological fetishism of the transcendental “irreducibility” of affect and embodiment as “material” conditions of interpretation. Husserlian phenomenology made the
process of achieving sense beyond the contingencies of changing values
the content of a transcendental claim and the aim of a phenomenological
reduction (Epochê): to determine the invariant conditions of experiencing
sense by bracketing out the so-called “natural attitude.” In “Philosophy and
the Crisis of European Man,” Husserl identifies this “primitive” attitude
with “a naively direct living immersed in the world, in the world that in a
certain sense is constantly there consciously as a universal horizon” (166).
Both Husserl and Benjamin formalize a longing to reactivate the affective
fullness of an originary idea; however, while Husserl struggles with the
contradictions that vex his methodological exclusion of the “natural atti-
dtude,” Benjamin avows its destructive and constructive agency in animat-
ing the traces of buried futures from everyday sedimentations of belief.
For Benjamin, the naivety of the natural attitude is not to be bracketed out
since it leaves the subject open to a resurgent mimetic faculty decaying
under the impact of industrialization. Submergence in “life on the level of
nature” enables a shocking reinitiation into the reciprocity between the
self-knowledges of things and humans, between the objective and subjec-
tive energies of the outmoded. “Primitive” immersion is therefore a crucial
affective element in the plot of the constellation that requires a rational-
ized and protective perceptual-conscious to become permeable again so
as to render the modern subject vulnerable to jarring similarities.

This observation sheds light on Benjamin’s investment in
Baudelaire’s poetry because it lyrically “parries” the continual shocks of
life among city crowds and thereby resists the reifying forces of modern-
ization. Baudelaire’s status as a quintessentially modern “traumatophile”
poet for Benjamin points beyond an affiliation with Brechtian political
tenets, as Hansen suggests, and toward Freudian premises about a phy-
logenetic and prehistoric past (Hansen 185). Such premises inform Ben-
jamin’s characterization of the mimetic faculty as a “gift” with a history
“in both the phylogenetic and the ontogenetic sense” (“On the Mimetic”
333). Here and elsewhere Benjamin echoes Freud’s tendency to align the
unconscious with the “primitive” inclination toward “magical” beliefs in
the omnipotence of thought and the conspiracy of signs in nature.

Benjamin explicitly links his delineation of the modern city
dweller in “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” with Freud’s allegory of the
division that emerges between the perceptual-conscious-system and the
unconscious-system in Beyond the Pleasure Principle. Benjamin cites
Freud’s phylogenesis of the perceptual-conscious, which identifies it with
a deadened or “burnt-through” cortical layer, a “special envelope or
membrane resistant to stimuli” that forms around a unicellular organism as protection against the “energies of the external world.” This membrane has to some degree lost the structure proper to living matter. Hence external stimuli “are able to pass into the next underlying layers, which have remained living, with only a fragment of their original intensity.” From this analogy, Freud concludes, “Protection against stimuli is an almost more important function for the living organism than reception of stimuli” (27).

For Benjamin, Freud’s analogy suggests that the traumatic impact of modern life reinforces a systemic aim to harden the psyche against intrusive levels of stimulation. When the selective and protective cortical layer takes over in the course of the civilizing process, the once receptive “inside” comes to resemble the petrified “outside” to become “deadened” in its turn. It is for this reason that Benjamin locates film’s revolutionary potential in its ability to simulate the “increased threat to his life which modern man has to face. Man’s need to expose himself to shock effects is his adjustment to the dangers threatening him.” Film’s form “corresponds to profound changes in the apperceptive apparatus—changes that are experienced on an individual scale by the man in the street in big-city traffic, on a historical scale by every present-day citizen” (“Work” 250). Through its ability to simulate these changes, film can subtly redirect the habit-hardened defense system that deflects shocks.

Freud’s phylogenetic figuration of a traumatized consciousness also illuminates Benjamin’s Proust-inspired prioritization of mémoire involontaire over mémoire volontaire in the Baudelaire essay because the former evokes images that bypass the selective perceptual-conscious. In “A Short Speech on Proust” delivered on his fortieth birthday (1932), Benjamin writes, “[T]hey are images we have never seen before we remember them” (qtd. By Hansen 179; Benjamin 24). He adds that this “is most clearly the case in those images in which—like in some dreams—we see ourselves, the way we might have stood somewhere in a prehistoric past, but never before our waking gaze” (qtd. by Hansen 179; “Aus einer kleinen Rede” 24). Dreamlike regression is therefore key to the shocking resurgence of a precognitive receptivity toward metaphoric correspondences that puncture the homogenized veneer of rationalized history and foment its messianic destruction.

Insofar as Freud aligns the unconscious with “infantile” and “primitive” tendencies toward animism and magical thinking, his psychoanalysis evinces the same primitivist slant as Benjamin’s materialism.
When he defines the experience of aura in nature as its power to look back, Benjamin presumes an animist subject who can register this “daemonic” gaze, which Hansen relates to Freud’s notion of the uncanny (188). The implication that Freud draws from a brief philology toward the beginning of “The Uncanny” essay is that the Unheimlich is what was once heimisch, or familiar (226). This coincidence crystallizes a thesis of Ernst Jentsch, who attributes the uncanny to “doubts whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might not be in fact animate” (qtd. by Freud 226).29 Freud amplifies Jentsch’s thesis to suggest that this effect “is most easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced.” This effacement contributes “not a little to the uncanny effect attaching to magical practices. The infantile element in this, which also dominates the minds of neurotics, is the over-accentuation of psychical reality—a feature closely allied to the belief in the omnipotence of thoughts” (244).

In Freud’s formulation, the uncanny signals the resurgence of a former home (repressed instincts, primitive superstitions, infantile wishes or fears) in the unfamiliar and thus “unhomelike” adult mind disciplined by physical laws. What renders the logic of the uncanny attractive to Benjamin is that it involves a shocking convergence between a reified second nature and the once familiar first nature it divested, which promotes a phantasmagoric slippage between imagination and reality. However, while Freud designates an infantile “over-accentuation of reality” as a “neurosis” that borders on paranoia, Benjamin, as I have been arguing, embraces this hesitation between the rational and the irrational, the literal and the metaphoric that allows nature to gaze back and compels humans to see themselves from the standpoint of things. The awakening of a dormant mimetic faculty is shocking because it instigates a sudden revaluation of repudiated mythic beliefs. It thereby permits “the murmur of the past” to be heard in correspondences as the “data of remembrance”—“not historical data,” as Benjamin remarks in the Baudelaire essay, “but the data of prehistory” (“On Some Motifs” 182). The uncanny harkens back to an estranged yet familiar thing knowledge that overturns rational values and thereby opens a caesura in thought whence bypassed hopes flash between the posthistorical shards of fashion and use.

Benjamin’s adaptation of the uncanny transfigures a melancholic fixation on the debris of use and exchange value into a renewed mimetic sensitivity. This “postmelancholic” sensitivity awakens the spiritual and creative power of nature and transfers it to history to make the
past whole, not only as a concatenation of catastrophes but as a compost heap of missed possibilities. The affective plot of the dialectical image begins with a melancholic sense of the futility of concrete action aimed at changing the status quo in anticipation of its messianic destruction; however, the shock of the uncanny splices through this mood and subtends a modern subject’s self-protective rationality into a mimetic receptivity toward the correspondences through which nature transforms knowledge. Benjamin’s materialism is thus metaphorical in practice in endowing the relics of exchange value with the aura of a personified nature that returns his gaze and reciprocates his longing for spiritual intimacy. The question that such a reciprocity raises for feminist readers is not how sexual difference transcendentally or materially grounds Benjamin’s praxis, but on Butler’s model, how it is constituted by the metaphors he employs to transfer affect between human and nonhuman nature. How does his messianic-primitivist dialectic create sex?

**Benjamin’s Libidinal Materialism, or Affect Displaced**

Among the lessons that Hansen’s 1987 critique of Benjamin offers to feminists and other critics who have committed to affect redemption is how the uncanny hinge of his primitivist-messianic dialectic sexually differentiates it. In “The Uncanny” essay, Freud links the notion of a “former home” to the womb and, by extension, the effect of the uncanny to an estranged homesickness. The child might long to return to this “home,” but for the adult, a fulfillment of this wish would be nightmarishly akin to being buried alive. The terror of castration that Freud metonymically associates with threats to vital organs such as the eyes in his reading of E. T. A. Hoffmann’s “The Sand-Man” is another testament to the sexual differentiation of the uncanny.

Hansen observes that, for Freud, the uncanny heralds the survival of a repressed pre-Oedipal wish to return to the womb that is “displaced and transformed by fetishistic denial” as a defense against castration. Benjamin’s writing seems driven by a desire at once to reverse and to rehearse this displacement, “to destroy the fetishistic illusion while preserving the promise of happiness” that it sustained (Hansen 214). Hansen also suggests that the concept of aura transfers the maternal look onto a nonhuman nature, which thereby assumes the power to gaze back and subtend the rational subject’s petrified narcissism. Once
assimilated to Benjamin’s primitivism, the affect in a mother’s gaze is refracted through Benjamin’s craving for a tender communion with a dominated and forsaken nature that can no longer return his look. This refraction is amplified in Benjamin’s attention to Baudelaire and Proust. Benjamin is attracted to Baudelaire’s poetry because it reempowers nature to reciprocate his gaze through the language of correspondences. Conversely, Proust represents the “absence of the counterpart” in the gaze of the Parisian woman accustomed to mass living but not fresh air, whose remoteness Proust’s protagonist fails to overcome. His melancholic fixation perverts les Parisiennes into sallow husks of nature that have forgotten their own self-knowledge: they cannot properly return his gaze. Yet, in Benjamin’s view, love for the male city dweller is “spared, rather than denied, fulfillment” (“On Some Motifs” 170).

Hansen highlights the ways in which Benjamin’s uncanny configuration of the aura proper to nature does not merely undermine the scopic economy organized around castration anxiety; it also repeats a philosophical tendency to distantiate sexual difference in general and the female body in particular despite a contravening longing for it. This tendency plays out in Benjamin’s recourse to the abstraction of a dissipated faculty for intimate communication with nature. On the one hand, the auratic gaze of nature depends upon “a veil of forgetting, that is, a reflective yet unacknowledged form of fetishism which reinscribes the female body as a source of both fascination and threat.” On the other hand, Benjamin’s concept of nature’s gaze “potentially upsets the fetishistic balance of knowledge and belief” that affords the male spectator pleasure without anxiety while watching the spectacle of the female body on screen. The experience of nature’s aura arouses an uncanny hesitation between the familiar and the unfamiliar, which calls “into question the binary opposition of distance and proximity that governs ‘normal’ vision, along with its alignment of sexual difference, subjectivity and identity.” It thus challenges the unilateral mastery traditionally attributed to the male gaze (Hansen 215–16).

I would add that this challenge is fraught to the extent that Benjamin’s deployment of the Freudian logic of the uncanny inadvertently “philo-feminizes” the primitive and infantile unconscious. This logic supplies the axis for a jarring convergence between first and second nature that resurrects the trace of a future entombed in homogeneous history; however, when he invests nature with the power to reciprocate the intimacy of a human look, Benjamin redistributes affect and thus
rationalizes it. As I argue above, Benjamin endorses a distracted mode of reception because it enables a potentially revolutionary regression into an animist receptivity. This endorsement seems to reverse the implications of Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s references in the “Culture Industry” chapter of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* to absorbed housewives compensating for their alienation in the darkness of the movie theater and susceptible shop girls imitating the stylized gestures and tones of film stars. The “feminine” passivity that Horkheimer and Adorno decry in consumers of mass culture is ideologically connected to the distracted “regression” that for Benjamin facilitates a mimetic receptivity. By affirming this regression, he inverts a high cultural denigration of consumer passivity while sustaining its association with the infantile, the feminine, and the primitive. By implication, primitive/feminine receptivity is the condition for Messianic redemption because it embraces the divine power of thing language that a demythologizing reason silences and kills. The allegedly “feminine” mass subject would, in this view, be *more naturally* fluent in the profane language of commodities that a critic must transfigure in order to unfetter their revolutionary magic.

I want to highlight Hansen’s reference to Benjamin’s “libidinal materialism” (219n66) because it seems to fulfill Braidotti’s 1993 agenda to sexually differentiate affect, but as “materialized” in the epistemophilic motifs of a text. *Libidinal materialism* alludes to the “physiology” of writing, to Benjamin’s transfer of erotic affect to nature, to the Kabbalistic concept of the name, to Eduard Fuchs’s work of collection, and to the physiognomy of the big city. This “materialism” reconciles the tension between word and image through corporeal cadences, as Caygill observes, particularly in the Baudelaire essay where “it is resolved into the libidinal rhythms of orgasm” (81). It is also evinced in Benjamin’s recourse to physiognomic imagery to personify city spaces and thereby recall the natural history of their ruins. Libidinal materialism rewrites the mimetic faculty as an attunement to the “physiognomic expression of objects” that makes the obsolescent icons of second nature return the look in the way of the first.

Gerhard Richter underscores Benjamin’s recourse to physiognomy to transcribe the aura of a human countenance to nonhuman nature including cityscapes. Rather than rehumanizing reified modern subjects, the face, for Benjamin, is the synecdoche of a mimetically animated nature, which reciprocates our tender gaze. Yet the look that emanates from nature’s face also disfigures the idealized unity of the primary
narcissistic imago, when the solipsistic subject is surprised into seeing him or herself from the uncanny perspective of discarded things.

In foregrounding this physiognomic poetics as a reproof against modern narcissism, Hansen’s and Richter’s readings introduce echoes of Lacanian psychoanalysis into Benjamin’s messianic-primitivist dialectic. Benjamin can thus be read as critiquing the subject of Jacques Lacan’s allegory in “The Mirror Stage” who misrecognizes and introjects an image of corporeal integrity as a symbolically mediated ideal of self-mastery. Hansen and Richter thereby finesse a rapprochement between Lacanian psychoanalysis, poststructuralism, and Benjamin’s materialism. What nevertheless comes to the fore is that his “libidinal materialism” does not “retrieve” the affective materiality of embodied difference, but only re-creates it through animistic transference.

Of particular concern for critics whose melancholy attracts them to Benjamin’s model of affect recovery is the extent to which their own “epistemophilic” desires lead them to excuse the ideologically variegated terrain of Benjamin’s longing for the material. A perniciously anti-Semitic climate fostered both Benjamin’s and Freud’s recourse to phylogenetic configurations of a modern consciousness and a prehistory consigned to the unconscious. Their urge to overcome the biopoliticization of racial ideologies entered into what must appear from a contemporary posthumanist standpoint as naively universalistic reactivations of the “anthropologism” of the primitive. As a mode of “magical thinking,” Benjamin’s concept of the mimetic faculty betrays its shared ideological horizon with what Bracken characterizes as “the joint project of anthropology, missionary education, and colonial administration” that conjured up “the specter of the primitive in almost every region of the globe to justify the scramble for conquest and colonization.” However, Benjamin convokes this specter “not to deplore once again that primitive peoples are not as civilized as ‘modern human beings,’ but to demonstrate that ‘modern human beings’ are not as primitive as a properly revolutionary politics requires them to be” (Bracken 328).

Recent postcolonial critiques of this trope’s imperialist legacies make critics skeptical of any metaphoric practice that presumes the “universal” decline of an archaic mimetic faculty that returns to “us moderns” in episodes of cognitive regression. Yet perhaps such skepticism spawns another politically paralyzing melancholy over the lost ease with which generalizations about human nature might be employed as an antidote to rationalizations of inequality. Benjamin’s cult would then thrive on an
unacknowledged desire for a universalism that would not betray its own hypocrisies.

For this reason, if Benjamin’s affect matters, it is because critics who conjure his magic evacuate the form of his dialectical materialism of its messianic, primitivist, and libidinal contents while retaining its potential to mobilize the utopic force of desire from the vicissitudes of commodity fetishism.\textsuperscript{35} This evacuation formally bypasses the distracted resignation that preconditions a mimetic blasting of foreclosed possibilities from the past. Present crises that propel a contemporary flaneur to open a vigilant eye in the midst of the “storm winds of progress” activate materialist illuminations rather than a mimetic track to the wholeness of natural history in Benjamin’s sense. It is still questionable whether a secular and nonprimitivist adaptation of Benjamin can proceed without a messianic cessation of happening that is probably not available to critics inclined toward skepticism. The genre based on Benjamin’s heuristic therefore marks the limits of mobilizing critique to shatter the bourgeois metropolitan trance.

\textit{A Note on the Political Economy of Affect Redemption}

As long as you write for bourgeois and about bourgeois, a \textit{real} materialist will not care (I should say, will not give a hoot) whether you wish to surrender to the illusion that you are of one mind with him.
—Scholem

The fashions of meaning change nearly as fast as the price of the commodity.
—Benjamin

The proliferation of Benjamin studies over the last two decades indicates that the longing for the material goes beyond feminist inquiries that seek to grant the affective leftovers of historical oppression a materiality after the demise of identity politics. In light of this proliferation, the question I want to reiterate is how Benjamin’s messianic-primitivist dialectic fulfills this melancholic longing. My suspicion is that this dialectic appears to offer a materialist alternative angle through which we might reauthorize a critical captivation with the poetics of loss in the wake of poststructuralism. While poststructuralist criticism enunciated the instability of reference, Benjamin locates this instability in a nonteological view of natural history and in the divinely creative force that a materialist dialectic animates. Yet, if affect is “material” for Benjamin,
it is because he metaphorically transfers it onto things as sentient vehicles of spiritual transformation. I have devoted space to explicating the critical reception of Benjamin in order to render explicit the theoretical stakes of adopting his model of affect redemption within and beyond identity politics. Pensky and Rabinbach highlight Benjamin’s pessimistic patience in anticipation of a messianic destruction of the present order that motivates his uncompromising commitment to the abstraction of politics and confirms the ineluctability of critique versus other modes of engagement. It is worth asking whether Benjamin’s readers take any consolation in a view of melancholy as a necessary departure point for a “spiritual politics” that repudiates the “nihilism” of concrete action while remaining, by all accounts, “materialist.” In eliding the dilemmas that mark Benjamin’s messianic standpoint, critics may inadvertently officiate a rejection of more activist interventions.

Once Benjamin’s materialist dialectics is detached from its Jewish-messianic and primitivist horizons, the next step is its institutionalization as a genre of critique. This institutionalization occults the socioeconomic relations that produce Benjamin’s aura as a melancholic affect-redeemer for us. Benjamin mourns the decay of an urhistorical intimacy between humans and things as a source of utopic fulfillment. I am speculating that his longing for this fugitive intimacy speaks to a parallel desire in our current moment for nonalienated labor relations in an increasingly corporatized university. This is not the ideal university as either von Humboldt or Kant imagined it, wherein the humanities retain their state-acknowledged preeminence and autonomy. In the “university in ruins,” as Bill Readings has described it, humanities scholars find themselves increasingly embattled in their efforts to justify and reproduce their own labor: to obtain a position, to publish the book that will ensure tenure, and to finance the equipment and time required for teaching, advising, and research.

An absence that is experienced as a loss under these circumstances is the prestige that “properly” belongs to a highly educated elite who must admittedly appropriate a share of surplus value in order to make time to build expertise. Yet, as Marx predicted, the professionalization of intellectuals in the university has abstracted their skilled labor as hours spent in efficiently disseminating quantities of “knowledge.” Of course, the time of knowledge production cannot be predictably quantified or rendered efficient, especially under the auspices of a yearly salary that overrides a clear division between public work and personal respite. Moreover,
if the university’s growing reliance on non-tenure-track instructors is a harbinger of things to come, temporally intensive expertise will become increasingly alienated: a commodity *sans* aura that we surrender and exhaust without enjoyment. Hence, the “epistemophilic substratum” for which Braidotti longed in 1993 goes beyond feminist critique to the extent that it serves as a compensatory figure for humanities scholars whose cultural capital is perceived as less and less use-valuable. For if my melancholy fastens on the “loss” of nonalienated knowledge, it also betrays a disappointed hope that others continue to desire my expertise and commit the state to funding it.

An unfulfilled longing for public respect lends itself to the project of affect recovery in a melancholic vein. Affect not only stands in for an auratic sense of presence-in-knowledge that has diminished with the rationalization of academic labor. It also performs the desire to objectify the value of the humanities in a context that demotes them to the “essential” sciences. It is not surprising, then, that we would seek to materialize affect to counteract a perception that “subjective” contributions to technical progress are “immaterial.” However, by fetishizing Benjamin’s materialism as an answer to our longing for the material, we risk naturalizing its melancholic impetus and imparting it to our students. If we fail to question an institutional commitment to affect recuperation, we may inadvertently institute quietism over and against a future where melancholic paralysis will no longer define the cultural critic’s second nature.56

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**Karyn Ball** is Associate Professor of English and Film Studies specializing in literary and critical theory at the University of Alberta, Edmonton. She writes on Critical Theory, cultural studies, and the Holocaust, is the editor of a volume of essays, *Traumatizing Theory: The Cultural Politics of Affect in and beyond Psychoanalysis* (forthcoming, The Other Press, 2006), and has guest-edited a special issue of *Cultural Critique* on “Trauma and Its Cultural Aftereffects” (2000) and an issue of *Parallax* on the concept of “visceral reason” (2005). Her current project titled *The Entropics of Discourse: Climates of Loss in Contemporary Criticism* reflects on figures of loss and melancholy in recent cultural theory.
Notes

1 My argument about this melancholic climate was inspired by Wendy Brown’s discussion of identity politics and its “wounded attachments” in States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity. For recent critical treatments of melancholy and loss, see Cheng; Crimp; Eng and Kazanjian; Gilroy; and Prato.

2 Citation figures from the Web of Science provide a cursory sense of this proliferation: in 1974, eight articles citing Benjamin were published; in 1984, there were 198; in 1994, there were 534; and in 2004, 548.

3 “The originally intuited life,” Husserl writes, “creates its originally self-evident structures through activities on the basis of sense-experience.” It therefore very quickly “falls victim” to the “seduction of language” (qtd. in Derrida 165). This seduction transpires in repetitions that adumbrate an “originary” intuition as “[g]reater and greater segments of this life lapse into a kind of talking and reading that is dominated purely by association; and often enough, in respect to the validities arrived at in this way, it is disappointed by subsequent experience” (Derrida 165).

4 In her groundbreaking analysis of the Passagen-Werk in The Dialectics of Seeing, Susan Buck-Morss notes that this work of remembrance had not the least concern for the conventions of empathetic “appreciation.” Instead, Benjamin’s Messianic “objective was to ‘rescue’ the historical objects by ripping them out of the developmental histories—of law, religion, art, etc.—into which fictional and falsifying narratives they had been inserted in the process of their transmission” (218–19).

5 It is worth noting that the first edition of Melancholy Dialectics appeared in 1993, the same year as Butler’s Bodies That Matter. As Pensky himself observes, the republication of Melancholy Dialectics in 2001 with a new preface attests to the expansion of Benjamin’s appeal beyond literary and cultural studies.

6 From Benjamin’s contradictory notes to the Arcades Project, Buck-Morss derives a schematism that formally situates the dialectical image in the tension between the urphenomenal physiognomy of commodities and the natural history of capitalism, between prehistorical myth and the posthistorical shells of exchange value. Pensky abbreviates this schematism as Benjamin’s logic of “destruction, construction, and redemption” vis-à-vis the “trash of history.” The constellation of these remnants hinges on an identification of the “interruptive, shocking moments lodged in the anamnestic recovery of the everyday, by which the everyday itself is revealed as strange, mythic, and artificial” (199).

7 On the significance of theology for Benjamin and Adorno, see Kaufmann. Kaufmann notes that the anglophone criticism of Adorno tends to sidestep its theological aspects, influenced by Benjamin (62).

8 Rabinbach observes that in the 1920s and 30s, Bloch and Benjamin “represented the warm current in the cold sea of European Marxism. The ‘anarchic breeze’ of Jewish messianism blew fresh air into the house that Stalin built” (122). However, Benjamin’s “affinity to anarchism,” as Rabinbach suggests, lends itself to a repudiation of politics as essentially nihilist violence in contradistinction to Bloch’s “activist” view.

9 Rabinbach is citing Benjamin, “Zur Kritik der Gewalt,” Gesam-
This assessment contrasts with Buck-Morss’s emphasis on the “political” character of the dialectical image in the context of the Arcades Project. “The dialectic,” Buck-Morss asserts, “allowed the superimposition of fleeting images, present and past, that made both come alive in terms of revolutionary meaning” (Buck-Morss 220). In Buck-Morss’s reading, the dialectical image is a “presentation of the historical object within a charged force field of past and present, which produces political electricity in a ‘lightening flash’ of truth.” The “temporal nucleus” of this truth “is lodged in both the known and the knower.” This nucleus becomes “politically charged” and “polarized dialectically” in a tension-filled constellation with the present as “a force field” between the “fore-history” of objects as estranged prototypes of the present and their “after history” in the traces left behind in the course of cultural transmission. The conflict between them permits utopian images of past objects to be read in the present as truth, which is actualized “in the political sense—as ‘presence of mind’ (Geistesgegenwart).” By virtue of this dialectic, the past is held fast as “a flashing image, in the now of recognition [im Jetzt der Erkenntbarkeit]” that jolts “the dreaming collective into a political ‘awakening’” (Buck-Morss 219, citing Das Passagen-Werk 594, 598, 574, 591–92, 577, my emphases).

In “The Messianic Idea in Kabbalism,” Scholem observes that under the influence of religious and political liberalism and an attempt to adapt messianic conceptions to the ideals of the French Revolution, the messianic ideal came to be associated with the idea of humans’ unassisted progress in the universe, “leading to the ultimate liberation of all the goodness and nobility hidden within [them]” (37).

Pensky insists on the need to distinguish between an “allegorical image, which is melancholic, and a dialectical image, which cannot be” (211). Because the former entails the “arbitrary assignation of meaning,” it risks losing its potential for critical-messianic insight “and will decay into hypersubjective brooding, self-commodification, acedia, political passivity” (211–12).

Buck-Morss notes the resonance between Benjamin’s concept of natural history and Adorno’s 1932 lecture titled “The Idea of Natural History,” where he offers a similarly dialectical formulation as a Marxist corrective to Martin Heidegger’s emphasis on “historicity as the nature of Being.” Adorno writes: “[T]he moments of nature and history do not disappear into each other, but break simultaneously out of each other and cross each other in such a way that what is natural emerges as a sign for history, and history, where it appears most historical, appears as a sign for nature” (qtd. by Buck-Morss 59; Adorno, “Die Idee” 560–61).

I am paraphrasing Bracken 542.

In the context of his exegesis of Genesis in “On Language as Such and the Language of Man,” Benjamin interprets the fall, according to Howard Caygill, as “the descent from truth as transformation to knowledge as judgment” (21). “In the Fall,” Caygill writes, “human language departs from naming
and expressing other languages through translation and begins autarchically to create spiritual essences” (19). He enumerates three consequences of this descent: it establishes the distinction between the speaker and language, which reduces the latter to communication; it destabilizes human language by introducing the prospect of deception and dissemblance, which establishes the need for judgment along with the attendant abstractions of “good” and “evil”; it abrogates the language of things to man, which “leads human language into the folly of Babel, and reduces the languages of nature to silence” (20).

16 Likewise, Pensky notes that critical illumination for Benjamin “can only ‘struggle’ against the night [the darkness of myth] by the subtlest dialectic in which the form and content of myth and mythical language itself could yield up the messianic originary truth concealed within it” (46).

17 In “Benjamin, Cinema and Experience: ‘The Blue Flower in the Land of Technology,’” Hansen argues that his writings in the 1930s concerning “experiential poverty” (Erfahrungsarmut) are marked by a problematic slip-page between a historical phenomenology tracing the decline of experience and the political endorsement of such a decline for the sake of what he calls a “new, positive concept of barbarism” (Hansen 186 citing Benjamin’s “Erfahrung und Armut” 215–19).

18 Bracken is citing Benjamin’s 1921 fragment “Language and Logic” where he quotes Hermann Günther citing S. Oldenburg’s Budhha (1906), Weltanschauung der Brahmanischen Texte (1919), and Satapatha Brahmana XI. The full quotation reads: “In olden times in particular, names and words are something like a spiritual substance, at all events something real, actual, existing, something that was felt to have the same value as body and soul” (Günther, Von der Sprache der Götter und Geister 5; qtd. in Benjamin, Selected Writings 1, 274–75).

19 “To the extent that Benjamin’s philosophy of language resembles magic,” Bracken observes, “it mimics the processes of magical thought” (531). It is this magical notion of the material, according to Bracken, that most prominently distinguishes Benjamin’s standpoint on commodity fetishism from Marx’s. For if Marx criticizes the social forces occulted by the red shoes spotlighted on the storefront window parapet, Benjamin, as Bracken suggests, views the social itself as the demonic manifestation of powers that mute the language of things. Bracken’s discussion of magical critique draws on Benjamin’s 1930 outline for a book under the heading “False Criticism” along with a fragment from the same period titled “Criticism as the Fundamental Discipline of Literary History” (Selected Writings 2, 408, 415, and 416).

20 Scholem quotes Jean Selz’s observation to the effect that Benjamin “investigated and considered every word from all sides and thereby uncovered an unexpected meaning in the single syllable” (Walter Benjamin und sein Engel 50).

21 As Kaufmann observes, Benjamin’s attempts “to get beyond the Kantian ban on the cognition of the transcendent” demonstrate that he wants to sustain the distinction between the phenomenal and the noumenal, the immanent and the transcendent. It is this “theological impulse” to protect
the “transcendent from any incursions by the immanent,” Kaufmann argues, that guides Benjamin’s understanding of prelapsarian and postlapsarian language (66). Kaufmann’s analysis is valuable for its insight into the ways in which Benjamin’s theology is mediated by the neo-Kantianism of his teacher, Hermann Cohen. For an exhaustive treatment of Benjamin’s relationship with Cohen, see also Deubermankowsky.

According to Caygill, Benjamin’s extension of Kant “traces the removal of the absolute,” or what Kaufmann calls the transcendent, “through the warp, distortions and exclusions of a bereft experience” (26). This extension not only does away with the distinction between the faculties of intuition and understanding in Kant (24), and between intuition and the spiritual; it also puts Benjamin at risk of falling prey to either a “redemptive idealism or the melancholic endless task of the collector of scattered fragments” (26).

22 I have modified the employment of italics to reflect the format of the German version.

23 Pensky observes that “Benjamin recognized that both origin and dialectical image are descendants of the Goethean Urphänomen, perhaps more than he had been able to perceive ten years earlier.” He cites Benjamin’s notes to the Passagenwerk to the effect that he realized that his own concept of origins in the Trauerspiel study “is a strict and compelling transfer of this first principle of Goethe’s from the realm of nature to that of history” (Pensky 218 citing Benjamin GS 5, 577, N2a, 4). According to Pensky, there is something “unbidden” about the “sudden character of the ineffable” in Benjamin’s characterization of the dialectical image (under Goethe’s influence) as a “primal event, carried over from the pagan context of nature into the Jewish concept of history.” This unbiddenness is so palpable in Benjamin’s notes that it is “tempting to regard the dialectical images as a truly theological event, and the critic as little more than a sort of region of disclosure in which this event transpires” (218).

24 Hansen contends that this affirmation of the decline of aura that limns cult objects and original paintings denies the potential value of aesthetic experience to the masses (thereby leaving it to the enemy to exploit), which cuts off an indispensable impulse in Benjamin’s own thought (186).

25 This consonance is reflected more strongly in the English translation of both einzig and einmalig as unique.

26 Benjamin confesses to “a period of impotence before the city” that he blames on a very poor sense of direction and his mother’s insistence on thrusting his “disinclination to perceive this fact” under his nose. He writes:

On her I lay the blame for my inability even today to make a cup of coffee; to her propensity for turning the most insignificant items of conduct into tests of my aptitude for practical life I owe the dreamy recalcitrance with which I accompanied her as we walked through the streets, rarely frequented by me, of the city center. But to this resistance in turn is due who knows how much that underlies my present intercourse with the city’s streets. (“A Berlin Chronicle” 4)

27 Given his fascination with prerational states, it is not surprising that Benjamin became interested
in surrealism as an attempt to stimulate urhistorical affinities. As Pensky argues, it could not take him far enough, since the surrealists were incapable “of transposing the shock of the profane illumination from the model of dream to that of waking” (200). Keya Ganguly reproaches “latter-day enthusiasts” who cite Benjamin’s predilection toward surrealist strategies of defamiliarization “to authorize their proclamations about cultural subversion” (260). Ganguly’s essay targets uncritical celebrations of his “subversive” potential, which are odd given the secular ethos of cultural criticism that would deride any writer other than Benjamin for claiming, as he does in the “Theologico-Political Fragment,” that “[o]nly the Messiah himself consummates all history, in the sense that he alone redeems, completes, creates its relation to the Messianic.” It is for this reason, then, that “nothing historical can relate itself on its own account to anything Messianic” (312).

28 I am borrowing Pensky’s phrasing here (187).

29 Freud is citing Ernst Jentsch’s 1906 essay “The Psychology of the Uncanny.”

30 As Hansen suggests, this logic is consonant with his figuration of the “destructive ‘masculine’ gesture of allegory, the mortifying grasp of knowledge, of critical reading” (214).

31 For a more nuanced and substantive reading of the figuration of the feminine in Horkheimer and Adorno’s Dialectic of Enlightenment, see Robyn Marasco’s “Already the Effect of the Whip: Critical Theory and the Feminine Ideal” in this issue.

32 In Hansen’s words, “although film as a medium enhances the historical demolition of aura, its particular form of indexical mediation enables it to lend a physiognomic expression to objects, to make second nature return the look, similar to auratic experience in phenomena of the first” (Hansen 209–10).

33 Physiognomy, as Richter and Rainer Nägele have recently argued, inscribes and structures the relationship between the human form and language whereby the self, as Richter notes, is “aporetically traversed” by the semiotic nature of its body, which constructs and disarticulates it (54). This traversal translates into historiography since “to write history means to give dates their physiognomy” (154, citing “N” 67; Gesammelte 5, 595). For an alternative reading of Gesichtsbild as it relates to Benjamin’s concept of the image, see Jacobs, particularly ch. 5, “The Image of Proust.”

34 Crystal Bartolovich criticizes readings that make Benjamin into a poststructuralist “avant la lettre” while ignoring the ways in which his class consciousness explicitly informs his critique of capitalism. Bartolovich’s analysis focuses on Benjamin’s description of a childhood household object—a sculpture of a “Moor” in a gondola holding an oar in one hand and a golden bowl in the other—as an illustration of a reading practice that would be useful to anti-imperialist critique. See Bartolovich.

35 See, for example, Buck-Morss, Dreamworld and Chisholm, Queer Constellations. Chisholm redeems Benjamin from the symptoms of his own “second nature” by identifying the power of sexual difference and desire to animate the physiognomy of urban culture.
Her reading adapts Buck-Morss’s schematism of the dialectical image from *The Dialectics of Seeing* to constellate an emerging genre of queer literature that attests to the libidinal motility of city life. Though it engages in a form of affect redemption following Benjamin’s materialist model, Chisholm’s use of the dialectical image is not goaded by the repressed pre-Oedipal relation to the mother that haunts his understanding of aura; neither is it mired in the pessimistic ethics of the Jewish messianic tradition that compels his abstraction of politics. Rather, in focusing on literature that maps the city “through the eyes of cruising gays and lesbians,” Chisholm’s dialectical readings permit shocking glimpses of the power grid of capitalist market forces that limit the potential for an emancipatory and/or subversive politics. These glimpses reveal the ways in which surveillance and gentrification not only exceptionalize and cover over the desire that spurs queer spatial practices and the sites they create for display, communion, or community; Chisholm also identifies how such forces extract the power of queer desire to shape the phantasmagoric landscapes of commodity fetishism. In consonance with Benjamin’s self-stylization as a flaneur in “The Berlin Chronicle,” the narrators in the novels of Neil Bartlett, Sarah Schulman, Eileen Myles, and Gail Scott walk the streets of Manhattan, London, Paris, and Montreal, retracing queer haunts of the past and the libidinal trajectories that connect different times and spaces in order to subject them to a “retrospective reckoning” (254). In some moments, this reckoning affectively reactivates involuntary memories of buried promise and traumatic persecution; in others, the irreversible effects of forgetting propel a melancholic surrender to status quo sedimentations. *Queer Constellations* formalizes this oscillation as one of the principal motifs of a self-consciously urban literary genre.

Rabinbach writes: “It is characteristic of modern culture that it constantly devours its own images, even the image of apocalypse itself. If it is difficult to appreciate the urgency of the cultural criticism of the 1920s and 1930s, it is not because it has become less meaningful, but because the catastrophe has become a permanent fixture—the apocalypse is boring. Worse, its image is ubiquitous in the culture industry” (124).

**Works Cited**


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