A Self of One's Own?

Only where man is essentially already subject does there exist the possibility of his slipping into the aberration of subjectivism in the sense of individualism. But also, only where man remains subject does the positive struggle against individualism and for the community as the sphere of those goals that govern all achievement and usefulness have any meaning.

> —MARTIN HEIDEGGER, "The Age of the World Picture"

He asked her one night
which one of herselves was sleeping with him.
And all she could reply was: this one."

> —CARRIE OLIVIA ADAMS, "Vermilion" in *A Useless Window*

Our identity is always a case of mistaken identity.

> —MELANIE KLEIN, in A. S. Weiss, *The Aesthetics of Excess*

Consider the little games lovers play with each other. You know the kind: "Would you still love me if I was in a horrible accident and lost both my legs? Or if my face became paralyzed and I always spoke like *this*? Or if I lost my job and had to clean toilets? Or if I suddenly started wearing those jeans with the transparent pockets we saw yesterday in that shop window?" The perfectly reasonable assumption is that beneath this litany of horrors is a unique being worthy of being loved, a being immune from physical distortion or fashion disasters. But what is it exactly that we love about this being, if we cannot confidently locate a definable essence? Are we happy to just answer, "Their soul"? Some kind of intangible kernel of being? If so, then how do we assimilate the trauma of the second love? How do we account for the insult of multiplicity, as discussed in the previous chapter?

The ever reductionist Alain de Botton sums up the problem quite succinctly in his book *Essays in Love*: "Once we locate beauty in the eye of the beholder, what will happen when the observer looks elsewhere?" (1994,

101). Clearly, love is not simply the harmonious blending of two complementary contents—the contents of our unique individualities. We could not find a less appropriate symbol than the combination of yin and yang to represent the subtextual decodings of the lover's discourse, since the complementarity is too Neoplatonic, too complicitous with the discourse itself.

"There but for the grace of God go I," states the folk wisdom, recognizing the invisible contingencies which separate us from our neighbors (an aphorism which shares a rhetorical kinship with the deceptively profound "If it's not one thing, it's another." A lottery ticket, a different science teacher, an allergy to spaniels, an unassuming foreskin, and, indeed, the Grace of God itself may be the only things which we can point to as the bases of distinguishing Tom from Dick from Harriet.[1]

The crucial move, however, is to make this statement stand *without* relying on the naïve onto-liberalism that would posit a shared substance, specifically "humanity," which is only then, through life's trials and tribulations, imprinted with "difference" (i.e., identity). The trick is not to advocate a *Homo generica*, or Home-Brand Humanity, which exists a priori to experiential grids such as ethnicity, class, and gender, only then to be shaped through time. Instead, we must give serious thought to a constitutive difference at the very origin (Stiegler would say "default") of being, which *itself* is the medium of transmission—to share the fact that we have nothing to share, not even our somatic structures, since these can be radically revised through birth, injury, surgery, or design.[2]

This is all to say that some very complicated maneuvers are being made whenever we utter the personal pronoun "*I*." Indeed, the mysterious inconsistencies of deixis challenge the authority of Descartes's "I think, therefore I am" by stalling any self-evident logic at the dictum's very first word (the first *letter*, even!).

To illustrate this a little further, it seems useful to turn to that different kind of default: literature. In his novel *The Secret Agent*, Joseph Conrad invites the reader to an Italian restaurant in London, which we see through the eyes of the assistant commissioner of police:

> The patrons of the place had lost in the frequentation of fraudulent cookery all their national and private characteristics. And this was strange, since the Italian restaurant is such a peculiarly British institution. But these people were as denationalized as the dishes set before them with every circumstance of unstamped respectability. Neither was their personality stamped in any way, professionally,

socially, or racially. They seemed creat
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socially, or racially. They seemed created for the Italian restaurant, unless the Italian restaurant had been perchance created for them. But that last hypothesis was unthinkable, since one could not place them anywhere outside those special establishments. One never met these enigmatical persons elsewhere. It was impossible to form a precise idea what occupations they followed by day and where they went to bed at night. And he himself had become unplaced. (1968, 149)

This is a beautiful example of the diluted globalism that precedes "inessential commonality" and of the latter's challenge to identity forged primarily through nationality. Here whateverbeing emerges inside that most generic of spaces, the Italian restaurant, which, despite Marinetti's attempts to the contrary in his *Futurist Cookbook*, bears only the most tokenistic stamp of its ethnic origins. Just as people are born in America every day with no other apparent purpose than to buy and wear Gap clothing, the citizens of the coming community emerge from the sheer success of capitalism, growing like poisonous mushrooms within the cracks of Empire. To Conrad's example we could add Vladimir Nabokov's *Bend Sinister*, which depicts a police state "where everybody is merely an anagram of everybody else" (in 1991, 353); just as Joan Riviere writes: "There is no such thing as a single human being, pure and simple, unmixed with other human beings . . . [for] other persons are in fact . . . parts of ourselves. . . . We are members of one another" (in Kilgour 1990, 240).

Instances continue to multiply, giving way to both claustrophobia and agoraphobia. In a confessional letter Keats admitted, "When I am in a room with People if I ever am free from speculating on creations of my own brain, then not myself goes home to myself: but the identity of every one in the room begins so to press upon me that I am in a very little time annihilated" (in Agamben 1999a, 113). Georges Bataille writes: "A man who finds himself among others is irritated because he does not know why he is not one of the others. In bed next to a girl he loves, he forgets that he does not know why he is himself instead of the body he touches. Without knowing it, he suffers from the mental darkness that keeps him from screaming that he himself is the girl who forgets his presence while shuddering in his arms" (1985, 6).

Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* depicts a similar moment of threatening dissolution as the protagonist eats some cake and tea with her colleagues,

their fluidity sustained somewhere within by bones, without by a carapace of clothing and makeup. What peculiar creatures they were; and the continual flux between the outside and the inside, taking things in, giving them out, chewing, words, potato chips, burps, grease, hair, babies, milk, excrement, cookies, vomit, coffee, tomato-juice, blood, tea, sweat, liquor, tears, and garbage. . . . For an instant she felt them, their identities, almost their substance, pass over her head like a wave. At some time she would be—or no, already she was like that too; she was one of them, her body the same, identical, merged with that other flesh that choked the air in the flowered room with its sweet organic scent; she felt suffocated by this thick sargosso-sea of femininity. She drew a deep breath, clenching her body and her mind back into her self like some tactile sea-creature withdrawing its tentacles; she wanted something solid, clear: a man; she wanted Peter in the room so that she could put her hand out and hold on to him to keep from being sucked down. Lucy had a gold bangle on one arm. Marian focussed her eyes on it, concentrating on it as though she was drawing its hard gold circle around herself, a fixed barrier between herself and that liquid amorphous other. (1969, 167)

If no woman is an island, it is possible to be drowned in a sea of femininity during a distinctly Freudian panic. Hence the protagonist's acquiescence to a masculine life buoy to shore up a fragile identity. Gender is obviously paramount in this example, and I have no wish to discount its importance. However, as with Deleuze's essences (discussed below), identity can be hermaphroditic, even after Zeus's vindictive surgery.

To get married, or otherwise co-habituate, is to enter into a more complex assemblage: that of the couple. Thus, we suddenly become a hyphenated being: Tim-and-Tess, Claire-and-Phil, George-and-Mildred, and even "Billary," "Bennifer" and "TomKat."[3] (Not to mention the fascinating overlaps between identical twins, which seem to take the ontic-origami of "the fold" to yet another level.) The self and the other become far more symbiotic.

No doubt the list of interpersonal interpenetrations is as inexhaustible as the people who record and inspire them. Together they reinforce the suspicion that our modern spin on identity is but an echo of the ancient attitude towards the same: Humanity represents only one part—and an unstable one at that—of the vast Cosmic Recycling Program.

On Essence, (or "The Immortal in Another Way")

For a hundred years, (literary) madness has been thought to consist in Rimbaud's "Je est un autre": madness is an experience of depersonalization. For me as an

amorous subject, it is quite the contrary
to keep myself from doing so, which dri
is what I realize with horror.

—ROLAND BARTHES, *A*

There are only three questions asked in
what the fuck's going on?

—JOHN LANCHESTER, *T*

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amorous subject, it is quite the contrary: it is becoming a subject, being unable to keep myself from doing so, which drives me mad. I am not someone else: that is what I realize with horror.

—ROLAND BARTHES, *A Lover's Discourse*

There are only three questions asked in art: who am I? And who are you? And what the fuck's going on?

—JOHN LANCHESTER, *The Debt to Pleasure*

I'm sitting next to a young woman on a crowded train. She starts complaining loudly to her gum-chewing friend sitting opposite. "I hate crowds," she says, as if, by some act of sheer will, she is somehow exempt from comprising part of it. By audibly articulating her displeasure, it seems she is attempting to invoke a spell to ward off an excess of otherness encroaching on her shopping bags and much vaunted "personal space." Mercifully, there are fewer people on my return journey. This time there are two young girls, about seven years old, captivated by a station billboard for a pair of women's shoes. The model stares through the window like an indifferent airbrushed Valkyrie bearing an emphatic but enigmatic message for every person who meets her unfocused stare. "She's beautiful," announces one of the girls, before adding, "I'm her." The other girl objects: "No you're not. *I'm* her." The first girl to speak—possibly a future leader in the burgeoning science of conflict resolution—finishes the matter by stating, "Okay. We're *both* her." Taken together, these two scenes capture more than just the mutual reinforcement of identification and advertising, for they speak of competing logics when confronted by alterity. In both cases the other is excessive: the first in terms of quantity, the second in terms of insistence or presence. And both cases show that the traditional existential anxieties expressed in the two epigraphs that introduce this chapter seep into the everyday language of adults and children alike.

For a number of years now, it has been something of a heresy, at least in the halls of "progressive" humanities departments, to suggest the existence of an essence. The concept itself, implying a stable property or quality which belongs to and defines an object, goes against the grain of the large share of post-structuralist theory which seeks to emphasize the "shifting, fluidic, Heraclitean flux" of postmodern existence. Certain hijackings of Lacan in particular have used subjectivity itself as the deconstruction site for the modern-liberal-enlightenment unit of the self, which has hitherto been viewed as stable, autonomous, sovereign, and ultimately atomic.

Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, for instance, lament the self-fulfilling–prophetic trajectory of so-called Western history "from Plato-to-NATO" (2002, 14). However, if we take the time to read the thinker named in the first of these terms carefully, a less coherent picture emerges. Indeed, we would be hard-pressed to find a more cogent portrayal of "multiplicity" than that provided by Diotima, the wise woman of Mantineia, speaking to Socrates in the *The Symposium*:

> The new is always left in the place of the old. For even in the same individual there is succession and not absolute unity: a man is called the same; but yet in the short interval which elapses between youth and age, and in which every animal is said to have life and identity, he is undergoing a perpetual process of loss and reparation—hair, flesh, bones, blood, and the whole body are always changing. And this is true not only of the body, but also of the soul, whose habits, tempers, opinions, desires, pleasures, pains, fears, never remain the same in any one of us, but are always coming and going. And what is yet more surprising is, that this is also true of knowledge; and not only does knowledge in general come and go, so that in this respect we are never the same; but particular knowledge also experiences a like change. For what is implied in the word "recollection," but the departure of knowledge, which is ever being forgotten, and is renewed and preserved by recollection, appearing to be the same although in reality new, according to that law of succession by which all mortal things are preserved, not by absolute sameness of existence, but by substitution, the old worn-out mortality leaving another new and similar one behind—unlike the immortal in this, which is always the same and not another? And in this way, Socrates, the mortal body, or mortal anything, partakes of immortality; but the immortal in another way. Marvel not then at the love which all men have of their offspring; for that universal love and interest is for the sake of immortality. (1999, 741–42)

Nevertheless, the bulk of readings of Descartes, Kant, and Hegel have produced a self with an essence, something unique to each person and located somewhere in either the mind, the heart, or the soul. In contrast to the B-movie histrionics of the "postmodern onion people"—who can shed layer upon layer without revealing a "true" kernel of selfhood—the more traditional, basic democratic unit (one monad, one vote) is the proud owner of an essence. Indeed, this latter notion has been so prevalent and persistent that I feel safe in saying that the reader need only check the current pop charts for a singer (alternatively, check the current talk shows for an expert guest) who advises the public to "be true to themselves." It is an individual's essence, unsullied by others, to which such people claim fidelity.

Beyond the metaphors of onions [...] tive conceptions of essence—Deleuz[...] prison of selfhood, just as Foucault fi[...] soul. In contrast to those who want [...] the hostile charge of "essentialism," I [...] to avoid making the mistake of throwi[...]

We are already familiar with the cruc[...] book's introduction, concerning the ga[...] spectacular gang caused such a commo[...] the narrator that he had trouble isolati[...] effect created a lasting impression of [...] of sheer presence, prior to the stamps [...] to distinguish between them. But what [...] tion? What can we discover *beneath* [...] unsettled?

It is impossible to adequately summa[...] presentation of "essence" in *Proust and* [...] count the way his book playfully tempt[...] Deleuzian transcendentalism or aestheti[...] But we must nevertheless attempt to ha[...] in which this particular essence circulate[...] in order to "work through" the trauma [...] begins with the deceptively straightforw[...] ing is nothing without an ideal essence t[...] the exemplary case of the artist—specif[...] "the past as it is preserved in itself . . [...] eternity"—Deleuze considers the vexe[...] ousy, and an artistic apprenticeship to si[...] tory messages from (almost) irreconcilab[...]

> transcend the states of subjectivity no less [...] the essence that constitutes the sign insofa[...] ting it; it is the essence that constitutes me[...] subject apprehending it. It is the essence t[...] ship or the final revelation. (38)

This "final revelation" amounts to a ki[...] point, in that essence "is not something [...]

Beyond the metaphors of onions versus kernels, however, exist alternative conceptions of essence—Deleuze's in particular, freeing it from the prison of selfhood, just as Foucault freed the flesh from the prison of the soul. In contrast to those who want to throw out essence completely via the hostile charge of "essentialism," Deleuze's reading of Proust allows us to avoid making the mistake of throwing the bathwater out with the baby.

We are already familiar with the crucial passage in Proust, quoted in this book's introduction, concerning the gaggle of girls on Balbec's beach. This spectacular gang caused such a commotion within the internal vibrations of the narrator that he had trouble isolating one girl from the other. Their net effect created a lasting impression of an inchoate and gestalt arrangement of sheer presence, prior to the stamps of personality which are usually used to distinguish between them. But what is it that lurks *behind* such an apparition? What can we discover *beneath* the sands, which have become so unsettled?

It is impossible to adequately summarize Deleuze's delicate and complex presentation of "essence" in *Proust and Signs*, especially if we take into account the way his book playfully tempts the reader to see a distinctly non-Deleuzian transcendentalism or aestheticism at work in the ideas presented. But we must nevertheless attempt to harness a hazy conception of the way in which this particular essence circulates around and throughout our topic in order to "work through" the trauma of the second love. Indeed, Deleuze begins with the deceptively straightforward statement that "material meaning is nothing without an ideal essence that it incarnates" (2000, 13). Taking the exemplary case of the artist—specifically, Proust's attempts to salvage "the past as it is preserved in itself . . . [as] the instantaneous image of eternity"—Deleuze considers the vexed relations between memory, jealousy, and an artistic apprenticeship to signs constantly beaming contradictory messages from (almost) irreconcilable worlds. Thus, essences

> transcend the states of subjectivity no less than the properties of the object. It is the essence that constitutes the sign insofar as it is irreducible to the object emitting it; it is the essence that constitutes meaning insofar as it is irreducible to the subject apprehending it. It is the essence that is the last word of the apprenticeship or the final revelation. (38)

This "final revelation" amounts to a kind of meta–or anti–Archimedean point, in that essence "is not something seen but a kind of superior view-

point" (110). Indeed, "the viewpoint remains superior to the person who assumes it or guarantees the identity of all those who attain it. *It is not individual, but on the contrary a principle of individuation*" (110, my emphasis).[4]

Until this essence is understood, however, "we always fall back into the trap of the object, into the snare of subjectivity" (38). Essence thus designates the unity of sign and meaning as revealed in the beloved or the work of art. But what does this really tell us? "What is an essence as revealed in the work of art? It is a difference, the absolute and ultimate Difference. Difference is what constitutes being, what makes us conceive being" (41).

Crucially (and this is what distinguishes Deleuze's schema from a transcendental or mystical concept), is his insistence that essence "does not exist outside the subject expressing it, but it is expressed as the essence not of the subject but of Being, or of the region of Being that is revealed to the subject" (43). Essence is "deeper than the subject," emitting signs *through* the subject to other subjects, although it cannot exist outside the subject. It is immanent to the system. Deleuze thus rephrases the existentialist maxim "Existence before essence" to something resembling "Existence *as* essence."[5]

Perhaps another example would be helpful at this point. Try to recall that moment when you look into your beloved's eyes and suddenly, *uncannily*, "see" a former love peering out at you. Or when you see a brother in the gestures of his sister, or the squint of a mother in her daughter. In these simplistic shortcuts we can understand how essence forges itself at the crux between difference and repetition.[6] Whether we have only two lovers, or two hundred (and we *always* have at least two, unless we happen to actually shack up exclusively with our mothers), then we begin to sense how "each love contributes its difference, which was already included in the preceding love, and all the differences are contained in a primordial image that we unceasingly reproduce at different levels and repeat as the intelligible law of all our loves" (68).[7]

Essence is thus the law of love's seriality, and the secret (often deceptive) signs that each successive lover presents to us, a secret that moves from assumed singularity to "an increasingly greater generality" (67). This is why, in Proust's words, "We shall need, with the next woman, the same morning walks" (in Deleuze, 2000, 69). Essence, therefore, acts as the fuel for an ultimately *machinic* relationship to relationships themselves. Suffer-

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ing, jealousy, joy, confusion, doubt, and panic are no doubt experienced as unique and indeed lie at "the heart of a specific love." However, all these codified responses form a resonance machine within the pure potentiality, multiplicity, and contingency of amorous encounters.

Once again: Love is e(x)ternal. For Deleuze as for Proust, "nothing shows the externality of the choice better than the contingency that governs the identity of the beloved" (76). Resonating with Lola's nocturnal query "Why me?" the question of essence funnels back to the precariousness of subject-object overlaps and feedbacks: "[B]y what accident is it that Albertine incarnates essence when another girl might have done so just as well?" (76). Not only that, but who is this "I" who allegedly does the choosing? Who is it, exactly, who succumbs to "the automatism of love"?

> We shall not ask who chooses. Certainly no self, because we ourselves are chosen, because a certain self is chosen each time that "we" choose a person to love, a suffering to experience, and each time this self is no less surprised to live or to relive, and to answer the call, whatever the delay. (127–28)

Thus, and this really is the heart of the matter:

> It is not the subject that explains essence, rather it is essence that implicates, envelops, wraps itself up in the subject. Rather, in coiling round itself, it is essence that constitutes subjectivity. It is not the individuals who constitute the world, but the worlds enveloped, the essences that constitute the individuals. . . . Essence is not only individual, it *individualizes*. (43)

For Deleuze the emphasis on essence means that it is not purely a matter of infinite substitutability (since it is profoundly "irreplaceable"), but rather constant repetition. It is precisely at this point that we can see how it may be possible to reconcile the trauma of the second love, since the singularity of personal experience is rescued through several machinic motions: an increasing generality, an apprenticeship to signs, and ultimately a revelatory relationship with (lost) time. These machines combine to produce certain truths, via the work of art (which itself is a machine).[8]

Thus, love is exposed as a matter of hieroglyphs and hermaphrodites.

Proust himself states, "Imagination and thought can be splendid machines in themselves, but they can be inert; it is suffering that then sets them in motion" (in Deleuze 2000, 147). Part of this motion is the media that es-

sence uses to manifest itself, since essence is comprised of "free substances that are expressed equally well through words, sounds, and colours" (47). Deleuze's valorization of the redemptive qualities of art seems more consistent with his own system when we remember that art and technology were only recently split by our own Zeus-like tendencies, and love itself may be the effort we bring to forging them back together. Paintbrushes, pianos, fountain pens, and laptop computers—these are what we use in place of Hephaestus's instruments to forge an encounter.

Indeed, according to media theorist Friedrich Kittler, love is primarily a matter of storage methods, so that art itself is figured as merely an ornate database of communication techniques. The information it stores (the lover's coding), however, always escapes the retrieval mechanisms of the day. He tells us:

> Only as long as the unchallenged and unrivaled medium of the book was able to simulate the storage of all possible data streams did love remain literature and literature love. . . . But a writer whose school teaches physics instead of philosophy objects. The combination of sensory data streams achieved by love is devoid of "permanence." It cannot be stored by any medium. Moreover, it loses "all individual character." That is, no real can pass through the filter of love. Which is why love does "not serve for the poet, for individual variety must be constantly present for him; he is compelled to use the sense sectors to their full extent," or, simply, to become a media technician among media technicians. . . . In other words: literature defects from erotics to stochastics, from red lips to white noise. (1999, 50–51, internal quotes from Rainer Maria Rilke)

As islands within the data stream, we feel our sense of individuality threatened by the global warming of "hot" media, such as the internet and other, less tangible networks. But this is no bad thing, as it leads to a recognition of whateverbeing and the junk coding both in our own DNA and in the lover's discourse itself.

So, just as Heidegger insists that the question concerning technology is nothing technological, we may suggest that "inessential commonality" is intrinsically a question of essence.

Divided and Entangled: The Coexistence of Coessences

> You will notice that I spoke of essence, just like Aristotle. So? That means that such old words are entirely usable.
>
> —JACQUES LACAN, *On Feminine Sexuality*

And so it seems that the term *essence* not automatically make contempora in Pavlovian fear at its mere mention context or precondition of/for mappi

In order to elucidate this constan question of technology in the form "The very being of man (both intern *cation*. To *be* means to *communicate*" (But what exactly is being communica transmitters and receivers is abandon polycentric, something where point encounter? *Communication* is then a l the feedback loop, which precedes u Lévy argues that airplanes are the a virtual network (1998)—in this case, know them can be considered as conci vectors.

While it is impossible to deny that nodes in a social network, the implica processed on the ontological level. brought into question at its very foun fatuous recognition of "influence," to self from its self. To borrow a conce the self is then exposed as an "imagir imagined aspect in this case is that th earlier). Just as the nation is unthinkabl developments such as print capitalism, the *exposure* of something felt to be ir from elsewhere, by anonymous—and p

> If "communication" is for us, today, suc word—if its theories are flourishing, if it the "mediatization" of the "media" brin tional vertigo, if one plays around with t the "message" and the "medium" out of nation, then it is because something is e> exposed] is the bare and "content"-less v it is the bare web of the *com-* (of the *telec*

And so it seems that the term *essence* can be redeployed in ways which should not automatically make contemporary cultural critics—who usually sweat in Pavlovian fear at its mere mention—nervous. Essence thus becomes the context or precondition of/for mapping the inessential.

In order to elucidate this constantly elusive point, let us return to the question of technology in the form of communication. Bakhtin tells us: "The very being of man (both internal and external) is a *profound communication*. To *be* means to *communicate*" (1984, 287). And, no doubt, vice versa. But what exactly is being communicated if the inadequate binary model of transmitters and receivers is abandoned for something more nuanced and polycentric, something where point A and point B do not precede their encounter? *Communication* is then a loose term for the flow of information, the feedback loop, which precedes us as thinking subjects.[9] Just as Pierre Lévy argues that airplanes are the actual manifestations of a preexisting virtual network (1998)—in this case, of global travel—human beings as we know them can be considered as concrete cases of already established media vectors.

While it is impossible to deny that as so-called individuals we make up nodes in a social network, the implications become more significant when processed on the ontological level. Here the coherent, molar entity is brought into question at its very foundations, enabling us to get beyond the fatuous recognition of "influence," to the constitutional alienation of the self from its self. To borrow a concept from Benedict Anderson (1991), the self is then exposed as an "imagined community": population 1. The imagined aspect in this case is that the individual is in-dividual (as we saw earlier). Just as the nation is unthinkable outside the advent of technological developments such as print capitalism, the self is equally impossible outside the *exposure* of something felt to be intimate and private, but bequeathed from elsewhere, by anonymous—and perhaps even sinister—donors.

If "communication" is for us, today, such an affair—in every sense of the word—if its theories are flourishing, if its technologies are being proliferated, if the "mediatization" of the "media" brings along with it an auto-communicational vertigo, if one plays around with the theme of the indistinctness between the "message" and the "medium" out of either a disenchanted or jubilant fascination, then it is because something is exposed or laid bare. In fact, [what is exposed] is the bare and "content"-less web of "communication." One could say it is the bare web of the *com-* (of the *telecom-*, said with an acknowledgment of its

independence); that is, it is *our* web or "us" as web or network, an *us* that is reticulated and spread out, with its extension for an essence and its spacing for a structure. (Nancy 2000, 28)

In other words, "Being is communication. But it remains to be known what 'communication' *is*" (28).

If some readers would prefer this notion be presented in the more familiar mode of dialectical logic, then we can rephrase it through Hans Jonas:

> This dialectic is precisely the nature of life in its basic organic sense. Its closure as a functional whole within the individual organism is, at the same time, correlative openness toward the world; its very separateness entails the faculty of communication; its segregation from the whole is the condition of its integration with the whole. . . . Only complex functional systems afford the inner autonomy that is required for greater power of self-determination, together with greater variety of inner states responding to the determinations which impinge on it from without. . . . Only by being sensitive can life be active, only by being exposed can it be autonomous. And this in direct ratio: the more individuality is focused in a self, the wider is its periphery of communication with other things; the more isolated, the more related it is. (in Hansen 2000, n.p.)

As noted already in passing, it seems barely coincidental that one of the first philosophers to present himself to the world under the sign of both shame and defiance—Rousseau, via his epoch-shaping *Confessions*—was also tempted to roam the streets of Turin and flash his genitals at the washerwomen who gathered by the town's well at twilight.[10] These dubious crepuscular compulsions (flashing, writing, confessing) underscore the importance of exposure to the modern project of self-narration and self-consciousness. Hence there is a correlation between wishing to expose one's deepest secrets (thereby solidifying those "events," in Badiou's sense, which form the magnetic poles of autobiography) and the urge to expose the body which is increasingly seen to harbor such experiences, hoarding them jealously for this fledgling self, as a squirrel gathers nuts for winter nourishment.[11] On this theme Nancy notes, "We happen as the opening itself, the dangerous fault line of a rupture" (2000, xii).[12]

Such exposure is also evoked by the anxiety-producing imperative of love, which contains within it the shadows and ghosts of that more recent technology photography. That is to say, the fear of rejection or replacement is haunted by that special effect known as double exposure, where different

times and places overlap in a single in[...]
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sentiment returned is to be exposed [...]
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Sylvia Agacinski gives: "This inadequ[...]
already the inadequacy of bodies, whi[...]
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16–17).

Agacinski qualifies this situation:

> All mammals' infants graft themselves [...]
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In concert with Nancy, Agamben, and [...]
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In essence, then, love is figured as [...]
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This basically comes down to the under[...]
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times and places overlap in a single image, thereby collapsing the singularity and integrity of each moment. Thus, to say "I love you" and not have the sentiment returned is to be exposed on the narcissistic level of psychology, but also on the vertiginous level of ontology. This is so for the simple reason Sylvia Agacinski gives: "This inadequacy of sexual and mortal existences is already the inadequacy of bodies, which are less separate than it might seem and which are, before anything else, excrescences of other bodies" (1991, 16–17).

Agacinski qualifies this situation:

All mammals' infants graft themselves to, or "plug themselves into," the body of their mothers while they breastfeed, such that each one is momentarily the organ of the other (and the infant is no less necessary to the breast than the breast to the infant). This troubling connection (one that troubles the opposition of the self and the other in the same way that sexual relations also trouble it) cannot be described as a subject/object relationship, any more than it allows one to say who or what is active or passive. (17)

In concert with Nancy, Agamben, and others, Agacinski believes that "the question *of the other* is only possible if the other is irreducibly plural, if it is *others*, and if they are not thought of in the perspective of an *us* (a collective subject)" (12). Moreover, she directly connects this insight with the "experience of what we call 'love,' an experience that cannot be thought of in terms of a 'bond' between two adequate concepts" (15). In other words, when we *fall* in love, we experience the vertiginous realization that existence is lived "in the mode of absence . . . entrusted to the other" (15). Thus, the ontological weakness of the subject is, at least for Agacinski, a precondition for falling in love (in contrast to the Cartesian or Kantian consciousness, which is free, autonomous, and capable of "resting upon itself").

In essence, then, love is figured as intimately and intrinsically *technical* and *communal*, since the weakness which nurtures its emergence is

to *hold* (to remain, to remain "standing," to be, to be stable . . .) only to find supports or props "outside of the self": the earth, the mother, but also any form of support one can think of, including all the prostheses usually classed as technical objects or instruments. (Only God is supposed to rest upon himself absolutely.) (16)

This basically comes down to the understanding that if we are to avoid the well-meaning, circular superficiality of certain existentialisms—"Who is

this I which exposes itself?"—it is necessary to ground the theory of exposure in a more sophisticated analytical framework. While several such are available, there are few more lucid accounts than Nancy's *Being Singular Plural*, which fleshes out Heidegger's *Mitsein* (with-being)—itself, according to Nancy himself, "still no more than a sketch" (2000, 44).[13] Nancy's book gives us a better sense of what is at stake in sharing singularities (or rather, the sharing *that is* singularity). Why, for instance, do people feel the urge to expose themselves, when we spend so much of our lives fearing exposure? Is the perverse thrill and/or relief of wallowing in controlled shame (exhibitionism) enough to account for that same pleasure in relief? Isn't something more subtle going on, challenging the very self-who-is-supposed-to-be-ashamed-via-exposure?

We often speak in very abstract terms, especially when discussing society at large. We utter sentences like "They say we should be eating less salt" or "They say miniskirts are back in." But who exactly is this "They"? The scientific community? Fashion designers? A loose conglomerate of experts? Well, the answer is both, all, and none, for "the they," as Heidegger calls them, are an empty category which functions as a particular horizon for ontic understanding. The *they* are the "subject" of everydayness and complicate the relationship of the I to the self. Rather than representing the mass of not-I's which form the anonymous backdrop for our own egocentric limelights, the they are "those from whom one mostly does not distinguish oneself, those among whom one is, too" (Heidegger 1996, 111).

For Heidegger, as for Nancy, the history of metaphysics has come up woefully short when attempting to think—or even acknowledge—the essential *with* that binds being together. *Being* in the singular does not precede being with other beings, they insist, but arises from this originary conjunction. "The world of Da-sein is *with-world*," writes Heidegger. "Being-in is *being-with* others" (112). As a necessary extension of this condition, "Knowing oneself is grounded in primordially understanding being-with" (116).[14]

Heidegger is at pains to delineate and encourage the authentic mode of being-one's-self—not, however, as a detachment of the self from the *they* (a breaking loose and declaration of independence) but, enigmatically, "*an existentiell modification of the they as an essential existential*" (122). It is around this point that many people's eyes glaze over, daunted by the sheer effort of

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keeping up with Heidegger's idiosyncratic vocabulary and his remarkably complex rendering of ontology. Indeed, if Nancy really believes *Mitsein* to be a sketch, we can only shudder in horror at the prospect of a more sophisticated portrait of proto-whateverbeing, perhaps springing from his own brow. However, Nancy's notion of being singular plural does indeed manage to map these concepts in a relatively intelligible way. Not only this, but he manages to counter Heidegger's "mistake" of beginning with *Dasein* before moving to *Mitsein* (and thereby avoids replicating the metaphysical hierarchy that Heidegger himself spent so much energy trying to undo).[15]

In presenting his theory of "this autistic multiplicity" (2000, xiii), Nancy sharpens the focus of our own discussion, in which humanity cannot be considered as something external to, and thereby superior to or in control of, information technology. Thus, "we *are* meaning in the sense that we are the element in which significations can be produced and circulate" (2, my emphasis). In simplified terms, the medium is the message, and the message is "us" (that is, "them"—since we are never coterminous with that self-narrativized construct known as "ourselves").

For Nancy the "plurality of beings is at the foundation of Being," and as a consequence, a "single being is a contradiction in terms" (12). For Agacinski, too: "The 'subject' only encounters the 'problem' of the other and of coexistence because it has begun by detaching itself (from the world and from others), and by forgetting that it is, before anything else, in-the-world and with-others. Nothing is more remarkable than this operation by which thought withdraws into itself and dis-engages itself from existence" (1991, 12). Because of this *originary* coexistence, meaning is immanent to its own circulation within the network. Without getting too involved in the question of "meaning," it is prudent to note that ontology and epistemology (that is, what we *are* and what we *know*) overlap through the primordial phenomenon of sharing. Thus, a recognition of plurality must occur before any attempt to understand the world, or else we are immediately sliding down Descartes's slippery slope toward atomism and ultimately even solipsism and psychosis.

Moreover, there is no "world" to comprehend in a holistic and representative sense—as Heidegger insisted in his discussion of the world picture[16]—simply because sense is produced in that transductive space enabling

"the spacing and intertwining of so many worlds" (Nancy 2000, 5). What we refer to so casually as *the world* is not the aggregate of its citizens, both animate and inanimate, but the intersections of each locality. Against all the rules of grammar and the ontological principles they assume, the subject actually experiences Being in the paradoxical mode of the "first person plural"—a kind of indiscrete individuation. And as with our own primal scene of the first handshake, this spacing—this *between*—"does not lead from one to the other; it constitutes no connective tissue, no cement, no bridge" (5).[17] In fact, we should cease seeing ourselves as either connected or unconnected, for such increasingly digital options are too binaristic to account for the quantum valences of relations. As with Lacan, encounters are neither centrifugal or centripetal, but "the *inter*lacing of strands whose extremities remain separate even at the center of the knot" (1999, 5).

Of course, in our own lives, we do not necessarily think explicitly in these terms. And yet, as I have tried to show thus far and will endeavor to do so in the pages that follow, many minor epiphanies emerging from the cultural fabric attest to an affirmation of being singular plural (another mode, I suggest, of whateverbeing). For Nancy and other like-minded thinkers, the founding tension is between the radical substitutability of the subject and the unique event of singularity. Indeed, one could be forgiven for thinking that the villainous figure of the "individual" has been booed off the panto-mime stage of contemporary Continental thought, only to be replaced by the garrulous hero of "singularity," a pale inversion of the universal figure it is supposed to usurp. Indeed, reading such material, it sometimes feels as if we find ourselves in a French-Italian remake of the *Life of Brian*: the as-sembled crowd prompted to admit, "Yes, we are all singularities" (followed by the single, desultory exception: "I'm not"). However, the difference be-tween the liberal-humanist individual and the emerging figure(s) of singu-larity is ultimately decisive—especially considering the latter's acknowledgment of interpersonal interpenetration *preceding* any conscious-ness of selfhood. So, while we may still be tempted to say of an eccentric friend, "When they made X, they threw out the mold," we are now forced to realize that the crucial presence within such a statement is not so much X as the *they*.

Such far-from-trivial qualifications, as always, become more clearly de-fined when we approach them through the prism of love and technology. Since what is essentially under discussion is the question of community—as

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essence—these other two terms will allow us to grasp how they are also in fact generated by each other from the outset (which should not be thought of as a locatable point of origin, in either time or space, but rather as the pre-creation *always already*).

Nancy tells us that for Heidegger, "curiosity is the frantic activity of passing from being to being in an insatiable sort of way, without ever being able to stop and think" (2000, 19). Such curiosity is the passion driving the seducer, who mistakes the "uncircumspective tarrying alongside" of carnal knowledge with that more elusive form of acquaintance, the "authentic understanding of others." From this distinction it is easy to see how vulnerable Heidegger's notion of curiosity is to moralistic, monogamous interpretations (since the emphasis on "passion" does indeed point to a thoroughly subject-centered attitude toward the other—precisely as an "other" to be discovered, conquered, consumed, and so on).

For Nancy the question is not passion, but *compassion*, for this latter term recalls "the contagion, the contact of being with one another in this turmoil. Compassion is not altruism, nor is it identification; it is the disturbance of violent relatedness" (xiii). Thus, "[i]t is no accident that sexual curiosity is an exemplary figure of curiosity and is, in fact, more than just a figure of it" (20). Consequently, the erotic encounter is as much an opening up, an exposure, of Being itself as the mutual offering of two autonomous beings. The ontic discourse of sharing bodily fluids according to capitalist economics is thus itself exposed as a flimsy soap opera compared to the ontological experience of sharing a moment according to the circulation of meaning.

But why only a moment and not the eternity of the lover's discourse? Well, without delving into the admittedly constitutive temporal dimension of this point, the matter relates to the randomness of social life and the intrinsic use-by dates of events. These are due, no doubt, to human mortality, but also to boredom, compulsion, obligation, "drifting apart," and however else we wish to figure the figure of Time Itself. (As Badiou says, "Randomness, from which every truth is woven, is the subject's material" [1991, 28].)

As if anticipating my own discussion of Wong Kar-wai and Haruki Murakami, Nancy notes, "It is never the case that I have met Pierre or Marie per se, but I have met him or her in such and such a 'form,' in such and such a 'state,' in such and such a 'mood,' and so on" (2000, 8). Thus, "being

in the mood for love" is more about the contingencies of context than about the contents of its characters:

> *Being singular plural* means the essence of Being is only as coessence. In turn, coessence, or *being-with* (being-with-many), designates the essence of the *co-*, or even more so, the *co-* (the *cum*) itself in the position or guise of an essence. In fact, coessentiality cannot consist in an assemblage of essences, where the essence of this assemblage as such remains to be determined. In relation to such an assemblage, the assembled essences would become [mere] accidents. Coessentiality signifies the essential sharing of essentiality, sharing in the guise of assembling, as it were. (30)

Deleuze states: "We wonder about what makes the individuality of an event: *a* life, *a* season, *a* wind, *a* battle, 5 o'clock. . . . We can call ecceities or hecceities these individuations that no longer constitute persons or 'egos.' And the question arises: Are we not such hecceities rather than 'egos'?" (1991, 95). Such rhetorical questions add weight to this general dismantling of the metaphysical building blocks of both romantic narrative and society itself, replacing the rationality of intention and will with the fundamental ventriloquism of our own thoughts. In this case, however, the puppet master is not God, nor even ideology or the Media, but the proverbial "next man" who could—in alternative circumstances or parallel universes—be "you."

Deleuze continues: "The imperatives and questions with which we are infused do not emanate from the I," since "another always thinks in me" (199–200). For those with a latent investment in the repressive apparatus required to maintain the illusion of homeostatic coherence within individual consciousness, this is a scary statement. But for those who, in contrast, believe that "the notion of subject has lost much of its interest on behalf of *pre-individual singularities and non-personal individuations*" (95), this is an intriguing and promising approach to questions of belonging.[18] Moreover, it becomes clearer why distressing "clinical" conditions, such as schizophrenia and multiple personality disorder, are reinflected as caricatures or excessive mutations of an ontological truth: a return of the repressed.

Let us take the example of Jimi Hendrix.

This historical figure is not simply the subject of a broader discussion—a now-deceased individual. When we talk of Jimi Hendrix, we are actually talking about "Jimi Hendrix": an assemblage of elements, including physi-

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ology (long fingers, left-handed coordination), "race" or ethnicity (diasporic African-American), technology (amplifiers, pickups, wahwah pedals, LSD), cultural events (Woodstock, Isle of Wight), plurality (audience, feedback), among a host of others. "Jimi Hendrix" is thus the quilting point for various discourse networks which have become emblematic of that cultural moment known simply as "the Sixties." Without belittling his undoubted and unprecedented talent, the term *genius* should be approached with caution, since it is saturated with the logic of the liberal-humanist "Man of Letters," an orientation which completely neglects the way brilliance or intelligence emerges dialogically from the clinamen, that is, from within a larger set of elements than the great Author or Artist himself (historically gendered as such). From this less familiar perspective, Jimi Hendrix is a spectacular node in the circuit (indeed, the node itself *as* circuit), himself part of a feedback effect as powerful and resonant as those between his Fender guitar and Marshall stack.

Similarly, we could point to the multitude of poets and musicians who talk of the strangely passive experience during the creation of "their" work. These testimonials are usually variations on the theme "The music was just flowing through me"—that is, from elsewhere. Art is less the fruit of a certain maturity and understanding than of the sparks given off by the hardwiring of the matrix itself (whether figured as langue, grammar, the noosphere, the collective unconscious, or whatever). The human element is most certainly an operator within this assemblage, with a certain amount of choice at his or her disposal ("I think I will use the blue paint rather than the orange"), but as any Freudian, ontologist, or systems theorist could tell us, our choices are very rarely "our own," pure and simple, exercised outside invisible psychosocial pressures.[19] (And here we see shades of Adam Smith's invisible hand, which moved from the external sphere of macroeconomics to the internal sphere of libidinal economies in the early twentieth century.)

As always, *those three little words* are never far from our discussion. Since for Nancy and others, "[p]resence is impossible except as copresence" (2000, 62), then

the relation as such is nothing other than its own representation, the symbolic is what is real in such a relation. By no means, however, is such a relationship the representation of something that is real . . . but the relation is, and is nothing other than, what is real in the representation—its effectiveness and its efficacy. (58)

The paradigm for this is, interchangeably, the utterance "I love you" and the enormous, jealous, ambivalent chain-love-letter addressed to ourselves known as the spectacle.[20]

Nancy asserts: "There is no society without the spectacle because society is the spectacle of itself," just as "the truth of the play of mirrors must be understood as the truth of the 'with.' In this sense, 'society' is 'spectacular'" (67–68). Love simultaneously traces the productive "limits" of incommensurability (considered as empirical boundaries only by the romantic trope of unity, fusion, transcendence, and so on) and "Being-together . . . defined by being-together-at-the-spectacle" (51).

The vacuum of democracy rests on the same premise: a universal subject without-qualities, and therefore without any political power or ontological clout whatsoever.[21] For Nietzsche this empty multiplicity is far from pleasant: "What is disagreeable and offends my modesty is that at bottom I am every name in history . . . I go everywhere in my student's coat, and here and there slap somebody on the shoulder and say, *Siamo contenti? Son dio ho fatto questa caricatura*" (in Durham 1998, 222). Yet, in *Ecco Homo*, Nietzsche's last "finished" manuscript, he passionately embraces the fact that he is every name in history. In a Dionysian precursor of Joyce's H.C.E. (Here Comes Everybody), Nietzsche seizes on the potential power of whateverbeing. For as soon as we accept the essential nature of being singular plural, we cannot help but take that next step and realize that "what will not be built any more henceforth, and cannot be built any more, is—a society in the old sense of that world. . . . *All of us are no longer material for a society*" (in Durham 1998, 220).

In Essential Commonality

We approach a society/ Without a society

—JOHN BROCKMAN, *Afterwords*

But we do not even say we . . . a we that would be without content.

—MARCEL PROUST, *Remembrance of Things Past*

Hopefully, we are now equipped to finally consider Agamben's notion of the coming community, especially his seductive call for an "inessential commonality." In the last section we broached the concept of an essence, a

belated recognition or unifying princip[le] which exists *through* the individual b[ut] individual. But how does such a notion in principle at least, all identity is grad[ual] and abusive conditioning, so that the cog in the military machine (as depic[ted] Can we say that the soldier, like th[e] of whateverbeing?[22]

Before we answer Yes, we must co[nsider] instance, whateverbeing is harnessed b[y] of the concept itself. In Deleuzian term[s] ized form of whateverbeing. But just as to break free from the harness of the stat[e] off its rider, whateverbeing will always [exceed?] the military mandate. Whateverbeing c[an] ganized attempt to defend or attack actu[al] traditional directive of the soldier.

The soldier has a sibling: the mystic d[istin]guishing qualities of self in order to diss[olve] This man or woman without content, w[ho like] the soldier, for both are, from a certain a[ngle?] community. Both act according to a prof[ession?] to *be* an essence rather than *have* an essenc[e] ity of a world where newborns are not eve[r] of selfhood on which we hang our evanesc[ent]

But it seems that these qualifications le[ad] not, in good faith, list the soldier or mysti[c] of whateverbeing—tricksters, fakes, assist[ants?] soldier and mystic are infinitely substituta[ble] the Same, not the Other. They try to ext[end?] And ultimately, this difference is decisive. belongs to a common body: the corps and t[he] they represent part of a transcendental ca[use?] selves as exemplars of whateverbeing. As o[p]posed to "something"—in this case the institution precedes individuation and exists as a suppl[ement]

belated recognition or unifying principle (an "immortality in another way") which exists *through* the individual but does not *belong* to any particular individual. But how does such a notion differ from, say, the Marines? Here, in principle at least, all identity is gradually extinguished through discipline and abusive conditioning, so that the soldier behaves like an unthinking cog in the military machine (as depicted in Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket*). Can we say that the soldier, like the character actor, is an exemplar of whateverbeing?[22]

Before we answer Yes, we must consider certain qualifications. In this instance, whateverbeing is harnessed by forces which pervert the potential of the concept itself. In Deleuzian terms, the soldier is a highly territorialized form of whateverbeing. But just as the war machine always threatens to break free from the harness of the state, as a wild horse struggles to throw off its rider, whateverbeing will always exceed the drills and procedures of the military mandate. Whateverbeing consistently deterritorializes any organized attempt to defend or attack actual territory, which, of course, is the traditional directive of the soldier.

The soldier has a sibling: the mystic disciple, who seeks to lose all distinguishing qualities of self in order to dissolve in the unity of the godhead. This man or woman without content, without ego, is the mirror image of the soldier, for both are, from a certain angle, possible subjects of a coming community. Both act according to a profound perception of what it means to *be* an essence rather than *have* an essence. And both point to the possibility of a world where newborns are not even given proper names, that marker of selfhood on which we hang our evanescent identities like on a meat hook.

But it seems that these qualifications lead to disqualification, for we cannot, in good faith, list the soldier or mystic alongside Agamben's exemplars of whateverbeing—tricksters, fakes, assistants, and 'toons.[23] Certainly, the soldier and mystic are infinitely substitutable, but they dwell in the place of the Same, not the Other. They try to extinguish or neutralize difference. And ultimately, this difference is decisive. The marine and the mystic each belongs to a common body: the corps and the corpus, respectively. As such, they represent part of a transcendental category and thus exclude themselves as exemplars of whateverbeing. As opposed to Deleuze's cosmology, "something"—in this case the institution of the military or religion—precedes individuation and exists as a supplement to the aggregate of indi-

viduals. In the coming community, essence cannot be conceived outside of its own incarnation(s).

To the mystic and the marine, the loss of self within a greater essence can be a form of *communion*—something anathema to contemporary critiques of community. For them this loss of ego is still a utopian prospect. To the liberal-humanist, in contrast, this scenario is a dystopian vision of pseudo-subjects, with only dronelike status in the service of a faceless state, tyrannical leader, or delusional opiate. How could love flourish in such a situation? they ask. The simple answer is that it cannot, which is no reason to reject the scenario outright. We must seriously consider the suggestion that love (or at least the assumptions of the lover's discourse—the conditions which produce it in its current form) acts as a moralistic barrier *against* our struggle with the nationalisms and factional religions which currently and consistently wreak havoc on this world.

According to its current coding, love allows a person to recognize, and thus treasure, the essence of another person. Whateverbeing would find this notion nonsensical, for the reasons detailed thus far. Love exists in the barracks or the ashram only when it is channeled toward a more abstract principle (the mother country for the soldier, and the godhead for the mystic). This is still a dangerous situation, due to the co-option by forces which attempt to harness such love and redirect it into indignance, dogma, and, finally, its supposed opposite, violent hatred. The love of one's own country, family, or god translates too easily into the hatred of another's country, family, or god to be considered a different emotion or orientation. As Freud, Girard, and countless others could tell you, hate is immanent to love.

These movements trace the thin red line of Terence Malick's majestic movie of the same name (1998), a virtual line which separates sanity from madness, wartime from peace, life from death, love from hatred, you from me, and the metaphysical from the political. This line is so easily crossed that its status as something which separates is called into question, and it becomes rather a "line of flight" from the solidifying forces which seek to impose the will of the war machine. Just as essence itself does not exist outside those who make it manifest, Eros and Thanatos do not stalk the planet in any other form than the population of the day, a population animated by different cultural and historical epochs and agendas.

In *The Thin Red Line* (1998), animals and indigenous people continue with the work of the cosmos, indifferent to the European enactment of the

same that is unfolding around them.
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rather to highlight the wider pattern
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same that is unfolding around them. This is not in order to romanticize a more "organic" connection with the world that the European has lost, but rather to highlight the wider patterns which continue both beyond and within modernity, challenging the teleological rationalizations for homeopathic genocide. Indeed, the "natural world" features highly in all three of Malick's films, suggesting a cosmic connection continuously undercut by the disorientations of *Dasein*. (Before making films, Malick translated Heidegger's *The Essence of Reasons* for Northwestern University Press.)[24]

Private Bob Witt (Jim Caviezel) grapples not only with World War II itself but with the conflict between gestalt philosophies of humanity and the implications of an inessential commonality. We sometimes see him fighting and then trying to escape, striving to leave the frame of the film itself and join Thomas Pynchon's Slothrop in pure diffusion.[25] And as a pursued hybrid of mystic and soldier, Witt questions the limitations of both. Sergeant Eddie Walsh (Sean Penn) is the world-weary guardian of human dignity, outpaced by the repercussions of such so-called civilization. At one point the voice-over which punctuates the film ponders on a vulgar version of Deleuze's essences: "Maybe all men got one big soul where everybody's a part of. All faces are the same man, one big self. Everyone looking for salvation by himself. Each like a coal drawn from the fire."

The writings of Blanchot are particularly sensitive to these repressed affinities and can serve as a second screening for *The Thin Red Line*, pointing to the place "where an episodic community takes shape between two beings who are made or who are not made for each other." Thus, "a war machine is set up or, to say it more clearly, the possibility of a disaster carrying within itself, be it in infinitesimal doses, the menace of universal annihilation" (1988, 48). Such a perspective props up both the cinematic event of Malick's meditation on violence and the sacred as well as the insistent cliché "All is fair in love and war."

To do justice to the other (including the other of ourselves) means to keep the space of subjectivity open. It is to be "whatever," which Agamben tells us is not simply a matter of indifference, nor of "It does not matter which," but also etymologically contains the opposite, "being such that it always matters" (1993a, 1).[26] This involves ethically negotiating (or, further still, metaphysically exposing oneself to) alterity, a procedure explicitly explored in the chapter on "Ease" and the Talmud in *The Coming Community*:

At the point when one reaches one's final state and fulfills one's own destiny, one finds oneself for that very reason in the place of the neighbor. What is most proper to every creature is thus its substitutability, its being in any case in the place of the other. . . . This substitution no longer knows a place of its own, but the taking-place of every single being is always already in common—an empty space offered to the one, irrevocable hospitality. . . . In this community there is no place that is not vicarious. (23–24)

Thus:

Against the hypocritical fiction of the unsubstitutability of the individual, which in our culture serves only to guarantee its universal representability . . . [the coming community] presents an unconditioned substitutability, without either representation or possible description—an absolutely unrepresentable community. (24–25)

Agamben denotes this unrepresentable space as "Ease," noting, for our purposes, that the Provençal poets also used this word as a technical term "designating the very space of love. Or better, it designates not so much the place of love, but rather love as the experience of taking-place in a whatever singularity" (25).

The coming community figures belonging *as* becoming (be-coming) and thus drives a wedge between familiarity and belonging. (A techtonic analysis would insist that it is technology which renders this general stream of be-coming, allowing the reconceptualization of being in relation to culture-saturated time.) As Agamben puts it:

The Whatever in question here relates to the singularity not in its indifference with respect to a common property (to a concept, for example: being red, being French, being Muslim), but only in its being *such as it is*. Singularity is thus freed from the false dilemma that obliges knowledge to choose between the ineffability of the individual and the intelligibility of the universal. (1)

What has historically been presented in terms of "the problem of individuation" is now only a pseudo-problem. Agamben's inessential commonality partakes of "a solidarity that in no way concerns an essence. *Taking-place, the communication of singularities in the attribute of extension, does not unite them in essence, but scatters them in existence*" (18–19). But as we saw in the previous chapter, it very much depends on how you define essence. Indeed, it seems almost impossible, at least with our current conceptual tools, to map the

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As we have seen, whateverbeing is "ne[...]
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singular traits: It is whatever face, in w[...]
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The tricky aspect (only one among many[...]
leaves to its readers) is the way in which[...]
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movements of love, technology, and community, under the sign of whatev-
erbeing, *without* recourse to the kind of essence as described by Deleuze.
This forces me to make the perhaps bold claim that what Agamben calls
"inessential commonality," Deleuze simply calls "essence." This is not to
counter or confuse Agamben's notion but to unpack it further, although
perhaps in a different direction from that which he intended.

As we have seen, whateverbeing is "neither particular nor universal, neither
one nor multiple" (Agamben 1993a, 17). It resides in pure potentiality—a
potentiality even after the (f)act—and thus speaks of an "incessant emer-
gence" (20, 56). We can see this process occurring in the human face, which
"is neither the individuation of a generic *facies* nor the universalization of
singular traits: It is whatever face, in which what belongs to common nature
and what is proper are absolutely indifferent" (19).[27] The enigma lies in a
movement we have been taught to take for granted but that in fact describes
a two-way transition that destabilizes the categories which shore up the
representation of conceptuality itself. These include the movement from
potentiality to act, language to word, common to proper, form to example,
and vice versa.

Phrased differently, Agamben asks if there is such a thing as the letter *p*
outside all those idiosyncratic inscriptions of it made by different human
hands. Accordingly, the human face is not so much a variation on a theme,
but a theme on variation. For our purposes it is sufficient to note that these
two examples—writing and what Deleuze calls "faciality"—are technolo-
gies. Moreover, these technologies combine at the point of the interface, or
the "interfaciality," of our contemporary networked systems (from which
we ourselves incessantly emerge, as we saw in chapter 4). Hence, Agamben
claims: "Whatever is the thing with all its properties, none of which, how-
ever, constitutes difference. In-difference with respect to properties is what
individuates and disseminates singularities, makes them lovable" (19).
Whenever we posit the technological, we also evoke the amorous and
erotic: "The singularity exposed as such is whatever you want, that is, lov-
able" (2). In other words, whateverbeing is inconceivable without desire.
The tricky aspect (only one among many questions which Agamben's book
leaves to its readers) is the way in which desire circulates in the "free *use of
the self* . . . that does not . . . treat existence as a property" (28–29). Simply

put, how would the libidinal economy of the coming community differ from the one we live with, but perhaps do not understand, today?

In his major contribution to the debate, *The Inoperative Community*, Jean-Luc Nancy preempts Agamben's critical position, stating that thinking "community as essence" is in effect "the closure of the political." He continues in terms which should now be familiar to us, stating that community resists "letting itself be absorbed into a common substance" and, further, that "Being *in* common has nothing to do with communion, with fusion into a body, into a unique and ultimate identity that would no longer be exposed" (xxxviii). Nancy thus poses his key question: "How can we be receptive to the *meaning* of our multiple, dispersed, mortally fragmented existences, which nonetheless only make sense by existing in common?"—a commonality that does not stem from "the will to realize an essence" (1991, xl).

According to Nancy's system, the individual is "merely the residue of the experience of the dissolution of community" (1) and thus bears witness to the unraveling of "the autarchy of absolute immanence" (4). As a consequence, community is "neither a work to be produced, nor a lost communion" but rather a "space itself, and the spacing of the experience of the outside, of the outside-of-self" (19). After establishing this conceptual framework, Nancy emphasizes the importance of love, since love "exposes . . . the incessant *incompletion* of community. It exposes community *at its limit*" (38). Our lives are therefore figured as "an infinite migration through the other" (90), with the result that the refrain "I love you" becomes a declaration where "I" is posed only by being exposed to "you" (89). The self does not precede the other, just as the heart does not precede heartbreak (99).[28]

Hence the crucial paradox that "Love in its *singularity*, when it is grasped absolutely, is itself perhaps nothing but the indefinite abundance of all possible loves, and an abandonment to their dissemination, indeed to the disorder of these explosions" (83, my emphasis). But is it possible to resolve the tension between whateverbeing and singularity, since these concepts seem to tug at each other's frayed sleeves? Before answering, we should note that being in common is not to be confused with a "common being," the sympathetic Ur-structure of liberal-humanism. Thus, we cannot begin to repose the question of community without conceding the crucial role love

plays in discourses of belonging. For precisely the possibility of knowledg

Whateverbeing: A Reprise

Lovers go to the limit of the improper dwell in carnality and amorous discour and facticity, to the point of revealing t originally dwell in the proper; yet they of contemporary nihilism) inhabit the *human beings are those who fall properly in living beings—are capable of their own in*

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—GIORGIO AGAMBEN, 7

Rimbaud is constantly exhumed in ord "Je est un autre" (I is another). It tak Agamben, however, to remind us of th this modern mantra: "If brass wakes up 114). Only when the two points are ma the utterance really emerge. It not only distinctions between form and content l stro; the very same who conducts us th that make up our daily lives. For if we "essence," and "a trumpet" with "exis closer to home.

Employing the kind of paradoxes whi struction (and giving only headaches to Agamben states: "Whatever is singularit *ever, in this sense, is the event of an outside.* difficult to think: the absolutely non-thin (67). The coming community would th being-*within* an *outside*" (68), since what determines an existence, but it finds its es

plays in discourses of belonging. For as Agamben notes, "Love . . . conditions precisely the possibility of knowledge and the access to truth" (1999b, 186).

Whateverbeing: A Reprise

> Lovers go to the limit of the improper in a mad and demonic promiscuity; they dwell in carnality and amorous discourse, in forever-new regions of impropriety and facticity, to the point of revealing their essential abyss. Human beings do not originally dwell in the proper; yet they do not (according to the facile suggestion of contemporary nihilism) inhabit the improper and the ungrounded. Rather, *human beings are those who fall properly in love with the improper, who—unique among living beings—are capable of their own incapacity.*
>
> —GIORGIO AGAMBEN, "The Passion of Facticity"

> What is astonishing is not that something was able to be, but that it was able to not not-be.
>
> —GIORGIO AGAMBEN, *The Coming Community*

Rimbaud is constantly exhumed in order to reiterate his trademark phrase, "Je est un autre" (I is another). It takes the meticulous ventriloquism of Agamben, however, to remind us of the very next sentence which follows this modern mantra: "If brass wakes up a trumpet, it's not its fault" (1999b, 114). Only when the two points are made together does the significance of the utterance really emerge. It not only complicates all the epistemological distinctions between form and content but wakes our own slumbering maestro; the very same who conducts us through the comfortable confusions that make up our daily lives. For if we replace "brass" here with the term "essence," and "a trumpet" with "existence," then the homology moves closer to home.

Employing the kind of paradoxes which enrage those who dislike deconstruction (and giving only headaches to those more open to this project), Agamben states: "Whatever is singularity plus an empty space. . . . *Whatever, in this sense, is the event of an outside.* . . . [It] is, therefore, what is most difficult to think: the absolutely non-thing experience of a pure exteriority" (67). The coming community would thus constitute "the experience of being-*within* an *outside*" (68), since whateverbeing "is not an essence that determines an existence, but it finds its essence in its own being-thus, in its

being its own determination" (93). The aforementioned exteriority of essence is what gives Agamben the theoretical leverage to keep this loaded term within his own system. "Only in this sense," he writes, "can we say that essence envelops—*involvit*—existence" (98). So we see that despite appearances, essence *does indeed* have a role to play in the figure of inessential commonality.

Further evidence can be found in Heidegger's influential thoughts on the matter, as summarized in these two sentences from his "Letter on 'Humanism'":

> To embrace a "thing" or a "person" in its essence means to love it [*sie lieben*], to favor it [*sie mögen*]. Thought in a more originary way, such favoring [*mögen*] means to bestow essence as a gift. Such favoring is the proper essence of enabling [*Vermögen*], which not only can achieve this or that but also can let something essentially unfold [*wesen*] in its provenance, that is, let it be. (in Agamben 1999b, 199)

For Heidegger the passions make up "the basic modes that constitute *Dasein* . . . the way man confronts the *Da*, the openness and concealment of beings, in which he stands" (198). Unlike anger, joy, and other "affects," love and hate—as passions—"traverse our Being from the beginning."

Speaking for his mentor, Agamben states that passion represents "the most radical experience of possibility at issue in *Dasein*: a capacity that is capable not only of *potentiality* (the manners of Being that are in fact possible) but also, and above all, of *impotentiality*" (1999b, 201). The Heideggerean strategy of "radical passivity," of actively experiencing the passivity of Being, thus becomes the provisional answer to Agamben's own question: "Where, and how, can a subject be introduced into the biological flow?" (1999a, 124–25).

Since the subject can be posited only through language and in relation to the other, we are left with the pure shifter "I" (116): "Indeed, 'I' signifies precisely the irreducible disjunction between vital functions and inner history, between the living being's becoming a speaking being and the speaking being's sensation of itself as living" (125). Anyone blessed with even the most minimal share of reflexivity as a speaking subject would acknowledge that "the fragile text of consciousness incessantly crumbles and erases itself," and thus we must come to terms with "the constitutive desubjectification in every subjectification" (123).

As David Odell pointed out much [...] inadequate concept for this radical [...] ("Why me and not one of those othe[...] Italian man randomly selected for ex[...] of Antelme, refuses to speculate on th[...] one else?")[29] The space between the [...] the witness and the victim—produce[...] taneously fostering the horrific condi[...] the name Agamben gives to "a pro[...] promiscuity that never becomes iden[...]

> Myself as a being amongst beings is th[...] first be glimpsed. The lie is known to [...] difference that grounds the 'amongst,'[...] place of Being where it is the very non[...] indefinite plurality. This is strange bec[...] undifferentiated and yet in expression,[...] tinction possible, like a tiny mote in a s[...] tallisation. And in this manifestation th[...] crystallisation is densest and hence mos[...] "I." (2001)

That is, the time has come to drain t[...] oils which we constantly use to massa[...] force of the task ahead: not to see oth[...] as other I's, but the ex-static, essential [...] Here we fall back on corrupt terms, th[...] was this frustration which fueled most o[...] even he resorted to old, old words, su[...] eternal frustration of searching for a wo[...] in the back of the brain, teasing us with [...] we've forgotten, or a word we've yet [...] name?

Hence the difficulty in avoiding this [...] asking, 'Who is this "I"?' Is it the "I[...] "I" of psychological narcissism? The "[...] who is indeed feeling fine and encourage[...] the "I" who can't sleep; the one who Lev[...] frazzled kind of empty insomnia?

As David Odell pointed out much earlier, "intersubjectivity" seems like an inadequate concept for this radical potential at the heart of substitutability. ("Why me and not one of those other girls?" asks Lola. In contrast, a young Italian man randomly selected for execution by Nazi officers, in the writings of Antelme, refuses to speculate on the question "Why me, instead of someone else?")²⁹ The space between the killer and the killed—or indeed between the witness and the victim—produces the shame of singularity, while simultaneously fostering the horrific conditions for access to essence. Intimacy is the name Agamben gives to "a proximity that also remains distant, to a promiscuity that never becomes identity" (125). Or in Odell's words:

> Myself as a being amongst beings is the lie through which the truth of Being can first be glimpsed. The lie is known to be a lie because it cannot account for the difference that grounds the 'amongst,' and so it points inexorably to the non-place of Being where it is the very non-existence of difference which grounds indefinite plurality. This is strange because in its own realm Being is utterly undifferentiated and yet in expression, or phenomenality, it is what makes distinction possible, like a tiny mote in a super-saturated solution that triggers crystallisation. And in this manifestation that mote is found at the point where the crystallisation is densest and hence most fractured, in the centre of what is called "I." (2001)

That is, the time has come to drain the self of those narcissistic essential oils which we constantly use to massage our solitary egos. And hence the force of the task ahead: not to see others simply as other-mes, or even me as other I's, but the ex-static, essential flux of . . . well . . . of *what*, exactly? Here we fall back on corrupt terms, the most obvious being *God*. Indeed, it was this frustration which fueled most of Nietzsche's driven scribblings, and even he resorted to old, old words, such as *Dionysus*. We suffer from the eternal frustration of searching for a word both on the tip of the tongue and in the back of the brain, teasing us with a bittersweet foretaste. Is it a word we've forgotten, or a word we've yet to coin for a creature we've yet to name?

Hence the difficulty in avoiding this hoary old chestnut: "Who is this 'I' asking, 'Who is this "I"'?" Is it the "I" of grammatical postulation? The "I" of psychological narcissism? The "I" who speaks neutrally in public, who is indeed feeling fine and encouraged to continue having a good day, or the "I" who can't sleep; the one who Levinas stated was no *I* at all—simply a frazzled kind of empty insomnia?

We are familiar by now with the various post-structuralist concepts of the subject which displace or disperse the self into a constant flux or multiple network, according to which, the self is least of all where we think it is—that is, when we say or think the I-word. But in contrast to concepts which insist there is no center to the subject, perhaps we should entertain the notion that there *is indeed* an organizing principle (or, yes, even center), which *changes* from moment to moment. The self is thus akin to the eye of an electrical storm, which flickers and moves according to both centrifugal and centripetal pressures, a structuring absence of enforced calm. The "I" which inhabits meditation is very different from the "I" of orgasm, just as the "I" standing before an employee is inconsistent with the "I" standing before a magistrate. This is as obvious as it is opaque, context-specific (or "situational") time ushering the subject into a semicoherent shape. Heidegger of course soaked his lederhosen with sweat in his monumental attempt to convey this idea to us.

What we must now confront is the next question: "Who is this 'we' *refusing* to ask, 'Who is this "we" '?"

SEVEN

Mind the Gap

For there is no such thing as a man w

—MARTIN HEIDEGGER
Technology"

Who I am for you and who I am for n
be overcome.

—LUCE IRIGARAY, *To B*

At Waterloo underground station in
repeatedly by loudspeakers to "mind th
station, a reference to the rather large
carriage. This piece of advice is just as
gaps between the self and the other, a
onto the tube.

Take, for instance, this extract fr
Nothingness:

I experience myself as any transcendence:
cadéro" to "Sèvres-Babylon," "They" ch
change is foreseen, indicated on maps, etc
quet, I am the "They" who change. To be
of the subway as much by the individual u
ends which I pursue. But these final ends
immediate ends are the ends of the "They