

A NEW ANTHROPOLOGY FOR ECOTHEOLOGY: RETHINKING THE HUMAN IN THE
WORLD WITH MERLEAU-PONTY'S PHENOMENOLOGY OF FLESH

By

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To the memory of my mother, whose accomplishments inspired me to persevere,

and

to Jarod, the best partner anyone could ask for.

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INTRODUCTION

The original contribution made by this dissertation is the construction of a philosophically robust, truly nonexceptionalist theological anthropology that achieves the heretofore unrealized goals of a particular strain of ecofeminism, and advances ecofeminist theology more deliberately into ecomaterialist theology.

In the first chapter, observing that ecofeminist theology has historically valued the overturning of thought systems that impose categorical separation between humans and the natural world, I trace the development of this idea through Mary Daly, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and Sallie McFague. I note that although they argued with increasing force that humans need to feel more “at home on the earth,” these ecofeminists nonetheless did not explicitly construct a theological anthropology that is consistent with this goal, allowing a trace of exceptionalism to linger in their constructions of the human. They thus inadvertently reinscribed the very separation they had opposed by leaving the depths of anthropology unplumbed.

Human exceptionalism is the idea that human beings are exempt in some way from the laws, traits, consequences or destiny of the material world. It is a way of thinking that has justified, among other things, animal exploitation and deleterious ecological policies. It has generally allowed humans to act as though we have someplace else to be besides this earth, and so the planet and everything on it are at our disposal. Although it would not be unreasonable to presume that human exceptionalism would promote universal acceptance of the reality of anthropogenic climate change (along the lines of a sentiment like, “We are the most powerful!”), instead, exceptionalist values hinder such acceptance. Ironically, climate change denial is a

testament to how ingrained exceptionalism is. Human exceptionalism manifests here in the assumptions that, we must surely be able to do whatever we want without there being any consequences for our actions; this is why so many are surprised that we are subject to the same laws as all other matter in the universe. Exceptionalism therefore needs to be rooted out in order to cultivate better attitudes toward the planet and to remove the blinders that prevent many from addressing our current situation. Hence, it is the need to find a new way to comprehend *being* human, and the need to reconceive our lived experience, that drives this project as much as a desire for constructive ecological action.

I then show how ecofeminism seems to be in the process of being replaced by “Ecomaterialism,” as the work of thinkers like Catherine Keller and Whitney Bauman attest. Although Bauman, for example, has made proposals for rethinking human identity along radically material lines, his reliance on Deleuze and Guattari means that he has not developed an anthropology that carries a robust sense of lived and embodied human experience. By contrast, I argue that a different kind of radical materiality is necessary for meeting the ecofeminist challenge and is actually the future of this trajectory of the ecofeminist project. This radical materiality, I argue, is best achieved through an embodied phenomenology of being in the world—that is, through dialogue with Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of flesh. One reason for this is because of what the latter allows with regard to a present and spatial sense of being, a spatially focused sense of ultimacy, which is, I argue, key to overcoming human exceptionalism.

The second chapter introduces the combined theological methodology that I will be employing in this project. I explain how my approach, founded in naturalism and radical theology, and inspired by theopoetics, develops Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology into a

theological anthropology. Before concluding the chapter, I introduce Merleau-Ponty's thought and go into further detail about its applicability for this particular ecofeminist purpose.

In the third chapter, I continue the discussion of Merleau-Ponty. Because of the lasting impact of Descartes' formulations of subjectivity, I briefly recap Descartes' points from the *Meditations* and explicate Merleau-Ponty's specific critiques of the former's argument. This discussion of Descartes also serves the purpose of being a further entrée into Merleau-Ponty's thought, since his phenomenological method is a direct descendant of Descartes' doubting exploration. Moreover, this discussion explains how Merleau-Ponty gets to a different conclusion than Descartes despite the same starting point of beginning with experience and not assuming anything beyond it. This different conclusion is primarily due to Merleau-Ponty's insistence on the priority of perception, which is also arguably his most salient contribution to philosophy. Although Merleau-Ponty's early work is the most well known, I draw most of my theological anthropology from developments in his unfinished and posthumously published *The Visible and Invisible*. I use Toadvine's interpretation of Merleau-Ponty's major developments in that work (specifically the "chiasm") to develop a phenomenologically informed picture of the human being as fundamentally material. Furthermore, I highlight the fact that this thought makes it possible to en flesh even "higher order" human functioning and experiences, especially those we must address in a theological anthropology: intuitions of transcendence and abstract thought.

Chapter Four takes this philosophical portrait of the human being and uses it as the basis for constructing a new theological anthropology for ecotheology. In this chapter, I introduce two constructive concepts. The first is "apophatic anthropology." I explain that, although this term can also be found in Keller and Mayra Rivera, its meaning in those instances is entirely different from my use of it. The apophatic anthropology I propose is one in which the self's own defining

boundaries, vis-à-vis the world, are unknowable and unspeakable. From this I explore what it means for human lived experience in the world, including and especially “religious experience.” I define the latter with John Caputo and Ivone Gebara, and then bring in Schleiermacher to discuss the theological ramifications of understanding *Homo religiosus* in radically material terms. This is where I introduce my second constructive concept: “inscendence.” I explain how this neologism, indicating a “climbing within” movement of thought, can be a spatial-affective way of understanding human being-in-the-world, because of how it enables us to feel our dependence and connection. This is the fruit of a truly nonexceptionalist theological anthropology, answering the ecofeminist call to rethink humanity as fully at home on the earth.

I then make some preliminary gestures toward implications of this anthropology on the other two categories in Gordon Kaufman’s monotheistic scheme: the world and God. I do not make any definitive claims about the latter, leaving that instead for a future project. I end the chapter by expressing a variation on McFague’s exhortation to see the world as God’s body: “the world as *my* body”—with emphasis now not on creating a new model of God but on reconceiving our basic understanding of ourselves.

Finally, in Chapter Five, I delve into certain key theoretical implications of this nonexceptionalist theological anthropology, particularly its ethical ramifications. These need to be addressed due to the need (emphasized by McFague) for a certain level of differentiation in order to enable the relationality required for ethical relationships. I show how my constructive, Merleau-Pontian anthropology does not have that problem because it is able to find connectivity and unity in the flesh, which does not entail dissolution into a monistic whole. I also look at the epistemological fall-out of nonexceptionalist anthropology, exploring what this perspective on humanity might mean for understanding ourselves and looking into the mourning that that entails.

From this mourning, via Judith Butler, I articulate a path toward hope; a hope in this embodiment and a mode of living that does not reinscribe the harmful ideas of the past, instead providing a way to be in the world in a way beneficial to ourselves and to all life on earth.

There has been prior work using Merleau-Ponty to talk theologically about embodiment. In 2002, then-Vanderbilt student Molly Hadley Jensen submitted a dissertation on the theme of feminism, gender-dualism and embodiment using Merleau-Ponty. Jensen sees her work as being part of the ecofeminist project to create a relational ethics that can overcome spirit / matter dualism and all its variants. She reiterates the ecofeminist complaint about philosophical contempt for the body, and outlines their proposal for an alternative ethics. She also talks about a lingering dualism within ecofeminism.

Her critique is that ecofeminism has not addressed the “mind and body relation nor the moral significance of the body.”¹ She charges ecofeminists with failing to account for human-nature interconnection, a critique with which I partially agree. McFague, for instance, does attempt to stitch the human back into the fabric of the world, but it is true that the intricacies of the relationships between human mind, human body, and general materiality are not a focus of her work. Jensen argues that the roots of this neglect are in ecofeminism’s lack of insight into the experiential nature of embodiment. While bodies are important in ecofeminism, the having-of-a-body vis-à-vis other bodies receives short shrift. One of the reasons for this, according to Jensen, is the ecofeminist aversion to recapitulating the stereotype of women being somehow “closer to

¹ Molly Hadley Jensen, *Fleshing out a Relational Ethics [Electronic Resource]: Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s Contributions to Ecological Feminism* (2002, n.d.), 39.

nature” in any way, which is a remnant of sexist duality. Jensen then goes on to focus on what she describes as the “sense phenomenology” of Merleau-Ponty in this case to overcome gender dualism and make a better body-ethics. Though I disagree with the extent of her critique of ecofeminism, her work does offer useful reading of Merleau-Ponty along ecofeminist lines, and makes note of the usefulness of the concept of the flesh for combatting dualisms. Though our interests overlap, my work is distinctive in that it takes up the task of constructing a nonexceptionalist theological anthropology.

In late 2015, almost two years after I began this project, Mayra Rivera Rivera published her highly acclaimed *Poetics of the Flesh*. Helpfully, her monograph lays the groundwork for using Merleau-Ponty in constructive theology, establishing a precedent for speaking of the flesh both materially and theologically. Although her work bears similarities to mine, and serves as a vanguard of the necessary materialist turn in feminist thought, the overall thrust of her argument is socio-political rather than ecological. Her aim is to use the flesh to materialize the social and cultural structures of our world and encourage us to see how they play out upon our bodies; my aim is to use this same flesh to construct a nonexceptional theological anthropology.

Rivera sees the importance of highlighting bodily interdependence and the connection between the flesh and individual bodies. She echoes Jensen’s observation that feminist thought has had a tendency to be suspicious of embodiment: “feminists tried to liberate themselves from the body-as-foundation—from biology as destiny,” yet she denies that this meant “abandoning” the body altogether.² She recognizes the need to turn toward the material, especially insofar as this entails redefining the material as dynamic and energetic rather than inert. She also promotes

² Mayra Rivera, *Poetics of the Flesh* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 6.

a sense of interdependent corporeality, and makes extensive use of Merleau-Ponty to do so. There are clearly commonalities between our approaches, but our projects differ significantly. Whereas my work focuses on constructing a new anthropology for ecotheology, the emphasis of Rivera's book is to chart how social norms and constructions materialize in the world and the body, and her primary concern is to examine the political ramifications of this culture-body materialization.³

In another instance of difference between our approaches, Rivera intentionally highlights and maintains the Christian roots of the term, "flesh." Beginning by looking at the concept of the flesh as it appears in early Christian thought, Rivera reminds us of Paul's impact upon how the flesh—the way our bodies are connected to this earthly reality—is considered to this day.⁴ She also observes that the flesh is both positively and negatively valenced in Tertullian, and that the way the latter deployed the concept away from gender dualisms shows some of the promise of this otherwise "ambivalent" term.⁵ Rivera then examines usage of this concept in modern times. Because of its association with Christian thought, "the flesh" has been troubling to some modern philosophers. "Is 'flesh' just a name for Christian projections of sin onto corporeality, devised for judging, shaping, and controlling desire?" she asks. Or worse, is it "just 'spirit' in disguise"? Both of these interpretations, she notes, can be traced back to differences in early Christian usages of the term. Rivera does not denounce this heritage but responds to these overtones theologically, allowing theology and philosophy to intertwine in her work in a way that my own

³ Rivera, 6–13.

⁴ Ibid., 34–37.

⁵ Ibid., 52–54.

methodology will echo.⁶ In spite of her theological reading, Rivera persists in the task of emphasizing the worldliness of the flesh.⁷

Bringing in Merleau-Ponty's thought to develop the flesh further, Rivera offers a useful distillation of what the flesh means: "Flesh weaves bodies and the world. Flesh twists and turns, constituting realities that never exhaust it. Flesh is constitutive of my body and of the world. Yet it does not belong to me and it does not belong to you. It is an element—like water or air—on which we all depend and to which we all contribute."⁸ In this, Rivera finds a foundation for her later social criticism by showing how the flesh and bodies interact with ideas and concepts. "Bodies incarnate the world and also express ideas that emerge from and contribute to the flesh of the world. Ideas and words are produced by the body as it transforms what it receives from the social-material world."⁹ Although it is here that our uses of Merleau-Ponty begin to diverge, I will tap into this same potency of the flesh in order to develop my ecotheological anthropology.¹⁰

In spite of our differences, I do not disagree with Rivera's point that "the socio-material elements of my own history interlace with the sediments of my ancestral past" in a way that is beyond our total knowledge.¹¹ Indeed, I appreciate that she turns to poetics here insofar as she

⁶ Ibid., 57–58.

⁷ Rivera, 60.

⁸ Rivera, 84.

⁹ Rivera, 85.

¹⁰ It is also worth noting that, in spite of the fact that Ted Toadvine is recognized as one of the leading commentators on Merleau-Ponty, Rivera makes no mention of his interpretation. The fact that my own work has been inspired by Toadvine's read of Merleau-Ponty may account for some of this divergence.

¹¹ Rivera, *Poetics of the Flesh*, 110.

points out that the full extent of our entanglements with the flesh can never be fully known, but can be imagined, in Edouard Glissant's words, "through a poetics."¹² What is poetic about the flesh is the way it "displays light and obscurity, visibility and invisibility, connections and gaps." (Rivera discerns this same poetics not only in the Caribbean poets with whom she explicitly engages but also in the Gospel of John and Merleau-Ponty's later work).¹³ It is for similar reasons that theo-poetics has inspired my theological methodology. However, my emphasis on theological anthropology in a time of anthropogenic climate change means that I apply it to different ends.

The focus of Rivera's work is to read the effects of racial and gendered social inscriptions and locales upon our bodies, to make corporeal the seemingly immaterial structures of society that "form the world from which our flesh is woven."¹⁴ In pursuit of her aim, Rivera turns to Franz Fanon and Judith Butler to discuss the racial and gendered aspects of embodied existence, using Merleau-Ponty's foundation to find a way to describe race and sex as being real and embodied without being somehow "essential."¹⁵ The fact that the body exists as it is only through its engagement with the world is key, and Rivera deploys this in discussing the force of social norms and the interplay of bodies and the world.¹⁶ I use this same Merleau-Pontian take on the body to develop my apophatic anthropology vis-à-vis the borders of human definition with

¹² Edouard Glissant, *The Poetics of Relation*, ed. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 154. Cited in; Rivera, *Poetics of the Flesh*, 110.

¹³ Rivera, *Poetics of the Flesh*, 158.

¹⁴ Rivera, 114.

¹⁵ Rivera, 136.

¹⁶ Rivera, 143.

the nonhuman world.¹⁷

In sum, although we value the same elements of Merleau-Ponty's thought, Rivera and I diverge significantly on which elements we highlight and the ends to which this phenomenology is employed. The focus in the pages to follow is on using Merleau-Ponty's flesh to redefine what it means to be a human being from an ecological perspective, and the theological implications of what it means to feel the nonexceptionalism implied by that fleshy entanglement.

¹⁷ Though this is not to deny that we are always acting in the world under the influence of human social contexts and constructs.

CHAPTER I

TOWARDS A THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY OF HUMAN NON-EXCEPTIONALISM

The Big Lie...regards the body as an alien tomb of the soul, and the soul as growing stronger the more it weakens the body. It abstracts the human from the earth and God from the cosmos, and says that that which is abstracted is the original, and the first...The Big Lie tells us that we are strangers and sojourners on this planet, that our flesh, our blood, our instincts for survival are our enemies.¹⁸

Introducing the Problem

Geologists increasingly agree that we are living in the anthropocene, a geological era in which *homo sapiens* has been the dominant shaping force; we have released a massive amount of stored carbon into the atmosphere, thereby warming the entire planet and altering its feedback loops.¹⁹ We are confronted with our species' collective power to be a force of nature, to destroy habitats and species, and to change the climate. We residents of the global north participate disproportionately in this great power, and are certainly complicit in it, and yet we too find ourselves at the mercy of the same earth systems that we have unintentionally altered. While extraction economies benefiting Western powers have wreaked environmental havoc for citizens

¹⁸ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Beacon Press, 1983), 264.

¹⁹ The term "anthropocene" was first coined in 2000 by scientist Paul Crutzen. "Living in the Anthropocene: Toward a New Global Ethos," Yale E360, accessed July 31, 2017, http://e360.yale.edu/features/living_in_the_anthropocene_toward_a_new_global_ethos.

of colonized states²⁰ for centuries, deleterious ecological change is finally happening in a way that even the privileged of the global North can no longer ignore. Privileged residents of the global north simultaneously experience ourselves as villains and victims, unable to escape our complicity in an ecologically destructive culture, yet also unable to escape the global threat of climate change. That is, our fundamental anthropological identity is troubled, as we find ourselves at the crossroads of power and powerlessness. The very power that led us to develop anthropologies of exceptionalism has also led us to a point of finally recognizing our powerlessness against the complex natural feedback loops affecting the climate. In acting as though we are exceptional, as though the laws of nature did not fully apply to us, we have brought ourselves to a point of being unable to deny our *non*exceptionalism, not only theoretically, but also (and in particular) in our lived, embodied existence.²¹

Exceptionalism is a problem because it abstracts human beings from the material world. There are a variety of manifestations of exceptionalist attitudes, but they usually consist of some version of the following: humans have a special right to dominate all “lower” life forms, and it does not matter what happens to our world because nature is “out there” and unrelated to human pursuits, whether spiritual or capitalistic. Getting away from exceptionalism is central to the project of changing eco-destructive attitudes. When I claim that humans are “nonexceptional,” then, I mean that we are animals that are the product of (and in the process of) evolution like all other life forms, and that we were not placed here separately by, nor do we represent, a force

²⁰ Including marginalized states and peoples within those Western powers, like the residents of Appalachia suffering from the environmental impact of mountaintop removal and fracking.

²¹ For example, it is one thing to know cognitively that humans are animals dependent on the earth’s systems for survival, and another to feel the record-breaking heat, storms, and floods caused by global warming threaten one’s own body.

outside of nature. Beyond that, I also mean that we are related to matter and made of matter; for better or worse, human beings are fundamentally *material*, though materiality is far richer than dualistic attitudes would have us believe. For a theological anthropology to be able to speak to this situation—that our belief in ourselves as exceptionalist has brought us to the point that we can finally begin to feel our ineluctable entanglement with the world—it has to be grounded in that en-matrixed reality, which is the approach I take in this project.

Constructing a new theological anthropology is especially important now, as climate change not only threatens our continued existence, but is also forcing us to realize our dependence upon the earth. We are presently in a unique position to appreciate the reality of our place on this planet, our shared materiality with all things. Ecofeminist theology has been exhorting us for decades to change our relation to the earth to avert climate catastrophe, but now, in 2017, we are faced with the incontrovertible evidence that the climate *has* changed, *is* changing, and will *continue* to change, and that human activity is largely to blame. The earth is our home, but we have turned it into something that threatens the established ways of life for many millions. We therefore find ourselves faced with a new kind of *unheimlich Heimlichkeit*.²² Eco-theological anthropology needs to be rethought in a way that can accommodate that uneasy, uncanny at-homeness.

In short, humans are in a unique situation that forces us to rethink who we are with respect to this world. This dissertation works with the material strains of ecotheology's ecofeminist core to construct an ecotheological anthropology to address this problem. I argue

²² The Freudian resonances of this phrase were unintentional, but not entirely inappropriate. This was made clear to me by Diane Jonte-Pace, *Speaking the Unspeakable: Religion, Misogyny, and the Uncanny Mother in Freud's Cultural Texts* (University of California Press, 2001), 70.

that ecofeminist theology's emphasis on the revaluation of bodies and matter can be read in tandem with Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological ontology to produce a theological anthropology that speaks to citizens of the anthropocene.

Ecofeminist theologians have pointed out the role that the notion of human exceptionalism has played in creating the ecological crisis. However, they have not developed an anthropology that operates from an explicitly nonexceptional basis. This is partly due to the fact that experiences of human religious hope—experiences which sometimes bear the descriptor “transcendent”—that lead to the doing of theology in the first place seem to set us apart in some fundamental way, suggesting that we are uniquely capable of being in touch with something beyond ourselves. New developments in what I term “ecomaterialist” theology, meanwhile, are more explicitly nonexceptional, but they discuss the location of religious hope in a way that predicates its availability to us on a certain distance from the present moment. In this dissertation, I argue that Merleau-Ponty's ontology of the flesh, which has not previously been applied to this problem, can provide a basis for developing a theological anthropology based in nonexceptionalism. I classify this project as a work of “ecomaterialist” theology that is consciously descended from ecofeminist theology. In this chapter, I will explore the state of the field of ecofeminist theology, discuss its most salient line of thought for this anthropological ecotheological project, and suggest that its future lies in ecomaterialism.

Ecofeminist Theology: State of the Field

Not much is being written these days that calls itself ecofeminist theology. Ecofeminist theology flourished in the 1980s and early 1990s, but no new theoretical strides have been made in the last fifteen years. When one searches for ecofeminist theology written in the last decade or

so, what one discovers is that old ecofeminist theology is being adapted to analyze new contexts, such as various communities of women around the world and their relationship to the land or other local environmental issues. Inspired by Anne Elvey's analysis, discussed below, I contend that the theoretical branch of ecofeminist thought has evolved into ecological theology that focuses on the revaluation of the place of matter.

Alan Watts (*Nature, Man and Woman*, 1958) and Lynn White ("The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," 1967) offered some of the first critiques of Christianity from an ecological perspective. Rosemary Radford Ruether is generally credited with pioneering the specifically eco-feminist theological movement in her *New Woman/New Earth* (1975) and in *Sexism and God-Talk* (1983), and she has contributed an essay or introduction to almost every compendium of ecotheological thought published since then. In the 1980s and '90s, feminist scholars increasingly published works linking the ontological situation of women with ecological degradation. The 1980s saw a good deal of criticism of the treatment of women and nature in Christianity and Judaism. There was a great outpouring of more constructive work in the 1990s, as scholars began to look to religious traditions as potential dialogue partners with ecofeminism.²³ Prominent among these scholars were Sallie McFague, who developed a fully fleshed-out ecofeminist theology based in reconceiving the root metaphors used to talk about the divine in *The Body of God* (1993)²⁴; Karen Baker-Fletcher, whose *Sisters of Dust, Sisters of Spirit* (1998) borrowed from Yoruba spirituality to develop a womanist ethic of belonging to,

²³ Heather Eaton, *Introducing Ecofeminist Theologies* (London; New York, N.Y.: T&T Clark International, 2005), 20–21.

²⁴ Sallie McFague, *The Body of God : An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

rather than owning, the earth²⁵; and Ivone Gebara, who, in *Longing for Running Water* (1999), built on McFague's Protestant, North American work to adapt ecofeminism to a Catholic, Latin American context.²⁶ What these works have in common is their thrust toward reimagining the sacred as in the world, their emphasis on human relationality with other humans and with nonhumans, and their understanding of God-talk in general as a means to encourage people to engage in this relationality and thereby promote mutual flourishing.

Since the turn of the millennium, most of the work in ecofeminism focused on instances where women, religion, and social justice converge. For example, Mary Grey's *Sacred Longings: Ecofeminist Theology and Globalisation* (2003) studied ecofeminist theology from a liberationist perspective in communities of Indian women, looking at the relationship between these women and the land.²⁷ Others have reflected on ecofeminism from other contexts, such as Scandinavian²⁸ or South African.²⁹ Ecofeminist theology is also branching into interreligious territory; Alison Downie, for instance, looks at how non-Christian religions either independently or in concert with Christianity can be read through an ecofeminist lens.³⁰ What most of these

²⁵ Karen Baker-Fletcher, *Sisters of Dust, Sisters of Spirit: Womanist Wordings on God and Creation* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1998), 125.

²⁶ Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation* (Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 1999).

²⁷ Mary C. Grey, *Sacred Longings: Ecofeminist Theology and Globalisation* (London: SCM Press, 2003).

²⁸ Pauliina Kainulainen, "Wisdom Theology and Finnish Nature Spirituality: Reflections on Ivone Gebara's Ecofeminism," *Journal of the European Society of Women in Theological Research* 15 (2007): 131–39, <https://doi.org/10.2143/ESWTR.15.0.2022773>.

²⁹ Annalet Van Schalkwyk, "Space, Place and Ecology: Doing Ecofeminist Urban Theology in Gauteng," *HTS* 70, no. 3 (2014): 1–13, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v70i3.2767>.

³⁰ Alison Downie, "A Spirituality of Openness: Christian Ecofeminist Perspectives and Interreligious Dialogue," *Feminist Theology* 23, no. 1 (September 2014): 55–70, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0966735014542378>.

readings have in common is a desire to explore how to build what Heather Eaton called “redemptive pathways to sustainability” both for the environment and for the communities of marginalized women who live in ecologically vulnerable areas.³¹ Meanwhile, Christian and post-Christian theological work in the United States no longer calls itself ecofeminist, even though many of these authors identify as both feminist and ecologically concerned. This is not a coincidence. Over the last two decades, ecofeminism has metamorphosed into ecomaterialism.

What do I mean by ecofeminism’s transformation into ecomaterialism? Put briefly, I agree with theologian and New Testament scholar Anne Elvey that ecofeminist thought provides the very tools needed to exceed its own boundaries; that is, the analyses provided by feminist philosophy and theology enable us to pry open our conceptual apparatuses and rethink what it means to be human and material.³² Moreover, in order to be true to its feminist principles, ecofeminist thought *must* continue to take matter seriously—a focus on matter, even if not explicitly addressing women, is nonetheless ecofeminist. I will explore the details of ecomaterialist theology as heir to ecofeminist theology a little later in this chapter. First, I want to highlight the most salient theoretical thread of ecofeminist thought for this project, which, I argue, is also what enables it to become ecomaterialist. That thread is the uncovering of what Ruether termed “the big lie.” The lie is that those things that are literally life-sustaining (earth, air, bodies, and so forth) are ontologically worthless, and that they must ultimately be rejected in order for humans to achieve the transcendence that is our birthright. We are told to despise the

³¹ Eaton, *Introducing Ecofeminist Theologies*, 108–9.

³² Anne Elvey, “Matter, Freedom and the Future: Reframing Feminist Theologies through an Ecological Materialist Lens,” *Feminist Theology* 23, no. 2 (2015): 186–204.

material as the mortal, and the theological anthropologies that have emerged from this basic conceit (as criticized by scores of ecofeminists) describe the human as trapped in varying degrees upon this temporary earth but having some higher purpose on a plane inaccessible to other creatures.

One major fact that bolstered the lie is religious experience. Because human experiences of religious communion or religious hope have a transcendent aspect to them, and are easily interpreted as meaning that we are in touch with a reality beyond this physical earth, they have appeared to reinforce some sort of “higher” plane, realm, or destiny. Ecofeminist theologians and ecotheologians have struggled with Christianity’s historic insistence upon “humanity’s transcendence over, and thrust to desacralize, the natural world.”³³ If that sacred place of religious ecstasy or hope is assumed to be elsewhere, it follows that the world must be lacking in sacrality. Ecofeminists such as McFague have acknowledged that this sense of the world as, literally, “mundane” has encouraged careless and destructive behavior on the part of human beings. Yet it has been difficult for ecofeminists to satisfactorily incorporate human experiences and intuitions of something that would otherwise be called “transcendent experience”—experiences of religious hope or ecstasy—into their theology without reinstating a little of that categorical divide between human beings and the rest of the world. This has resulted in what I see as a continuance of exceptionalism’s abruption of the human from the world, in spite of ecofeminists’ acknowledgment that we need anthropologies that situate the human as connected to the earth. Ecofeminist theology has therefore struggled to address the theo-anthropological implications of its own theories. This struggle is also partly due to the fact that the human-God

³³ Eaton, *Introducing Ecofeminist Theologies*, 101.

relation has been more of a priority for ecofeminist theologians. All the same, however, these thinkers have been aware of the need for something to address what it means to be human in the world. For instance, McFague (discussed in more detail below) has been arguing that we need to “take evolution seriously” and understand humans as a part of this world and cosmos, rather than holding dominion over it; Gebara had stated that anthropology needed to be reconsidered in terms of our relatedness and interdependence with the earth.³⁴ Without a direct focus on the anthropological question, ecofeminist theologians have yet to explain what that really *means* in terms of *being* human. What would that look like? There has so far been no philosophically robust accounting of such an anthropology that follows through with the ecofeminist call for abolishing human exceptionalism. The current turn to materialism makes this possible, so long as we can find a way to root transcendent experience within the material; that is what this project aims to do. Below, I explore the trajectory of ecofeminist thought leading to ecomaterialism, and the role of “the big lie” in that development.

The Big Lie: Revaluation of Material Things

In the core ecofeminist theological works that shaped the field, the genealogy of the concept of “the big lie” will reveal the movement of ecofeminist thought toward progressively less exceptional and more material anthropology. I will show how Mary Daly first introduces the idea of the “topsy turvy” as a feminist critique, which then emerges in Rosemary Radford Ruether as the “lie” that we are not meant or allowed to be comfortable upon the earth. Confronting this lie is Sallie McFague’s focus, as she constructs her theology of “the earth as the

³⁴ Eaton, 102–3.

body of God” as part of a project to help humans feel “at home on the earth,” in contrast to the lie that patriarchal religion told us, that we are not supposed to feel that we belong here on earth.

Introducing the Concept: Mary Daly’s *Beyond God The Father*

The connection between theology, ecology, and feminism became clear at the beginning of the second-half of the twentieth century, due to the looming threat of nuclear holocaust. When the world’s superpowers had stockpiled an arsenal whose combined destructive force could wipe out not only civilization as we knew it but most life on earth, the known connection between idealized masculinity and war/violence became linked additionally to the fate of the environment.³⁵ It was not lost on Mary Daly that this idealized, bellicose masculinity was reinforced by the patriarchal theology of most Christian churches. Thus it became possible to show a clear line of causality from theology to masculinity to war to environmental catastrophe. This paved the way for ecofeminist theology.³⁶

Daly, while not herself strictly an *ecoth theologian*, formulated a feminist cultural-theological analysis that allowed subsequent thinkers to identify the contradictions of the patriarchal, capitalist system. She detailed patriarchal religion’s relationship to the future and possible annihilation of life on earth via the “paroxysm” (using Teilhard’s word) of nuclear war;

³⁵ As Jill Lepore has noted, discussions about nuclear winter inaugurated the use of “environment” as terminology for where we all lived, rather than meaning a specific habitat for a given creature. Jill Lepore, “The Atomic Origins of Climate Science,” *The New Yorker*, accessed February 1, 2017, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/01/30/the-atomic-origins-of-climate-science>.

³⁶ We could even say that this is a classic example of power systems creating resistance: it was the cold war that actually spurred the creation of ecofeminist rhetoric. As historian Jill Lepore recently discussed in her *New Yorker* article, the backlash to the science behind these warnings is also connected: critics used the same arguments for skepticism of nuclear winter as they do now for climate change predictions; though it grows increasingly ridiculous as the effects of global warming become more and more obvious for even lay people. Lepore.

and produced an analysis of Western culture as the topsy-turvy world of the “looking glass society” in which women reflect men and in which women’s traditional deeds are abstracted, rarefied and claimed by men in order to further elevate men’s sacrality and affirm women’s inferiority.³⁷

Daly developed this critical lens a decade before Ruether would describe the same mechanism as “the Big Lie.” “The Looking Glass priests raised these functions to the supernatural level in which they alone had competence. Feeding was elevated to become Holy Communion. Washing achieved dignity in Baptism and Penance [etc.]”³⁸ Daly cites, as an example, how the Catholic Church’s celebration of the Eucharist mirrors a woman’s traditional role of keeping her family alive by feeding them day in and day out. The Eucharist turns it upside down and inside out—now an all-male priesthood distributes a symbolic wafer that gives “eternal life.” This is then valued more than the life that is *literally* provided on a quotidian basis by women. Whether or not we agree with the specific critique of the church Daly offers here, what she taught us was how to see the inversions of reality presented by patriarchal culture.³⁹

Daly’s vision for the task of theological anthropology is the “healing of the divided self, which means breaking the idols that have kept it torn apart.”⁴⁰ The aim of human life is to live into one’s own “unique being,” which requires new images of what is considered holy. Although

³⁷ Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father : Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), 179–98.

³⁸ Daly, 195.

³⁹ Val Plumwood would later call this move “backgrounding,” where the “other” (the subjugated race, class, sex, or species, often providing contributions essential to the functioning of civilization) is treated as the least important element of society. Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993).

⁴⁰ Daly, *Beyond God the Father : Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation*, 81.

in this quote Daly is talking about Christ versus Mary, this sense of wholeness being established and reinforced through images of what is considered sacred could also be applied to the human who is divided from the true, connected nature of her or his being. Daly sets a precedent for advancing a new anthropology via a refiguring of human transcendence in this work. Humans—women humans in particular, but men too—need to be freed from patriarchy to join with the great Be-ing that is participation in God the Verb. Her critique is that masculine language for God hypostasizes divine transcendence, which limits the human becoming that uses divine imagery as a model. Daly’s sense of becoming is terrestrial and political, yet I will argue that its cosmological echo in Catherine Keller and Whitney Bauman risks removing anthropology from the earth, as seen in the second part of the chapter.

Linking the Lie to Ecology: Rosemary Radford Ruether’s *Sexism And God-Talk*

Ruether names “the big lie” as such and expands its purview to the relationship between humans and the earth. This is the same “lie” concept that McFague will build upon and work to solve in her work: the lie that we are not home on the earth.

The Big Lie...regards the body as an alien tomb of the soul, and the soul as growing stronger the more it weakens the body. It abstracts the human from the earth and God from the cosmos, and says that that which is abstracted is the original, and the first...The Big Lie tells us that we are strangers and sojourners on this planet, that our flesh, our blood, our instincts for survival are our enemies.⁴¹

Although human belongingness on the earth is being emphasized here, human exceptionalism remains. In Ruether’s vision, exceptionalism emerges in the negative sense: we

⁴¹ Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 264.

are special in that we are prone to sin. “We alone can ‘sin.’ We alone can disrupt and distort the balances of nature and force the price of this distortion on less fortunate humans, as well as the nonhuman community.”⁴² Ideally, she would have us turn this sinful nature around, so that we become uniquely capable of serving rather than subjugating the natural world. We need, she exhorts us, to “learn to use our intelligence to become *servants* of the survival and cultivation of nature.”⁴³ Though clearly preferable to a model of dominion, I read this stewardship paradigm as continuing the same sense of distancing the human that created this ecological crisis.

Ruether seems to contradict her own argument that humans are not “strangers on this planet” when she asserts that “we alone” can wreak such havoc. By claiming that “we alone” have this ability to be truly bad, Ruether taps into the Genesis narrative of the Fall. In Genesis, we, unlike the other creatures, were made in the image of God, but we did wrong and fell away from what was intended for us. In Ruether’s story, we are animals like the others, but all the other animals are good whereas we went rogue.⁴⁴ Yet we are doing what all life forms strive to do: survive and multiply. Like other life forms, when there is too little competition, we find ourselves quickly depleting the resources upon which we depend.⁴⁵ We are no less natural than any other species that expands to rapidly in the absence of sufficient competition, but that does not mean that what we are doing is right. We do not need to think of ourselves as unnatural in

⁴² Ruether, 88.

⁴³ Ruether, 89.

⁴⁴ Ruether, 88.

⁴⁵ I am indebted to Charles Mann’s article for drawing my attention to Gause’s petri dish experiment in his 2012 article for Orion Magazine. Mann, Charles, “State of the Species,” *Orion Magazine*, 2012, <https://orionmagazine.org/article/state-of-the-species/>.

order to condemn our actions. Instead, if we are truly to stop being rogue elephants, as Ruether calls us, then we need to stop thinking of ourselves *as* rogue.

All of this brings up the question of ethics: can we be ethical if we are not exceptional? Do we need to condemn ourselves as uniquely evil in order to change our ways? If not, if we are actually no more unnatural than herder ants or beavers, then we face the conundrum of how to understand the havoc we wreak without condoning it. For instance, our nuclear bombs can destroy earthly life on a greater scale than other species, but similar destruction occurs in “nature,” too (such as the Permian-Triassic extinction event). That is not to say that our capacity for destruction is anything less than immense and horrifying. What I am saying is that it is a difference of scale rather than a difference of kind. We are not uniquely “evil,” nor ought we to be considered as such if the ecofeminist project of seeing us as rooted in this earth is to be fully realized. This is why the turn to matter is necessary, and why it will be important to emphasize not only human animality but also human “minerality,” by which I mean the fact that we are made up of the elements of the universe. We need a broader view, one that gets away from our desire to find something about us that is uniquely “fallen.” As I argue later in this chapter, there are ways to understand our harmful actions as the result of non-advantageous adaptations that now hinder rather than enhance our survival chances. As material, we are in a sense no different than volcanoes or comets, or the cyanobacteria that caused the first climate change and filled the environment with the oxygen that we now breathe. This does raise ethical challenges, discussed further below, yet I will contend that there are other ways to recommend ethical action besides the need to rectify fallenness from a state of natural grace.

In question is the idea of the “natural.” Are we natural? Are our destructive tendencies natural? But what would they be other than natural? Breaking down the nature / culture divide,

to the extent that “nature” becomes a meaningless concept (per Timothy Morton, critic of the concept of nature as separate from culture) is part of the anti-exceptionalizing project. Ruether herself begins to address the problem of the idealized difference between nature and culture, pointing out that there is no realm of nature that is entirely removed from human culture.

“Nonhuman nature...is not just a ‘natural fact’ to which we can ‘return’ by rejecting human culture. Nature is a product not only of natural evolution but of human historical development.”⁴⁶

We have been globally impactful; there is no place that that has not been affected by our collective activity, and nowhere that does not “[partake] of the evils and distortions of human development [...] Nature, in this sense can be seen as ‘fallen,’ not that it is evil itself but in that it has been marred and distorted by human misdevelopment.”⁴⁷ Ruether has touched upon the fact that humans and nature cannot be teased apart because the division between them is artificial, an intention that Morton would no doubt appreciate. Yet the way that she elides the two continues to privilege human products and existence as prior to and more agential than nature; human culture has spread and expanded to cover over all of nature, but she does not observe how nature (in the form of geographic features, climate, and available food sources) has affected the types of culture that people develop. In other words, nature is tainted by our influence, and it is a one-way relationship. She argues that there is nowhere to escape human culture because of the impact we have had on nature, but this assumes that humans are inherently unnatural. It may not be her intention, but there is a certain unexamined human-nature rift that she takes for granted in making her argument. It is in the very language she uses: “nature will never be the same as it

⁴⁶ Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 91.

⁴⁷ Ruether, 91.

would have been without human intervention.”

What are humans if not natural? It is like saying that trees can never be “in nature” because of how their biomass has fundamentally affected soil, land, and atmosphere. That sounds ridiculous to us, because we know that trees are part of nature, affecting and being affected in turn. I am not saying that the eco-destructive activity of humans should continue—far from it. What I am saying is that classifying it as “unnatural” is not a helpful solution, as it simply perpetuates the sense of human isolation, the sense that we do not belong here, which is the same way of thinking that got us into this mess in the first place. (Of course, this would also entail the word “natural” losing its valences of meaning inherently justified.) What needs to happen is a dissolution of the nature / culture dualism within anthropology. Ruether moves towards overcoming the nature / culture division, but continues to privilege humans by setting them apart. When “nature,” as a term that is opposed to “culture,” loses its meaning, we can begin working with what we have before us: an encompassing *ecology* that includes us all.⁴⁸

What, then, does it mean to be human? For Ruether, to be human is to be a creature of relationships; we create relationships that become socio-cultural artifacts.⁴⁹ She urges us to use our relationality for good instead of ill. “We have the ability to create dysfunctional relationships with the earth, with our ecological community, and with each other and to preserve them

⁴⁸ Here I borrow from Morton’s argument to do away with “nature” as a term, and to use “ecology” instead. He has developed this in several works, especially Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Harvard University Press, 2007); Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010).

⁴⁹ Similar, I would say, to termite mounds—the lasting products of biological organisms that outlast the individuals who created them

socially.”⁵⁰ She wants us to work, instead, toward “a new creation in which human nature and nonhuman nature become friends in the creating of a livable and sustainable cosmos.”⁵¹ Despite my criticisms, the important thing is that in Ruether, as I have mentioned, we see an early attempt to reconcile human and nature. She pulls back the Big Lie enough to reveal that we are not, in fact, meant to feel like strangers to earthly embodiment. The attempt does not fully breach the nature / culture divide, however, which is one of the boundaries set up by the big lie that Sallie McFague begins to tackle.

Building a Theology to Combat the Lie: McFague’s *The Body Of God*

Sallie McFague’s *The Body of God* builds on her earlier work on metaphors⁵² and models⁵³ in theology, using her prior arguments to justify imagining the world as God’s body. She develops a theology in which the model chosen for God is the world as God’s body, akin to a pregnant woman. The corresponding anthropology to this ecotheology is one of human beings as “at home on the earth,” yet also uniquely responsible for the wellbeing of this earth of which we are a part. As I show below, the way McFague arrives at this responsibility ends up contradicting the fundamental theological message of at-home-ness.

McFague notes that Christianity’s legacy has been to construct individuals raised within

⁵⁰ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Women Healing Earth : Third World Women on Ecology, Feminism, and Religion* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1996), 88.

⁵¹ Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 92.

⁵² Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982).

⁵³ Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987).

its conceptual confines who feel they are meant to be somewhere else, to be anywhere but here. This is what she attempts to fight in developing a different model of God. She has a sense of the negative affective condition that this produces in people. “Christians have often not been allowed to feel at home on the earth, convinced after centuries of emphasis on otherworldliness that they belong somewhere else—in heaven or another world.”⁵⁴ Here, McFague looks not only at how humans have done ecological wrong as a result of these attitudes, but also at *human* suffering caused by the big lie. Christians have needlessly suffered alienation and a false sense of earthly *Unheimlichkeit* because of it, and so have the nonreligious who live in our Christian-inflected culture. In fact, while secularization may have reduced the sense of an afterlife, “it has not been replaced with a hearty embrace of the earth as our only and beloved home.” Meanwhile, her hope is that, if Christians can be encouraged to think of the world as part of the body of God, then they will understand themselves to have a “mandate to *love* the earth.”⁵⁵

McFague combines a rejection of anthropocentrism with a persistent though subtle exceptionalism. On the one hand, McFague advocates for beginning with the physical reality that can be known by science, which she calls the “common creation story,” that is, the physical, chemical and biological origins of the universe and of all life, including human beings. “An embodiment anthropology must start with who we are as earthly, physical creatures who have evolved over billions of years as pictured by postmodern science.” This is to be our “first step” in developing a theological anthropology.⁵⁶ It is clear to McFague that there is no justification for

⁵⁴ McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*, 102.

⁵⁵ McFague, 102.

⁵⁶ McFague, 103.

an anthropocentric perspective. From what scientists have been able to tell us about geological time, and how very recently *Homo sapiens* appeared on the scene, she says, “this suggests, surely, that the whole show could scarcely have been put on for our benefit.”⁵⁷ On the other hand she reaffirms humanity’s unique special status. In noting that the universe is hardly “finished,” but that change and evolution seem fundamental to the very nature of the universe, she argues that “this suggests that in our current picture God would be understood as a continuing creator, but of equal importance, *we human beings might be seen as partners in creation, as the self-conscious, reflexive part of the creation that could participate in furthering the process.*”⁵⁸ That is, we are meant to feel at home on the earth while simultaneously knowing ourselves, as “the” self-conscious part of creation, as not simply distinct from, but fundamentally *unlike* the other parts, due to this difference of self-consciousness.⁵⁹ For McFague, this no doubt seems the obvious conclusion because our self-consciousness and our ability to ask the question of the meaning of Being ostensibly distance us from the rest of inert matter and un-self-aware animals. The idea that we are the one-and-only self-conscious part of creation retains that sense of a categorical leap beyond the rest of matter, which risks reinforcing the destructive views that got us here, although of course that is not her intention.

Thus, in spite of the fact that McFague argues against human superiority, she traffics in

⁵⁷ McFague, 104.

⁵⁸ McFague, 105 emphasis added.

⁵⁹ The very call to “find the earth our home” repeated throughout the works of these ecofeminist theologians is limited language; if it is our home, it is a space that we occupy, separate from us, keeping us ontologically apart from it.

human exceptionalism.⁶⁰ Although superiority and exceptionalism are not technically the same thing, any sense of exceptionalism risks leading to the hubristic and destructive actions that have caused ecological degradation, in spite of the best intentions of the framer of such a perspective. McFague argues *against* thinking of humans as a “species among species,” even though she no longer wants us to think of ourselves as “the crown of creation.” She sees our intellect as “totally and irrevocably” separating us from other animals in a non-hierarchical way. In theory, this “total and irrevocable” difference separates us just as the rhinoceros’ horn separates it from all other animals without horns on their noses. Yet in practice, our defining traits are “more” different, for McFague, than the defining traits of other species, because of the question of responsibility.

Separation is necessary for ethical action, in McFague’s system, because it serves to make us responsible. “We are decentered as the only subjects of the king and re-centered as those responsible for both knowing the common creation story and helping it to flourish.”⁶¹ Reading these lines almost twenty-five years later, it is clear that we are all the more culpable and responsible, but in order to break free from paralysis we need an anthropology that does not set the human apart and alone.⁶² Therefore, we have to redefine “responsibility” as less cosmic and more contextual. The issue here is ethical action in tension with human connection to the

⁶⁰ This is not entirely her fault; she wrote before a lot of the studies that have shown much greater cognitive, social, and emotional capacity in nonhuman animals were conducted.

⁶¹ McFague, *The Body of God : An Ecological Theology*, 108.

⁶² Perhaps climate change deniers hold fast to their denial due to the inability to accept this massive responsibility. The root of their denial is remarkably paradoxical: they are simultaneously refusing to give up the privileged human position that humans are special, this is our earth and we have no obligation toward it, while also refusing to believe that we are capable of having this level of impact upon it!

world, the fulcrum of which is the exceptionalism of human self-knowing and responsibility. McFague fights against alienation on one hand, while on the other hand finding it necessary to reinstate it, via her take on responsibility, for the sake of ethical environmental action. I contend that this is due to the lack of a thorough ontology of human-earth entanglement. This is a conundrum faced by many if not all ecotheologies, feminist or otherwise, because we want to argue against human uniqueness while simultaneously arguing for the fact that humans have created environmental problems and are the only ones who can solve them. The problems McFague raises here are thus problems that apply to any advancement of ecotheology along these lines, which is one reason why Merleau-Ponty's ontology, as I develop it with Ted Toadvine, will be necessary to overcome this problem. I attempt to use these thinkers to understand the human being's agency to both harm and help as derivative of the primordial agency of the flesh of the world.

Although McFague's focus is on how we talk about God, she sketches what she sees as a more appropriate theological anthropology:

A focus on gratitude for the gift of life rather than a longing for eternal life; an end to dualistic hierarchies, including human beings over nature; an appreciation for the individuality of all things rather than the glorification of human individualism; a sense of radical interrelatedness and interdependence with all that exists; the acceptance of *responsibility* for other forms of life and the ecosystem, as *guardians* and partners of the planet; the acknowledgment that salvation is physical as well as spiritual and hence, that sharing the basics of existence is a necessity; and, finally, the recognition that *sin is the refusal to stay in our proper place*—sin is...living a lie.⁶³

These are, in her own words, simply “notes” for creating a theological anthropology,

⁶³ McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*, 110 emphasis added.

which she admits must vary depending on the “tradition, social context, and kinds of oppression experienced by different communities and individuals.”⁶⁴ What I appreciate and find relevant for today is her emphasis on helping people *feel at home*—on mending the psychic damage caused by the big lie.

The goal of her anthropology is not only to save the environment, but also to give people “a sense of belonging to the earth, of having a place in it, and of loving it more than we ever thought possible.”⁶⁵ In this way she addresses the alienation, as I mentioned, the sense of not being at home, as well as the peace that comes with embracing this home. Yet within this anthropology there is a contradiction that obtains between McFague’s two stances on human being. On the one hand, “sin” in this system is defined as “to live a lie,” to treat other animals as a homogenous lump of “other than us” to which we are superior.⁶⁶ On the other hand, McFague suggests that we are different from all the other animals for a reason even greater than rationality: the ability to wonder. This ability comes from the self-consciousness of knowing that we know, and our responsibility stems from this fact: “in relation to other animals, our ability to wonder, to step back and reflect on what we know, places us in a singular position: our place in the scheme of things may well be to exercise this ability.”⁶⁷ McFague recognizes that separating humans on the basis of our rational minds alone is deleterious to our relationships with other species and the world: “we are like other animals in complex ways; we are also different from them—and they

⁶⁴ McFague, 110.

⁶⁵ McFague, 111.

⁶⁶ McFague, 121–22.

⁶⁷ McFague, 123.

from one another—in complex ways. We have simplified our relationship with other animals by focusing on one human characteristic, a kind of rationality divorced from feeling.”⁶⁸

Unfortunately, allowing *only* humans the capacity to wonder undermines McFague’s desire to have us feel at home. Finding links to our own capacity to wonder in the waterfall displays of chimpanzees (which Jane Goodall, Donovan Schaefer and others have argued can be seen as proto-religious behavior),⁶⁹ or in the burial rituals of dolphins and elephants, surely makes us feel more at home on the earth than imagining that we alone are gifted with the earth’s single spark of wonder. Additionally, the idea that it is possible for any species to “refuse to stay in [their] place” implies that something is fundamentally unnatural about human beings, when in fact expansion and consumption of resources until checked by an outside force or competition is the defining character of life and hence the most natural thing in the world. We need to define human beings as *natural* even in our capacities for thought and destruction. Again, this requires understanding that describing something as “natural” can no longer function as a means of justification.⁷⁰

Seeing humans as fully on a continuum with nature does not mean that anthropogenic climate change should not be addressed—far from it. We have clearly affected the climate in ways that endanger the lives of countless species, and this is a problem; these facts are not up for

⁶⁸ McFague, 119–20.

⁶⁹ See Donovan O. Schaefer, *Religious Affects: Animality, Evolution, and Power* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2015).

⁷⁰ After all, oppressive institutions such as slavery and male dominance, just to name a couple, have historically been justified as “natural;” it is clear that “natural” does not describe ecosystems but rather is used as a tool to promote various social structures. As Elliott Sober has pointed out, “to the degree that ‘natural’ is understood as a normative concept, it has very little to do with biology.” Elliott Sober, “Philosophical Problems for Environmentalism,” in *Environmental Ethics*, ed. Robert Elliott (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1995), 234.

debate in this project. What is variable, however, is how our actions are understood anthropologically. Saying that we have done this because we are somehow inherently *worse* than all other beings is no more helpful than saying that we have a right to do it because we are inherently *better* than other beings. The former lends itself to a sense of inevitability (“what can you expect from fallen creatures?”) while the latter makes these actions righteous. I am saying that exceptionalism, positive or negative, is the root of these destructive actions.⁷¹

One might argue that the very fact that we can think of ourselves as exceptional is actually evidence of our sin against the natural order. My contention is that it is a case of a trait that was selected for by one environment, a trait that is now detrimental in new conditions. That is, let us consider the thought construct of exceptionalism as akin to a genetic phenotype, such as the darker variants of the peppered moth (*Biston betularia*).⁷² Just as the black or “melanic” variant of these moths was selected for in industrial England because of its ability to blend in with the soot, and then became easy prey once the pollution was brought under control, such that the paler moths were once again favored by selection pressures, so too may our thought construct of exceptionalism⁷³ have been evolutionarily advantageous for humans in prior eras; now,

⁷¹ Nor am I alone in making this point. As Bryant points out, the general contention of ecofeminists and ecotheologians is that an error in our thinking has led to this state of affairs. David J Bryant, “The Human Animal and Christian Ecotheology: Reflections on Taking Biology Seriously,” *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 8, no. 1 (March 2014): 85–110, <https://doi.org/10.1558/jsrnc.v8i1.85> However, my unique contribution is to show the contradictions in the extant ecofeminist literature that perpetuate exceptionalism even while acknowledging how problematic it is.

⁷² I borrow the conceit of considering a concept as a lasting and self-perpetuating meme from Morton’s notion of “agrilogistics,” in Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

⁷³ One could even call the construct of human exceptionalism the vehicle for human beings’ “extended phenotypes”-the various things we produce. Richard Dawkins, *The Extended Phenotype: The Long Reach of the Gene* (Oxford University Press, 1999), 196 ff; This way of thinking about human and other animal products was brought to my attention in Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 34.

however, this trait that once enabled humanity to thrive threatens our continued existence.⁷⁴ This evolutionary view of human capacities is one that is not based in that same habitual assumption of human uniqueness. Instead, as I shall show with the help of Merleau-Ponty's ontology, all human agency can be seen as stemming from the primordial agency of the earth.

McFague would no doubt take issue with what I am doing in this project along the same lines that she critiques deep ecology. Although she appreciates deep ecology's "radicalism" in waking humans up to the fact that we are part of this planet, she sees the movement as "bent on converting us from *egocentricity* to *ecocentricity*" that is, that "human beings are essentially one with nature." She sees both of these as "extremes." The problem, as McFague sees it, is that deep ecology "wants us to *feel* our deepest, physical connections with and dependence on the earth," which she regards as urging us to "blend [humans] into nature."⁷⁵ The reason she does not want this kind of merger is because of the implications for environmental ethics: if all is one body, how can there be any differentiation between one and the other? She critiques deep ecology for lacking a "developed sense of difference."⁷⁶ If there is no difference, where is the room for relationality? I agree with that critique, which is why what I do with Merleau-Ponty's thought in this dissertation is so important. His fleshy ontology is able to reconcile a fundamental one-ness of all reality with real difference and diversity. Perhaps McFague would approve after all, if I have indeed found a way to take that deep green connectedness and ontologically parse it with Merleau-Ponty such that difference and hence ethics is preserved.

⁷⁴ Jim Mallet, "The Peppered Moth: A Black and White Story after All," *Genetics Society News* 50 (2004): 34–38.

⁷⁵ McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*, 124–25.

⁷⁶ McFague, 127–28.

Finding a way to argue for human continuity with nature while allowing for difference and relationality could make it possible to create an anthropology in which the last vestiges of harmful exceptionalism have been removed. In the absence of such a system, human difference was crucial to the development of an ecological ethic. “We *are* different in the model of the body of God as qualified by the cosmic Christ, for we are called to be the liberating, healing, sharing self-conscious ones.”⁷⁷ I have already argued that this setting-apart undoes the work of connectedness and reinstates the alienation she was trying to remedy. There is another problem, too: just as Ruether’s extrapolation from human sin to the fallenness of all nature denied reciprocal agency to the earth, so too does McFague’s identifying of humans as *the* healing and liberating ones remove all agency from the rest of the earth. The lack of this agency perpetuates anthropocentrism and prevents us from actualizing that right relation into which McFague exhorts us to live. (Of course, it was not until over a decade later that philosophers like the New Materialists began to explore this concept of material agency; it is through their lens that we can now see part of what was missing from McFague’s argument).⁷⁸ Again, I must stress that this does not mean that humans do not have a capacity to make things better, or that climate change is not anthropogenic. Rather, my critique is that if human agency is unique to humans, we find ourselves alone and distancing from the rest of life, a sense of distance that led us to these eco-

⁷⁷ McFague, 129.

⁷⁸ Ellen Armour takes McFague’s thought further addressing this element of her anthropology. I had critiqued McFague for presenting humans as the only ones who can act in meaningful ways toward the earth; Armour offers an alternative in her elemental theology, restoring some of the earth’s agency: “Rather than raw material that human beings are entitled by divine mandate to master and exhaust, elemental theology acknowledges that ‘nature’ transcends humanity’s ability to subject it to our will. Our divine mandate should be reframed as cooperation rather than conquest.” Ellen T. Armour, “Toward an Elemental Theology: A Constructive Proposal,” *Ecology, Economy and God-Theology That Matters*, 2006, 57.

destructive behaviors in the first place, as McFague herself has noted. If, by contrast, the source of our agency is in the earth's primordial movement, there is a sense of continuity and solidarity that would be more beneficial for encouraging eco-friendly behavior.

McFague has made more recent statements on theological anthropology in *Life Abundant*, yet her basic anthropology remains the same. I agree wholeheartedly with the purpose of her message: to emphasize on what it means to live in the world (“The question for Christian anthropology is how human beings should live in this world”⁷⁹), and need for sacrifice on the part of the most privileged. As in *The Body of God*, she continues to advocate for a “holistic anthropology” which she defines as “one in which the good life includes body and spirit.”⁸⁰ This theme continues into her most recent work, *A New Climate for Theology*.⁸¹ Yet I have not found the lingering exceptionalism to be satisfactorily resolved.

In sum, McFague encourages humans to reconsider what they are vis-à-vis the world as body of God, and to work ethically on that basis. But by emphasizing human exceptionalism as the mechanism of our ethics (rather than shared agency and compassion, for example), the alienation that she so valiantly fights is sadly reinscribed. That is what my anthropology aims to rectify, finding a way for ethical action to make sense even while fully reweaving humans into the tapestry of existence. In the end, curbing our exploitative and destructive attitudes toward the nonhuman world necessitates finding a way to eliminate the sense of human superiority over the

⁷⁹ Sallie McFague, *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 20–21.

⁸⁰ McFague, 129.

⁸¹ Sallie McFague, *A New Climate for Theology: God, the World, and Global Warming* (Minneapolis, Minn: Fortress Press, 2008).

earth, which requires us to be able to see ourselves as not standing apart from the world at all.

A Different Approach To Ethics

This dissertation will continue to consider the question of whether we can be ethical if we are not exceptional. Yes, our nuclear bombs can destroy earthly life on a greater scale than other species, but similar imbalances occur in “nature,” too. That is not to say that our capacity for destruction is anything less than immense and horrifying; however, it is a difference of scale rather than a difference of kind. We are not uniquely “evil,” nor can we be considered as such if the ecofeminist project of seeing us as rooted in this earth is to be fully realized. This is why the turn to matter is necessary, and why it will be important to emphasize not only human animality but also human “minerality,” by which I mean the fact that we are made up of the material elements of the universe. We need a broader view, one that gets away from our desire to find something about us that is uniquely “fallen.” If our ecologically deleterious actions do not make us special, then there need to be other ways to recommend ethical action besides the narrative of fallenness. I return to this problem at greater length in Chapter 5.

One approach to ethics within a Merleau-Pontian ecofeminism can be found in Molly Hadley Jensen’s dissertation, in which she notes that there remains a dualism in ecofeminism that Merleau-Ponty’s thought can help address. Jensen sees her work as being part of the ecofeminist project to “develop an expansive ethic of relation” that overcomes spirit / matter dualism and all its variants. She was inspired by David Abram to deploy Merleau-Ponty for this purpose. Jensen reiterates the ecofeminist complaint about philosophical contempt for the body, and outlines their proposal for an alternative ethics. Her critique is that ecofeminism has not

addressed the “mind and body relation nor the moral significance of the body.”⁸² She, too, charges ecofeminists with failing to account for human-nature interconnection. As I have shown, McFague, for instance, does attempt to stitch the human back into the fabric of the world, but the intricacies of the relationships between human mind, human body, and general materiality are not a focus of her work.⁸³ Jensen locates the source of this neglect in the lack of insight that ecofeminism has had into the experiential nature of embodiment. While bodies are important in ecofeminism, the having-of-a-body vis-à-vis other bodies (human and nonhuman) receives short shrift. One of the reasons for this is the ecofeminist aversion to generalizing all women as somehow “closer to nature” in any way, which is a remnant of sexist duality:

The apparent ecological feminist aversion to bodies lies in their self-acknowledged effort to avoid a mere reversal of gender dualism and to reject confining and burdensome gender roles. These feminists identify the dualism of male and female, human and nature, self and other as the root of exploitation, but surmounting this dualism need not involve an abandonment of bodies. The connection of women with bodies (and the body of the earth) has been and will remain problematic if the body and bodily connection and experience is defined entirely by oppressive identities.⁸⁴

Jensen then goes on to focus on what she describes as the “sense phenomenology” of Merleau-Ponty as a means to overcome gender dualism and make a better body-ethics.

There are some clear similarities between our projects, but Jensen’s primary focus is the ethical dimension whereas mine is the experiential, anthropological dimension. Her work

⁸² Molly Hadley Jensen, “Fleshing out a Relational Ethics: Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s Contributions to Ecological Feminism” (Vanderbilt University, 2002), 39, <http://etd.library.vanderbilt.edu/theses/available/etd-1205102-125846/>.

⁸³ Jensen, 46.

⁸⁴ Jensen, 130–31.

addresses the flipside of what I tackle in my project. The two mutually inform each other, and are separate sides of the anthropological coin. Put another way, I ask not just what should we do—though of course this is a crucial question—but, just as importantly, how can we understand ourselves? I contend that the latter question needs to be answered before the former can be adequately developed. Moreover, I would contest the idea that the unresolved dualism for ecofeminists is that they are uniformly uncomfortable with the body; my argument, by contrast, is that the divide between human being and nonhumans is the most troublesome split. In the final chapter, however, I will revisit Jensen’s work in my discussion of the promise for ecological ethics even without any level of human exceptionalism.

We have seen how the concept of the “Big Lie” rhetoric has gone from the exposure of gender-specific inversions within patriarchal theological systems to the lie that humans are not at home on the earth, yet how extant critical analysis along these lines could not quite make it all the way to undoing human exceptionalism. We have also begun to glimpse the need for a materialist account that could allow for earthly agency, and thereby help to right the imbalance between humans and the nonhuman world. In the next section, I will argue that this turn to materialism—to an emphasis on matter—is the next logical step for ecofeminist theological thought, especially for addressing our present anthropological dilemma.

Beyond Ecofeminism

Feminist theology is, in my view, no longer an “endpoint,” if it ever was, for theological engagement. Rather feminist theology has opened up ways of being toward the world that enable us to see and imagine ourselves and our world otherwise, to affirm our being one species among many with particular gifts and

challenges.⁸⁵

Anne Elvey in her 2015 article, “Matter, Freedom and the Future: Reframing Feminist Theologies through an Ecological Materialist Lens,” has helpfully shown how extant feminist and ecofeminist philosophy and theology points toward a greater focus on materialism. Like me, Elvey has been influenced by Timothy Morton and the New Materialists; she also lists Ruether, McFague, and Ivone Gebara as among the feminist (in this case, ecofeminist) thinkers whose use of feminism has paved the way for a turn to the material. In her article, she summarizes some of the major strains of feminist and ecofeminist thought that contribute to developing a materialist ecotheology and develops her own suggestion for the interplay of theology and matter, which has several resonances with Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology. (A brief note on terminology: Elvey uses “feminist” as an umbrella term for both sex/gender-focused feminism and explicitly ecofeminist thought.)

Elvey’s most salient point is that without ecofeminism’s focus on the lower status of matter as the common core of the subjugated position of both women and nature, and its subsequent challenge to the matter-spirit division, we would not be able to focus on the material in this way. “Ecomaterial theology,” as I call it, is really ecofeminist theology in disguise. That prioritizing of matter, of bodies, of the mat-ernal, and related issues, is what has paved the way for this. I agree with Elvey that the methods of ecofeminist thought have allowed us to exceed it. Ecofeminism has fostered a mode of critical analysis that ultimately exceeds itself; the heir to

⁸⁵ Anne Elvey, “Matter, Freedom and the Future,” 200.

ecofeminist theology is an ecotheology that emphasizes materiality.⁸⁶ Thus, I argue that, in developing an explicitly non-exceptionalist anthropology based in materialism, I am carrying forward the ecofeminist work of identifying and uprooting “the Big Lie.”

Elvey also sees the conundrum that acknowledging our radical materiality would pose to anthropology. We need a new way to think of what it means to be a human, specifically in relation to the fact that we are always already embedded in this world of nonhumans. Luckily, feminist thought has created a mode of critique that can help us do this. Specifically, the feminist thinkers listed above have enabled us to think “beyond normative assumptions about sex, gender and sexuality,” and that same mechanism of boundary-exceeding thought “can inform our ability to think beyond normative assumptions about being human.” Her suggestion for how this can be done is, like mine, grounded in affirming human materiality. She argues that taking seriously our shared materiality (shared with everything in the universe) is the starting point for this rethinking. In other words, she, too, sees the need for a new anthropology, and sees common materiality as the basis for this.

This is not a rejection of feminist thought or the hard-won gains of ecofeminist theologians. Indeed, as I have suggested, none of this new ecotheological thought would be possible without ecofeminism. The roots of ecomaterialism can be found in earlier feminist and ecofeminist work, which pioneered attending to the lived, material reality of the body.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ There is also Queer ecology: Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson, eds. *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire* (2010). Also Giffney and Hird, eds. *Queering the Non/Human* (2008). See also Morton’s “queer ecology” guest column from 2010 in PMLA. And Barad “nature’s queer performativity” in *Qui Parle* (2011). Indebted to Jacob J. Erickson for his notes to his article: “Doxological Diversities and Canticle Multiplicities: The Trinitarian anthropologies of David H. Kelsey and Ivone Gebara.” In *Divine Multiplicities* (2014).

⁸⁷ For instance, Sonia Kruks (2010) as cited in Anne Elvey (2015), on de Beauvoir’s attention to the materiality of the aging body.

Furthermore, the feminist component of ecotheological critique is crucial. Although, as already discussed, ecotheologians had already criticized the anthropocentrism implicit in Christian theology, it was the *ecofeminists* who showed us how that anthropocentrism is specifically predicated on a hatred of matter, a denial of the fate of all material things (destruction, death, decay), a “denial of earth in favor of heaven,”⁸⁸ and how the maternal and, hence, the feminine, is shunned because of its residue of human animality and finitude. Embracing matter, then, is a project that both achieves feminist goals, and serves as a kind of culmination of ecofeminist critiques. It is necessary, in creating an anthropology for the anthropocene, to keep the insights of feminist thought while expanding our focus beyond “feminist.” I agree with Elvey that, although we must of course continue to work toward more complete liberation in all spheres for women, “we must also recognize the partiality of feminist theories and theologies as human projects.”⁸⁹ If we are to develop a nonexceptionalist anthropology, we need to de-center the human, which we can do with the material turn.

In moving from ecofeminist theology to *ecomaterialist* theology we continue the ecofeminist movement of exposing the big lie, which means truly undoing human exceptionalism and returning both meaning and agency to the earth. That does not mean denying human agency, but rather, locating the source of that agency in matter. In that sense, this dissertation takes up the materialist promise of ecofeminist thought. In doing materialism with Merleau-Ponty via Toadvine, I can mine the anthropological ramifications of the shared material

⁸⁸ Gebara, *Longing for Running Water : Ecofeminism and Liberation*, 89.

⁸⁹ Anne Elvey, “Matter, Freedom and the Future,” 200.

continuum within which humans exist, moving beyond the limitations of earlier ecofeminist theologians.

Above, I discussed how ecofeminist theology has not yet been able to fulfill its non-exceptionalist potential, which means that it cannot adequately speak to the anthropological condition of life in the anthropocene. Recently, others have developed theology that takes a more explicitly material stance. Below, I briefly discuss two examples of this recent, progressive, science-embracing ecofeminist materialist theology: Catherine Keller and Whitney Bauman. While they succeed in returning a certain agency to matter, their projects are less anthropological and more cosmological, meaning that the question of what it means to be human qua matter has not been fully explored; they skirt the anthropological implications of human nonexceptionalism. One of those implications is the location of human experiences of what has been called the transcendent, which often serve as justification for setting human beings apart in some absolute way. Keller and Bauman find a way for transcendent hope to exist materially, but heighten the temporal dimension of it in such a way as to have the effect of abstracting our focus from our current embodiment.

Catherine Keller and Whitney Bauman do not presently label themselves “ecofeminist,” but have roots in ecofeminism, and they could be seen as examples of the new ecomaterialism. Although they are even less exceptionalist than the theologians above, they retain a certain transcendent “flavor” that is potentially distancing, lessening the impact that an anthropology based on this approach could have for addressing our current situation. That is, religious hope, ecstasy, or experience is often seen as referring to a transcendent (and potentially supernatural) reality. As nonsupernaturalists, Bauman and Keller point instead to future-becoming for human beings. It is not supernaturalistic, but it functionally places the emphasis of human desiring away

from the realities of our embodied entanglement, which does not adequately combat exceptionalism. What these thinkers are doing is leaping into the cosmological—big picture theology and the universe—without addressing the pressing question of what it means to be human in this materially connected existence. Meanwhile, I will show that the referent for these feelings of religious ecstasy and hope can be found in this fleshy entanglement rather than referring elsewhere in a way that potentially abstracts humans from our embodiment.

Catherine Keller: Uncovering the Generative Matrix

Keller's *Face of the Deep* can be read as a moment where ecofeminist merges into ecomaterialist. She repeatedly makes the connection between matter and mother, noting the connections between material, maternal, and matrix, and writing matter as “mat(t)er.”⁹⁰ It could be argued that *Face of the Deep* is a work of ecofeminist theology (though Keller does not name it as such), because of the recovery of feminine elements of the creation story and other elements associated with the female side of the male/female polarity, chaos over nothingness, complexity over simplicity, and so forth.

Theologians like Keller have paved the way for a theology that roots itself more in the world and less in a superior, transcendent realm. “Less than ever does one need a supernatural Creator to supply a transcendent origin for the universe.” She offers an explicit critique of the negative ecological ramifications of the world-denying theological tradition, in the vein of Ruether and McFague, continuing to uncover the big lie. Echoing McFague, Keller writes, “to be ‘at home in the universe’ would count as sin, sloth and sensuality, rebellious denial of our true

⁹⁰ Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep : A Theology of Becoming* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2003), 14, 44, 53.

Origin...A dominological Christianity had branded any deep sense of belonging within the flux as pagan, irrational—and chaotic.” Keller identifies “another discourse of the divine” which “makes itself at home within complexity. It looks neither for Creator nor for the human creature outside of the ecosocial web of all life.”⁹¹ In place of a *nihil* that alienates God from God’s creation, Keller suggests imagining a deep, *tehomitic* chaos, and a force within and amongst it that is God, creating Godself and the world out of these rich, chaotic depths.⁹² She thus rehabilitates chaos by showing that it is not a destructive leftover but rather a matrix (the *mater*- root of the word is important to her) of possibilities. So we are off to a good start; in these quotes we hear the refrain, repeated once more, of the need to highlight human belongingness in and to the world, and the importance of incorporating that basic belonging into our conceptions of the divine, though her focus is on what this means for God, more so than for humanity.⁹³

In *Cloud of the Impossible*, Keller works away from anthropocentrism, but there continues to be a certain human exceptionalism nonetheless. We might not be central, but we are special.⁹⁴ In spite of her clear intent to compose an ecologically-responsible theology, and her desire to challenge anthropocentrism, the focus of her work is not this eco-anthropology, and she understandably does not devote the space to developing it as such. We do not get a sense of what it means to be human as human-material. However, drawing on Judith Butler, who was herself

⁹¹ Keller, 190–91.

⁹² We will see in Chapter 3 how Merleau-Ponty offered a similar critique of the classical Christian creation story.

⁹³ I will engage this same principle in Chapter 4 as I develop my theology of “in-scendence.” Moreover, there is an embedded sense of primal connectivity, which, as will become clear in Chapter 3, resonates with Merleau-Ponty’s fold and invaginated “Flesh.”

⁹⁴ Catherine Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible: Negative Theology and Planetary Entanglement*, 2015, 170–73.

influenced by Merleau-Ponty, Keller does ask probing questions about the nature of singularity and grief and precarity beyond anthropocentrism, which will be considered briefly in Chapter 5.

Anthropology in Bauman: A Matter of Identities

Whitney Bauman, influenced by both Ruether and Keller, has more explicitly ecological aims for his theology. Bauman's anthropology constitutes a welcome counter to the ethical-yet-isolated human of Ruether and McFague. By complicating the erstwhile monolithic human identity in concert with a similar complication of the things of the world, Bauman's anthropology demonstrates great potential for reconsidering what it means to be human in a post-exceptional age. However, Bauman does not pursue this line of thought, choosing instead to focus on the way these multiple identities affect human becoming in a planetary direction. By this Bauman means how all of us here on this planet *become* in a complementary way that enhances mutual flourishing. Bauman thus does away with exceptionalism, but moves quickly into a becoming that ignores what it means to *be* fundamentally material. Thus one does not find in Bauman's work a conceptualization of what it means to be human in our relative (not absolute) difference from other creatures.⁹⁵

The way Bauman combats exceptionalism is by destabilizing the notion of the integral human subject in parallel with the deterritorialization of discreet and separate identities of any part of the planet. Drawing heavily on Deleuze, he notes that "our actions, thoughts, and emotions are always multiple." Moreover, we are constituted by the "multiple histories" of all the other things of this planet, animal, vegetable, and mineral, "all of which are evolving beyond

⁹⁵ That is, all species share the quality of being different, as a dolphin is different from a bat or a fungus.

their own boundaries and diffracting into proliferations of subject-objects.”⁹⁶ That is, that we cannot isolate human being in any meaningful way; as soon as you try to pin down a moment of separation, two more moments of connection converge upon you.⁹⁷ By emphasizing relationality, however, Bauman avoids really asking the question of what materiality means for anthropology in and of itself. Moreover, his point, like Keller’s, is that the self does not exist outside of these relations; while there is a push for nonexceptionalism, there is also a loss of individuality, both of individual species and individuals within a given species. What does it mean to be a human being rather than a mushroom? What does it mean to be a particular human being? This individual self will need to be thinkable in some way in order to be able to produce an anthropology—including an anthropology of relation. Because, after all, we must ask: *who am I*, as I experience myself in relation?

In spite of the above critique, I maintain that Bauman offers an earnest attempt to move past exceptionalism. Bauman’s stated goal is to “challenge the seemingly impermeable boundary between human and other planetary subjects, suggesting that if we take planetary technologies of meaning seriously, we must begin to imagine our own lives evolving beyond the species boundary.”⁹⁸ That is, a species is only a species if taken in one slice of time. Scientists currently

⁹⁶ Whitney Bauman, *Religion and Ecology: Developing a Planetary Ethic* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 155.

⁹⁷ Like Keller, Bauman draws upon Barad’s agential materialism. Summarizing some of Barad’s key points, Bauman observes that “matter is not a dead collection of objects that human agency or consciousness is added to, but it is agential all the way down.” the result of this is that “epistemology is ‘ontoepistemology’ and that ethics, epistemology, and ontology are always already together.” Bauman, 155 There is indeed a lot to draw from Barad, and her work is not necessarily at odds with Merleau-Ponty; it is a physicist’s way of expressing some of what Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology has already proposed; Bauman and others have found ways to put her thought in dialogue with Deleuze, but it is no less dialogical with Merleau-Ponty.

⁹⁸ Bauman, 125.

agree on the “gradualism” hypothesis of evolution (rather than “punctuated equilibrium”)—species continually change in tiny ways, and these tiny changes accumulate over time to create what can be recognized as new species. This has particularly marked effects when a population is isolated in some way, whether relatively recently divided by a river (as is the case with Bonobos and the common Chimpanzee) or completely cut off for eons (as in the marsupial species in Australia that were not wiped out by the newly evolved placental mammals), yet each of these species can be seen as perpetually and infinitesimally changing. Seen over a great swath of time, it is impossible to pin down exactly when or where a species begins or ends; ultimately, we are all still connected in the “tree of life.” I agree with deconstructing the boundaries between species, especially the categorical ontological boundary between human and non-human, but I feel Bauman does not provide a sense of what it actually means to be human in a context informed by the science of blurred species boundaries. How can we think of what it means to be human once we challenge this “seemingly impermeable boundary”? Furthermore, this seems prone to McFague’s critique of deep ecology: we have lost the individual in this total merging with nature. Who are we and why do we do what we do? How can we think of ourselves as material while knowing ourselves to be what we are? These are the anthropological questions that remain unanswered, and which I will address in this dissertation.

My Proposal: An Anthropology for the Material Turn

I find two major points of disagreement with the more material ecotheologies presented in the foregoing discussion. These points of disagreement have to do, on the one hand, with a definition of the human being, and on the other, with the referent of human religious experience. The first point is that human materiality needs to be emphasized to a greater degree—to the point

that we have what could be called a “radical materiality.” Because of the visceral response that human-animal continuity (to say nothing of human-mineral continuity, though, being more distant from us, minerals have less of a history of abjection in our culture) continues to produce in so many people, an anthropology founded on it must earnestly dig into this reality. The second point is that there needs to be a way to situate human transcendence somewhere besides a “becoming” (a word that, to me, always implies two other words that follow it “...something else”). Both Keller and Bauman wax lyrical on “becoming,” offering it up as an appropriate locus for transcendent experience. Although I do not deny the appeal of a theology of creative becoming, for the purposes of addressing this present issue of joint culpability-victimization of the climate crisis and the absolute, unavoidable relationality that it has revealed to us, I believe it will be more ecologically promising to focus less on human becoming and more on human *being*. Obviously, we can say, “human being *is* becoming,” and that would not be wrong. Yet if we look at what it means to exist as a creature as being a mix of both being and becoming—being in a constant state of change—then I would say that, for ecological purposes, it is more efficacious to focus on what it is to *be* rather than the hope that we can place in our *becoming*. Becoming focuses us on a future, a somewhere else, which can too easily be deployed as an escape from our current climate catastrophe, limiting the motivation and resources we have for addressing what is happening here and now. Also, for the purposes of thoroughly uprooting human exceptionalism, I believe it is presently necessary to address not our state of change but rather our state of being as we are here, as mineral and material entities, which has been neglected for far too long. Both human materiality and the materiality of our religious experiences need to be addressed in greater detail. Below, I briefly elaborate on these two issues and why engagement with my chosen philosophical interlocutor could be helpful.

Radical Materiality

The ecofeminist theology of the twentieth century went as far as it could but it would not step over the animality line (let alone the minerality line), for reasons both political and philosophical. The contemporary work by Keller and Bauman leapt over the line but went so far that we never dealt with what that line meant! Why the difficulty in discussing our animality, minerality, and materiality? Shame (which Bauman suggested as a barrier to a more engaged anthropological affect)⁹⁹ is not the ultimate issue standing in our way. The real issue is *fear*: a fear of our mortality that ecofeminists have point out, which is driven home by the fact that we cannot escape this planet whose fate is ours, and fear of the abject: the instinctive desire to reject the material that has what has been our conceptual “other” (our mirror, to use Daly’s terminology, in a Looking Glass society that includes all life) for so long. Even ecofeminist theologians have not been immune to the abjection implied in this *verboten* boundary-crossing.

As I will show, the appeal of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology is that it allows us to find the mystery, awe, and the sense of transcendence in this fleshy reality that we know or think we know so intimately. We can find a kind of transcendence through that on-the-ground experience that honestly deals with our shared animality—as well as our shared *minerality*—but we have to face a truth that is appalling to many: that in addition to being stardust, to living in fantastic constructed realities, this flux of change and time, that we are messy, fleshy mammals sharing biological functions and ecosystem with other vertebrates, invertebrates, plants, and saprophytes,

⁹⁹ He criticizes certain common environmentalist exhortations, like traveling less, immersing oneself in bioregionalism, and so forth, as counter-productive to the movement because they “evoke shame in a world that is filled with other options...these types of discourse take a page from antiquated religious commandments that rely on a transcendent other that is keeping score.” Bauman, 130.

caught up in innumerable feedback loops. How can we *deal* with that, knowing as we know that we are the kind of creatures that also create these fabulous theologies and deconstructing narratives?

No Future

Either we have a certain inherent distance from the world *in* us (as consciousness or the unique capacity for sin as in McFague and Ruether), or we can be distracted from our nondifference from the world by putting our hope in becoming (Keller, Bauman). The latter serves as corrective for the former, insofar as it begins with a robust anti-exceptionalism, but it nevertheless does not address the radicality of human-world ontological nondifference. What these other thinkers offer in their post-ecofeminist theologies is human transcendence in future time rather than in present place. I have already mentioned the problem with ecotheologies that emphasize human future-becoming as our moment of transcendence. By contrast, I propose that the most beneficial ecotheological anthropology will locate the source of human religious hope in a present, spatial reality, rather than a temporal “to come.” (Though obviously time and space are mutually imbricated, I mean to put the emphasis on the spatial side of the coin, so to speak.) Putting transcendence into the future further removes humans from the truth of our entanglement with the earth, and indirectly perpetuates the “big lie” that we are only sojourners on this earth. (Similarly, Morton has recently noted that focusing on preventing a future apocalypse continues to distance us from the ecology in which we currently participate; at least now that we are talking about living in the catastrophe rather than the coming apocalypse, we have eliminated that

element of distance.)¹⁰⁰ This future-loving tendency is arguably complicit in perpetuating human separation from the earth. Now that we are living in a reality undeniably affected by climate change, ecotheology needs to offer more than hope and exhortations for the future; we need to address the real human situation right now, a present that has been shaped by the failure of most ecological warnings to reach the ears of those who needed to hear it most.¹⁰¹ The value of turning to the flesh is that it makes it possible not to abstract from the material even in describing the heights of human experience.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown how classic ecofeminist theology made great strides towards breaking down human-world barriers, but how it was at a loss to explain human consciousness and relationality without a certain amount of exceptionalism related to the experience of transcendence. On the other hand, contemporary, proto-eco-materialist theology overlooks the profound anthropological implications of human nonexceptionalism, even while technically accepting that principle. There is a lacuna in ecofeminist theology where human materiality has been insufficiently tapped for its anthropological implications. The removal of the ontological boundary between humans and the rest of material reality needs to be examined closely because our current context, where we are increasingly feeling the negative effects of the anthropocene,

¹⁰⁰ Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 78–79.

¹⁰¹ Given that Bauman’s futurism emerges from a discourse heavily inflected by queer theory, it is only appropriate that I challenge his vision of transcendence with another queer theorist. Lee Edelman in *No Future* reveals and deconstructs the concept of the Child that directs much of the discourse in our society. How much of this theological weight placed upon hope for human and planetary becoming is part of the heteronormative hope for “the Child”? See Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2004).

forces us to face our nonexempt status from the fate of the earth, calling into question long-cherished beliefs in our specialness. What is required is a theological anthropology that can address the quandaries that are raised by the assertion of this nonexceptionalism. The construction of such a theology is my task in this dissertation. From both the creative suggestions and the lacunae of the literature above, several elements have emerged that I will need to consider in developing this constructive anthropology. In working toward a materialist, nonexceptional theological anthropology, I will need to find a way to account for the experience of transcendence without abstracting the human from being present on the earth. This new anthropology will also continue to focus on the personal dimension of what it means to ontologically nondifferent in terms of religious affect. By this, I mean that there is not some signature in our very being that makes us *categorically* distinct from other matter. When I say, “in terms of religious affect,” I mean both that it locates the referent of religious feeling in the continuous flesh of our reality, and also that this new theological anthropology will consider the implications for human religious feeling when the human is defined in this nonexceptional way. Finally, I will need to find a way to encourage ethical ecological action that does not rely on some kind of absolute human difference. That is, while *Homo sapiens*, like all species, has various characteristics that make it possible to distinguish this species from others, our traits (such as consciousness) do not need to be viewed as categorically separating humans from all other beings. The trajectory of the above literature indicates that the turn to the material begins to take us in the right direction for achieving these goals, but that it requires an ontology suited for the immediate, lived experience of human existence in the world in order to do so. I propose to provide this in the form of Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of the flesh.

The ecomaterialist turn can provide for this anthropology so long as it is based in a grounded-enough phenomenological ontology. Ecomaterialism (née ecofeminism) can develop an anthropology that speaks to the times by engaging with philosophy that already understands how human experience can exist as part of an embodied material world. I argue that Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological ontology provides this philosophical framework. Moreover, I contend that his work is an especially good choice to put in dialogue with ecofeminist theology because of its general appeal to long-held feminist and ecological values of relationality and embodied experience: I am a situated, embodied subject, and I only come to know things through that situation.¹⁰² Merleau-Ponty thus offers a way to conceptualize the radicalism of embodied situatedness for a theological anthropology. I apply his thought to this problem using a methodology of radical theology and naturalism, and I construct a theological anthropology that dives into our earthly entanglement, including the theological problems that arise in so doing.

Ultimately, I see what I am doing as carrying on the particular strain of ecofeminist theology I discussed above, continuing the theoretical work of uprooting the "big lie" and finding ontological value in our embodied reality. I simply take it to its ultimate conclusion of inescapable human materiality. I find a way to conceptualize what it is to be human, complete with transcendent experience, while also being materially contiguous with the world.

As eco(feminist)theologians have pointed out, the bulk of theology has been concerned with describing the special destiny of humankind. Thus, taking humans as *not* categorically unique is particularly challenging within the field of theology. To approach this will require a

¹⁰² Dorothea Olkowski, "Introduction: The Situated Subject," in *Feminist Interpretations of Maurice Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Dorothea Olkowski and Gail Weiss, 2006, 3.

combination of methods: a naturalist foundation, to address the science of our ecological existence, a radical theological impetus, to push the boundaries of what can be considered theology, and a theopoetic constructive mode, to tap into the flexibility and emotive potential of theological language. Therefore, in the next chapter I take the radical theological methodology of thinkers like Caputo, and its related theopoetics of thinkers like Keller, and push it further into the implications of naturalism, forming a radical theopoetical naturalism, which allows for a theology flexible enough to survive such moves as I will make. I use this methodology to develop a constructive anthropology of human materialism, emphasizing our connectedness with the earth. In Chapter 3, I address the problem of reconciling human theological capability with radical materiality by introducing Merleau-Ponty's philosophical scheme and showing how its treatment of the issues of consciousness and reflection provide a way to describe humans as part of the world and to show that human consciousness is ontologically contiguous with the being of the earth. Then, in Chapter 4, building on the findings of this fleshy ontology, I introduce my own suggestions for an eco-feminist-materialist theological anthropology. Finally, in Chapter 5, I talk about the larger theological and ethical implications of this kind of anthropology: what we can do in our world as a result, how this might affect how we see ourselves and other life forms, and what this means for addressing how we can live into our inescapable involvement in the fate of the Earth.

CHAPTER II

METHODOLOGY: TOWARD A RADICAL, NATURALISTIC ECOTHEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Introduction

In the broadest sense, theological anthropology is the study of the human in relation to God, specifically: human meaning and purpose with regard to divinity, or theological perspectives on what it means to be human. As I discussed in the previous chapter, there is a need for a new theological anthropology here and now, because the industrialized West needs a new way to think of what we are with regard to this earth. A theological anthropology can borrow from ecology, philosophy, and the sciences to craft its understanding of what the human is. Theology is uniquely equipped to answer the big questions to which these separate domains of knowledge combined give rise.

In Chapter 1, I showed how the “big lie” identified by ecofeminist theology is being answered in ecomaterialist theology, as the latter reframes cosmology to answer the materialist concerns of the former. This involves embracing human ontological continuity with the earth, yet the full implications of this materialist turn for theological anthropology have not been fully thought through. In this chapter, I will show the methodological means by which I intend to construct an anthropology that focuses on how the human being may be understood in an explicitly nonexceptional way. In the next chapter, I shall use Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of the Flesh to uproot this division and develop a theological anthropology in which human beings are not only connected to but part of the world in a fundamental way. In

order to get to that point, I will first show how the work I do here stretches but does not exceed the bounds of contemporary theology, and how, in fact, the methodologies of naturalism, radical theology, and certain elements of theopoetics can be applied successfully to the task of constructing an ecotheological anthropology.

The method of a nonexceptional *theological* anthropology is a tricky thing, because theology speaks to human religious experience, which is commonly perceived as one of the demarcation points between humans and nonhumans¹ It may therefore seem that there is no way to do theology from this standpoint. Moreover, as mentioned in the previous chapter, most theology has been concerned with describing the special destiny of humankind, and so particular consideration must go into crafting a theological anthropology that is not by definition exceptionalist. Here I present the naturalist foundation, radical theological impetus, and theopoetic constructive mode that inform my theological anthropology. In so doing, I provide the methodological basis for the constructive work of Chapter 4 by means of the philosophy to be developed in Chapter 3: beginning theological construction with the human being *qua* material. In this chapter I will also introduce Merleau-Ponty's thought in the context of other potential philosophical interlocutors, and explain how his work is conversant with my theological method.

The exploration of naturalism, radical theology, and theopoetics that follows is intended both to show the continuity of this project with extant theological approaches, and also to detail the uniqueness of my particular approach. My methodological approach borrows the nonsupernatural norms of naturalism while critiquing its under-interrogated operationalist core's

¹ Some religious studies scholars have recently begun arguing for forms of religiosity in nonhuman animals. See for instance Donovan O. Schaefer, *Religious Affects: Animality, Evolution, and Power* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2015).

residual supernaturalism. It also adapts radical theology's non-congregational orientation and sense of the impossible for ecotheological thought, which requires, in part, theopoetics' metaphorical and evocative way of talking about human and divine. In other words, it has already been established that non-supernatural, non-literal thought that prioritizes human experience in the world may yet be considered "theology," and my work takes this one step farther by making those elements explicit and adding a Merleau-Pontian ontology into the mix in order to generate a new theological anthropology. Below, I will explore each of the three major elements of my methodology in turn, and discuss they might be applied specifically to theological anthropology.

Naturalism

Naturalism means everything is potentially explicable by scientific method. I accept the basic premise of naturalism that there is nothing outside the world, but I find two main problems with naturalism. The first is that it leaves little room for theological construction; the second is that there is a certain human-world separation that persists even in the naturalistic sciences. After briefly defining naturalism, I shall look at each of these in turn.

It is the emphasis on finding the "real" within the physical world that I wish to borrow from naturalism. According to geologist Steven Schafersman, scientific naturalism's most basic definition is: "only nature² is real, therefore, super nature is non-real."³ In naturalism, there is

² In the sense of nature versus "super-nature," rather than in the sense of nature versus culture; for naturalists nature encompasses humans and human activity.

³ Clearly, this has to be axiomatic, since there is no way to disprove a negative—that is we cannot definitively prove the non-existence of a supernatural (absence of evidence not being the same as evidence of absence, after all), and there could be some other realm that we simply do not have the tools to know conclusively. However, since

only nature, every thing and event is natural, the universe “consists only of natural elements, that is, of spatiotemporal material elements—matter and energy—and non-material elements—mind, ideas, values, logical relationships, etc.” In this system, the non-material elements are also “somehow immanent in the structure of the universe.” This sense of nonphysical things being immanent in the cosmos foreshadows the relationship between visible and invisible that I discuss in the next chapter.⁴ To this I would add David Ray Griffin’s self-described “minimal” definition of scientific naturalism: it is “the doctrine that the world’s normal causal processes are never interrupted. Naturalism in this sense is simply the rejection of the possibility of supernatural interruption of the world’s web of cause-effect relations.”⁵ Augmenting this description of naturalism, Jerome Stone defines naturalism as a “set of beliefs and attitudes that focuses on this world” and holds that there is “no ontologically distinct and superior realm [...] to ground, explain, or give meaning to this world.”⁶ Stone himself gives preference to Arthur C. Danto’s definition of naturalism from the 1967 *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. There, naturalism is defined as:

A species of philosophical monism according to which whatever exists or happens is *natural* in the sense of being susceptible to explanation through methods which...are continuous from domain to domain of objects and events...repudiating the view that there exists or could exist any entities or events which lie, in principle, beyond the scope of

there is no evidence of this realm in our own world, then if it exists, the naturalist perspective on it is that it is at the very least functionally non-existent because it does not impinge upon this reality.

⁴ “Steven Schafersman, ‘Naturalism Is Today An Essential Part of Science,’” accessed March 29, 2017, http://www.stephenjagould.org/ctrl/schafersman_nat.html.

⁵ David Ray Griffin, “Scientific Naturalism, the Mind-Body Relation, and Religious Experience,” *Zygon* 37, no. 2 (June 2002): 361.

⁶ Neville, *On the Scope and Truth of Theology*, 1.

scientific explanation.⁷

From this, Stone argues that the four basic tenets of naturalism are: (1) the only thing that is real is the world of nature, and that “includes culture and human history;” (2) nature is a sufficient reason for its own “origin or ontological ground;” (3) we may comprehend nature without reference or appeal to an intelligent or deliberate design or designer; (4) the only causation is natural causation. In such a view, there is clearly no room for an interventionist deity or non-natural forces of any kind. This does not mean, however, that there is no room for experiences that we would conventionally label as “religious” (though the referents of those experiences would need to be rethought). While some naturalists do feel antipathetic to religion, naturalism and religion are not mutually exclusive. After all, as Michael Hogue points out, naturalism is not necessarily anti-religious, but it is (by definition) anti-supernaturalist.⁸ The question is whether religion has to be premised on the existence of the supernatural. One reason radical theology and theopoetics are complementary to the naturalist foundation of my project is that, for the radical theologians and the theo-poets below, the answer to that question is: no.

However, as I have said, naturalism is not enough. Naturalism can assert that the rich religious and theological lives of human beings is comprehensible by science (as Hogue notes, “most religious naturalists tend toward a generous materialism that allows for much of what we

⁷ Arthur Danto, “Naturalism,” *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York: The Macmillan Co. and The Free Press, 1967).

⁸ Michael S. Hogue, *The Promise of Religious Naturalism* (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010), 38.

designate by the terms ‘mind’ and ‘value’”),⁹ but little has been done that can weave together theological anthropology and the natural world. The difficult question, which will be my focus, is how naturalism is able to account for the rich inner life of human beings generative of theological reflection, a version of the mind-body problem, also known in philosophy as “the hard problem.”

Stone has expressed a similar frustration with the inability of naturalism to yield ready understandings of the transcendent excess of religious experience. He notes that, for religious naturalists, nature is not “enough.” That is, “nature is not self-explanatory. Nature is not completely meaningful...nature does not give us the answer to our moral dilemmas...nature is not enough for all our wishes.” Stone does not offer a rejoinder to this; there is nothing within his religious naturalist toolbox that can satisfy this lack. Instead, he is resigned that “nature, including human culture, is all we have,” and that it will have to suffice. For Stone, it does so in ways that are sometimes very satisfying. In other words, for Stone, within nature one can find “pockets of meaning” and sometimes we are able to “enlarge” them.¹⁰ Gary Dorrien has described Stone’s position as “a critically engaged openness to the sacred joined with a minimalist vision of transcendence.”¹¹ For Stone, the experience of connection with something beyond the mundane, which he calls “transcendence,” is important and is lacking in modern secular culture, due to “a religious inheritance that, even in its liberal forms, identified religious

⁹ Jerome A. Stone, *Religious Naturalism Today: The Rebirth of a Forgotten Alternative* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2009), 5.

¹⁰ Stone, *Religious Naturalism Today*, 229.

¹¹ Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology*, 470.

faith with maximal models of transcendence.” hence the need for a “minimalist” model of transcendence. He described the transcendent as “the sum of the worthy and constructively challenging aspects of the world.”¹² This seems to me a paltry compensation. It reveals the need for something more to bring theological depth to the discussion; naturalism is not enough because for naturalism, nature is not enough. Another way to understand this is to say: naturalism cannot adequately account for transcendent experiences. Although I affirm with the naturalists the impossibility of the supernatural as traditionally defined, or any kind of metaphysical teleology, I maintain that there must be a better way to think human transcendent experience within the realm of the physical.¹³

Apart from deficiencies in the area of transcendence, religious naturalism is also inadequate as a sole method for my theology because of its latent Cartesian assumptions. As Ted Toadvine has argued, scientific naturalism continues to take for granted the positive existence and separation of one being from another, and therefore continues to be metaphysical. Although scientists of course acknowledge that humans are material beings, in practice naturalism implicitly assumes that the human being who is engaged in the naturalistic sciences occupies a standpoint at a remove from the physical world that he or she is studying. In so doing, naturalism treats “nature, the human subject, and their relations in terms of presence and availability.”¹⁴¹⁵ In other words, scientific naturalism treats the phenomena it studies as “standing reserve,” objects

¹² Quoted in *ibid.*

¹³ Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology*, 469.

¹⁴ Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature*, 107.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 108.

available to and for human manipulation, and so begins from a framework of a certain level of human distance from the world. Toadvine argues that phenomenology more appropriately recognizes the always-already embeddedness of the scientist in their world, by “reaffirm[ing] the primacy of the lifeworld as the unacknowledged ground for scientific objectivity.”¹⁶ That is, we would not even have objectivity without our grounding in and pre-conscious formation by this enmeshed world from which we emerge; objectivity is contingent on and emergent from non-objective connectedness. For this reason, I hold that phenomenology (particularly Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology) is better able to get at the non-supernatural and anti-metaphysical realities that naturalism so values.

I have argued that the premises of naturalism are foundational to this project and yet naturalism alone is inadequate to solve the problem of developing a nonexceptional anthropology. Because approaches in naturalism do not offer satisfactory answers for transcendent experience, I use Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, as will be discussed in detail in the next chapter, to work from this basic naturalistic foundation to create something better. In order to get there, I will draw from the methods of radical theology and theopoetics.

Radical Theology

I take my idea of radical theology specifically from John Caputo, whose method is particularly relevant here because he shares my interest turning to the material, making the material not a polar opposite of the religious, and he has recently begun to investigate the overlap

¹⁶ Ted Toadvine, “The Elemental Past,” *Research in Phenomenology* 44, no. 2 (July 31, 2014): 273, doi:10.1163/15691640-12341288.

between theopoetics and radical theology. Moreover, Caputo recognizes the need for a shift in the focus of the humanities away from the solely human: “what I am calling for here under the name of a poetics, of theopoetics and cosmo-theopoetics, constitutes a call for what Derrida calls a ‘new’ humanities.”¹⁷ These new humanities begin at that blurry human-nonhuman border for which I have been advocating: “The humanities have always had to do with the chiasm, the intertwining of the insistence of the event and our existence, but this must include the intertwining of human and non-human, the correlations between the anthropological and the ethological.”¹⁸ His radical theology is therefore highly compatible with my aims in this project. In this section, I will discuss three main features of radical theology as I understand it: first, breaking from confessional communities, second, an approach to the impossible, and third, resonances with prayer and precarity.

Part of the appeal of radical theology for this ecotheological project comes from its ability to address American culture as a whole. Radical theology, Caputo says, “does not report back to the confessional community or seek its authentication there, and it reserves for itself the right to ask any question, without regard to whether it fractures or divides the community or causes schismatic conflict and confessional breaks.” Radical theology refuses to privilege the tradition that the theologian arbitrarily inherited, and “has the right to ask any question.”¹⁹ But if this is the case, then to whom is radical theology speaking? Caputo states that radical theology’s

¹⁷ John D Caputo, *The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps*, 2013, 216.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 217 In this quote, one can see both the influence of Merleau-Ponty on Caputo (in the terms “chiasm” and “intertwining”) and also Caputo’s intention that radical theology be brought to bear on the connection between human beings and the rest of our world.

¹⁹ John D. Caputo, “Theopoetics as Radical Theology,” *Theopoetic Folds : Philosophizing Multifariousness*, 2013, 126.

community, the one to which it reports back, is actually a “community without community.” That is, at least in principle, this kind of theology is for “anyone willing to listen, with or without a confessional affiliation.”²⁰ The ecofeminist theologians discussed in the previous chapter were also writing with a broad audience in mind; what I appreciate about Caputo is his willingness to posit explicitly that the public for his theology is likely to be outside of any Christian affiliation. Caputo also admits immediately that the audience will necessarily be constrained by the starting place of the theologian; the theologian, however radical, is never without her or his own standpoint, location, historical community of sorts.²¹ This understanding of theology’s public benefits from Robert Neville’s observation that the audience for this theology is “the whole of life that [the theology] might guide and by which it is assessed,” in this case, anyone who is confronted with the human situatedness in this world and wonders how to think of it in terms of meaning, purpose, and existential significance.²² Additionally, Caputo describes radical theology as kind of a “hovering spirit that haunts the living confessional traditions, a ghost that spooks their closed confessional assemblies,” as opposed to some kind of rival tradition.²³ This can, to some extent, describe the kind of theology I am doing in this dissertation: participating in this spooking of the confessional communities from whose theologies this kind of thought is descended.

²⁰ John D. Caputo, “Theopoetics as Radical Theology,” 127.

²¹ John D. Caputo, “Theopoetics as Radical Theology,” 127.

²² Robert C Neville, *On the Scope and Truth of Theology: Theology as Symbolic Engagement* (New York: T & T Clark, 2006), 3.

²³ *Ibid.*, 129.

Following from this openness, Caputo has developed a nonsectarian theology of not-knowing and “perhaps,” with a hermeneutical method that hinges on the possible / impossible. “What I call theology is possible only under the condition that it might not—perhaps—be theology, that it might be impossible for it to be theology, that it might be impossible, plain and simple. If it could sail smoothly and identifiably, without running up against the impossible, it would not be what I am talking about.”²⁴ This resonates with my work because the embrace of impossibility enables the pushing of boundaries and thereby makes room for creative contributions.

Moreover, this radical approach is in line with the realities of our present environmental predicament; radical theology justifies its existence by speaking to the precarity of our lives and the prayerful posture in which we human animals so often and in so many ways find ourselves. This prayer precedes the idea of God, and religion; it is the state of precariousness. “Pray, I say, pray to God, perhaps, but pray, with or without God, with or without religion, with or without a book of prayer, because prayer is for the precariousness, and who among us is not in a precarious situation?”²⁵ What is our situation but precarious, with the ecological crisis finally beating down the door of even the wealthy? Because we are creatures who pray as part of our feeling-scape; prayer is older than God, Caputo argues; it is the province of those whose lives are precarious.²⁶ Thus, in spite of first appearances, prayer can figure into a nonsupernatural, nonexceptional system. Prayer is anthropological, but it is not anthropocentric: it is an act that humans perform,

²⁴ John D Caputo, *The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps*, 2013, 17.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 16–18.

along with talking, responding with adrenaline to dangerous situations, sleeping, and so on. Prayer, when defined as an inner focus toward outward connectivity, is something we can phenomenologically observe about human behavior. Prayer is the “chiasm of insistence and existence.”²⁷ It is when human existence and the insistence of the event (or, I would argue, what we humans may occasional *label* as “the event”) cross over each other such that the boundary between the two is indistinct.

Not all aspects of radical theology are equally salient, however. In conducting a fair reading of radical theology, I cannot ignore the language of the “event.”²⁸ By the “event,” Caputo means (1) “what we cannot see coming” and (2) “not what happens but what is going on *in* what happens.”²⁹ The problem is that this event language displaces the focus of human concern away from the here and now. It is via the “event” that radical theology earns the right to the name “theology” in spite of its radically negative approach to theologizing. For Caputo, this theology is radical in part because it is trying to break through the creeds and get closer to the “event.” This “event” is a basic displacement between the human and a certain level of immediacy and presence that I believe is necessary for ecological thought. This is, perhaps, an unavoidable difference, given our respective choices of philosophical interlocutor. Caputo, working with Derrida’s thought, gravitates toward distance and untouchability. Meanwhile, working with Merleau-Ponty, I focus on immediacy and availability. (As discussed towards the end of this chapter, Derrida had a fundamental disagreement with Merleau-Ponty’s ideas,

²⁷ Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, 31.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 130.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 131.

believing them *too* immediate, *too* focused on presence.) It is also worth noting that Caputo does not explicitly develop a theological anthropology as part of his discussion of the event. Although the event is something a human being experiences, what the human being is *per se* is presumed to be more or less self-evident.

As we shall see, my work takes up radical theology's call to public theologizing, to considering the broader theological issues alongside the rest of the world, thereby opening up theology's borders to scientific and theological problems. But, though radical theology is good for blazing the trail away from the status quo, to begin to *create*, we need theopoetics. Although Caputo has shown how radical theology is a kind of theopoetics ("theopoetics is radical theology," he says),³⁰ theopoetics *per se* makes its own distinct contributions that I want to highlight for the purposes of this project.

Theopoetics

This section will trace the development and lineage of theopoetics insofar as it is a legitimate theological methodology to use in this project, though without embracing process theology, and will show how that kind of theopoetic work has already made significant inroads into crafting new ecological visions. I draw inspiration from this literature for the creative potential of theological thought, though I do not follow a strictly theopoetic methodology in this project. I will begin by sketching the origins of theopoetics as understood and interpreted by Catherine Keller, will then discuss by the ecological potential of theopoetics as described by Roland Faber, and will finally explore how such ecological theopoetics have been applied by

³⁰ Ibid., 141.

Luke Higgins.

In her essay on the subject, Catherine Keller offers a brief genealogy of theopoetics. “As *theopoiesis*, it originally belongs to the ancient mysticism of human ascent to the unknowable, immutable infinite.” In other words, theopoiesis can trace its roots to “classical apophaticism.” In that context, according to Keller, it had a sense of “making divine” or “making God.”³¹ These roots resonate with the apophatic element of my construction in Chapter 4, and also resonate with Faber’s ecotheosis, which will be discussed below. In recent times, the term “theopoiesis” was renewed in the 1960s at Drew University by Amos Wilder and Stanley Hopper. They developed it to mean the intermingling of literary and sacred texts. “Through intensive readings of religious texts as literature and literary texts as religious, the poiesis of theology was disclosing itself as inseparable from poetry.”³² Keller reinvented the term in the following generation. (“I thought I had coined it,” she confesses.)³³ She uses it slightly differently from her predecessors, and it is upon her modeling of this method that my work primarily draws.

I should note here that, although theopoetics is generally associated with process theology, I do not engage process methodology in this project. I appreciate Corrington’s critique of process-becoming, as well as his suspicion of anything teleological. Specifically, he warns against process thought both for its valorization of “creativity” and its very sense of “process.” First of all, for Corrington, the idea that creativity is a driving force in the universe is basically nonsensical from a Darwinian perspective, since what creativity actually looks like in the

³¹ Catherine Keller, “Theopoiesis and the Pluriverse: Notes on a Process,” 2013, 181.

³² Ibid., 184.

³³ Ibid., 184.

universe is mutation, and mutation is, most of the time, disastrous.³⁴ Moreover, the creeping telocic progress of process thought cannot be regarded without a critical eye: “as gentle and guileless as process views of history seem, replete with creativity and congenial forms of novelty, their underlying imperialism wont escape notice forever.”³⁵ Although “imperialist” may be too strong a term for it, I share Corrington’s reservations about process, and for similar reasons do not use it in this project.

In spite of the fact that I do not situate my work within process theology, certain arguments made in process thought share methodological assumptions with theopoetics, and as such, are useful in defining the parameters of my work here. Process theo-poets do “not pit an illogic but an alter-logic against the logic of identity, essence, substance, noncontradiction, exclusion.”³⁶ That is what is operant here: a “credible counterlogic.”³⁷ A counter logic like this is necessary because a logic of noncontradiction and exclusion is a logic based in dualism.³⁸ Put another way, we can do theology’s “logy” differently, via Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, in which he demonstrates that we cannot differentiate dualisms the way we thought we could.

³⁴ Similarly, in her recently coauthored *Goddess and God*, Plaskow shares that sense of the fundamental ambiguity of creativity; it can be good or evil. Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow, *Goddess and God in the World: Conversations in Embodied Theology* (Fortress Press, 2016).

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 135.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 185.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 187.

³⁸ Caputo finds that the issue of logos is a major point of overlap between theopoetics and radical theology. When radical theology operates as theopoetics in this way, it is “a theology without theology.” This is not because it is without theos, but because it “suspends its logos,” Caputo argues. Rather than “a/theology,” it is “theo-a/logic.” John D. Caputo, “Theopoetics as Radical Theology,” *Theopoetic Folds: Philosophizing Multifariousness*, 2013, 141.

Logos is, in a sense, the embodiment (or “enwordiment,” if you will) of the logic of subject-object splitting and distance.

John Caputo similarly troubles *logos*. He does not want to completely do away with the concept of a “‘logos’ but only [to] think it differently.”³⁹ His work entails transforming the logos of theo-logy into a poetics.⁴⁰ Caputo aims to “dilute” what he dubs the “old” logos of classical theology, which he sees as “celestial and moribund...always close to death,” and to replace it with poetics. While I venture no comment on the alleged morbidity of the old *logos*, its celestial aspect is troubling for an earth-based ecotheology, and further necessitates a move toward something different. Moving forward, then, with a differently thought logos, what do we get? According to Caputo, when you turn *logos* into poetics what you get is the “alogical”—that is, the “displaced logic, the specter of ‘perhaps.’” Logos is not “gone,” it is simply displaced by poetics, and that very displacement fuels the movement of “perhaps” in the theology Caputo is describing.⁴¹ Doing counter-logic (that is, theopoetic) theology pushes radical theology to an affective edge, one which is more open for an anthropology that elevates the prereflexive elements of human being.

However, as Keller notes, this alter-logic does not mean that anything goes. Reading “constructedness” for “poetics,” Keller says that recognizing the poetics or constructedness of *theos* “does not mean that therefore humans construct that God ex nihilo.” Rather, our

³⁹ Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, 115.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁴¹ In this poetics, “the logic of transcendence is displaced by a poetics of the quasi-transcendental.” The constructive contribution I will be making in Chapter 4, my suggestion of an apophatic anthropology and its concomitant “inscendent” affect could very well be described as an anthropoetics of the quasi-transcendental. *Ibid.*, 66.

constructions are made from the always already extant chaos of ideas, images, legends, and so forth that contemporary theo-poets have inherited.⁴² While this is true, I am cautious of theopoetics' affinity for linguistic constructivism, which risks neglecting the indisputable permanent referent of this earth and our embodied existence upon it. The reality of our world needs to find a way into the imaginaries of our theologies—this is something that I argue Merleau-Ponty's thought brings to the conversation. In spite of this, I view the freedom that theopoetics gives theologians to imagine new uses of words and their referents as immensely helpful to this project.

Theopoetics and Ecotheology

Roland Faber explains how theopoetics can push further into the ecotheological movement in an essay on what he calls “eco-theopoetics.” The core themes of this eco-theopoetics are: rejection of divine omnipotence, affirmation of multiplicity and relationality, both human and divine, and “ecotheosis.” This eco-theopoetics is based on Whitehead's rejection of omnipotence; specifically on:

*The subtractive affirmation of chaotic polyphony—a love of multiplicity—that is not built on power but on its mutual limitation by, immanence in, and determination through theoplicity—divine multiplicity—that is the transformation of relationality into compassion and, beyond any fixed measure of intensity and harmony, of the disequilibrium of powers toward ecotheosis in the midst of the potential virtual violence of multiplicities.*⁴³

Merleau-Ponty's ontology will help us re-immense ourselves in the masses of the flesh of the world, without separationist mastery-philia. Ecotheopoetics, the way Faber describes them,

⁴² Ibid., 186.

⁴³ Roland Faber, “Becoming Intermezzo: Eco-Theopoetics after the Anthropic Principle,” 2013, 231 (emphasis in original).

harmonize with and bring theological musicality to that philosophy.

As an example of a theo poetic approach, Luke Higgins has proposed that we engage in what he calls “speculative religious thought,”⁴⁴ as he calls it. Higgins suggests:

Rather than situating our theory in a dimension transcendent to (and thus reductive of) that which we critique, it may be more efficacious to spin meaningful fabrications or rhizomes⁴⁵ that add new dimensions of coherence, connection, and even aesthetic value, to our relations with the world. In short, perhaps we need to function less as critics and more as contemporary shamans or magicians—crafting ‘sacramental’ words, symbols, and expressions [...].⁴⁶

This is a distinctly theo poetical attitude toward theology, harkening back to the movement’s roots: Amos Wilder, one of the founders of theo poetics, notes that “we should recognize that human nature and human societies are more deeply motivated by images and fabulations than by ideas.”⁴⁷ Although these fabulations seem concrete, their mutability suggests an apophysis at the heart of theo poetics. This apophatic movement in theo poetics is what keeps in check “the habit of the abstract reterritorialization of both God and world by a triumphalist Logos.”⁴⁸ These imagistic, apophatic, multiple and messy proclivities of theo poetics hold potential for my constructive proposal. However, the focus of these theo poetics has been, appropriately, on God. For all the appeal of their method, these theo poets do not develop a theological anthropology

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Higgins is also influenced by Deleuze, as evidenced by this “rhizome” language.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 229.

⁴⁷ As quoted in L. Callid Keefe-Perry, “Toward the Heraldic: A Theo poetic Response to Monorthodoxy,” in *Theo poetic Folds: Philosophizing Multifariousness*, ed. Roland Faber and Jeremy Fackenthal (Bronx: Fordham University Press, 2013), 151.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 189.

sufficiently robust to counteract entrenched exceptionalism.

Approaching Anthropology

How will the subject of theological anthropology be approached, defined, and interrogated? Having established the general method I will be using, it is time to see what I mean by the “theological anthropology ” to which this methodology will be applied. Below, I look at three theologians’ perspectives on anthropology in order to elucidate two methodological concerns for my anthropology. The first concern is the importance of the sources that offer the primary definition of the human being. I give an example from Kathryn Tanner to show how this is essential in arriving at a nonexceptional anthropology. The second concern is how the subject is delineated and situated, as my discussion of M. Shawn Copeland’s and Sallie McFague’s respective takes on anthropology will illustrate.

Kathryn Tanner’s “The Difference Theological Anthropology Makes” exemplifies a relatively classical approach to theological anthropology, and shows the difference that a scripture-based approach to anthropology makes for ecological purposes. Although her anthropology gestures toward a need for addressing ecological ills, among others, it places scripture and tradition first by design. I discuss it here because it serves as an example of how the nonexceptionalist move recommended by ecofeminists and ecomaterialists is necessary. Additionally, Tanner makes some observations about the function and meaning of theological anthropology that are generally relevant to this project. For instance, she begins from what she calls a “contemporary outlook on humanity,” in that her anthropology has a sense of “human life

as inextricably embedded in wider worldly spheres, both ecological and socio-political.”⁴⁹ But even beginning with that framework, she displays a common problem in Christian theological anthropology. On the one hand, theologians tell us to value the “well-being” of non-human creation; on the other hand, we are not to value the creature in and of itself: “esteem for the creature apart from the God who makes it is idolatrous,” because the only good in the creature derives from God.⁵⁰ This comes back to Aquinas and the hierarchy of “the good,” or the neo-Platonists’ Great Chain of Being. As ecofeminists have shown, hierarchical systems are almost uniformly antithetical to ecological well-being. Also problematic is Tanner’s assertion that human beings have a “special” relationship with God, as “the focus of Gods concern.” This sounds a lot like liberation theology’s “preferential option,” and reading this from an eco-liberation perspective reveals the inconsistency of such a statement. Why would we be the focus of God’s concern when we are the dominant and arguably most oppressive life forms? If there is a preferential option for the poor, it only makes sense that there would also be a preferential option for the poor creatures in this world. Tanner, however, bases her anthropology on the biblical account that we are made in God’s image, which leads her to conclude that we therefore have this special status. We are to live into this “by reflecting, corresponding to, following obediently after, making an appropriate response to, the God who has created [us] for such a relationship.” In spite of her exceptionalism, Tanner does direct her scripture-based anthropology towards eco-friendly ends. She argues that *because* of this being-in-the-image-of-God, we also

⁴⁹ Kathryn Tanner, “The Difference Theological Anthropology Makes,” *Theology Today* 50, no. 4 (January 1, 1994): 569.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 572.

need to be like God in that we must be similarly good shepherds of creation, advancing the “project of universal well-being.”⁵¹ The difference that this anthropology posits between humans and other forms of life continues to participate in exceptionalism, and as such is unable to aid in resituating the human being in the world in a way that I have argued is necessary for ecological progress.

Tanner provides an articulate exposition of a way theological anthropology attempts to attune itself toward the ecotheological project in how it reinterprets the role of humans in this world. No sleuthing is required to identify the human exceptionalism here, of course; the “we are creatures, *but...*” is the problem. I am not convinced by her argument that theological anthropology prevents the glorification of humanity by other disciplines; nor do I agree with her that the fact that all goodness is derived from God means that we cannot “exaggerat[e] our differences from, and superiority to, other beings within the world.”⁵² When an anthropology places humans closer to God, it also means they are closer to the *good*; this kind of system guarantees humanity’s privileged place on the chain of being and firmly fixes everything else beneath us. In a way, it also puts everything else under our command, because we are like God to the rest of the world. Just as the *location* of the anthropological subject vis-à-vis God is determinative of ecological capacity, so too is the *definition* of that subject vis-à-vis other beings. The theologian below approaches the problem from an intra-human social-justice perspective that can be broadened to include nonhumans.

In *Enfleshing Freedom*, M. Shawn Copeland sets a precedent for reconfiguring the

⁵¹ Ibid., 573.

⁵² Ibid., 579.

theological subject in order to achieve justice. She interrogates the assumed, privileged, European subject that was considered normative since the “turn to the subject” during the Enlightenment. While she critiques the white, dominant male subject in the interest of social justice, some of the same moves she makes could also be used to critique the *human* subject in the interest of ecological justice (naturally, much of that “human” subject is presumed to be the normative, Enlightenment male that Copeland deconstructs). One of Copeland’s orienting questions is, “what might it mean for poor women of color to grasp themselves as human subjects, to grapple with the meaning of liberation and freedom?”⁵³ Parallel to this, I ask: what might it mean for any human being, and especially those receiving the most material benefits from Western industrialization, to grasp ourselves as enmeshed-with-the-world subjects? That is, as subjects whose sensory boundaries are constitutive of our self-awareness, as described in Merleau-Ponty’s system? Though her project differs from mine in that it seeks to rectify some of the theological injustice done to poor women of color, rather than to the environment, the logic behind Copeland’s move is the same as mine, and serves as something of a template. She aims to reorient theological anthropology’s focus “away from a camouflaged subject, toward a new subject” (in her case, poor women of color), and for it to do this as part of a “praxis of solidarity for human liberation.”⁵⁴ While I agree wholeheartedly with the necessity of her project, I also contend that such an approach would work for shifting from a subject with impermeable boundaries toward a human-in-the-world subject, in the name of ecological justice. The pursuit of this new subject would also benefit the poor women of color who are disproportionately

⁵³ M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 88.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 105.

affected by ecological degradation, as ecofeminists have shown.

Theological anthropologies that engage in such methodologies as Copeland's typically concern themselves with liberating the perspectives of humans of different social strata, fighting their oppression by other humans; it is unusual to take a theological anthropological approach to the issue of humans considering their identity amongst other forms of life and matter. This is a thorny issue in part because many marginalized groups have had to fight hard for their status *as* humans in the first place. At the same time, a lot of that marginalization depends on the same hierarchical value system that has harmed so much of the earth; if I am to be valued because I am human, that means animals are intrinsically not to be valued, or definitely less than humans, and the rest of the world valued perhaps not at all. The liberation perspective thus illuminates another aspect of my work, which asks: what does it mean to have a nonhierarchical theological anthropology? What does it mean to do theological anthropology in which the *anthropos* is not fundamentally separate from the world, because all things are united in a shared materiality?

This is the kind of approach Sallie McFague appears to be recommending.

The first step in a theological anthropology for our time is not to follow the clues from the Christic paradigm or even from the model of the universe as God's body, but to step backward and ask, Who are we in the scheme of things as pictured by contemporary science? Who are we simply as creatures of planet earth, quite apart from our religious traditions?⁵⁵

She encourages us to look at ourselves not "from the sky down" as the Christian tradition has characteristically done, but rather "from the earth up."⁵⁶ Given that this is what I aim to do in my project, why not just work with her anthropological paradigm? The answer is that it is easy

⁵⁵ Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 103.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 103–4.

enough to say that we should look at ourselves from the earth up, instead of the sky down, but it is also necessary to ask *whence and from whom that look is coming*. We must consider both who the subject is vis-à-vis the world, and also what level of human separation from the rest of material reality is implicit even in the scientific approach. The next chapter will develop an ontology that can answer these two questions.

Why Merleau-Ponty?

Merleau-Ponty is not the only philosopher dealing with what it means to be an embodied human being. Other thinkers, in particular the new materialists and the object-oriented ontologists, have approached the problem of how to consider our relationship with non-human life and matter in general. However, in spite of the fact that both of these lines of thought offer valuable critiques of how we have conventionally conceived matter, Merleau-Ponty's work best fits my purposes in this project, as there remain resources in his thought that have been under-explored for the purposes of theological anthropology.

One diverse assemblage of thinkers, who have been called "the new materialists," has been working from a feminist perspective to rethink the nature of the material world. These are the thinkers that inspired Anne Elvey (discussed in the previous chapter) to recommend that feminism embrace materialism.⁵⁷ Particularly influential for many new materialists is Karen Barad, a physicist and feminist theorist. Her groundbreaking *Meeting the Universe Halfway*

⁵⁷ See for example Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Bloomington; Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010); Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Also the collection of new materialist essays in Diana H. Coole and Samantha Frost, eds., *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham NC ; London: Duke University Press, 2010).

combines her take on scientific theories of matter and energy and philosophy about what that might *mean*. Barad cites primarily the scientific work and philosophical thoughts of physicist Niels Bohr, interpreting much of it through the lenses of Butler and Foucault—and vice versa. She creates a theory of “agential realism” that allows for a massive expansion of agency away from its traditionally narrow confines around the human.⁵⁸ One complaint I have is that she ultimately writes as though no philosophy exists that can adequately encapsulate her results, but throughout her lengthy volume makes only passing mention of Merleau-Ponty’s work on ontology.⁵⁹ Barad’s work has been a catalyst for the flourishing of philosophically minded feminist theory of the physical universe; all of which holds great potential for future ecological work. These new materialists are generally working toward similar ecological ends as I am in this project, and Barad’s work provides a notion of agency that extends far beyond the human. Yet I focus on Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological approach for the purposes of developing my anthropology, because I believe he can better address the issue of *what it means to be human* in this agential world, and hence be more productive for the purposes of theological anthropology.

Another potential route toward rethinking humans and the material world may be found in the emergent “Object-Oriented Ontology” and the philosophers who describe themselves as Speculative Realists. Much of the recent work in object-oriented ontology has been collected into

⁵⁸ Though other thinkers were already considering different ways to think of matter and agency even before Barad published her findings. Diana Coole, “Rethinking Agency: A Phenomenological Approach to Embodiment and Agentic Capacities,” *Political Studies* 53, no. 1 (2005): 124–142, doi:10.1111/j.1467-9248.2005.00520.x.

⁵⁹ Barad mentions him only insofar as he, like Bohr, uses the example of a blind man walking with a cane to illustrate how instruments are incorporated into the body. Karen Michelle Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 157, 358.

*The speculative turn: Continental Materialism and Realism.*⁶⁰ Some of the resultant philosophies deliberately take the human perspective and physical being into account. An inspiration for almost all of them, and also for many feminists who use matter and ontology in their theories, is Bruno Latour, author, perhaps most famously, of *We Have Never Been Modern*.⁶¹ I will focus on what I have found to be the most lucid of the recent publications in this area: in the introduction to his *The Democracy of Objects*, Levi Bryant essentially outlines the shared positions of others in his camp, giving a sense of what this mode of thinking is all about.⁶²

The general problem that the speculative realists have been trying to address is that which has been neglected by “anti-realism.” This school of thought holds that there is a division between “the world of nature and the world of the subject and culture.” What emerges then are discussions about representation—how the world is represented to us, what we can know. This is not necessarily an evil, because the philosophies that show the limits of what we can know also often work to critique various “‘world pictures’ that function to guarantee privilege.”⁶³ The problem, however, is that instead of talking about “what substances *are*,” philosophy has been talking only about “how and whether we *know* objects.” This is the same anthropocentric philosophical problem that I feel Merleau-Ponty’s work addresses, as I will discuss shortly, below. What bothers the speculative realists is that, instead of talking about objects, we are

⁶⁰ Levi R Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman, *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism* (Melbourne, Victoria, Australia: re.press, 2011).

⁶¹ Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993).

⁶² Levi R. Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*, 1st ed., *New Metaphysics* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2011).

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 15–16.

talking about “a particular relation between humans and objects.”⁶⁴ The problem is that we ultimately are just talking about humans, all the time. Although Bryant admits that “our access to objects is highly limited,” he maintain that “we can still say a great deal about the being of objects.” As such, the realism that Levi Bryant has in mind is an “*ontological* realism”—that is, he is going to make claims about “the being of objects themselves, whether or not we exist to represent them.”⁶⁵ This is what makes his thesis an object-oriented ontology, or, as he calls it, “onticology.” I admire this movement’s crusade against anthropocentric solipsism, but I take issue with the methods proposed to address it.

My reservations begin to emerge as Bryant goes on to write, in rather stark terms, about there being “only one type of being: objects,” among which humans may be counted, rather than imagining that there are certain special “subjects” in relation to whose perspective everything else is an “object.”⁶⁶ While I, too, have been arguing that human beings should cease thinking of ourselves as the only subjects, the flipside is not necessarily that we are all objects. The idea of making the world a place of *less* subjectivity, rather than more, could be problematic for an ecological project in which the aim is to encourage people to esteem nonhumans more highly. However, where I am the most troubled is where Bryant argues that “it is necessary to staunchly defend the autonomy of objects or substances, refusing any reduction of objects to their relations.” The problem I have with this is that Bryant is all but labeling “relations” as *less real*

⁶⁴ Ibid., 16 (emphasis in original).

⁶⁵ Ibid., 18.

⁶⁶ Levi R. Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*, 1st ed., New Metaphysics (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2011), 20–23.

than objects. So not only do we have a world without subjects, but also a world in which relationships are considerably downplayed. This viewpoint seems to me to be blind to its own privileging of *space* over *time*.⁶⁷ That is, in this philosophy objects are imagined as existing in stasis, yet this is an illusion. An object only appears separate and unrelated when it is pictured at a particular slice of time; its being, when imagined throughout the movement of time, is ultimately comprised of its relations with and dependence upon other things; to the extent that the line between the movement, process, or force operating in the interstices and the objects themselves is practically nonexistent. Granted, the ties of relations and relationships over time could be seen as smacking all too much of “invisible forces” that must instantly be written off by the object-oriented ontologists as anti-realist or metaphysical, vestiges of a more superstitious age. In this area especially, I hope to show that Merleau-Ponty and his discussion of “the visible and the invisible” could correct the notion that the “invisible” (that is, ideas, thoughts, and so forth) must somehow also be of another realm that is disconnected from the “visible” objects we see before us.⁶⁸ It would be difficult for ecotheology to generate a useful anthropology if it took an Object-Oriented Ontology approach. It was the excessive valuation of individual autonomy that factored heavily into the current ecological crisis; the work of ecotheology is, among other

⁶⁷ For some reason, I am deeply disturbed by how the speculative realists, these object-oriented philosophers, describe “real” objects as non-relational. In so doing, they are privileging space over time; and it is not without reason; clearly, as I look at the water glass on my table, it is its own “thing,” sitting there by itself. The silica and the heat that went into its manufacture are not presently visible, and although the table supports its weight, separating the glass from the table does not cause the former to disintegrate. However, the emphasis on non-relationality seems like a deliberately negative response to Buddhist interdependent co-arising and the (generally feminist) thought on intercorporeity and relationality.

⁶⁸ One speculative realist actually criticizes Merleau-Ponty for clinging to a strand of idealism; could it be that it is the speculative realists themselves who have an overly-limited sense of what “real” and “object” could describe? Graham Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things* (Chicago: Open Court, 2005), 50.

things, to encourage people to see the interdependencies and interrelationships that they had previously ignored. Merleau-Ponty's thought is arguably the polar opposite of the object-oriented approach, and can better achieve ecotheological ends. His work allows us to think a reality in which subjectivity is spread out amongst all, relations co-constitute subjects, and subjectivity is predicated upon that relationality.

Introducing Merleau-Ponty

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) was a French philosopher influenced by Husserl's later work, especially his idea of the shared world of experience, *Lebenswelt*. He takes Husserl's phenomenological reduction in such a way as not to separate self from world but merely to suspend common concepts that we place on the world, thus getting to the core of our natural comportment toward this existence in the world. We are, then, reconnecting with that initial mode of being in the world, which was always there under our concepts and language. Consciousness is never separate from the world, but in doing phenomenology, we loosen those binding ties a little so we can pay closer attention to them.

In his work, Merleau-Ponty established the importance of embodiment on experience, and later developed an ontology that could make sense of the pre-cognitive relations intrinsic to that embodied experience. Phenomenology in general was already making strides into the mind/body problem insofar as it escaped the trap of wondering if anything outside our minds was real at all. In so doing, it paved the way for eventually examining human beings' basic commonality with the nonhuman world, which western philosophy had avoided for a long time because its efforts had been concentrated on the problem of whether we could ever "know" the world at all. Phenomenology, and particularly Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, illuminates a

way out of solipsistic anthropocentrism. Merleau-Ponty had from very early on maintained that there is a continuous, dynamic, prelinguistic, and prereflective dialogue between humans and other beings (human or nonhuman). In his later works, he attempts to understand *how* that can be the case, however, his early work is most well known, particularly *La structure du comportement* [*The Structure of Behavior*] (1942), in which he first suggests that phenomenology can account for consciousness vis-à-vis nature or world, and *Phénoménologie de la perception* [*Phenomenology of Perception*] (1945), in which he argues that phenomenology, unlike science or idealist philosophy, can actually describe what it is to be engaged in and with the world as a human being.⁶⁹

The human-in-the-world is the foundational origin point for phenomenology, because consciousness and world exist in an unbreakable *unity*. In this early work, Merleau-Ponty speaks of a “phenomenal field,” which is the locus of phenomenological investigation. This is our “immediate experience” as we actually live it, without filtering it through scientific or philosophical lenses.⁷⁰ He rejects any objectivistic or excessively scientific perspective of the human body as describing mere “exteriority,”—that is, objects affecting each other causally; such a perspective cannot account for the meanings that arise and change within the phenomenological field. He gives the example of how a flame changes its appearance to a child after the child has touched it and been burned: after burning the child, the flame no longer acts as

⁶⁹ Gary Gutting, *French Philosophy in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, U.K. ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 184–86.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 188.

an attractant to the child's hand.⁷¹

Merleau-Ponty wants to avoid both objectivism and subjectivism, steering clear of either pure exteriority or pure interiority. Thus there is already that key element that emerges in his later thought—reconciling interiority and exteriority, sacrificing neither but finding some way for the two to cohere. The problem with both extremes is that they make the world a “pure object” of either subjectivity or objectivity—and disconnect the human from the world. One is above and one is below the phenomenal field, and Merleau-Ponty wants us to remain on the phenomenal level.⁷² To do that, he privileges the perspective of the body—only my body can tell me what the object I am observing is like from “here.”⁷³ My body provides the underlying scaffold for receiving information about the objects in my world. Merleau-Ponty had already begun establishing this in *The Structure of Behavior*, in which he asserted that every perception on a personal level takes place within a dialogical relationship between myself and the world, and his later work was about elucidating the ontological mechanisms by which this could be the case. He later went on to say that this is because the body, *any* body, is never just a thing on its own, “but also a relation to an *Umwelt* [environment],” the body cannot be taken in isolation from its lived environment.⁷⁴ The body is not only *in* an environment, but it actually *is* its relationship *to* that environment. The environment inhabited by a body is crucial for understanding that body; the world of the human being is part of what makes the human being

⁷¹ PP 64/52, cited in *ibid.*, 189.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 189–90.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 190.

⁷⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Nature: Course Notes from the Collège de France*, ed. Séglaard Dominique, trans. Robert Vallier (Northwestern University Press, 2003), 209.

what it is. I am the central reference point for, for example, the book that is nearby—it is only nearby to *me* because of where I currently am in space.

From the dialogue between self and object, the world appears to us.⁷⁵ This dialogue does not happen in a vacuum, but is interwoven with the “historical and cultural” environment within which one is situated.⁷⁶ Focusing on interpersonal relationships, Merleau-Ponty notes that, in relating to other people, we humans from our earliest days (for example, the infant and its caregiver) pre-reflectively perceive the other based on the behavioral dialogue that already pertains between the two. This pre-reflective, pre-linguistic understanding of the world is *by* the body, via its behavior in the world. Merleau-Ponty also calls this “*Praktognosie*” or “practognosis”—knowledge through practice.⁷⁷ Although there are other levels of experience beyond this prereflective perception, the latter is the foundation for those other levels.⁷⁸

The conceptual primacy of situatedness-in-the-world featured in Merleau-Ponty’s second work, *Phenomenology of Perception*. There he argues that one is located in the world in a way that precedes one’s concepts of it. The way I am situated in the world determines how I will perceive and interact with the world. Merleau-Ponty calls this a *structure* or *meaning* with regard to my situation in the world.⁷⁹ Location in the world is not only spatial; it also includes things from my past (experiences or other modes of embodiment that comprise who I am today, or, as

⁷⁵ Frederick Copleston, *History of Philosophy, Volume 9* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1994), 403.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 406.

⁷⁷ PP 164, cited in *ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 408–9.

⁷⁹ Gutting, *French Philosophy in the Twentieth Century*, 191.

in Merleau-Ponty's example, the having of a limb that one has since lost). These structure my relationship to objects in the present.⁸⁰ Thus, our being-in-the-world is comprised of our past, our present, our reflexive actions, our considered actions, and so on. Because the phenomenal field can account for all this, it can also account for the things for which both philosophical reflection and empirical science have been unable fully to account, like my experience as human here and now in the world as both sensed and sensing.⁸¹ The "flesh" that he develops in his later work is then a "fleshing out," if you will, of the underlying bodily ontology that enabled these earlier claims.

"Flesh" is a way of expressing the nonbinary reality of mind and body. Whereas a dualistic worldview holds that what makes me a subject is that I have a soul or mind within my body, Merleau-Ponty argues that the body *itself* is the subject.⁸² He aims to do this without being reductionist, without saying that matter "really" is mind or vice versa. Because such a concept is difficult to express in extant philosophical language that is predicated on this split, Merleau-Ponty had to create a new way to speak so as to express this both/and nature of the body.⁸³ The flesh is the means by which the human and world may be considered related in Merleau-Ponty. It is that relationship where "the seer and the visible reciprocate one another and we no longer know which sees and which is seen."⁸⁴

⁸⁰ Ibid., 192.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Copleston, *History of Philosophy, Volume 9*, 399.

⁸³ Ibid., 400.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 139.

As a subject, I am always already embedded in a world of other subjects. My own subjectivity is not “pure” and isolated, because that would imply the same of all other subjects, which would make all others unknowable. Rather, my subjectivity emerges from my embodiment; there was never a time that I was not in a world that was shared with other bodies. Some of these bodies are sources of “meaning” for me, just as my own body can be a source of meaning for others. I would argue that, in his later work, Merleau-Ponty forges an ontology that allows for meaning to come ultimately from the whole of being, rather than having its ultimate source be certain individual, mostly human, bodies.⁸⁵

Meaning is tied to speech, and Merleau-Ponty also brought a sense of corporeality to language. Contrary to the linguists of the time, Merleau-Ponty argued that the shape and sound of a word is specific and relevant. Apart from abstract geometric or mathematical terminology, the word *itself* has and expresses a meaning—that is, it does not merely point beyond itself to a meaning that is exactly the same in all languages. We have to live into and feel the word and what it connotes differently, however subtly, in different languages. In part, this is because of how it feels for the human body to make and hear these sounds.⁸⁶ Linguists have recently shown that words are not entirely arbitrary but do in fact derive from a certain onomatopoeic core.⁸⁷ Even without the onomatopoeic component, the way a word feels and what it connotes in one language cannot completely carry over into another: *manger*, eat, and *essen* contain certain irreducible meanings. As for mathematical proofs, even they are contingent on lived experience,

⁸⁵ Gutting, *French Philosophy in the Twentieth Century*, 195.

⁸⁶ PP 218/187 cited in *ibid.*, 194.

⁸⁷ Padraic Monaghan et al., “How Arbitrary Is Language?,” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 369, no. 1651 (September 19, 2014), doi:10.1098/rstb.2013.0299.

if only for the fact that my body is the only way through which I can exist and it is the “condition of the possibility” of such knowledge.⁸⁸

Merleau-Ponty’s theories on language relate to the development of “truth” both in itself and as a concept. For Merleau-Ponty, truth comes from present speech about past speech, in which “speech is able to settle into a sediment and constitute an acquisition for use in human relations.”⁸⁹ By talking about past speech, present speech turns past speech into a “given” that becomes “Truth.” I agree with Gutting, who sees this as an example of how Merleau-Ponty demonstrates that consciousness is absolutely inseparable from the world (a world in which words are connected to embodied experience of existing in the world and are spoken and then recalled and talked about—it is all traced back to being a body in the world).⁹⁰ Merleau-Ponty refers to an “ambiguous mode of existing,” that is revealed to us by “the experience of our own body.”⁹¹ I would contend that trying to describe this “ambiguous mode” in greater detail is what Merleau-Ponty does in his later work in developing “The Flesh.”

The Later Merleau-Ponty

Where Merleau-Ponty deviates in his later work is on the issue of the self. His earlier work has a slightly more removed sense of the self. Although I am embodied and constituted by my own history, beneath and behind that there ought to be, according to the early Merleau-Ponty, “a retreat of not-being, a *Self*,” a “perpetual absentee,” to which all the layers of consciousness,

⁸⁸ PP 445/388, cited in Gutting, *French Philosophy in the Twentieth Century*, 200.

⁸⁹ PP 221/190 cited in *ibid.*, 194.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ PP 231/198 cited in *ibid.*, 195.

historical and otherwise, “present” themselves.⁹² He also calls this the “tacit cogito.”⁹³ American philosopher Gary Gutting has argued that Merleau-Ponty may have later developed “flesh” as a way to show how subject *qua* tacit cogito and object/world are both distinct and yet “inextricably entwined dimensions of being.”⁹⁴ Put most basically, what Merleau-Ponty adds in his last work is that my awareness of material reality is actually material reality’s *self*-awareness, because I am entirely in and of that material reality.⁹⁵ On this issue, Ted Toadvine serves as an able guide.

Toadvine has presented the most comprehensive analysis of the development of Merleau-Ponty’s work as it pertains to the ecological issues that concern my project. Toadvine’s goal is to find a new way to understand what it means to be human with regard to “nature,” which he argues is significant because it grounds discourse on human anti-ecological activity, and can suggest where to go from here.⁹⁶ Toadvine identifies Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of the nature of reflection as the main difference between Merleau-Ponty’s earlier and later work.⁹⁷ He describes this “tacit cogito” as a “radical rupture of the relation with nature” that was otherwise assumed in Merleau-Ponty’s early work; it is, in fact, a place of contradiction in *The Structure of Behavior* and *Phenomenology of Perception*. The tacit cogito is the means by which Merleau-Ponty accommodates human “freedom and objectivity,” and as such it risks depending on human

⁹² PP 459/200, cited in *ibid.*, 202.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 202–3.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 209.

⁹⁵ Copleston, *History of Philosophy, Volume 9*, 409–10.

⁹⁶ Ted Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature* (Northwestern University Press, 2009), 10.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 17.

exceptionalism.⁹⁸ Merleau-Ponty solves this “tension,” as Toadvine calls it, in his later work, by reconsidering the nature of reflection, eventually finding a way to account for phenomenological reflection in a nonanthropocentric way. Rather than being the product of a tacit cogito that ruptures the continuity of human and nature, now reflection is founded in a movement of being—in being’s autointerrogation.⁹⁹ Merleau-Ponty develops the “ontology of the flesh” in order to explain the human mind’s situatedness within corporeality.¹⁰⁰ I will explore this in detail in the next chapter.

I have been inspired by the richness of Merleau-Ponty’s thought, as well as by Toadvine’s interpolation of Merleau-Ponty’s ontology vis-à-vis nature and humans, to apply the latter’s work to developing a theological anthropology. So doing can answer the lingering question of exceptionalism and enable the nascent ecofeminist return to matter, as suggested in Chapter 1, to remain with the human experience.

Radical, naturalistic theology can work with Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the human-in-the-world to produce a new anthropology for ecotheology. The compound methodology developed in the preceding pages raises questions and creates openings for a nonexceptionalist anthropology that will be built around a phenomenological core. Merleau-Ponty’s work is anti-supernaturalist yet, as I will show, able to speak to intangible experience, and as such is able to answer the shortcomings of naturalism, finding a way to more satisfactorily make room for religious experience. His thought also speaks to the theo poetic method because of how it

⁹⁸ Ibid., 17–18.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 18.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 19.

accounts for language, grounding speech in embodied existence, connecting theopoetics to the earth. Finally, I would argue that the very application of Merleau-Ponty's thought to theology in this naturalistic yet theopoetic way is an act of radical theology.

Conclusion

There are three methodological issues that need to be addressed concerning my choice of philosophical interlocutor before moving forward. The first two are about why I chose Merleau-Ponty: first, why his thought makes sense with a feminist-inflected project such as this, and second, why not use Gilles Deleuze, who has seen a recent surge in popularity among ecotheologians? The third issue concerns Merleau-Ponty's atheism, and what effect that could have on this project.

First, I contend that Merleau-Ponty is a natural interlocutor for ~~ecofeminist~~ feminist materialist theology, even though there is plenty to critique in Merleau-Ponty from a feminist perspective. In Chapter 5, I will talk about some of the issues around, for example, how he talks about "embodied experience" as if there were no difference between male and female lived/embodied experience and how he thereby risks making male embodied experience the "standard norm" from which the female experience is a deviation.¹⁰¹ In addition to addressing issues around the "whom" of embodied experience (the importance of which was just highlighted above, with Copeland), I will also discuss his use of specifically female-valenced words like "pregnancy" and "invaginated," which have raised some feminist eyebrows. Still, Merleau-Ponty's

¹⁰¹ Beata Stawarska, "From the Body Proper to Flesh: Merleau-Ponty on Intersubjectivity," in *Feminist Interpretations of Maurice Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Dorothea Olkowski and Gail Weiss, 2006, 92.

philosophy is quite organically resonant with the goals of ecofeminism. As Dorothea Olkowski has observed, for all his flaws, the way he privileges embodied experience and places it “within the context of making sense of lived experience in an intersubjective world of shared meaning,” makes him a natural choice of conversation partner for ecofeminist thought.¹⁰²

Second, given the burgeoning attention being paid to Gilles Deleuze, especially in several of the main theological texts I have already cited in this dissertation, it bears explaining why I have chosen Merleau-Ponty. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, neither Keller nor Bauman refer to Merleau-Ponty, choosing instead to work with the similar but more recent ideas of Deleuze. For instance, Keller draws heavily on Deleuze’s version of *complicatio, explicatio, implicatio* (“folding, unfolding, refolding”) to solve the problem that McFague had highlighted: the apparent incompatibility of unifying one-ness of creation and individual differentiation. Folding (complicating the undifferentiated) means that there is no cut, no sharp separation; folds allow for difference within unity, and I employ Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the flesh and its dehiscent folding for the very same purpose. As Stephan Günzel has pointed out, Deleuze derived his language of folding *from* Merleau-Ponty (and subsequently turned it into his concept of topology);¹⁰³ in this sense, then, my work with Merleau-Ponty can be considered a return to an earlier source.¹⁰⁴ All in all, perhaps I like Merleau-Ponty for the same reason Derrida criticizes him. Toadvine has noted that “Derrida’s most detailed engagement with Merleau-Ponty, in *Le*

¹⁰² Dorothea Olkowski, “Introduction: The Situated Subject,” in *Feminist Interpretations of Maurice Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Dorothea Olkowski and Gail Weiss, 2006, 22.

¹⁰³ Although, of course, *complicatio, explicatio, implicatio* was originally developed by Nicholas of Cusa in the 15th Century.

¹⁰⁴ Stephan Günzel, “Deleuze and Phenomenology,” *Metodo. International Studies in Phenomenology and Philosophy* 2, no. 2 (November 20, 2014), <http://www.metodo-rivista.eu/index.php/metodo/article/view/87>.

Toucher, Jean-Luc Nancy (*On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy*, 2000/2005), criticizes the latter’s account of touch and ontology of flesh for its tendency to privilege immediacy, continuity, and coincidence over rupture, distance, and untouchability.”¹⁰⁵ It is this very immediacy that is so appealing about Merleau-Ponty’s thought for an embodied, nonexceptional anthropology that seeks to address the anxiety of living in these times. Moreover, the fact that Merleau-Ponty works from a phenomenological starting place that began with the human and moved toward the flesh makes it worthwhile to return to Merleau-Ponty for a new take on anthropology.

Lastly, I turn to the fact that Merleau-Ponty’s thought was predicated on atheism. On the one hand, Merleau-Ponty is the quintessential atheist: as Christina Gschwandtner has mentioned, while Dominique Janicaud, was lamenting the “theological turn” that French philosophy had taken in 1991, with the theologically-leaning philosophies of Levinas and Marion in mind, Janicaud “called for a minimalist phenomenology (of the sort conducted by Maurice Merleau-Ponty) that would be radically atheistic (or at the very least agnostic) and exclude all discussion of God or religion from philosophy.”¹⁰⁶ On the other hand, Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the flesh feels “too religious” for some philosophers, as Mayra Rivera, in working to demonstrate Merleau-Ponty’s applicability to theology, has pointed out. (Notably, Deleuze was one of those continental philosophers who found Merleau-Ponty’s ontology “too religious.”)¹⁰⁷ The difference in definition depends on whether one focuses on Merleau-Ponty’s foundations (naturalistic,

¹⁰⁵ Ted Toadvine, “Maurice Merleau-Ponty,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Winter 2016 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2016), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/merleau-ponty/>.

¹⁰⁶ Christina M. Gschwandtner, *Postmodern Apologetics?: Arguments for God in Contemporary Philosophy* (Fordham University Press, 2012), 13, <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/20474>.

¹⁰⁷ Mayra Rivera, *Poetics of the Flesh* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 11–12.

which, as we have seen, does not admit of a supernatural divine) or whether one focuses on his ontological terminology, whose sensuous, affective connectionality has overtones of religion's ties that bind). I see this tension between the religious overtones of his thought and its atheistic predication as generative for new theological efforts, because of what it can mean for rethinking intuitions of transcendence within the material.

In summary, this dissertation brings a radical, naturalistic theology to an embodied anthropological subject. Naturalism's basic principle of anti-supernaturalism is the foundation for this project, but its under-interrogated objectivist methods benefit from phenomenological critique. Moreover, by itself it has no theological method—that has to come from outside. Therefore, to that, I add radical theology, which blasts open the field for extra-congregational work and a grounding in human experience. Radical theology provides an excellent starting point for carving out new theological anthropology, but it needs to be helped by theo-poetics' insight into alter-logic in order to say something constructive. Theo-poetics already has several examples of engaging with ecological issues; it opens up the apophatic dimension, and makes room for a kind of theological affect beyond nature / culture divide discussed in Chapter 1 (because in tapping into feeling it taps into the body, beyond the mind / body, culture / nature problem), that have affected how the subject of theological anthropology is understood. My approach to anthropology is focused on re-defining that subject more inclusively. I use Merleau-Ponty to address those anthropological issues due to his resonances with the ecofeminist core of ecomaterialism.

The application of the theological method above to this ontology of nonsupernatural yet agential materiality is what will enable me to develop an apophatic anthropology and an alternative for considering the locus of human transcendent experience. But before that

constructive element will make sense, it is necessary first to examine Merleau-Ponty's thought more closely. The following chapter will explicate the elements of Merleau-Ponty's thought that provide the basis for an alternative way of conceptualizing the human being.

CHAPTER III

MAURICE MERLEAU-PONTY'S ONTOLOGICAL DIFFERENCE

“By the Nature in us, we can know Nature, and reciprocally it is from ourselves that living beings and even space speak to us.”¹

Introduction: Using Merleau-Ponty for Ecotheological Anthropology

The goal of the project is to find a way to really think nonexceptional theological anthropology. There are barriers to this, in spite of the fact that ecofeminist theology has acknowledged that this is important. The problem is that it is hard to account for human transcendent experience without exceptionalism. This chapter shows that theology is actually part of Being itself.² Merleau-Ponty helps us think the human capability for transcendent experience within a materialist framework, which then answers the difficulty of anthropology for ecofeminist thought that already wanted to avoid exceptionalism but had trouble doing so. As I discussed earlier, a successful eco-theological anthropology must do away with any sense of human exceptionalism, which is a fallacy that ecofeminist thinkers have identified as a major factor in justifying exploitation of the nonhuman world. Humans have believed themselves to be exceptional, based on our ability to engage in reflective, interrogative thought (a remnant of believing humans alone had the divine breath breathed into them) and this lead to the conclusion

¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Nature: Course Notes from the Collège de France*, ed. Séglaard Dominique, trans. Robert Vallier (Northwestern University Press, 2003), 206.

² By “Being” I mean existence, reality, all that is. I capitalize it here in order to be consistent with Merleau-Ponty’s usage, and also to differentiate it from any one individual being.

that humans, in spite of scientific evidence to the contrary, are not entirely congruent with the rest of the natural world—or that they are congruently at the pinnacle of the world in a system of hierarchical relation. Merleau-Ponty is able to describe the human in the world in a way that does not entail human exceptionalism.

I have been arguing that eco-theology’s anthropology needs to be rethought from the ground up in order to deal with the unique challenges presented by climate change, and that this requires a close look at the ontology underpinning how we think of the human in the world. In this chapter, I follow Ted Toadvine’s reading of Merleau-Ponty because Toadvine is Merleau-Ponty’s most ecologically-minded interpreter, and because it is his reading that best allows me to develop my “human as a radically material” anthropology. This is necessary because, as Toadvine has observed, if we treat “the power of reflection as the distinguishing mark between humans and animals... [we risk] returning to a philosophy of consciousness that alienates humanity from life.”³ Toadvine has argued that the tension between *νόμος* and *φύσις* (understood here as mind/order/culture and matter/nature/chaos, respectively) has troubled philosophy since ancient times, and contends that it was renewed in Descartes’ proto-phenomenology, which Merleau-Ponty heavily critiques. My argument is that this tension continues to impact the way that theological anthropology describes the human with regard to the world, in particular, making it difficult to even talk about the human in the world without assuming this kind of a divide. Moreover, the *nomos/physis* divide is one explanation for the difficulty ecofeminism has had with fully rejecting human exceptionalism. Merleau-Ponty’s ontology shows us an alternative way to conceive human and world that honors the observations of human consciousness and, I

³ Ted Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature* (Northwestern University Press, 2009), 95–96.

argue, religious experience, while at the same time working with the very real differences between various individuals and species to tell a more interconnected and ecologically viable story. The answer to the problem of explaining experiences of transcendence lies not in the exceptionalism of the human being but rather in the nature of being itself.

It is possible to imagine matter differently than in the way our tradition has taught us, and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is an excellent resource for this endeavor. New materialist thinker Diana Coole has seen similar potential in Merleau-Ponty's work. Rejecting the assumption that material things are inert lumps of stuff that are "inherently devoid of agency or meaning" and absolutely other than consciousness, Coole sums up nicely what a Merleau-Pontian ontology can offer. She sees it as a means by which she may imagine "a lively materiality that is self-transformative and already saturated with the agentic capacities and existential significance that are typically located in a separate, ideal, and subjectivist realm."⁴ Ecofeminist theology had discarded the dualism, but kept its categorization of reflection and idea as specially human. By finding a way for the invisible—reflection, ideas—to be inseparable from the visible component of the flesh, Merleau-Ponty's ontology circumvents the common blocks to nonexceptionalism.

The blocks to accepting this radical materiality and nonexceptionalism are due to three main problems that Merleau-Ponty's ontology is able to solve for us. This ontology digs into materiality in order to be able to develop a robust understanding of humans as nonexceptional. This ontology can account for the two main issues that troubled the ecofeminists discussed in Chapter 1. The first issue is the danger that could come from an ontology of interconnectedness

⁴ Coole and Frost, *New Materialisms : Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, 92.

that would actually be capable of achieving nonexceptionalism: if everything is connected, where is the room for relationality? As McFague has noted, absolute unity eliminates real individuals who are separate enough *to* relate. This chapter shall show how Merleau-Ponty's thought solves that via the concept of the flesh and its folds; rather than humans and the world merging in a monistic blur, the flesh folds in such a way as to allow for difference and relationality. Secondly, there needs to be a way to account for intuitions of the transcendent without resorting to dualisms that reinforce exceptionalism. The final issue is the problem of human mind, which appears to separate us fundamentally from everything else. Ted Toadvine's reading of Merleau-Ponty shows how this does not have to be a problem: these mental processes of interrogation—and, I argue, the moments of human transcendent experience—are actually already part of Being itself, and we can therefore consider humans as lateral rather than hierarchical kin to the other things of this world.

Critiquing Descartes

Part of what makes Merleau-Ponty relevant to eco-theological anthropology is that he is not satisfied with simply renouncing Descartes and all his dualistic works, but actually pays attention to the original problem of self-in-the-world and offers a “critical reprise” of Cartesianism in response. It is necessary to address and amend Cartesian thought because the exceptionalist legacy of Cartesian dualism pervades even the most progressive ecological work in the guise of scientific objectivity of the observer, and so ecological theology, importing that discipline, must grapple with how to reconsider the world and ourselves as participants and

observers.⁵ Ecofeminism's latent exceptionalism falls under the broad umbrella of this mind-body problem, as it has not yet dug into basic presuppositions that haunt even a nonsupernaturalist anthropology: the specialness of human minds. Because of the way Descartes established the isolated observer as prior to the things of the world, based on the idea that there was a fundamental lack of connection between mind and world, there was no way for Cartesian-inflected perspectives to understand the world as intrinsically possessed of meaning. Guided by Toadvine's development of Merleau-Ponty's ontology, my contribution engages with Merleau-Ponty's question of what it means to be both perceiver and perceived—that is, what it means to be human in this world from which we are ontologically non-different. Therefore, my discussion of Merleau-Ponty begins with Merleau-Ponty's critique of Cartesianism and the centrality of the thinking self in Descartes' *cogito*.

Descartes famously argued for the separation of mind and body, finding a way to argue from the former to the latter. Descartes was writing at a time when the very reality of the world was up for philosophical debate. He found a way out of the radical skepticism of his day by beginning with the very doubt that was stymying philosophical thought and using it as the basis of knowledge.⁶ The fact that I am aware of this doubt means that at the very least that thought of doubt exists, and therefore, so do I.⁷ Yet the *cogito, ergo sum* does not extend to other activities

⁵ Ted Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature* (Northwestern University Press, 2009), 107.

⁶ Richard Henry Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza* (University of California Press, 1979), 209–210 I am indebted to Gary Hartfield's article for directing me to this interpretation. "René Descartes", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2016/entries/descartes/>.

⁷ This was not an entirely original thought; Frederick Copleston has observed that Augustine formulated the same sentiment, though without using it as the cornerstone of a philosophical edifice. Augustine's was, "si fallor, sum" [if I doubt, I am]. Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy, Vol. 4* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1994), 90–

besides mental ones, like walking. One cannot necessarily say *ambulo, ergo sum*, for instance, because while I may *think* I have a body that is walking, I cannot be *certain* of this in the same way that I am certain that I am doubting. The seat of my “I,” therefore, is my mind, which is necessarily prior to the body in this system.⁸

The Emptiness Of The World

In the *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes argues for the reality of the self, the world, and God. He attempts to discover more about himself by shutting out the information provided by his sense organs:

I shall now close my eyes, I shall stop my ears, I shall call away all my senses, I shall efface even from my thoughts all the images of corporeal things, or at least...I shall esteem them as vain and false; and thus holding converse only with myself and considering my own nature, I shall try little by little to reach a better knowledge of and a more familiar acquaintanceship with myself. (III: 1)

According to Descartes, I am substance, which is why I am able to have a concept of substance in my mind. However, since I am finite, yet have the idea of infinite substance within me, it must be derived from elsewhere, from some true infinite source. This infinite, God, is more real than the finite (III). When dealing with the world, however, we have to use our senses, but are then plagued with the problem of error and deception: because I depend on my senses to mediate the outside world to me, I could easily be deceived as to its truth and existence. However, God guarantees the correspondence between my senses and reality; I could be deceived in my knowledge if God were a deceiver, but, because deception is a quality born of

91.

⁸ Copleston, 93.

weakness and limitation, it would not be found in the perfect God; therefore, God is not a deceiver (IV). For Descartes, the human being is defined by thinking: “My essence consists solely in the fact that I am a thinking thing.” Although I have a body to which I am currently “conjoined,” “yet because, on the one side, I have a clear and distinct idea of myself inasmuch as I am only a thinking and unextended thing, and as, on the other, I possess a distinct idea of body, inasmuch as it is only an extended and unthinking thing, it is certain that this I is entirely and absolutely distinct from my body, and can exist without it” (VI).

In sum, for Descartes, the mental is more foundational than the physical, true human essence is based in the mind, and only God guarantees the coherence of everything. Merleau-Ponty observes that “nothing less than this absolute object and this divine subject are needed to ward off the threat of the malicious demon and to ensure that we possess the true idea.”⁹ Although his proto-phenomenological approach broke new ground, Descartes’ conclusions require a transcendent deity, a separate and immortal soul, and a world less substantive than either. By beginning with the self and the self’s ability to know things, Descartes ultimately proves the reality of God and the world, but in a way that leaves the world perpetually in question and demands God’s separation from it. “Descartes located the foundation for cognition and rationality in the human ‘ego’ or self, which ‘clearly and distinctly’ apprehends its own presence as well as its own defining activity, thinking.”¹⁰ There are many other things that can be said about what is wrong with this, and Marion and Jüngel have both offered detailed critiques

⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of perception* (London; New York: Routledge, 2002), 46.

¹⁰ Paul J DeHart, “The Ambiguous Infinite: Jüngel, Marion, and the God of Descartes,” *The Journal of Religion* 82, no. 1 (January 2002): 78.

about what this does to the idea of God.¹¹ What is relevant for the task at hand is the fact that this divides the mind from the body and prioritizes human and God over the world. Merleau-Ponty critiques Cartesian Christianity for positioning God as the ultimate point of objectivity—to which we humans do not have access. This gaze alienates me from the actuality of my own body as an element of the world, for it is only for God, Merleau-Ponty says, that my body objectively and my body *as I experience it* even are “bodies in the same sense.” This is because “God alone is the metaphysical place of coherence.”¹² In this kind of theology, everything is in place “under the look of God.” This “look of God” from “above” can also be described as the “sovereign gaze,” the view from nowhere. The possessor of this gaze is the *kosmotheoros*, the absolute spectator. This sovereign gaze is the one adopted by science’s objectivism, importing a little bit of theism into secular, scientific method.

What Descartes did in his ontology, in Merleau-Ponty’s reading, was to “purify” the “immediate contact that we have with Being,” in order to be able to “discern what is solid, what resists understanding.”¹³ That is, to look beyond the phenomenon, into something both more real and more incomprehensible. The effect is that exterior nature (nature outside of my own mind) is, in Merleau-Ponty’s words, “reduced” to extension (matter), which, in turn, has two characteristics.¹⁴ First, it is “indefinitely divisible.” Second, each point of extension is “non-

¹¹ Paul J DeHart, “The Ambiguous Infinite: Jünger, Marion, and the God of Descartes,” *The Journal of Religion* 82, no. 1 (January 2002): 75–96.

¹² Merleau-Ponty, *Nature*, 206.

¹³ Merleau-Ponty, *Nature*, 126.

¹⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Nature: Course Notes from the Collège de France*, ed. Séglaard Dominique, trans. Robert Vallier (Northwestern University Press, 2003), 126.

substitutable” for another; each “has its own locality.” In relation to the other points of matter, all that a given point has is its “alterity in relation to the others.” The only thing that defines a given point of matter is that it is not other points of matter. This negative definition hints at the negativity lurking in a Cartesian model of the world. In this model, *a thing does not have its own essence*. It is dependent: “Our extension is not an essence, it is a certain existence by right, and it must be anchored at every moment: hence continuous creation.”¹⁵ The essence of matter is located not in and of itself, but is ontologically dependent on God.

Although Descartes was trying to get away from doubt about the nature of reality, he essentially fixed it in place by defining the world by its difference from human mind. Thought and matter exist in two different planes: the *res cogitans* takes up no space, whereas the *res extensa*, corporeal matter, by definition extends into space. By contrast, Merleau-Ponty will argue that the things of thought are within and among the things that extend into space; they do not occupy separate planes. The result of Descartes’ proposal is that the ego and God become uncomfortably dependent upon each other, and there is nothing left for the world.¹⁶ The world has no realness, and this ontology is forever threatened by an inherent nothingness. Or, as Mayra Rivera puts it, “Descartes’ inert matter is not devoid of religious significance... Its passivity is the outcome of having extracted all productivity from materiality to a God defined as substance.”¹⁷ This sense of the inertia of matter persists even in ecofeminist thought; matter is perhaps imbued

¹⁵ Merleau-Ponty, 129.

¹⁶ I am indebted to Paul Dehart’s essay for parsing some of the finer points of this problem. DeHart, “The Ambiguous Infinite.”

¹⁷ Rivera, *Poetics of the Flesh*, 104.

with meaning and productivity through infusion with the spirit of God in a panentheistic theology, but matter itself cannot be agential.

In brief, Merleau-Ponty's critique of Descartes' solution is that it implies an emptiness of world and body, in which the world is practically nothing in the face of God. Because the mind is prior, the body is alienated from what can be considered "self" and from the world. For Descartes, thought has "more" being than actual beings do; thought is more real and trustworthy than the physical objects around us. In other words, in this system, the world "is" practically nothing. The only reason that being continues is because of the source of being, whence matter is extended. That source is God. Not surprisingly, because of the way Descartes thinks about matter (that is, extension), "this world, such as it is, is a series of the unlimited emergence that is God," because "God alone can be posited as the truly objective object."¹⁸ What Descartes has done in this ontology of the object is to "[transform] Nature into a necessity which cannot be other than what it is, and behind this Nature, in the last instance, he perceives God."¹⁹ This takes away any agency nature could have, in that Nature is perpetually sustained and guaranteed by God. I agree with Merleau-Ponty that such a starting point prevents thought from "grasping...the concrete act of existing in ourselves."²⁰ This nothingness haunting being constitutes more than a simply ontological quandary. The idea that being is inherently empty contributes to the lack of agency for the earth, and serves as an impediment to humans' ownership of our own materiality, making

¹⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Nature*, 126.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 126–127.

²⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *Nature*, 134.

it more difficult to conceive of ourselves as of the world, and heightening the sense of alienation from it.

One of Merleau-Ponty's main problems with Cartesian thought, insofar as it is a representative of and model for many philosophies of consciousness, is that it "establishes man [sic] in a dimension where he no longer had any relation with life."²¹ This is the same problem that ecofeminists had been addressing. Moreover, this kind of thought makes it impossible to think the human in the world meaningfully, as we are essentially minds interacting with embodiment at a remove, a different substance from *res extensa*. We cannot get a meaningful eco-theological anthropology from Cartesian or Cartesian-influenced thought because it robs matter of all intrinsicity (the quality of being intrinsic to itself). We cannot talk about what it is to be human in the world if that world does not fully exist in and of itself. The reason the world does not really exist in Descartes' model is that, for him, only human will is really substantial, and even it is dependent upon God. The most important relationship, in that model, is between the human mind and the mind or will of God, connected and relating as it were on two ends of a solid pole, while all the rest of the material world extends merely as limp puppetry, or as an inflatable lawn ornament, kept up only by the continuous air blown into it at all times.

The Problem of the Objective Observer

Cartesianism's legacy extends to the scientific model used today. The lineage of ecofeminist thought from which I draw is friendly to science. Sallie McFague even directs us to accept the "common creation story" as told to us by astrophysicists, geologists, and biologists.

²¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Nature*, 272.

However, there remains within the sciences a tendency to set the human being apart from the world, which is no doubt necessary the purposes of experimentation. Unfortunately, this distance harkens back to the underlying assumptions that structure Descartes' doubt. Merleau-Ponty argues that Descartes' doubt actually affirms an absolute exterior, by assuming an external position from which to doubt, a kind of final empty boundary containing all that is doubted. His solution depends on the relationship between human mind and some ultra-exterior Being.²² In the 4th Meditation, Descartes said, "notwithstanding the supreme goodness of God, the nature of man, inasmuch as it is composed of mind and body, cannot be otherwise than sometimes a source of deception" (VI). This correspondence between God and perfect knowledge is the crux of Ted Toadvine's point about the metaphysics implicit in conventional naturalism. I participate in the external gaze of God in surveying this world, and am thus, to some degree, always already separate from the rest of matter.

Thus, a certain dualistic theology stows away in the very sciences from which eco-theology borrows as it makes its case, which is arguably one reason for the difficulty ecofeminists had with implementing the nonexceptional view of human beings for which they argued. They were trying to create a new theology while using a naturalism that contained within it an unacknowledged theological exceptionalism. This is corroborated by Diana Coole, who reminds us that Descartes' thought relies on God; God "guarantees the correspondence between exterior nature and mind" but is basically separate from this world that "He" created; the world is therefore devoid of spirit/mind. Matter, in the Cartesian system, is utterly without any kind of

²² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible: Followed by Working Notes* (Northwestern University Press, 1968), 107.

spirit or agency. Hence a truly naturalistic ecotheology needs to interrogate this inheritance.

Naturalism is based on science that inherited Descartes' spirit-less matter, which depends on God to be its guarantor, and is thus inflected with a quasi-theistic dualism. This is part of what needs to be explicitly identified and interrogated in the formation of a nonexceptionalist anthropology.

Toadvine has advanced the argument that scientific, naturalistic approaches remain Cartesian in ontology unless an alternative ontological approach is deliberately offered to counter it. I agree with Toadvine that the metaphysics of Cartesianism continue to inform even naturalism and ecological thought, unless we deliberately develop an alternative. That is why even a bare scientific naturalism as applied to theological anthropology cannot adequately describe the human and the human being's relationship with the world. Toadvine has said that "scientific naturalism is an insufficient basis for thinking the human relation with nature, as it relies on an ontology of positive beings that exist *partes extra partes*."²³ By starting with the assumption of unrelated and external objects that fill empty space, naturalistic thought "is therefore metaphysical in Heidegger's sense, adopting a standpoint outside the *φύσις* they purport to describe, and treating nature, the human subject, and their relations in terms of presence and availability."²⁴ The naturalism in science-oriented ecofeminism, unfortunately, implicitly accepts this metaphysical understanding of the world and our relationship to it, resulting in that subtle yet persistent element of human exceptionalism. In developing a nonexceptionalist theological anthropology, it is not enough just to draw from the conclusions of the sciences; we have to have an ontologically robust materialism. Merleau-Ponty's

²³ Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature*, 107.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 108.

phenomenological ontology provides that more complex and mutually relational ontology. As I shall show, Merleau-Ponty's work is able to engage the material in a way that is not predicated upon an external and superior human subject manipulating inert objects.²⁵ Merleau-Ponty wants to see how human beings and the things in our world interconnect; he is looking for the *nexus*, for "how all of this *holds together*."²⁶

An Embodied Methodology

As already noted, Merleau-Ponty's method is phenomenology, in which knowledge is gained via sensory experiences of phenomena. Merleau-Ponty sees the project of philosophy as a whole as being "an expression of experience by experience."²⁷ On the one hand, his method directly opposes philosophies that hold that we are trapped in meat-sacks of perception, minds unable to access the real "in-itself," and that the world is devoid of real Being; on the other hand, he also counters those who reduce the world to an assortment of discrete physical objects; his method is based on the argument that a being's *experience* of the objects of the world and of itself is also part of Being, in spite of the fact that it is not easily measured by the scientific method. This ultimately allows for an expansion of the location of intrinsic meaning; meaning exists within this very world of experience, and is not constrained to "higher" realms. "Nature"

²⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Nature*, 203–204.

²⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Nature*, 206.

²⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible: Followed by Working Notes* (Northwestern University Press, 1968), 155.

(of which we humans are a part) can reveal something about itself that does not require some external, orienting principle to give it meaning.²⁸

In the past, thinkers like Descartes have looked outside of our experience for “the truth.” Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological method tests the theory that we can know the world by virtue of the fact that we are *of* the world. Thus, Merleau-Ponty redeploys the Cartesian desire to understand how we know our reality, but with an emphasis on human embodiment rather than mind. The goal of this method is to explain and understand Being in a way that has not been done before. He is looking for “a true *explicitation* of Being, that is, not the exhibition of a Being, even infinite, in which the articulation of beings one after and other comes about in a manner that in principle is incomprehensible to us,” which is what happens when the source of all Being is posited in God, as discussed above. Rather, he aims at “the unveiling of Being as that which they [beings] define, that which places them together on the side of what is not nothing.”²⁹ Being is defined by the beings that constitute it. “That which is not nothing,” refers to the Cartesian doubt critiqued by both Husserl and Merleau-Ponty; the phenomenological method, far from doubting the reality of all things, would place all things and the means of knowing such things on the same side of the plane of existence; there is indeed something, rather than nothing.³⁰

²⁸ I put “nature” in quotes because the goal of my argument in this chapter is to render the concept of “nature” as separate from human beings and products meaningless; however, the words is still necessary in order to communicate my points. Let it be understood that the words “that which we currently understand as nature” could precede every instance of my using the word.

²⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Nature*, 206.

³⁰ Merleau-Ponty is, unsurprisingly, indebted to Husserl in his use and critique of Descartes. The form of Cartesianism that Husserl uses is, as Merleau-Ponty calls it, “purified.” It is Cartesian in the sense that it pursues the “Cartesian goal of a universal philosophy...” When Husserl discusses Descartes, he uses the latter’s

Merleau-Ponty's most basic phenomenological premise for approaching this kind of study is that it must be based in what can be known by the investigator. While Descartes assumes that the mind is prior and superior to the body, and therefore starts his investigation of reality by blocking off his sense organs, Merleau-Ponty begins with what he can know with his eyes open. He begins not with concepts of the mind but with perceptions of the body, allowing his perception (both its findings and the fact of its existence) to reveal truths about this world and about this experiencing, thinking body. Body, in this scheme, is epistemologically prior to mind. The body is the starting point for approaching how we can understand the human in the world.

This methodology begins with an assumption, just as Descartes' method did. In this case, one assumes not ultimate exteriority, but rather a complete embeddedness in nature. From this assumption Merleau-Ponty is able to argue that, the fact that we are part of "nature"³¹ means we must therefore be capable of learning something about nature, if only because, as part of nature, to know ourselves is to know a small portion of nature. We have, as it were, an inside-scoop on

term, "cogito," to talk about "all spatio-temporal being [that] exists for me because I experience it, because I perceive it...etc." He critiques Descartes for his "fateful transformation of the ego to a *substantia cogitans*...which then becomes the point of departure for conclusions by means of the principle of causality." (This move apparently made Husserl the father of "transcendental realism," which Husserl describes as "rather absurd.") Husserl wants to "keep aloof from all this" by cleaving to "radicalism in self-examination and with it to the principle of pure intuition." That entails regarding nothing as true "except the pure immediacy and givenness in the field of the ego cogito which the epoché has opened up to us," Husserl, *The Paris Lectures* [Springer, 2013], 9). That is, Husserl uses the field of the "I think," and is therefore indebted in this sense to Descartes. More importantly, he thereby establishes that only that which is immediately given to us in the objective world should be regarded as true (for the phenomenologist.) This attitude could be considered to be the source of Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on "seeing," as Husserl holds that we should not make claims about things we cannot see. This shows that Merleau-Ponty's primacy of sight is actually, to a certain degree, grounded in Husserlian phenomenological method, hence probably for the same reasons.

³¹ "Nature" is a complicated term with an ecologically-ambiguous history. It should be understood for the purposes of this project that we understand Merleau-Ponty's use of "nature" to mean the physical world not created by humans, including humans. Elsewhere in this chapter I avoid the term where possible, in favor of "world" or other more nuanced terminology, because of the common understanding of nature as the opposing polarity to "culture."

nature, due to the fact that we contain its mysterious elements within our own selves. Merleau-Ponty's axiom is that "the Nature in us must have some relation to Nature outside of us; moreover, Nature outside of us *must* be unveiled *to* us by the Nature that we are."³² This "must" reflects the fact that any investigation of nature that we undertake is ineluctably going to make use of our "natural" attributes—eyes, hand, brains, and so forth—hence, we are already and have no alternative to using the nature that we are in making any such exploration. Therefore, it would be erroneous to presuppose that we could have Nature outside of us "unveiled" to us if we do *not* start our study from the Nature that we *are*, because we would then be ignoring the aforementioned "in" that we already have on the subject.

The body is not just a discreet quantity of mass, but is, rather, alive with experience. It is proper, then, for the human body to be, as Merleau-Ponty calls it, a "universal measurant"—the means by which we humans can measure the world. In taking this approach, Merleau-Ponty is consciously rejecting "age-old assumptions that put the body in the world and the seer in the body."³³ That is, he is working from an understanding of the human as an "interbeing" mode of embodiment—not essentially separate and secondarily placed in relation, but rather always already being in relation at a pre-reflective level, before we are even aware of separations between self and others. While there is increasing evidence to suggest that this may be the case in a way that can be described by biology and physics, and Merleau-Ponty is working to understand what it means to "inter-be" from a *philosophical* perspective. He treats the body as a

³² Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 206 (emphasis added).

³³ *Ibid.*, 138.

potentiality of experience, rather than as a vessel for “a knowing subject.” It is through these embodied experiences that knowledge of the world can be gathered.

In Descartes’ method, I am only sure of myself, and must reason out the existence of everything else from that certainty. My mind is *res cogitans*, while my body, including my brain, is *res extensa*.³⁴ They are two completely different substances. Moreover, the mind is epistemologically prior to the rest of reality:

[B]odies themselves are not properly perceived by the senses nor by the faculty of imagination, but by the intellect alone; and since they are not perceived because they are seen and touched, but only because they are understood or rightly comprehended by thought, I readily discover that there is nothing more easily or clearly apprehended than my own mind (II).

Things out there may or may not exist; my senses have to work in concert with my mind to form a “clear and distinct” impression of something out there, along with corroboration by my memory of past events that help me determine that this is not a dream. My senses are at times unreliable, and my mind must step in. This is not wrong, but the priority placed on mind over senses implies a distance between self and object. My senses are tools that provide data to my mind, which, in spite of the fact that Descartes proves the existence of external reality, still operates much like a brain in a jar. By contrast, for Merleau-Ponty, perception is not a tool but rather an always-already element of our existence in the world; our sense organs are already of and in the world, or else they would not function. The fact that I use perception to know the world around me proves that I share this world and its fleshiness.³⁵

³⁴ The mind is not the brain. The brain is manifestly physical—it is extension—and therefore part of the “machine” that is the body. Additionally, the mind receives impressions “only from the brain,” and not from the rest of the body. VI

³⁵ This contains an implicit epistemological shift: the implication that “perfect” knowledge is not necessarily the

In answer to Descartes' concern about being deceived by our sense organs, Merleau-Ponty contends that the error lies in beginning with a presumed distance between objects and consciousness of those objects.³⁶ In *Phenomenology of Perception*, even before he had developed the concept of the Flesh as that which underlies and enables this relationship, Merleau-Ponty was already arguing that there is a connectedness that precedes these questions of doubt: "To ask oneself whether the world is real is to fail to understand what one is asking, since the world is not a sum of things which might always be called into question, but the inexhaustible reservoir from which things are drawn."³⁷ Our senses—taste, touch, sight, smell, hearing—are the body's entrée to the outside world. More than that, these sense organs are made up of the same stuff as the outside world, because there *is* no pure "outside." There are still always going to be errors of perception (defined as that which is not agreed upon by others) that are corrected by later perceptions and upon consideration of different evidence. Merleau-Ponty encourages us to accept that "I know myself only in my inherence in time and in the world, that is, I know myself only in ambiguity."³⁸ Yet we would never be able to doubt or think in the first place if we were not already connected with the world:

My awareness of constructing an objective truth would never provide me with anything more than an objective truth for me, and my greatest attempt at impartiality would never enable me to prevail over my subjectivity (as Descartes

same thing as "true" awareness of the self-in-the world, because we are human beings, not gods, and what matters is understanding our existence and not attaining a masterful sum of knowledge. There is much more to be said about epistemology, but it will have to be saved for another project.

³⁶ Gary Gutting, *French Philosophy in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, U.K. ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 198.

³⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of perception*, 401.

³⁸ Merleau-Ponty, 401.

so well expresses it by the hypothesis of the malignant demon), if I had not, underlying my judgments, the primordial certainty of being in contact with being itself, if, before the voluntary *adoption of a position* I were not already *situated* in an intersubjective world, and if science too were not upheld by this basic *δόξα* [belief].³⁹

What the body is—its ontology—cannot be separated from perception. Much though I may wish, for simplicity’s sake, neatly to delineate one from the other, in Merleau-Ponty’s thought we cannot define the body without talking about perception any more than we can explain perception without a grasp of the body. The body is inextricably linked to perception because perception is the body’s participation in the shared fleshiness of the world. Yet the body is more than just another instantiation of “world tissue;” the body is a “*sensible for itself*, which means...a set of colors and surfaces inhabited by a touch, a vision, hence, an *exemplar sensible*.”⁴⁰ The body is defined first as being inhabited by a touch, a vision—not necessarily inhabited by a separate mind that receives information from tactile and visual stimuli. The self, therefore, is defined beginning with the body; on a physical level, we are essentially perceivers. Because our own bodies are touch-able, see-able, and otherwise perceptible objects in the world, we have the key to being able to participate in this world as perceivers. The body’s corporeal being is what allows it to participate in the being of others, and our own bodies conveniently give us minute case studies into the nature of sensibility—from the inside and from the outside.⁴¹ In this scheme, the body is understood as *enfleshed perception*, and is thus what every thing is: a

³⁹ Merleau-Ponty, 414 (emphasis in original).

⁴⁰ Ibid., 135.

⁴¹ Ibid., 137.

“*dimensional this.*”⁴² It has these multiple dimensions of visibility and invisibility, which it shares with all other beings. The world is not *mediated* to me by my sense organs. What Merleau-Ponty suggests is that those organs are already part of that outside world, because my body was already part of that flesh before my sense organs started giving me information in the first place. What this means is that the purported *distance* between me and a thing is the same as its *proximity*, because nature is mediated to us through its distance from us.⁴³ Perception “dawns” through my body, and that is what my body is “built around.”⁴⁴ The mediation of the senses, this distance between self and object that comes from the necessity of perception, is, in fact, my *guarantee* for knowing other beings. Avoiding both dualism and monism, Merleau-Ponty asserts that this perceptually-mediated gap between myself and another is neither “infinite distance” nor “absolute proximity”—rather, what lies between myself and another being—and hence, between myself and Being itself—is the “thickness of flesh.” This thickness is the “means of communication” between the perceiver and the perceived; it is no less than “the presence of its [the world’s] flesh to my flesh.”⁴⁵ That is, a relation of the flesh to itself.

A key insight for theological anthropology lies in the close attention Merleau-Ponty pays to the experience of our own perceiving perceptibility; it is this that encapsulates what it means to be a human (or, really, any being) in the world. I can be measured and perceived by myself and by others, and I can perceive at least parts of the organs with which I myself perceive the

⁴² Ibid., 260 (Working note from June, 1960).

⁴³ Ibid., 126.

⁴⁴ VI 24/9, quoted in Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature*, 114.

⁴⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 127.

world. This is a deceptively simple movement, but it is that which, at the most basic material level, allows us to describe the human as dynamically embodied and enworlded. Using this body methodology, Merleau-Ponty is able to formulate a way of understanding human being that can account for conscious experience without resorting to exceptionalism.

Redefining the Human Being for a Non-Exceptionalist Theological Anthropology

...[C]arnal being, as a being of depths, of several leaves or several faces, a being in latency, and a presentation of a certain absence, is a prototype of Being, of which our body, the sensible sentient, is a very remarkable variant, but *whose constitutive paradox already lies in every visible*.⁴⁶

It is one thing to say, based on measurable, physical qualities of my earthly form, that I am embodied in a world, that the flesh apparently containing or generating my mind is subject to the very same laws of gravity, entropy, conservation of energy, and so forth, as other matter. More is required, however, to reconcile all of that with the flights of abstract thought and analogical imagination required for theological construction and ethical contemplation. As I have noted, ecofeminist theologians have an inadvertent exception to their non-exceptionalism in this thinking and wondering capacity. Here, via Merleau-Ponty's thought and Toadvine's interpretations of it, I tackle this problem in incremental steps. First, I use the body methodology discussed above to interpret the most basic fact that each of us can know from our own experience: that I am both a perceiver *of* the world and also perceptible *to* other sensing bodies in the world—as evidenced by the my own simple experience of touching one hand with the other

⁴⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Claude Lefort, *The Visible and the Invisible ; Followed by Working Notes*, Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology & Existential Philosophy (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 136 (emphasis added).

and thereby experiencing touching and being-touched at the same time. Second, I explore the concept of the “Flesh” and how its invisible dimension may be potent ground for intuitions of the transcendent. Finally, with Merleau-Ponty, I extrapolate from this basic circuit to a theory of consciousness based on locating reflection and interrogation in being itself. Toadvine’s unique reading, particularly his framing of the issue regarding consciousness as a reflection of a primordial movement of Being, applies here in that he explicitly brings out the non-human elements latent in Merleau-Ponty’s unfinished work on the subject. In this way, we can describe human mental activity and intuitions of transcendence as not separating us from the world, but rather as participating in the rest of enlivened, embodied reality. Thus, I show how it will be possible to describe humans as “radically material,” defined as such in relation to the world as a whole.⁴⁷

The Chiasm

Asserting that we are absolutely inseparable from “nature” presents a new problem: how can I make sense of being both a subject in nature and an object *in* nature? Where is the delineation between one and the other? Merleau-Ponty offers the concept of the “chiasm” as a way to explain this mutual crossing of the being of nature and the being of the human.⁴⁸ The chiasm describes how one can be both perceiver and perceived without the two collapsing into each other. As Merleau-Ponty scholar Jack Reynolds has helpfully put it:

⁴⁷ Because of the fact that this is in the nature of Being, and not *just* an animal phenomenon, it also avoids the fallacy of human beings representing some “pinnacle” of evolution—that in the history of animal-kind, we have at last emerged as the theological variant.

⁴⁸ Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature*, 109.

Any absolute distinction between being in the world as touching, and being in the world as touched, deprives the existential phenomena of their true complexity. Our embodied subjectivity is never located purely in either our tangibility or in our touching, but in the intertwining of these two aspects, or where the two lines of a chiasm intersect with one another. The chiasm then, is simply an image to describe how this overlapping and encroachment can take place between a pair that nevertheless retains a divergence, in that touching and touched are obviously never exactly the same thing.⁴⁹

The focus here is on that line between what makes me an object in the world that can be perceived by others, and what it is within me that does its own perceiving, and where or when one becomes the other. When I say that I am an embodied subject, does that mean that I am a touching body or a touched body? In this, case, as Reynolds points out, my “self” is neither all in one or all in the other, but rather in the fact that they *intertwine*, that they cross in that moment of chiasm. That is, my identity as an individual body is found in my interaction with the outside world. Merleau-Ponty describes that moment of same and other crossing as a form of “encroachment”—my sensing self is impinged upon by and impinges upon the other—rather than “dialectical surpassing” in which the knowing subject somehow assimilates this alien other in the formation of new knowledge.⁵⁰ It is this understanding that can finally realize the promise of nonexceptionalism. This chiastic relationship with the world prevents us from imagining that our consciousness rises above or constitutes an exception to the rest of the world. This promotes a sense of lateral, rather than hierarchical, kinship with the material.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Jack Reynolds, “Merleau-Ponty, Maurice | Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy,” accessed August 20, 2016, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/merleau/#SH3b>.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁵¹ As suggested in Kelly Oliver, *Animal Lessons: How They Teach Us to Be Human* (Columbia University Press, 2009), 223–28.

Looking at the human in the world through the lens of chiasm, in which subjectivity is emergent from objectivity, can contribute to a formulation of the matter of the world as intrinsically agential, rather than raw material upon which human agency acts. That is, “nature,” must be thought of not only as “the residue of what had *not been constructed by me*, but also [as] a productivity which is *not ours*, although we can use it—that is, an originary productivity that continues [to operate] *beneath the artificial creations of man* [sic].”⁵² The key point in this quote is that there is a sense of ongoing productivity from which human productivity and agency derives, and which continues even as human beings create and alter their environments. Importantly, it is not a simple one-way relationship of natural agency being requisitioned by human beings. Kelly Oliver has elaborated upon Merleau-Ponty’s unfinished argument, based on his earlier focus on the dialogical relationship between perceiver and perceived (discussed in the previous chapter), “neither the organism nor its environment has sole causal power. Neither the body in its materiality nor some transcendent consciousness is the causal agent of animal or human behavior. Instead, organism and environment are in a relationship, which engenders activity (and passivity) on both sides.”⁵³ The tensile entanglement of an organism and its environment—which includes other organisms—mediates the agential capacity of things. Life itself is “the opening of a field of action,” a field whose borders are defined by these relationships.⁵⁴

⁵² Merleau-Ponty, *Nature*, 125 (emphasis added).

⁵³ Oliver, *Animal Lessons*, 219.

⁵⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Nature*, 173 Cited in Oliver, 219-220.

This view yields a concept of human as fully embedded within this world. It gets us away from the feeling of the human as not-at-home on the earth. Insofar as it enables an understanding of the space between myself and the object of my attention as sharing in the flesh of the world, it takes steps towards overcoming the sense that the world is empty space populated by discreet objects. This ontology therefore provides an alternative for what it can mean to be a human being in the world.

Redefining Human Being

Given all this, what *is* the human, in Merleau-Ponty's scheme? The human being *is*: "experiences...thoughts that feel behind themselves the weight of space, the time, the very Being they think."⁵⁵ Perception itself constitutes our being as humans.⁵⁶ We only exist as this relationship between our individual bodily flesh and the flesh of the world. The human being, because of the nature of the body and the world, gains its identity through experiences of inter-being perception. The beauty of this, compared to monism or various forms of non-dualism, is that it does not require complete *assimilation* into the world—the flesh of my body and the flesh of your body are mutually imbricated, sharing in the same flesh of the world, but I am still me and not you. That is, we are separate folds of this same flesh, just as my hand is not my foot and yet both belong to the same body.

From a Merleau-Pontian perspective, awareness of world and self begins with shared embodiment. That is, my perception is inseparable from Being and is Being's inscription upon

⁵⁵ Ibid., 115.

⁵⁶ And, presumably, not solely for us, but humans are our current focus in this study.

itself. To understand perception and the body, as we have seen, is to discuss that which my body shares with other bodies and with being itself. Being an enworlded self requires us to attend to our points of connection to the world—all our senses—in order to understand ourselves; there is no distinct line that can be drawn between my “self” and the world.⁵⁷ Although Merleau-Ponty did not have all of this information at the time of his writing, even in his day it was apparent that the difference between body-self and world were difficult to delineate. This is the concept of Flesh. Because the Flesh does not entail monism, it avoids the concerns that Sallie McFague and other ecofeminists had with ecological thought that situated the human absolutely within the world: she had worried it would cause the human being to disappear into the world, obviating the possibility for relationality, and with it, ethics. Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the Flesh presents an alternative to Cartesian dualism while avoiding the anti-relational pitfalls of monism.

In this wholly material approach, the question now is not: *how can I know that the world exists?* but, *how can I explain my mental experiences of knowing, doubting, interrogating, if I am in essence not a mind, but rather a body among other bodies?* In this sense, it is a reversal of the Cartesian scenario. Descartes knew that he thought and existed, but arduously had to prove the reality of anything else. By contrast, Merleau-Ponty asserts the primacy of the world and our bodies’ perceptual abilities to confirm it along with our corporeal reality, and so the onus is upon him to explain how thought and reflection fit into this schema. More broadly, how do I come to be thinking theologically, to look at my life and surrounds and be asking questions about just how I came to be here and what it all means and what I should do? In the next section I will

⁵⁷ As scientific research continues to show, where to draw the line between self and non-self, even on a purely physical level, is an increasingly complicated endeavor, given the sheer mass of non-human DNA that occupies and helps run our own bodies, inside and out. Indeed, only half the cells in our bodies are actually human, as discussed in Ed Yong, *I Contain Multitudes: The Microbes within Us and a Grand View of Life*, 2016.

elaborate upon this concept of the Flesh, and seek to understand how a construction of human as fundamentally non-different from the world can still account for transcendent experience. I discuss how this phenomenological, material take on anthropology lets us move from a description of humans as bodies in a world full of bodies to an understanding of human beings as theological yet nonexceptional: that is, as “radically material.”

Materializing Transcendent Experience

Flesh: A Pregnancy of Possibilities

I have already referenced “the flesh” in passing. Here, I will explore the concept at greater length, with special attention paid to how it can allow for transcendence to be materialized. Merleau-Ponty describes the concept of “Flesh” (*la chair*) as an “element” of Being, in the sense of the classical elements of water, earth, air, and fire. That is, it may not encompass all that Being is, but it is the dimension of being within which our lives take place.⁵⁸ It is a middle ground between the idea and the individual who exists in space and time.⁵⁹ It is important to observe what flesh is not: it is not synonymous with matter *per se*: “the flesh is not matter, in the sense of corpuscles of being which would add up or continue on one another to form beings.” That is, it is not literally meaty cells that adjoin each other, making some mega-being. It is not mind, either: the flesh as “the visible (the things as well as my own body) [is not] some ‘psychic’ material that would be—God knows how—brought into being by the things

⁵⁸ Ibid., 139.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 139.

factually existing and acting on my factual body.” Having covered those two traditional philosophical poles, Merleau-Ponty goes on to denounce the traditional mediation between them: neither matter nor mind, flesh is also not “a representation for a mind,” because, after all, “a mind could not be captured by its own representations; it would rebel against this insertion into the visible which is essential to the seer.” In general, flesh is not a “fact or a sum of facts ‘material’ or ‘spiritual’.”⁶⁰ It is thinkable by itself without being a compound of other concepts.

The body is able to touch and see objects because it is part of the universal flesh. To wit, Merleau-Ponty states that, if the body “touches them [the visible objects] and sees them, this is only because, being of their family, itself visible and tangible, it uses its own being as a means to participate in theirs, because each of the two beings is an archetype for the other, because the body belongs to the order of the things as the world is universal flesh.”⁶¹ The body can see other bodies precisely because and only by virtue of the fact that it is a body; one must have an eye in order to see other beings. The body can see because it is of one and the same type as that which it is seeing. “The flesh” is not the same as the literal flesh of a living organism, but Merleau-Ponty choose this word in order to indicate the non-inertia of materiality, highlighting the fact that it is “a *pregnancy* of possibilities...[and] therefore absolutely not an ob-ject.”⁶² One cannot point to and objectify the flesh as a static thing; it is dynamic and self-emergent.

⁶⁰ Merleau-Ponty and Lefort, *The Visible and the Invisible ; Followed by Working Notes*, 139.

⁶¹ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 137.

⁶² Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (working note from 1960). Feminists have a lot to say about his use of this imagery. I will discuss this in the final chapter.

The flesh can be described as a “coiling over of the visible upon the seeing body” (and the tangible upon the touching body, and so forth). This “coiling” is the concentration, around the body, of things that can be sensed. These things interact with my sense organs, “making me,” in the case of sight, “*follow with my eyes* the movements and contours of the things themselves.”⁶³ My vision then, is not sovereign; it does not pull data from an inert world; rather, my vision is called forth by the things of this world in this reciprocal relationship. This one example of “coiling over” is representative of the style of being itself: Merleau-Ponty calls it “sort of incarnate principle that brings a style of being wherever there is a fragment of being.”⁶⁴ The way that our sense organs “follow” the visible, tangible, audible, gustible and olfactible, is indicative of a “pact between them and me, according to which I lend them my body in order that they inscribe upon it and give me their resemblance.”⁶⁵ Merleau-Ponty calls this perceiving-lending a “pact of mutual lending,” by which he means that we have access to objects because of a mutual disclosing rather than a one-sided penetration (in either direction). That is, the flesh is the two-way street of perception, through the experience of which my very body is constituted. I am, then, constituted by my sensory-permeable edges. All of my body is this flesh, existing in the world, impacted by the world, thereby receiving impressions of the world because of its participation in it.

Our interactions with the world reveal our embeddedness in and indebtedness to the flesh. For example, the human interacts with the world, and examines an object that she picks up.

⁶³ Ibid., 146.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 139.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 146.

When she does so, she finds “much more than an object.” In opening herself to the “actual world such as it is,” the world as it is discovered in phenomenology, she finds “a Being of which [her] vision is a part, a visibility older than [her] operations or [her] acts.” Yet, importantly, this does not imply that she and the thing are one; the reason that she makes this discovery is that “a sort of dehiscence opens [her] body in two.”⁶⁶ The body is split between the body looking and the body looked at, and so forth. Because “there is overlapping or encroachment” at this split, therefore “we must say that the things pass into us as well as we into the things.”⁶⁷ It is this split that the figure of the chiasm, mentioned above, seeks to explain and describe, and it is the chiasm that allows us to speak of “the flesh.” As Toadvine puts it, the chiasm is “a crisscrossing or a bi-directional becoming or exchange between the body and things that justifies speaking of a ‘flesh’ of things, a kinship between the sensing body and sensed things that makes their communication possible.” The flesh exists as a means of explaining how this mutual lending between my sense organs and the things of the world is possible, in spite of the apparent spatial distance between eye and object.

Merleau-Ponty wants to “show that the flesh is an ultimate notion, that it is not the union or compound of two substances, but thinkable by itself.”⁶⁸ While not a union of two existing substances, the Flesh does have two sides to it: it is both visible and invisible. “The visible” is flesh that can be sensed, “the invisible” is the flesh of ideas, but this does not reinstate dualism

⁶⁶ There is a gendered component with the splitting-open language that echoes the pregnancy language Merleau-Ponty uses elsewhere. This could be seen as a deliberate bridging of male-female duality, or, alternatively, as an appropriation of the mystical feminine into the normative male subject of philosophy. Changing the pronouns, as I have done here, brings this out to an even greater degree.

⁶⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 123.

⁶⁸ Merleau-Ponty and Lefort, *The Visible and the Invisible ; Followed by Working Notes*, 140.

because they are both of the same flesh.⁶⁹ Yet the visible is more than the tangible object; it also produces the space and time in which we encounter those objects. In other words, the visible is not a collection of objects existing upon a spatial or temporal plane; the visible itself *constitutes* time and space. “The visible itself is not *in* time and *in* space, but not outside of them either, since it is what in the present announces and harbors an immense latent content of the past, the future, and the elsewhere.”⁷⁰ One could say, metaphorically, that the visible is the paper and the ink that together form the map that is time and space. Without the visible, there is no time and space. Additionally, my body is “*in* the visible.” Merleau-Ponty clarifies that, in saying this, he does not mean that the body is simply “a particle of the visible, [that] there is the visible and here (as a variant of the there) is my body.” Instead, my body “is *surrounded* by the visible...it sees itself, it is a visible—but it sees itself seeing...” That is, the body sees visible things all around it, literally, and also sees itself as a seeing thing. It is an active existence within the visible Flesh.⁷¹

The invisible is the side of the visible that we do not see. Being, in its Fleshy element, *emerges* as visible or perceptible, but in *itself* it is invisible. It undergirds the constant body-world relational dialogue found in Merleau-Ponty’s early work, discussed previously.⁷² It is the “field” that contains all the “structures” of reality. (This is in contrast to two other ways of being invisible—either “de facto” as in, a visible thing that cannot be seen right now because it is

⁶⁹ Ted Toadvine, “Maurice Merleau-Ponty,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Winter 2016 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2016), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/merleau-ponty/>.

⁷⁰ Alphonso Lingis, “Translator’s Preface,” in Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, xlv.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 270–271 (working note from December, 1960).

⁷² Frederick Copleston, *History of Philosophy, Volume 9* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1994), 410.

hidden behind something else; and “absolute” invisible, which “would have nothing to do with the visible.” The invisible of this world is neither of those.) The only way we even have contact an idea *as* an idea is “in a carnal experience.” In fact, the reason ideas are as powerful as they are is because they “are in transparency behind the sensible, or in its heart.”⁷³ That is, the idea *qua* idea is of “this dimension.” It is “not an absolute invisible, which would have nothing to do with the visible.” On the contrary, the invisible idea is “the invisible *of* this world, that which inhabits this world, sustains it, and renders it visible, its own and interior possibility, the Being of this being.”⁷⁴ Thus, although ideas are invisible, they are intimately connected to the visible world, because they are the other side of visible flesh.

Invisibility and Theological Thought

Because of how the invisible deals with time and the hiddenness of ideas, the invisible is the key to being able to describe theological thought as continuous with the material world. The invisible ties together the visible along temporal lines. An idea forms within the visible world, within existence, and is guaranteed by the duration of myself and of others; thus, “behind the idea, there is the unity, the simultaneity of all the real and possible durations, the cohesion of one sole Being from one end to the other.” What this means is that the “fabric of experience,” which he also names, “the flesh of time,” lies beneath the idea.⁷⁵ Some of Being—of which the flesh is an element—is therefore always supposed to be invisible. Phenomenology reveals that there are

⁷³ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 150.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 151.

⁷⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 111.

invisible (hidden) elements. “If Being is hidden, this is itself a characteristic of Being, and no disclosure will make us comprehend it.” The hiddenness of Being is part of what Being is. These invisible elements of the flesh, like the musical phrase that “possesses the violinist” to move his bow along the strings in a particular way, are not hidden due to our lack of sight or our unfavorable circumstances. The animating invisibility is meant to be invisible; it are *not* invisible “in the sense that under the light of another sun hidden from us [it] would shine forth.”⁷⁶ The invisibility of the invisible is no more lamentable than the hiddenness of the skeleton in a healthy body.

In the words of philosopher and translator Alphonso Lingis, the invisible can thus be thought of as the piling, “upon which the visible is set.”⁷⁷ The very act of seeing is to “see according to the invisible axes and pivots, levels and lines of force of the visible.” The visible does not exist happily on its own and then have this invisible dimension added to it in any way. Rather, the visible is only what it is, is visible by definition, in that it “involves a non-visibility.”⁷⁸ Describing the visible and understanding the visible requires acknowledging the invisibility at its heart. In the same way, the invisible is not in a separate, secret realm, to which perhaps only God has access. Rather, the invisible is known to us—and best known to us—through the visible that it supports. The concept of the flesh thus enables an understanding of theological thought (and

⁷⁶ Merleau-Ponty, 153.

⁷⁷ Lingis, “Translator’s introduction,” in Merleau-Ponty, lii.

⁷⁸ Merleau-Ponty, 247 (Working note from May, 1960).

the moments of transcendence upon which it reflects) as material; as Molly Jensen puts it, transcendence can therefore be understood “as a depth of the carnal world.”⁷⁹

Thought can be understood as the invisible aspect of the Flesh. The invisible encompasses what was once set on one side of the Cartesian mind-body dualism. What Merleau-Ponty does in this understanding of Being as Flesh, according to Toadvine, is give us “a means for understanding the visibility of the invisible...in a way that treats the two as obverse and reverse or as part of a single ontological circulation.”⁸⁰ By showing that it is not elsewhere or apart from the visible but rather a structure of the visible, Merleau-Ponty avoids reinstating that original dualism. Where are these invisible ideas when we are not actively thinking about them? “We do not see, do not hear the ideas, and not even with the mind’s eye or with the third ear: and yet they are there, behind the sounds or between them, recognizable through their always special, always unique manner of entrenching themselves behind them.”⁸¹ There is a fleshy continuum between the visible and invisible that makes one inseparable from the other. A consequence of this fleshy connectivity is that, just as the body must be part of the flesh in order to see the *flesh* of other bodies, we also need the body in order to know the *idea*. “There is no vision without the screen: the ideas we are speaking of would not be better known to us if we had no body and no sensibility; it is then that they would be inaccessible to us.”⁸² Our bodies and our sensory organs

⁷⁹ Jensen, *Fleshing out a Relational Ethics [Electronic Resource]*, 134.

⁸⁰ Ted Toadvine, “How Not to Be a Jellyfish: Human Exceptionalism and the Ontology of Reflection,” in *Phenomenology and the Non-Human Animal*, ed. Corinne Painter and Christian Lotz (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007), 51 (cited in Oliver, 224).

⁸¹ Merleau-Ponty and Lefort, *The Visible and the Invisible ; Followed by Working Notes*, 151.

⁸² Merleau-Ponty and Lefort, 150.

permit access to ideas. Our participation in and constitution by the flesh of the world is what allows us to reflect theologically while also remaining radically material, as I will explain further, below.

Flesh as a concept is not about potent subjectivity taking in knowledge from objects, nor is it about the stubborn, intransigent opacity of objects making any knowledge of themselves unattainable to the human being. Rather, as mentioned earlier, it is about a shared nature between myself and other beings in the world that allows my sense organs to be impacted by the sensible objects, an *involuntary vulnerability* which allows me to gather knowledge about aspects of those objects into myself. It is a spanned distance that allows for imperfect access. In its invisible aspect, it also makes room for the intangibles of our reality, opening a way for moments of transcendence within the material. But can we get from this primal, shared impressioning and room-for-transcendence to full cognition? How are conscious reflection and theology comprehensible within this scheme?

Reflection and Interrogation

As noted above, Descartes' reflection in the *Meditations* famously features him shutting out the outside world, and retreating into his mind. Descartes wanted to give us "access to a universal mind via reflection."⁸³ Yet Merleau-Ponty points out that the only reason I can reflect *internally* is because I begin as part of the *external* world; the only way I could begin asking about the universal, absolute mind, is by being, first, part of this "intersubjectivity" in the world. I am not getting any closer to the truth of what I "really" am by shutting out the world and

⁸³ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 49.

existing in my own mind. To wit: “if I pretend to find, though reflection, in the universal mind the premise that had always backed up my experience, *I can do so only by forgetting this non-knowing of the beginning which is not nothing*, and which is not the reflective truth either, and which also must be accounted for.”⁸⁴ The only reason I was able to make this reflective appeal to myself, to ask questions such as Descartes asked, is because “first I was outside of myself, in the world, among the others, and constantly this experience feeds my reflection.”⁸⁵ Thus even our impulse to reflect inwardly was initially informed by our awareness of there being an *outside*, of being amongst others; we could not deliberately disconnect and go inwards if we were not first already connected outwardly.

The capacity for theological engagement and transcendent experience emerge from a capacity of the flesh in which all things share. Reflection can be seen to originate in the flesh of the world, that is, in an element of being itself. As previously noted, the capacity for reflection has, in Cartesianism, been a means by which the human being is either implicitly or explicitly separated from the world, and the way it is understood it has major implications for what it means to be a human in the world. Merleau-Ponty’s ontology shows that philosophy (and, I would argue, theology) can “now [be] understood as only one of the many moments of the flesh’s divergence and recuperation and, specifically, as a self-interrogation of flesh for which the very possibility of such interrogation is what is at stake.”⁸⁶ In other words, the very reflection that seemed to separate the mind *from* the world is actually inextricably tangled up in—and, in

⁸⁴ Merleau-Ponty, 49.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 49.

⁸⁶ Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature*, 95.

fact, *part of*—the flesh of the world. The human being and other objects hold together in such a way that human reflective capabilities can be understood as intertwined with the earth, giving new meaning to both of them.

We can see interrogation at work in many life forms. Oliver reminds us that, “for Merleau-Ponty, behavior itself is a form of interrogation.” Movement is “a way of questioning and responding in relation to the environment and others and the body.”⁸⁷ “Interrogation” is the name Merleau-Ponty gives for “the torsion or self-reflexivity of the sensible by which it doubles itself with an invisible sheath,” as Toadvine clarifies. Furthermore:

The fixture of interrogation names the operation of the negative in its self-reflexivity, its manner of turning back onto itself in order to effect a “non-difference-with-self.” Strictly speaking, then, we must recognize that being is not what it is, not self-identical. It is through this self-othering movement that being is “in the interrogative mode,” and it is precisely this interrogative movement of being that is its...unmotivated surge.⁸⁸

Merleau-Ponty argues that reflection is a “primordial movement” of Being. But what does that mean? For an individual being, reflection (literally the “bending back” of something upon itself) is “the body touching itself, seeing itself.”⁸⁹ That is, reflection is when the subject, due to the internal dehiscence or splitting mentioned above, makes of itself an object for its own perception. The subject becomes object to itself without losing its subjectivity, experiencing what it is like to be touched, for example, while simultaneously, within the same awareness, experiencing itself touching. That this can happen, that I can be both subject and object, is

⁸⁷ Oliver, *Animal Lessons*, 216.

⁸⁸ Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature*, 125.

⁸⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Nature*, 268.

evidence of the operation of the “*écart* [separation/gap] at the heart of every being.”⁹⁰ The locus of reflection is being itself, taking place in my body; it is not an immaterial mind engaging from a distance with a material object, but the nature of the physical itself in the complexity of subject/object relations. The body *is* reflection, configured in the physical.⁹¹

There is no way for human reflection to take a position that is removed from nature, because, as embodied beings, our reflection, in Toadvine’s words, “emerges from and opens onto nature.” Nature, that is, “conditions” reflection.⁹² Reflection is based on the same inextricability from the world as the perception discussed above. Human ability to reflect derives from the world, and is a capacity of being itself: “my vision of Being [is] not forming itself from elsewhere, but from the midst of Being.”⁹³ Though my perception forms in the midst of Being, my own identity is not lost; there is still a way to consider the *cogito*.

In this system, the *cogito* becomes a negative space. As Toadvine puts it, “reflection is...the movement through us of a negation sunken into being.”⁹⁴ The *cogito* is thus a hollow or a fold in the flesh. It is a negation within the human being that echoes a negation within being itself. Describing reflection within a given human individual as a “negation,” is a way of understanding the “I think” that we find alongside all our experiences; it is also a development of the “tacit *cogito*” concept found in Merleau-Ponty’s earlier thought, as discussed in the previous

⁹⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 127.

⁹¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Nature*, 268.

⁹² Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature*, 108.

⁹³ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 114.

⁹⁴ Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature*, 125.

chapter. Merleau-Ponty asks about that “central vision” that “joins the scattered visions,” or the singular touch that “governs” all the touching that my body perpetrates. He works toward understanding how there even *is* a center.⁹⁵ Though he does not completely develop it in *The Visible and the Invisible*, his working notes point toward his suggestion for an answer. “The named I...is an object. The primary I, of which this one is the objectification, is the unknown *to whom* all is given to see or to think [...] before whom...there is something. It [the primary I] is therefore negativity—ungraspable in person, of course, since it is *nothing*.” Merleau-Ponty argues that the I that lies within the objectifiable I is negativity. Why? Because within the context of the flesh, it can only be defined as a gap.

There is the I that hears something, and the I that says something, and between them is the I that almost, but not quite, hears me hearing my speech. Between listening and speaking, in the hiatus, in the gap, there we find the I. “The speaking-listening duality remains at the heart of the I, its negativity is but the *hollow* between speaking and hearing.”⁹⁶ This negation is inherent in the fabric of being itself. It is a “natural negativity” that is enfolded into the visible and the invisible, happening along the lines of the *écart* (separation) already mentioned. That ability of the thing and body to be “duplicitous”—subject and object—is a “reverberation” of the duplicity of being itself. This is the case because of the basic folding of being: “being is not primordially self-identical but an event of originary non-difference of which the divergence between touching and touched is the exemplar.”⁹⁷ That moment when I touch one hand with the other—when I am

⁹⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 145.

⁹⁶ Merleau-Ponty, 246 (working note from April, 1960).

⁹⁷ Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature*, 125.

both subject and object to my own perception—that is the moment when subject and object can clearly be seen to be parts of the same being (non-different) yet separated into sensed and sensing by a gap within (the) B/being itself. What occurs in the moment of reflection is the “dehiscence and self-palpitation of the flesh of the world.”⁹⁸ That is, like a seedpod splitting itself open, the flesh of the world self-invaginates, creating two sides of a single thing, and allowing one side to touch the other.

When we ask our theological and philosophical questions and entertain mental ideas, we are not engaged with free-floating transcendentals but with folds in being itself. Toadvine’s explication is that “essences, ideas, are not representations for a consciousness but invisible hinges or folds within the visible.” These “hinges” constitute what have previously been considered objects for our consciousness.⁹⁹ The consequence of this is that the human being, which has been called *Dasein*, is not the originator of asking the question of the meaning of being. Rather, this interrogation is “born by an infrastructure of being,” and we relate to Being by using our “ontological organ” of thought in the interrogative mode.¹⁰⁰ When operating in this “interrogative mode,” Being “others” itself. There is a negative space in Being which is the basis of both “biotic” development (that is, living things in particular and not all matter) and also human interrogations of the question of Being.¹⁰¹ Thus we see how this system can account for

⁹⁸ Ibid., 86.

⁹⁹ Toadvine, “How Not to Be a Jellyfish,” 49.

¹⁰⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 121.

¹⁰¹ Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature*, 125.

perception and consciousness, and the material roots of philosophical (and theological) inquiry and meaning-making.

I agree with Toadvine's reading of this ontology: it allows us to consider reflection as being a power belonging to being itself.¹⁰² From this, we can therefore say that human beings derive our reflexive ability from the nature of the world itself, and in such a way that does not collapse the perceiver into the perceived. Noting that defining reflection as uniquely human yields "a philosophy of consciousness that alienates humanity from life," Toadvine concludes from Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of reflection that "reflection can no longer be considered a capacity of the human being; it is rather that 'coming-to-self of Being' which entails a *lateral rather than hierarchical relation* between life and mind."¹⁰³ This is the mechanism by which exceptionalism can be overcome even for a theological perspective. Reflection is not a trait we alone possess, either by dint of divine will or evolutionary singularity; it is, rather, a movement of Being itself occurring in various forms throughout all life, which means that, while it is a distinguishing trait, like dolphin echolocation, it does not have to be read as setting us apart from the world. That does not mean that we are not distinct from other species or from one another. Nor does it deny the fact that we do have consciousness of sort that is not, so far as we know, found in other species. The point is that this consciousness does not constitute a *break* from matter; you can find the origins of mind in the flesh of the world, in Being itself, and there is therefore a continuum in which we humans, mind and all, are embedded. We are different from other forms of matter, but only insofar as each form of matter is different from the next. The

¹⁰² Ibid., 87.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 95, 96 (emphasis added).

ramifications of this non-different-difference for climate change and environmental ethics will be discussed further in Chapter 5.

Conclusion

As I mentioned in the introduction, the problems that need to be overcome when laying the foundation for a nonexceptionalist anthropology are how to allow for relationality within a schema that advocates for continuity, how to account for transcendent experience without abandoning a commitment to the material, and how to understand human mental and theological capacity without reinstating exceptionalism. I have shown that the concept of the flesh, with its chiasmic folds, makes room for differentiation within connectedness, locates moments of transcendence in the invisible aspect of the flesh, and presents human mental experiences of reflection and interrogation as stemming from the nature of being itself.

The last section of this chapter has delved into the constructive elements of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, showing how an anthropology based on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological account of being yields a picture of the human in the world quite different from those given us by other narratives. The upshot of this exploration has been that we are able to understand being human in a way that is less insular and more connected to the world as a whole. We have a way to understand our bodies that accounts for the constant material and energetic exchanges that our corporeity undergoes, as described by the natural sciences. Our relationship with the earth can be different because of it. That is, we see that humans are not fundamentally divided from, or exceptions to the material universe, even taking into account the feats of which human cognition is capable. Our invisible reflective capability and our interrogative modes are on a continuum with other species, and with visible being as a whole, rather than constituting a qualitative break.

Because of this, we can understand human meaning-making (including theologizing) not as abrupt divergences from the patterns of nature, but as reflections of the movement of Being itself and all beings. This leads to an anthropology of the human as radically material, constituted by our intertwining with the world. The next chapter will develop this nonexceptionalist anthropology and explore its ramifications for ecotheological thought.

CHAPTER IV

ANTHROPOLOGY WITHOUT ANTHROPOLOGY: A NONEXCEPTIONALIST THEOLOGY OF HUMAN BEING

Introduction

Although it is common in ecotheology and especially ecofeminist theology to argue that we must think of humans as part of the physical world, my contention has been that no one has really conceptualized a theological anthropology that can understand human beings as truly and fully nonexceptional. The ecofeminist theologians of the late 20th Century, as discussed in Chapter 1, always maintained that there was something a little special about us, while the more recent theologians writing with an eye to ecojustice (whom I would label proto-ecomaterialists) have focused on cosmological becoming rather than theological anthropology. I have brought Merleau-Ponty's concept of the flesh to bear on this issue as a way of getting into the nitty-gritty, phenomenological aspect of being a human on this earth—and as a way to account for our grander mental and spiritual propensities without resorting to exceptionalism. In this chapter, I am going to expand on the anthropology we get from the foregoing considerations, working toward a picture of human being that digs into our kinship with this world. The result will be an “apophatic anthropology”: an anthropology that honors the dark places of our connections with the world, the points of crossing between us and not-us whose limits are not precisely definable.

With the concept of the flesh, I have introduced an ontology that eliminates the need for human exceptionalism. The previous chapter illustrated how Merleau-Ponty's ontology allows us

to understand the human being as linearly rather than hierarchically akin to the world. The upshot of this exploration has been that we are able to understand being human in a way that is far less insular than before. In an ontology of the flesh, we belong to and are made of the world to such an extent that “the human” cannot be considered apart from entanglement with the world, nor as anything less than an emergence from the world. This ontology provides a way to understand our bodies (and all bodies) in a way that takes into account the constant material and energetic exchanges that our corporeity undergoes, as described by the natural sciences. We see that humans are not fundamentally divided from matter, even when taking into account the feats of which human cognition is capable. This ontology also suggests how our reflective capacity and our interrogative modes may be considered as on a continuum with other species, rather than constituting a qualitative break. Human meaning-making can, in this system, be understood not as an abrupt divergence from the patterns of nature, but as a reflection of the movement of Being itself and of all beings (since, after all, Being is only known through beings). In other words, the human is constituted by its intertwining with the world, and possesses cognitive endowments that are contiguous with the material structures of the world.

Others have proposed ontologies that similarly fight against exceptionalist mindsets, but using Merleau-Ponty’s thought, because of the up-close-and-personal aspect of his phenomenology, yields possibilities for a uniquely intimate anthropology. Given that we have this ontology, what kind of anthropology do we get? We get an apophatic anthropology—dissolving edges between self and world that make defining ourselves in ourselves impossible. The theological anthropology I offer here draws on the apophatic dimensions of our entanglement with the world; we continuously and unavoidably influence and are influenced by the physical world. This two-way impacting is communicated to us by our sense organs, which

not only communicate information about the world to us but arguably *constitute one's sense of self*, as discussed in the previous chapter. Thus, though the individual is distinct from the world, the self-world boundary is blurred; the notion of clean lines of separation is illusory. I am not an active force upon a passive substrate; the world is infused with active and responsive agency, rather than being “standing-reserve [*Bestand*].”¹ My senses interact with this world, belonging as much to it as to me. The limits of my corporeality, seemingly obvious at first glance, therefore become difficult to discern upon close examination—or, as Keller pithily expresses it, “separation is a sham.”²

In this chapter I discuss what I mean by this “apophatic anthropology,” and what that entails for human experience. I then explore the religious implications of this construction, and finally extrapolate from this anthropology to possible implications for constructions of the world and the divine.

Apophatic anthropology

My constructive contribution is to develop an “apophatic anthropology” based on the aforementioned ontology. It so happens that Catherine Keller and Mayra Rivera have both made mention of this phrase in different ways, and use it to refer either to an indistinctness of binary categorization (Keller) or the unspeakability of the face of the other (Rivera). I develop it in still another way. By “apophatic anthropology,” I mean that the borders that are drawn around the human—the lines that de-scribe the human being—are unspeakable, *apo-phanai*, other-than-

¹ Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology, and Other Essays* (Garland Pub., 1977), 17.

² Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible*, 167.

speech. This is not to say that humans are actually part of a continuous and undifferentiated mass; my own borders are indistinct, but not nonexistent. My borders are unspeakable because of the impossibility of absolute definition, and also because of the fact that speech itself is an emergent property of the matter in which human beings find themselves.

Keller, by contrast, uses the phrase “apophatic anthropology” less in the sense of human-world and more in the sense of “gender-negation.”³ By “gender-negation,” Keller means that anthropology is apophatic when it engages in the neither/nor on the question of gender: neither male nor female. Keller derives this concept from Gregory of Nyssa’s description of the human soul in the image of God. That same neither/nor structure could be applied here: the non-exceptional human is neither submerged into a monolithic one-ness of Being nor standing apart from the rest of materiality. But, for my version of apophatic anthropology, more is required than that single dichotomy: there are more things that are unspeakable. For instance, the human being is neither just victim nor just perpetrator with regard to climate change. Moreover, a both/and structure would also apply: both sensing and sensed, both visible and invisible. It is from the multitudinous possibilities of these both/ands that my version of unspeakability arises. We cannot say exactly where our borders are because of our inability to occupy one side definitively. In order to make sense in a reality in which our humanity is ontologically indistinct from the material world, our anthropology has to be apophatic. The “us” that remains legible in spite of the world’s total entanglement in us, and ours in it, is simply impossible to accurately describe in spoken terms; we can only approach it apophatically. That is why, in spite of the limitations mentioned above, I do borrow a sense of the “neither-nor” of apophasis from Keller and the

³ Keller, 66.

original usage of apophasis. The human being is neither solely singular nor solely multiple, neither *anthropos* nor *zōon*, ontologically speaking, because of our entanglement in the flesh.

On the other hand, when Rivera talks about “apophatic anthropology,” what she means is “*not naming the Other* except on the basis of an ethical relation.”⁴ She derives this from Levinas’ concept of ethics: the unknowable ethical obligation to the unknowable other. In this “other,” who is to be named only “on the basis of an ethical relation,” we find “the gleam of transcendence.” With Levinas, Rivera defines the other as “a human person in his radical singularity.” Being in touch with the otherness of others puts us simultaneously “in touch with a multitude.”⁵ This multitude could potentially be all other beings, though Rivera only explicitly references other *human* beings. The openness of her later work to ecological issues suggests that it is not going against the grain of her argument to propose a more inclusive reading.⁶ Yet in considering Levinasian ethics like Rivera’s, the most relevant question is not whether other specific, non-human beings get to be the face of the other for our ethics. The question at hand here is whether this experience of transcendence via apophatic anthropology can be rooted in nonhuman nature as a whole.

In Rivera, transcendence is accessible to human beings through intra-human relationality.⁷ We are called to take a respectfully apophatic stance toward the other. When we

⁴ Mayra Rivera, *The Touch of Transcendence: A Postcolonial Theology of God* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 61 emphasis in original.

⁵ Rivera, 97.

⁶ Likewise, deconstructive readings of Levinas can include the animal other, as demonstrated in Barbara Jane Davy, “An Other Face of Ethics in Levinas,” *Ethics & The Environment* 12, no. 1 (2007): 39–65.

⁷ Rivera, *The Touch of Transcendence*, 2.

face the other as Other, it means recognizing that they cannot be defined in relation to oneself or “some universal standard,” nor even in relation to the *boundaries* of oneself, “for then the Other is still a function of the self,” which does not allow the other to be truly Other. Instead, to truly meet the Other face-to-face, we have to allow ourselves to encounter the Other in a way that is not in “opposition to the self”—that is, we encounter the Other’s singularity.⁸ Thus, Rivera’s is an apophasis of other *anthropoi*, rather than of *self*-definition. It is an anthropology of the Other, first, and of the self second, insofar as I am an Other to other people.⁹ Although this form of transcendence holds great ethical promise, in my apophatic anthropology the question is not: what is the other to me? But, what am I myself—to myself?

A Merleau-Pontian Apophatic Anthropology

Rather than subjectivity occupying body like an explorer in a submarine, sending out sense organs like probes into the deep sea of the world, in this ontology, perception is prior. My body and my consciousness are built around the primacy of perception as constitutive of my identity. These truths become evident to me in the fact that my sense organs are always already part of that outside world, involuntarily vulnerable to receiving impressions; thus, my sensing of the world is always already belonging to the world as much as if not more so than to me.¹⁰ In this

⁸ Rivera, 61.

⁹ Beyond discussing Fanon’s approach to anthropology, Rivera does not re-engage with the question of anthropology in her work on Merleau-Ponty.

¹⁰ The blurred boundaries and apophasis may raise an epistemological question—what and how can I know? As explored in Chapter 3, with Merleau-Ponty I contradict Descartes, holding that mind is no longer a prior or separate substance. In Merleau-Ponty’s system, knowledge is no longer predicated on distance but upon connection. I can know the world and I can know myself, but both the knowledge and the act of knowing are inextricable from the fabric of this material reality.

way we come to ourselves from *the outside in*, rather than coming to the world from the inside out. Merleau-Ponty's criticism of Descartes was that we only *have* a sense of inside because of the givenness of everything on the outside; the inside is the absence of external stimuli, meaning that for it to be comprehensible, the external stimuli must first exist and therefore do not require Cartesian methods to prove their reality. So in this relatively superficial sense, interior *anthropos* is defined by the *apo-phanai* of the sensory world. There is more to it than this, however. The significant aspect of this apophatic anthropology is not in trying to pin down the existence of an interior self, but rather in expressing a holistic definition of the human vis-à-vis the world.

The human is unspeakable because there is no separate human per se: we cannot speak the borders of our distinctness from the world. Yes, those borders do exist, but exactly where they are—where I end and the biosphere begins, where my DNA is mine and not a viral code insertion, for example, these things cannot be said with absolute certainty. This is not about blurring the lines between human and dog, for instance, but about noting that we cannot *precisely* pin down the borders of our own identity. We can only say what it is not, and in so doing we realize that the same can be said of all things. I experience the world as a coherence of divergence from myself, that is, as a coherence of all that is “not me.” I get a sense of where I end by connecting the dots between innumerable moments of divergence from “me,” and their coherence sketches a border.

The apophatics of our anthropology is like the visibility of invisibility in Merleau-Ponty's analysis. The invisibility is visible; we can see that something is not visible “where the invisible is not only non-visible...but where its absence counts in the world...(...it is *Urpräsentiert* [directly, originally presented] precisely as *Nichturpräsentierbar* [not directly presentable]), as another dimension, where the lacuna that marks its place is one of the points of passage of the

‘world’ [*un des points de passage du ‘monde’*].”¹¹ Although it is up for debate exactly what Merleau-Ponty intended with these statements, given that these are unfinished working notes, I appreciate Jessica Wiskus’ take on them, wherein she interprets him as meaning that ontological depth is the point of coherence for “oppositional pairs.” The world happens where divergence coheres.¹² This is also an example of how the concept of “flesh” allows for distinctness within unity. There is definitely a distinction, a difference, but there is also a way for two entities to interpenetrate one another to a certain extent—enough to make perceptibility possible. A lacuna marking the absence of the invisible is translated by Lefort as “one of the points of passage of the ‘world’ ” (quoted above); however, the expression “*points de passage*” can also be translated as “border-crossing” or “crossing point,” which would mean that the invisible’s absence “counts in the world” because that is one of the places where the world’s borders are crossed. As a space of negativity (discussed further below) one of those border crossings is between subjectivity and the sensible world.

Our world, our existence, is marked by the coherence of our divergence from that-which-is-not-us. These connections are dark and unspeakable to minds that are used to objects on a plain of manipulability. Furthermore, it is apophatic because language cannot completely account for and encompass those connections. Instead, the world is made up of *things untranslatable that only speak for themselves*, and in this sense there is a commonality with Rivera’s apophatic other. One category of such things is the gap or the silence of dark aporiae in

¹¹ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 228 (working note from January, 1960, emphasis added).

¹² Jessica Wiskus, “Cohesion and Expression: Merleau-Ponty on Cézanne,” in *Merleau-Ponty and the Art of Perception*, ed. Duane H. Davis and William S. Hamrick (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2016), 70.

our linkages between ourselves and the world. The abyssal depth of the human is an “upsurge ... of a negativity that *comes to the world.*”¹³ I read this as another way of elaborating on the folding of the flesh: the negative space between folds of the flesh contains the psychological and cognitive depths of human experience. Human experience is located within the world as a present absence, a product of folds in the visible. In being a human, I am not a consciousness set positively against the backdrop of the world, as Merleau-Ponty observes in his late working notes, but I am she who “(1) has a visible world, i.e. a dimensional body and open to participation; (2) i.e. a body visible for itself; (3) and therefore, finally, a self-presence that is an absence from self.”¹⁴ Based on my logic above, this means that this presence/absence is a divergence cohering, and *I myself am one of the border-crossings of the world*; I am a fold in the world. My subjectivity crosses into the world over the threshold of this coherence of divergences.

What does this apophasis mean for embodied human subjectivity? The very lack of speech that is apophasis could be considered that moment or time when I “speak” the world in its own “words.” These are the wordless words of primordial being. In this ontology, speech itself is considered a product of the overlap of these folds; the roots of the meaning generated by speech preexist specific linguistic formalities. Matter, “mute” flesh, is not disconnected, nor is it animated from a jolt of divine breath or electricity from another plane. Instead, “the structure of [the human body]’s mute world is such that all the possibilities of language are already given in

¹³ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 250.

¹⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (working note from May, 1960).

it.”¹⁵ Thus Merleau-Ponty argues that language and nature are chiasmically related. In discussing what he calls the “human-nature chiasm” in Merleau-Ponty’s work, Toadvine notes that:

If the relation between silence and language parallels the relation between the unreflective and reflection, then a chiasm obtains between them...*if this is so, then the very being of nature and language are inextricably intertwined*; neither can be defined in positive terms and apart from the essential movement underway by which each crosses into its other.

That would be why nature is not completely untouchable by language or thought. Nature is reached by language through its own “expression in language.” Toadvine continues that, at the same time, “language becomes, not a means of human communication or representation, but a movement of nature itself.” Toadvine extrapolates from the end of *Visible and Invisible*. If, as he contends, *language is a movement of nature*, then so too, I would add, is silence.¹⁶ Language is a movement of the silent into speech. It is unspeakable because the being of our speech blurs into non-speech; speech itself fails at the edges of our identity. We can only say what we are not—and yet *what we are not is also part of what we are*.

Within this apophatic anthropology, what room is there for religion, religious experience, or intuitions of the divine?

“Religious Experience”

Schleiermacher, Gebara, and others have argued that theology needs to be based in religious experience, and a theological anthropology must account for this—especially one in which the anthropos is definitively grounded in matter which has for the longest time been

¹⁵ Merleau-Ponty, 155.

¹⁶ Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature*, 129.

considered ineligible for religious thought.¹⁷ The term is tricky, however. What is “religious experience?” The understanding of religious experience that I use here is an amalgam of Gebara’s and Caputo’s respective formulations of the term. For Gebara, “religious experience is polyphonic and multicolored, despite the fact that in the depth of each of us we hear something of the same note or perceive something of the same choir. It is a search for the meaning of our existence, a groping for that ‘mysterious something’ that is within us and at the same time surpasses us.”¹⁸ But what *is* it? Gebara acknowledges the difficulty of answering that question definitively. In spite of that difficulty,

What seems certain is that what we call religious experience is a manifold experience, one that can be expressed in many different ways. One of the most common expressions in religious language is discourse about the experience of ‘union’ with the divine, or with the whole; the overcoming of the fragmentation caused by the masks and divisions with which we have to deal in our everyday lives.¹⁹

Let us, then, define religious experience as some feeling of union outside the self; an overcoming of fragmentation. Moreover, this feeling carries with it a certain level of *passion*. In *Prayers and Tears*, where Caputo describes Derrida’s God as “not an object but an *addressee*, not a matter for theological clarification but the other end of a prayer... neither him nor her nor it, but ‘you’ (*tu*),” religious experience is a “certain passion for the impossible.”²⁰ In this passion,

¹⁷ Heather Eaton has highlighted this. Eaton, *Introducing Ecofeminist Theologies*, 103.

¹⁸ Gebara, *Longing for Running Water : Ecofeminism and Liberation*, 65.

¹⁹ Gebara, 91.

²⁰ John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida : Religion without Religion*, The Indiana Series in the Philosophy of Religion (Bloomington [u.a.]: Indiana Univ. Press, 2004), 288–89.

the feeling's intensity is turned back on itself because of its impossible referent; the point is more the experience of the feeling itself rather than any end goal of that feeling reaching its "addressee." I hope to show that the flesh itself as a concept is a vector for this kind of passion. Indeed, this is one reason that certain Continental philosophers found Merleau-Ponty's work to be too theological. For Jean-Luc Nancy, for instance, the flesh is too theological precisely because it carries the connotations of "passion" with it.²¹ Through Caputo's understanding of religious experience as essentially a passion—prayers and tears—for the impossible, the flesh could be described as a medium for passion in both senses of the word.

In the next section, I turn to Schleiermacher to investigate how "religious experience" can unfold in this apophatic anthropology. I will argue that religious experience from the perspective of apophatic anthropology is a tapping into dependence and interconnectedness. Through Schleiermacher's thought, I advocate for a new concept ("inscendence") as a mode of expressing the "whence" via the flesh.

Experiences of Dependence and Connection

One reason I turn now to Schleiermacher is that there are implicitly ecotheological elements of Schleiermacher's work, as noted by Shelli M. Poe. Poe has recently written on the ecofeminist potential of Schleiermacher's thought, noting that his concept of "*Naturzusammenhang*," the "interconnected process of nature," is a term useful to the ecological endeavor (though it is not without certain totalizing Christian impulses that are problematic today). In a way, Schleiermacher laid the groundwork for this sort of theological anthropology

²¹ Nancy, "Sense of the World," 1997, p. 149. Cited in Rivera, *Poetics of the Flesh*, 12.

almost 200 years ago, through this concept and what it means for the human being. Though it is by her own admission anachronistic, Poe argues that the concept could even justify calling Schleiermacher something of an “ecotheologian.”²² It is not a perfect concept for my purposes, since, of course, *Naturzussammenhang* occurs within the scope of absolute dependence upon God. Using the image of concentric circles, Poe observes that, “moving inward, there is first the divine on whom everything absolutely depends, then the interconnected process of nature, then interconnected humanity within it.”²³ Still, as far as anthropology goes, Schleiermacher would likely agree with the idea of human constitution-by-others. In his own words, “the idea of the world also determines the boundaries of our knowing. We are bound to the earth. All operations of thinking, even the entire system of our concept forming must be grounded therein.”²⁴ We are always already in and of this earth and cannot know anything—including anything about ourselves—outside of that context. This is not the same as an apophatic anthropology, but it shows a consonance with the work I do here. The main reason I engage Schleiermacher is because of the way he connects a feeling of relational dependence with theological expression, bridging the two in a way that allows for a theological discussion of human religiosity; Schleiermacher’s discussion of the feeling of absolute dependence illuminates a phenomenon that I call “inscendence.”

²² That project would also look at the implicitly ecotheological elements of Schleiermacher’s work, following the lead of Shelli M. Poe. Shelli M. Poe, “Friedrich Schleiermacher’s Theology as a Resource for Ecological Economics,” *Theology Today* 73, no. 1 (April 1, 2016): 10, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040573616630022>.

²³ Poe, 15.

²⁴ Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher, *Dialectic or, the Art of Doing Philosophy: A Study Ed. of the 1811 Notes* (Atlanta (Ga.): Scholars Press, 1996), 43; Cited in Poe, “Friedrich Schleiermacher’s Theology as a Resource for Ecological Economics,” 14.

Within an interconnected, apophatic anthropology, discussions of divinity must be based in a feeling or intuition rather than a cognitive knowing. There is considerable theological precedent for prioritizing human experience, beginning notably with Schleiermacher's *Gefühl schlechthinniger Abhängigkeit*, which was arguably the first time theology was definitively oriented around *subjective experience*.²⁵ In *The Christian Faith* (hereafter abbreviated "CF") Schleiermacher famously argued that every person is aware of a feeling of "absolute dependence," and asks: "whence" does this feeling come? "The *Whence* of our receptive and active existence, as implied in this self-consciousness, is designated by the word 'God,' and [...] this is for us the really original signification of that word." The idea of "God" is "nothing more than the expression of the feeling of absolute dependence. Furthermore, "to feel oneself absolutely dependent and to be conscious of being in relation with God are one and the same thing" (CF 4:4).²⁶ I would argue from this that, therefore, if I am feeling absolutely dependent on this Flesh of the world, then I am in relation with whatever we could call God. I am not saying that God is the same as Flesh; I do not make any claims as to what God is. What I am saying is that, anthropologically speaking, human experience/feeling/intuition can derive not from a separation of self or divine from the world but rather from an awe-some and mysterious connectivity with the world, and our own unspeakable boundaries and borders.

It must be clarified that the flesh is not the world—it is, in Rivera's words, "what ties bodies and the world."²⁷ Flesh is what ties each individual body (including human bodies) to the

²⁵ Clayton Crockett and Jeffrey W Robbins, *Religion, Politics, and the Earth: The New Materialism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 17.

²⁶ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (S.l.: Apocryphile Press, 2011), 17.

²⁷ Rivera, *Poetics of the Flesh*, 60.

world—it is how we are able to know and touch and sense in general, and be sensed in turn. My own existence literally depends not just on the food and air, and so forth, provided by the world, but on *the fabric of flesh enfolding me and defining the boundaries of my being that actually make me exist as a specific, individual person*. My ability to act upon the world and to exhibit what looks like freedom in any way is always already contingent on my preexisting materiality, which is a cognate of my unavoidable participation in the flesh. My freedom is conditioned by and dependent upon my being enfolded in and composed of the flesh. Within the flesh, via inscendence, we may gain intuitions of something that resembles or may be called divinity.

Although Poe is correct in noting Schleiermacher's ecological potential, there are limits to how useful his thought can be to this project. As mentioned earlier, a main limitation is the fact that this absolute dependence references a kind of exterior transcendence that exceeds and encompasses the world. "Absolute dependence is the fundamental relation which must include all others in itself." The "immediate self-consciousness" of absolute dependence "becomes a consciousness of God," (CF 4:4).²⁸ That pointing-beyond is not what I am seeking to emphasize in this project.

There are other resources within Schleiermacher, specifically the relationship between self-consciousness and relationality. The Merleau-Pontian resonances are evident here insofar as my self-consciousness arises from an awareness of the relationality upon which my existence is predicated—that is, upon which I as a being and "I" as an independent subject depend. The problem for this project, however, is where the *source* of that feeling can be said to be located. All this time, I have been arguing for locating transcendent experience within the material realm,

²⁸ Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 18.

and have criticized ecofeminists who locate an element of human experience outside of this plane of existence. For Schleiermacher, God is the “whence” (“*woraus*”) of our religious experience, and is intrinsically apart from the world, given that nothing in the world nor all the things of the cosmos *in toto* can be that whence this feeling is derived. Schleiermacher argues that the feeling cannot come from the things of the world because of the relationship between dependence and freedom.

For the world, if we assume it to be a unity, is nevertheless in itself a divided and disjointed unity which is at the same time the totality of all contrasts and differences and of all the resulting manifold determinations, of which every man is one, partaking in all the contrasts. To be one with the world in self-consciousness is nothing else than being conscious that we are a living part of this whole; and this cannot possibly be a consciousness of absolute dependence; the more so that all living parts stand in reciprocal interaction with each other. This oneness with the whole in each several part is essentially twofold: a feeling of dependence, indeed so far as the other parts act spontaneously upon it, but also a feeling of freedom in so far as it likewise reacts spontaneously on the other parts. the one is not to be separated from the other (CF 32.2).

That is, there is the ability to act on it as well as to be acted upon by it, which means we cannot be *absolutely* dependent on it. There is a mix of freedom and dependence in this relationship, which Schleiermacher sees as precluding that absolute feeling. In other words, in Schleiermacher’s view, it is *because* we are all connected and interdependent that religious consciousness cannot possibly refer to the world as its ultimate referent. Therefore, the feeling of absolute dependence has to be an awareness not of the world but of the existence of God (who is not the world), “as the absolute undivided unity.” Why? Because in relation to God there is no “immediate feeling of freedom,” and no feeling of freedom could be the counterpart to this feeling of dependence (CF 32.2). In terms of the flesh, at least, that freedom/dependence relationship is troubled by a Merleau-Pontian ontology. Given that Merleau-Ponty’s ontology has shown the surprising complexity of the body-world relationship vis-à-vis agency and exteriority,

freedom and dependence may be redefined.

Schleiermacher acknowledges that it is easy for the feeling of absolute dependence to be confused with the feeling that I am dependent on the *world*, but because I also have a level of *freedom* with regard to the world, I cannot be absolutely dependent on it. But what if freedom and absolute dependence are not mutually exclusive? (After all, in Merleau-Ponty, mutually exclusive impossibles cohere into the abyssal depths of the Flesh!) I contend that we could read Schleiermacher's critique as applying only if the world is viewed through a Cartesian, positivist lens—that is, if we and all the things of the world occupy empty space and act upon each other in discreet ways. If, however, we emphasize the indeterminability of the difference between self and the world, we see that freedom and dependence are put into a different relationship.

Our relative freedom toward the world prohibits us understanding the world as that upon which we are absolutely dependent. However, if every aspect of that freedom is in fact contingent upon our entanglement with the flesh, in which the borders of our subjectivity (which is what is required for freedom) are given to us by the flesh on which we depend, then that argument against total dependence on world becomes complicated. The ontological continuity between self and world makes for greater dependence and less Cartesian-style freedom.

Within this apophatic anthropology, the “self's” boundaries are blurry; how, then, can we point to the world (*qua* materiality) as apart from the self in the first place? Any freedom to influence the world depends, definitionally, upon not already being of that world, presupposing that I am apart from the world and my actions put something there that was not there before. Yes, every action brings an element of novelty—perhaps even natality—into the world, but in the form of an admixture of preexistent elements. What I do not do, when acting, is apply my

unilateral agency upon inert matter, exerting the force of my extra-worldly will (Descartes' *res cogitans* having an effect upon *res extensa*); there is, instead, a rearrangement of elements within a closed system. Therefore, Schleiermacher's arguments against world or cosmos as referent of this feeling of absolute, rather than just proximate, dependence, do not have to apply.

Additionally, dependence also takes on other valences of meaning because its opposite, freedom, has been redefined—dependence is not at odds with freedom.

I venture that, in this folding and enfolded materialist ontology, the mode of the *woraus* could be the web of ecological dependence: this sense of chiasmatic fleshy connections that constitute my being, my total relationality, and yet my uniqueness at the same time. The *woraus* points with and through the flesh. This alteration in the structure of the *woraus*, this change in how the feeling of dependence is understood, is part of what I will mean when I use the word “inscendence” in the next section. Inscendence is a way of pointing to God, but in something of a Caputan way, in which it is the gesturing that is important, not what is being gestured at. Rather than also pointing *beyond* it as well, the *woraus* points *within the depths* of these interactions. In a materialist ontology without metaphysical hierarchies, we do not need to search for a “*höchsten Wesen*” to be the source; there is instead a literal dependence for our existence and experience upon the material whole. I would not go so far as to label the world or the flesh “God,” *per se*: with inscendence comes a certain level of apophatic theology to go with the apophatic anthropology.

Inscendence

I use the concept of “inscendence” to account for human religious experience that remains within material being, without requiring any level of human exceptionalism or the positing of a realm abstracted from the world. In the fleshy ontology developed in the previous

chapter, even the most abstract and ecstatic human ideas and experiences can be brought within the *fold* of being,²⁹ and therefore the experience of feeling totally dependent, too, is part of being. That is, just as consciousness comes from a primordial movement of being, so too must the experience of absolute dependence also have its roots in the very nature of the Flesh of Being. The significance of this is that it means the foldings of human experience from which intuitions of the Whence emerge did not spring, unprecedented, from human culture, but are, rather, rooted in (with echoes throughout) the very makeup of the physical world. From this, I suggest that religious experience resonates within the folds of Being. When we have that sense of getting in touch with something larger or beyond, we can actually describe it as finally beholding the reality of connected Flesh, finally touching these folds and connections, which is why it feels like we move beyond ourselves. Though moving beyond the self has been called “transcendent,” I argue that, because of the nature of apophatic anthropology, we are not in those moments transcending, but we are *inscending*.

In developing inscendence, I am indebted to Lawlor’s close reading of Merleau-Ponty on the issues of immanence versus transcendence, suggesting that what is required is a third way that is neither one nor the other. He holds to what Merleau-Ponty recommends, which is that the two poles of various dualisms (infinite/finite, internal/external, humanistic/naturalistic, and so forth), must not be separated, nor must they coincide.³⁰ In inscendence, I neither collapse transcendence into immanence nor immanence into transcendence, but rather find a third way

²⁹ Pun intended. My apologies.

³⁰ Leonard Lawlor, *The Implications of Immanence : Toward a New Concept of Life*, 1st ed., Perspectives in Continental Philosophy Series (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 145.

that incorporates elements of each but is outside of the established dichotomy. In spite of this set-up, inscendence is not simply an alternative to the transcendent/immanent dichotomy.

Rather than being solely a middle way between immanence and transcendence; inscendence is a way of describing *feeling the transcendent through immersion in the immanent*. It is how we experience transcendence without leaving immanence. That which used to separate us as humans is actually an intuition of our great connectedness with everything else, and inscendence is how we feel it. That is, that material connectedness gives a sense of de-fragmentation and movement beyond the mere self, and that movement beyond self is actually inscendence rather than an intuition of a reality somehow beyond, or a self that is unique in its subjectivity.

I have mentioned that transcendence either suggests an alternate, “more real” reality (not the material world) or a special quality of human subjectivity. While it is easy to see how the former detracts from the cultivation of an ecological ethic (for which reason it has been roundly criticized by Bauman and others), I want to unpack the latter further, and show how it can be answered by apophatic anthropology. Experiences of transcendence are seen to rely on subjectivity. In Levinas’ thought, “man [sic] is no longer required to dissolve into a higher reality. Transcendence becomes the intimate structure of subjectivity. In other words, it is subjectivity that is found at the beginning of the movement of transcendence.” Levinas locates the source of transcendence in the individual her- or himself. “The transcendence of subjectivity attests to this amazing possibility of going beyond any situation and exceeding any definition.”³¹

³¹ Pierre Hayat, “Preface: Philosophy Between Totality and Transcendence,” in *Alterity and Transcendence* (Columbia University Press, 1999), xi.

Levinas “shows how a ‘new transcendence’ is the very meaning of ‘the human.’” Interestingly, he derives his philosophy from an “intuition: that of the upsurge of transcendence as a ‘*question* to the Other and about the other.’ Transcendence is born of intersubjective relation.”³² The ecofeminists I have discussed never explicitly stated that transcendence is itself why they are continuing to be slightly exceptionalist, but they do treat human subjectivity in a particular way and have a sort of unacknowledged, operative assumption of transcendence (which is also related to ethics, and discussed further in Chapter 5). Transcendence, in this sense, is an experience, a throwing of the human mind beyond the current circumstances. But if the human mind is a product of the human embodied experience, and the edges of the human are always already “beyond” into the world in some sense due to their apophatic nature, then transcendence’s meaning changes drastically.

Bauman criticizes the other kind of transcendence. He defines it as “the option that most meaning-making practices take to articulate that whatever reality might be is beyond what we know and sense of the world... The notion of transcendence has been used to describe ultimate reality, the divine plan, and even future states of being that are more ecologically sound and socially just.” However, like me, he wants to think of these things, if they are to be thought of at all, “in terms of immanence.” This is because transcendence holds a location away from this earth as more real or valid or permanent in some way, which is a problem for Bauman because it encourages foundationalist and “dominological” thinking and also prevents us from honoring and working with the constantly changing nature of reality. His solution is “radical immanence,” which brings the transcendent into the immanent. In radical immanence, “space and time are

³² Hayat, xii.

interconnected.” This radical immanence “keeps ideas-matter on the same plane of existence,”³³ which is the same move I make via Merleau-Ponty. Indeed, he even accomplishes this through “enfolding,” from Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of “the fold,” which is itself derived from Merleau-Ponty. “If we exist on a single plane of existence, where there is no transcendent point, then the horizon of our thought is not like a transcendent movement pulling us beyond the here and now, but rather a fold in the plane of existence.”³⁴ Therefore, “enfolding suggests a radically immanent way of understanding how material and physical reality are always intertwined with ideas, imagination, and meaning.”³⁵ This is an alternative to mind/body and other dualisms, and is the same thing that I am arguing for by way of Merleau-Ponty.

In radical immanence, the only place for transcendence is the “not yet”: “the earth as grounds for identity and knowledge formation implies that transcendence becomes not something that is spatially beyond, but simply something that is radically not yet.”³⁶ I find many elements of commonality with Bauman’s work, and it serves as an excellent resource for the ecotheological project. He and I share many of the same ecotheological goals and presumptions necessary for ecological progress. The difference is that I use Merleau-Ponty, which provides a groundedness and a focus on human embodiment that Deleuze and Guattari do not. As I have already mentioned, this approach is more experiential and local to the individual and less cosmological. Though the cosmological is fascinating and useful, I want to deal with this lived

³³ Bauman, *Religion and Ecology*, 39.

³⁴ Bauman, 110.

³⁵ Bauman, 200.

³⁶ Bauman, 135–36.

experience, the fact that we are in this unique situation of power and powerlessness, earthly relationality demonstrated through our ability to cause global harm. We need something to address what it is to be living here and now.

Moreover, although what Bauman is saying about the transcendent being located in the immanent in the form of the temporal is true, it does not give us enough of a sense of where and how we can understand what has been called religious experience. If religious experience shares that space with transcendence, and is located simply in the not-yet, it is ecologically inhospitable, because it puts our greatest concern, or our experience of connection, into an unrealized reality. There are benefits to this, of course—in terms of planning what to do to combat climate change, for example—but there also needs to be a way to honor such experience on a present and spatial plane.

Merleau-Ponty provides one way of understanding, explaining and describing religious experience within the material. His thought can help with bringing intuitions of religion into the sensory and embodied world in a more concrete way. Rather than “radical immanence,” I describe my “in-scendence” as a spatial-relational “hyper-immanence.” The mystery in this anthropology’s ontology lies not in the not-yet-known but in the impossible-to-see; the invisible connections and enfoldings that mean we humans are spatially interrelated with all matter in a way that makes exceptionalism utterly nonsensical. This is not to say that the time aspect is wrong, but that this spatial aspect is one that needs a more deliberate and specific focus.

One reason I developed this neologism is to suggest something more than a fold of transcendence into immanence. Instead, there is an active capacity to the immanent in which we can participate. Simply saying, “transcendence in immanence” obfuscates the overarching, divide-troubling point that this project attempts to make. I am trying to express something that is

neither transcendence nor immanence, but retains qualities traditionally ascribed to each. Broken into their constituent Latin parts, “transcendence” means to “climb over or beyond,” and immanence means to “remain within.” If trans-scendence literally means *beyond*-climbing, then in-scendence would mean *inward*-climbing, which retains the “in” of immanence but adds the facet of movement from transcendence. To transcend, you climb over and beyond the ordinary, the normal, the mundane. In inscendence, you climb “in”—you do not climb *over* and away from material reality, but rather climb ever deeper *into* it. Human beings are already in this world, but Western thought has trained us to imagine that our minds inhabit and treat with the corporeal in a utilitarian way that is ecologically destructive. The solution, therefore, is to embrace our interdependent flesh and *inscend* reality. To inscend is to experience more fully my being in and of this world, pulling back the veil of separation and living into this enmeshment that has always been there. Let it be noted that I not making a suggestion for how we *should* be, act, or experience religiosity, I am saying that we can imagine different ways of approaching and interpreting our lives—including our religious lives—by inhabiting this inscendence. Such an understanding would enable us to think nonexceptionally, because it is a way of talking about those feelings of moving beyond the self that suggests that this movement is a participation in the nature of being rather than a unique capacity of humanity or a distancing from the world.

Through inscendence, we can take seriously the idea of the subject’s self-transcendence, and then complicate that with an apophatic anthropology in which the boundaries of the subject are unclear, and in which subjectivity is not a sovereign human property. Self-transcendence is always already happening everywhere in everything, due to the nature of the flesh, because nothing is solely itself, and everything is always confronted with others that bring oneself to oneself. Transcendence is thus not an experience that takes us away from material reality, but is

rather a mode of the fleshy and physical reality of our material existence. That awareness of ineluctable participation in the Flesh, and the fact of self-definition being absolutely dependent on enmeshment with the rest of the world: this is inscendence. Finding inscendence in religious experience could be one way of achieving Mary Evelyn Tucker's suggestion about the "planetary" of religions, which Bauman has interpreted as being the time when "religious reflection...recognizes its biological and historical embeddedness in evolutionary and ecosystemic structures."³⁷ Yet within a monotheistic worldview, how would this kind of anthropology and its concomitant inscendence lead us to talking about our theological understandings of the world and of God?

Notes on the World and God

Any theological reconsideration of anthropology has ramifications for how we think both the world and God. As Gordon Kaufman (among others) has pointed out, the basic schema of monotheism involves the three interrelated categories of God, human, and world. Kaufman begins with God as "the ultimate point of reference," followed by humanity, in "special relationship" to that God, and finally the world, which serves as the "context" for human lives.³⁸ If the definition of what it means to be human changes, then the character of the relationship with the divine also has to be reconsidered. This is especially true in this case, where the world, (understood as an all-inclusive, material, fleshy ontology), rather than being the third category, the stage upon which the human-divine relationship drama unfolds, has instead been the primary

³⁷ Bauman, 8.

³⁸ Gordon Dester Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), 73–74.

point of reference. This has been part of undoing the “big lie” that ecofeminists identified that places it in third place, the place of least importance in the grand scheme of things. In this section, I look at what this alteration to the anthropological side of the equation might do to how we think the relationship between God and world, or, put another way, how this anthropology impacts the doctrine of Creation.

World: Replacing Creatio Ex Nihilo with Aliquid Aeternaliter

From Merleau-Ponty, we can describe the world and our place in it differently. The world is not a collection of things inside a space of emptiness that somehow relate or do not relate to each other. Contrary to the *ex nihilo* doctrine, the universe is not a nothingness that has been partially filled with positively-existing things.³⁹ The negative spaces are not a primordial nothingness but are, rather, folds in the always-present somethingness. “The negative is therefore to be understood topologically as a fold or a divergence, an *écart*, rather than a nothingness.”⁴⁰ *Creatio ex nihilo* is part and parcel with the idea that there is some empty space outside of the separately existing objects that fill the universe in which the human mind can reside in order to study these things scientifically and objectively.⁴¹ Of course, Catherine Keller has presented comprehensive critique of the creation-out-of-nothing idea, and found biblical precedent for suggesting a more “chaosmic” origin story.⁴² This is a different take on the problem. The world is

³⁹ As demonstrated in Keller, *Face of the Deep : A Theology of Becoming*.

⁴⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 125.

⁴¹ Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature*, 107–8 Toadvine must be credited with this critique, though the theological connection is not part of his argument.

⁴² Keller, *Face of the Deep : A Theology of Becoming*, 19.

not comprised of one solid thing meeting another solid thing on a plain of emptiness, but instead is a whole dotted with folds of negativity such that inside and outside boundaries are unclear. This account is consistent with what we know scientifically about the physical reality of our world: at the atomic level, we are made up of electric energy fields between which “empty” space exists, whose very emptiness is given “meaning” by encompassment by the fields that contain it, but which gives the lie to any kind of integral solidity. Moreover, and most importantly, emptiness is not originary, as Keller has shown. Rather, there is a persistent, chaotic mix of presence and absence, emptiness defined by the presence that surrounds us.

As conscious human beings, we are not things filling the blank slate of a universe that is essentially nothingness. Rather, our subjectivities are folds in the somethingness. The question is thus not “why is there something rather than nothing,” but “why would non-nothing need explanation?” or even, “why assume that something and nothing are somehow incompatible opposites; that where one is the other cannot be?” What Merleau-Ponty shows us is that nothing and something go hand in hand, and are not mutually exclusive. They intersect and co-constitute each other; and Being is made up of both. Being is not presence opposed to a vast empty plain.

This in turn renders our lives intrinsically meaningful on the most basic level, in the same way that all things are essentially meaningful to all other things. In Merleau-Ponty’s fleshy ontology, I understand that my body is acted upon and perceived by—and real to—other things in this world.⁴³ My existence *makes a difference* to the things of this world, as they do to me. We see this on a macro level, with the human contribution to climate change, but it is also relevant on a personal level. This cannot be overstated: when we understand our enmeshment, we realize

⁴³ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 137.

the difference that we make, to plants and rocks and all matter, let alone to other animals and our fellow humans; the world “senses” our presence even if it is not “sentient” of it. For instance, the leaf at some level registers our presence when we block the light.⁴⁴ More simply, we must take in material to live, we produce heat and waste and an endless shuffling of cells, and we are home to many beings—and all this is without our even trying, and often without our awareness. Each body is a network of shared meaningfulness, as are all those bodies together in the flesh of the world.

Although neither term has meaning in its original sense anymore, to begin with we could say, at the very least as a corrective to the prevailing attitude, that “somethingness” is ontologically prior to and more real than “nothingness.” As a thought experiment, beginning with something rather than nothing changes our perspective on the world and our sense of self within it. There is always something with these holes in it, holes that are not a rend in the fabric that covers over primeval emptiness, but are part of the very nature of being itself. The holes of nothingness are not even really holes, but are momentary folds in the great movement of being. The theological character of the world is more *aliquid aeternaliter* (something eternally) than *creatio ex nihilo*.

This *aliquid aeternaliter* reverses the *creatio ex nihilo*. Being is not a place where nothing has been filled in with something; nothing is, rather, the place where the visible has become the invisible. I take Merleau-Ponty one step further by asserting the ontological primacy of the visible, which I do as a corrective to the aforementioned doctrine. In a sense, the God of

⁴⁴ Daniel Chamowitz, *What a Plant Knows: A Field Guide to the Senses* (Brunswick, Vic.: Scribe Publications, 2012).

this anthropology could be called a “god of the gaps”—but in a very different way from how that phrase is usually employed. “God of the gaps,” is typically used pejoratively to connote using the divine as a way to account for what science has not yet been able to explain, which is theologically problematic for many reasons, not least that this God’s domain grows increasingly smaller as our knowledge increases. Rather than a god filling in the gaps of knowledge, slowly receding as science provides more satisfactory answers, this God *is* gaps, a god of folds and places unseen. Perhaps such an understanding would help theology to take us there, to lead us there toward this realization of human non-specialness that is actually the “opening of awe,” to use Mary-Jane Rubenstein’s phrase. The gaps are where meaning emerges from the world; these folds or spaces thereby counter the charge that there is no accounting for meaning without some kind of transcendent realm.

Experiencing God

My approach to the problem of God takes a page from Caputo’s book. As discussed in Chapter 2, I appreciate the direction in which Caputo takes theology, although his work does not engage explicitly with ecotheological issues. As his work progresses from *Weakness of God* to *Insistence of God*, he seems to get closer to greater embodied groundedness, observing that there is a whole cosmic component to his work involving the physical-material world that he has not touched upon. What is particularly relevant is his methodological capacity for dealing with a God who may not “ek-sist” in any traditional sense. The way he does this, in my reading, is by highlighting the phenomenological experience of being a human desiring God. Deconstruction

itself, he writes, is a “hermeneutics of the desire for God.”⁴⁵ Moreover, there is a centering in the uncertainty, an acceptance of the primal reality of that uncertainty about the divine that actually grounds this kind of approach to God: “I hold my ground on the groundless ground of ‘perhaps’ in order to stay alive to the chance of the event.”⁴⁶ Both this affirmation of the experience of desire and this embrace of a God that does not need to be “true” in the classic sense could be productive ways of approaching a theology for this particular anthropology.

However, in Caputo’s language of “event,” one finds again the desire for the “to come,” which I see as another way of avoiding living into a true nonexceptionalism. Focus on the “event” projects the human temporally away from this present earth, imagining something beyond; and while it is indeed a beautiful way to reconcile the desire for God and the uncertainty of God’s existence, this kind of move also separates and isolates human concern from the earth. Each individual becomes an atomistic thinking-center. What I seek is something more definite and present; rather than hoping for an event someday, somehow, there must be a way to experience the desire for God that can be embedded in our communal existence *now*. Perhaps this can be achieved if that desire can be translated into an inscendent rather than transcendent movement.

Note, however, that I do not contest the existence of “desire for God” as a driving force. The presence of this pre-rational, affective desire for God is true of many, if not most people. There is something in us that reaches outward and beyond our individual existences, but I would like to direct that spatially rather than temporally. The human being as a desiring body is an

⁴⁵ John Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 291.

⁴⁶ John D Caputo, *The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps*, 2013, 5.

embodied reality composed of Flesh, and the desiring body is a theological body. Beyond even bare desire, the experience of the presence of God is a lived reality for many people. Regardless of whether that referent literally exists elsewhere, that *experience* is real, and is something happening in the world, just like the desire for God that Caputo has identified. In the feeling of unity with the world, the out-of-body religious euphoria (that arguably is more in-body than we know and is actually out-of-consciousness; or, not out-of-body, but in-to-world), we are getting in touch with the nature of reality. Religious experience is connected experience, a real thing that happens here on earth in our material bodies.

Caputo's concept of "a theology of perhaps" serves an approach to understanding this desire for a God within a nonsupernatural context. It would provide a way to talk about God without relying on final truths, living instead in the tension of the maybe-or-maybe-not. However, the "there or not" aspect of Caputo's divine potentially means that a "somewhere else" is being posited; the God that *insists* is still somehow other, elsewhere, an event that is existing in the to-come, which is not now, thereby perpetuating distance and isolation (as mentioned above). To provide an alternative to this treatment of the God concept, I turn to Leonard Lawlor, who draws on Merleau-Ponty's thought to offer a way to describe the "where" of God.

Replacing naturalism with something he would call "life-ism" in order to distance it from the snares of biopower, Lawlor also imagines an alternative theology.⁴⁷ Instead of theology, he would have "theiology;" the difference being that the latter is discourse about "the divine" rather than about "God." According to Lawlor, it is a discourse for an ontology based not in nature but

⁴⁷ Lawlor, *The Implications of Immanence : Toward a New Concept of Life*, 143.

in life, thereby restoring a kind of transcendence or spirituality to life.⁴⁸ What would it mean to do theology without God but with the divine? What is the difference between God and “the divine,” insofar as they function as referents of the *Gefühl*?⁴⁹ I use “The divine” rather than “God,” to indicate that we are not talking about a discreet referent, but rather a sense or intuition. As a referent of the *Gefühl*, the divine is more diffuse—it pervades everything in a way that the symbol of God does not.

Caputo’s language of prayer, desire, faith, and indeterminability suggests the potential for a theology interwoven with the moment of real human lives. From Caputo, therefore, I borrow the emphasis on the emotional, pre-rational element of human religiosity as it relates to the concept of God. From Lawlor, I take the idea of diffuse divinity in one sense or another. Together, when added to the idea of transcendence, the result is a theology of human affective engagement with the fact of our absolute dependence on materiality. A theology based in this anthropology would have to emphasize being over speaking, and feeling over knowing. There is nothing wrong with either speaking or knowing, but this kind of anthropology shifts the emphasis from logos and mind to presence and affect. This shift is grounded in the fact, as shown in Chapter 3, that meaning and language *emerge* from this physical world and are not placed upon it like butter upon bread. We turn away from disembodied *logos* and restore mind and word to the flesh. Understanding herself as a momentary, unique fold in the common flesh of Being, a practitioner interpreting what it means to be human according to this scheme would

⁴⁸ Lawlor, 144.

⁴⁹ From a Feuerbachian standpoint, this could be interpreted as an example of how humans would project God from an apophatic anthropology: diffuse humanity would naturally project itself as a diffuse divine field—because if “us” is diffuse then the God we project is a field.

attend to and foster moments of inscendence—moments of slowing down and “be-ing” into this fundamental interconnectedness.

Placing be-ing and theology in such close proximity together may call to mind Mary Daly’s suggestion that we think of God as a Verb, as the great Be-ing in which we are to take part.⁵⁰ Catherine Keller has recently published in a similar vein, bridging Cusan negative theology and the theme of entanglement. She writes about “doing God,” and “mindfully enfleshing planetary entanglement.”⁵¹ Merleau-Ponty, in an earlier work, draws inspiration from early-20th Century French poet and dramatist, Paul Claudel, whose understanding of God is described by Merleau-Ponty as being “not above but beneath us—meaning that we do not find Him as a suprasensible idea, but as another ourself which dwells in and authenticates our darkness.”⁵² Given the theopoetic element of this work, it seems fitting that the visions of a poet provide Merleau-Ponty with a way of imagining the divine. Moreover, the context of this quote is Merleau-Ponty’s reading of the Christian God as fundamentally antithetical to human-divine hierarchy. Because of Christ’s incarnation, he sees Christianity as “the recognition of a mystery in the relations of man and God, which stems precisely from the fact that the Christian God wants nothing to do with a vertical relation of subordination.”⁵³ This “another ourself” way of

⁵⁰ Daly, *Beyond God the Father : Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation*.

⁵¹ Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible*, 308.

⁵² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 71; cited in Richard Kearney, “Merleau-Ponty and the Sacramentality of the Flesh,” in *Merleau-Ponty at the Limits of Art, Religion, and Perception*, ed. Kascha Semonovitch and Neal DeRoo (New York, NY: Continuum, 2010).

⁵³ Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, 71; This part of the quote was originally brought to my attention in Jessica Wiskus, *The Rhythm of Thought: Art, Literature, and Music after Merleau-Ponty* (University of Chicago Press, 2013), 150n48.

understanding God seems to support the inward movement of inscendence as a means of experiencing the divine.

What if that other “ourselves” is the nonlinguistic, affective element of human experience that is vaguely aware of being a fold in the flesh of the world? The darkness is comprised of the invisibilities of the Flesh’s chiasmic folds, the apophatic boundaries of our self-definition. The darkness is dark because of its opacity to logical penetration; in linking it to the divine we acknowledge our dependence on these unspeakable edges, on the parts of ourselves unknown to us, the parts where we connect to the world, where our being sublimates away into not-our-being, while at the same time never ceasing to be part of Being. This kind of talking about the divine has the benefit of not needing to prove the “existence” of God; it does not matter if this God of our darkness is “really” there, because there is no “there” for God to be—there is only “here.” This is part of talking about the experience of divinity as the experience of inscendence. The experience is real. We might name its referent “God” in order to encompass the magnitude of our dependence. That is, “God” as a concept “authenticates” this darkness of ours by giving it a name, holding space for that invisible relationality not immediately available to our cognition. God⁵⁴ names the unnameable and speaks the unspeakable. We live into this divine because of the apophatic edges of our anthropology.

⁵⁴ But when we do speak, how would we speak of this God? The God of this anthropology, if in need of a pronoun, could be referred to as “it.” It makes no sense to talk about a gendered God when the God you imagine is not “personal.” Such a way of speaking would, ideally, counteract the pejorative overtones currently inscribed into the neuter pronoun, overtones which both reflect and bolster the distancing and destructive relationship to the nonhuman world identified by ecofeminists. When “it” becomes the best language to evoke the divine, it enables us to embrace the basic “it”-ness of ourselves—that is, our nonexceptionalism and our participation in the Flesh. This in turn reminds us of the value of objects that are not us. Without the hierarchical gap between us value-giving humans and those value-less/instrumental objects of the world, we can have a truly nonexceptional anthropology.

Theology

Even the constructive theology that I do here is a movement in being. Recall that I, the subject, do not originate this negating interrogation; the negative space is already in being. (As Toadvine put it, the “dehiscence into visible and invisible is a separation or folding of a natural negativity.”)⁵⁵ When I ask a question, like “who am I?” a negative opens up in me, emergent from the very nature of being. The negative is a fold, not a nothingness; we do not open up the positivity of being with the negativity of interrogation.⁵⁶ This negativity is “operant non-being” which is at work throughout life. This same opening of negative spaces is what propels biotic development ever forward, and also what, in another form, allows for the metaphysical interrogations of the human mind. Thus, the act of doing philosophy or theology is not the human acting on an inert world, but is the nature of being manifesting within humans. Doing theology, then, could be understood as working with (or being worked by) the negative, apophatic spaces that open up throughout all that is. In this model, we do not isolate ourselves from the world in order to do theology, but rather, the work of theology becomes a kind of enspirited phenomenology, in which we do a close “read” of the world where we are, practicing reaching in, climbing into those folds; not climbing away or up or across. We cannot ever fully speak it or ourselves, but the world glows brightly in this phenomenological meaning-scape, and we feel ourselves called to climb in. We move with prayer and compassion, and we inhabit the world even more fully as we theologize. In this sense, theology is a natural process, and the unspeakable unknown that has been represented by God in our culture could be considered an

⁵⁵ Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature*, 125.

⁵⁶ Toadvine, 125.

intuition about the flesh of being of which we are a part.⁵⁷

Conclusion: The World as my Body

If I hurt others, if I hurt the earth, I literally and not just spiritually hurt myself. The world is not just the body of God (*pace* Sallie McFague)⁵⁸; the world is *my* body (and my body—which includes my mind—is part of the world), and awareness of God occurs at the moment of inscending this connectivity. Speaking metaphorically, I am a limb, finger, freckle on this body that is the world; the earth and I cannot be and never have been separate.⁵⁹ The finitude of human life, in this system, takes on a different valence. As part of the flesh, I do not “go” anywhere when I die; there is nowhere *to* go. Nor does the “after death, there is nothing” narrative retain salience, because that sets up nothingness as an opposite to life, whereas Merleau-Ponty's account of the nature of reflection and interrogation shows that this is based on a false dichotomy. We can embrace our own presence to ourselves as always already riddled with absence, just as Being itself is a sponge of nothingness and somethingness. Of the many gaps in which meaning is made, found, or generated, nothing is lost at the end of individual existence

⁵⁷ We only “are” because of our intertwined emergence from the world. This is fundamentally mysterious; even atheistic Merleau-Ponty observed the mystery in his ontology. For example, Merleau-Ponty writes that, although our body can command the visible for us, “it does not explain it, does not clarify it, it only concentrates the mystery of its scattered visibility” (Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 136.) There is mystery in the Flesh. There is a certain poetic justice that dispensing with a separate transcendent realm (which had seemed the only way to preserve the meaning of human transcendent experience) and going all the way to a committed materialism actually lets us rediscover the real awe-some and awe-ful mystery of our uncanny kinship—our uncanny individual kinship but ultimate nondifference from the things of the world.

⁵⁸ McFague, *The Body of God : An Ecological Theology*.

⁵⁹ Importantly, however, this is not the Gaia hypothesis, as found in Anne Primavesi and James Lovelock, *Sacred Gaia: Holistic Theology and Earth System Science*, 1 edition (London ; New York: Routledge, 2000) My argument does not hinge on the systems of the earth acting in as a whole, but rather on the basic materiality of the cosmos.

any more than it is lost from day to day. This apophatic anthropology and accompanying inscendent theology could ease our anxiety at this connection and this combined agency and helplessness, help us see more of the meaning in our lives, and remove the denial that leads to the exceptionalist attitudes that make us harm the earth—it could remove the false belief that it is even possible to place “ourselves” first, as though there is any self without the whole.

What I have presented in this chapter is a suggestion for a nonexceptionalist anthropology; I have also discussed how human religious desire can be interpreted via the lens of “inscendence.” As I have mentioned, moving beyond human exceptionalism has been a point suggested by ecofeminist and ecomaterialist theologians because thinking of ourselves as above, beyond, or apart from the earth is at the root of so many eco-destructive attitudes. The aim of all of this is to find a different way to think about ourselves in the world that can promote a more sustainable way of living. From Merleau-Ponty, we can say that being human does not have to be insular or isolating. There are constant material and energetic exchanges between all bodies; our minds and souls arise from this corporeity, or even better: they are plunged into, folded into, this flesh of the world for brief moments. There is room for diversity as well as for connection; through apophatic anthropology we can avoid the conceptual trap of absolute monism as well as the distancing of rigid taxonomic difference. Because of this we can see not just kinship but *identification* with the earth, without losing our unique identifiers and sense of self as individual consciousnesses. As we recall from McFague, it is important for the functioning of ethics for there to be relationality, which requires some level of differentiation. The anthropology described above allows for differentiation while at the same time preserving continuity. It is not a question of different or same, relational or monistic; within a fleshy ontology there is room for folds within sameness. The final chapter will further explore the eco-ethical implications for

living this kind of anthropology.

CHAPTER V

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS OF A NONEXCEPTIONALIST ANTHROPOLOGY

In the last chapter I developed an apophatic theological anthropology as a way of reading the human in the world that included human intellectual activity and religious experience, without the need for any exceptionalist framework. While I contend that this formulation of the human is beneficial for the eco(feminist)-theological project, it does face challenges on several fronts. In this chapter I explore some of the problematic theoretical implications that arise from this anthropology, focusing on three main aspects of my suggestion for ecotheological anthropology. First, I consider certain ecofeminist concerns, around the issue of the role that exceptionalism has played in generating ecofeminist ethics; second, I examine the theological implications for what God-talk could look like when beginning from this anthropological starting point; third, I consider the ramifications of embracing this kind of anthropology for lived human existence. In examining these issues, I aim to show that the overall effect of my anthropological construction is to push the extant boundaries of the field in a direction that contributes to greater human-ecological flourishing.

Ecofeminist implications: ethical commitments

This project returns to its ecofeminist roots to consider what the anthropology I have constructed could mean for ecofeminist concerns about reforming human attitudes and behaviors toward the earth, and improving the lived conditions for women. In the first case, I will show that, in spite of the fact that human exceptionalism has often seemed to be necessary for motivating

ecologically ethical action, this is not the only way to encourage humans to work toward shared ecological flourishing. Instead, my apophatic anthropology proposes grounding environmental ethics in commonality rather than singularity. I also consider what such a move could mean for talking about “evil.” Finally, I will briefly address the specifically feminist component of ecofeminism, and consider some of the ways that a Merleau-Pontian theological anthropology could interact with feminist concerns.

Ethics Beyond Exceptionalism?

My emphasis on nonexceptionalism has been based in a desire to avoid the kind of mindset that exempts human beings from the fate of the earth and promotes ecological devastation. Therefore, my intention is that one eco-ethical implication of this work be a way to think of ourselves as inextricable from the world in order to discourage heedless destruction and exploitation. Yet within this inextricability there needs to be a mechanism for being-to-being ethical relationality. As previously discussed, McFague has observed that ethics hinges on this relationality, which is itself contingent on difference.¹ This is why I have explored how Merleau-Ponty’s ontology allows for a nonexceptionalist anthropology of human-world continuity that avoids monistic non-differentiation. This is possible because the concept of flesh encompasses all beings in such a way that there is no absolute disconnection but the mechanism of chiasm ensures that a certain level of individuality is nonetheless preserved, which means that a basic individual-to-individual ethical relationality remains possible.

Within ecofeminism, this basic architecture is troubled by the need to explain why the

¹ McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*, 127–128. Or as Keller puts it, “It is difference that the tie that binds is binding.”; Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible*, 225.

human species wrought so much damage upon the planet, and a need to reverse the engine of this destructiveness in order to call for future ethical action. Usually the answer to both of these needs is found in some level of special human uniqueness. That is, there must be something singular about human beings that explains why we, of all animal species, have caused so much destruction, and it is upon a similar basis that they argue for change. Here I return to Sallie McFague and Ivone Gebara as examples of how ecofeminist theologians have exhorted their readers to change their ways. My argument is that their calls to a change in attitude and behavior implicitly depend on an exceptionalist account of human being, and therefore require a corrective to explicitly state otherwise and provide an alternative. McFague and Gebara develop their eco-ethical imperatives in ways that, I argue, court the very exceptionalism that they themselves had agreed was at the root of the ecological crisis: a sense of humans as separate and different in some fundamental way undergirds their sense of an eco-ethical imperative. Must calls for ethical action require the ontological separation of human beings from the material world, thereby reinscribing the very value system (human exceptionalism) that fueled much of the modern era's exploitation of the nonhuman nature? After examining ecofeminist approaches to this issue, I will present my alternative, nonexceptionalist suggestion for ecotheological ethics. I will argue that the apophatic anthropology I have developed can speak both to and from materially embodied reality, such that human embeddedness is not a hindrance to arguments for ethical action, but a help, insofar as we conceive of ourselves as sharing in matter's own agency. In the end, I argue that the immediate connectivity of apophatic anthropology's inscendence can inspire humans to *affectively* find desire for change, a desire that itself ties into the agential flesh of the

world.² Our embeddedness can be a source for, rather than a challenge to, ethical action.

McFague makes the best case for ethics within an ecofeminist framework: the human species' current combination of knowledge and power. McFague argues that we have responsibility based on our ability to destroy or preserve the flourishing of life on earth, combined with the knowledge that this is the case. McFague has argued that that our combined knowledge and capability for both harm and destruction makes us uniquely responsible for making sure that actions taken do not lead to the destruction of life of on earth. Both in terms of incidental environmental degradation and willful nuclear war, "we have the knowledge and power to destroy ourselves as well as many other species *and* we have the knowledge and the power to help the process of the ongoing creation continue. This means, in a way unprecedented in the past, that we are profoundly responsible."³ Thus, there is not something intrinsically responsible about human beings, *per se*; our responsibility grew as our capabilities and knowledge increased. By McFague's logic, we were less responsible in the past because our capacity for destruction was limited, and because we knew not what we did. For instance, when *Homo sapiens* still relied on hunting and gathering, we were genetically the same as today but had yet to amass the resources that could support large-scale environmental engineering and its unintended consequences. I would add that we have been having a significant effect upon our environments for some time. As early humans migrated out of Africa, they behaved like any species that encounters an environment in which the endemic life forms did not evolve alongside

² Although the field of affect theory is far too great to engage here, it is my hope to develop the specifics of this affectivity at length in a future project.

³ McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*, 108.

it: early humans arguably wiped out most of the megafauna of every other continent to which they spread. Any species that moves rapidly from where it originally evolved to a new environment, if it survives, wreaks havoc upon that new environment, for the organisms therein have not co-evolved with that individual species and have no defenses.⁴ At the time, we were simply seeking our own survival and had no knowledge of the consequences of our actions. Our current knowledge in the face of climate change is key to locating responsibility upon our shoulders. Yet in order to avoid nuclear holocaust, and mitigate the current climate disaster, I argue that it is (perhaps ironically) necessary to focus on our entanglement with life over our unique mode of destructiveness, because that sense of being alone is what got us to this point in the first place.

The combination of the *power* to wreak mass destruction and the *knowledge* that we are doing so is what generates responsibility. This responsibility is, for McFague, what sets human beings apart. I agree that the addition of knowledge to the responsibility equation is significant. However, it is worth pointing out that we are that, on a material level, we are not alone in the power component; various geological forces or single-celled organisms have also drastically changed the climate of the earth, and on a scale that rivals even our own (for example, it is thanks to cyanobacteria that Earth's atmosphere first became oxygenated).⁵ Of course, those

⁴ David Bryant has suggested that the extinction of megafauna everywhere but Africa is due to the fact that human beings are introduced species everywhere outside of the African continent. Bryant, "The Human Animal and Christian Ecotheology."

⁵ Donald E. Canfield, *Oxygen: A Four Billion Year History*, Reprint edition (Princeton Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015), 41ff.

forces and organisms were not *sentient* of what they were doing.⁶ Moreover, I would add that the significance of “knowledge” needs to be carefully construed. Based in the ontology previously discussed, the knowledge we humans now possess about our effects upon this planet must be said to arise from the totality of the flesh, rather than to reside discretely in human minds. After all, as McFague herself acknowledges, we have only become aware of what we are doing in the blink of an eye in human history; an accumulation of earthly entanglements has recently engendered this awareness within us. From our current lived perspective we experience ourselves as possessing some measure of knowledge and, hence, choice. This knowledge does not have to imply some kind of exceptionalism. Perhaps knowledge amasses unevenly throughout the cosmos, accumulating in greater amounts in some locations than others. It is a difference of scale than of kind; just as the tallest mountain is a massing of granite bigger than any other, but is not ontologically set apart from all other hills and rocks. Because my anthropology can allow for a diffusion of knowledge in this way, it can allow for responsibility without exceptionalist overtones, so long as the reasons for it are derived from an ontology of profound kinship. With this caveat, I can agree that knowledge and power combined make us contextually responsible insofar as there is an impetus to address the destruction we have wrought.

Responsibility as McFague has described it is a basically negatively oriented position: we need to stop doing the bad, now that we have the knowledge and power to do so. Exceptionalism also plays into positively formulating motivations for changing our behavior, and for seeing new

⁶ As hunter-gatherers, even if various tribes did wipe out their local megafauna, they did not know that they were doing so—they knew only that they were feeding themselves. But once we farm and attempt to accumulate wealth—then we know what we are doing, even if we do not know the far-reaching consequences.

ways to envision our actions upon and within this earth. Ivone Gebara furnishes us with one such positive exhortation for eco-ethical action, demonstrating the common temptation amongst eco- and ecofeminist theologians to bolster the human spirit via rhetoric of our uniqueness.

Gebara argues that humans are the consciousness of the universe, which is why it falls on us to fix this ecological mess. Although she is trying to work from human as material even more explicitly than McFague,⁷ she nevertheless reinforces a sense of human exceptionalism. Human and divine are not opposed, and human cannot be considered without the world; the connection between a distant God and the loneliness of humanity with ecologically destructive attitudes is clear to her. She criticizes the Catholic teaching⁸ that there is “a radical divide that separates the greatness of God, the smallness of humanity, and the ‘irrationality’ of the rest of creation.” She correctly points out that such a viewpoint comes from a “hierarchical understanding of the world,” which she rejects.⁹ Gebara even states that “we are all one and the same Sacred Body in multiple and diverse expressions,”¹⁰ which strongly resonates with my Merleau-Pontian ontology, and she goes so far as to assert that we are literally of the earth; we have this primal relation with the soil.¹¹ All of this would seem to argue against maintaining any kind of exceptional status for humans, and yet that same quality of *knowing*—here represented as thinking—that McFague had

⁷ This may be due to their ecclesial differences—McFague’s Protestantism as opposed to Gebara’s Catholicism.

⁸ Though of course these attitudes are changing thanks to Pope Francis’ approach to the environment. Pope Francis and Catholic Church, *Laudato Si: On Care for Our Common Home* (Our Sunday Visitor, 2015).

⁹ Gebara, *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation*, 81.

¹⁰ Gebara, 82.

¹¹ Gebara, 88–89.

identified as a core component of responsibility, sets human beings apart in Gebara's system, and is what both enables and necessitates creative action toward the world.

For Gebara, our specialness is not only what gives us the responsibility to be stewards of the world; she also describes humans as, "in some sense *the* thinking dimension of the universe." This seems at odds with the fact that, as Jacob Erickson has noted, Gebara works to overcome the same binaries that have been the subject of this dissertation.¹² Here, she is not saying that we are "a" thinking dimension of the universe, but that we have a *singular* creative power. In reflecting on the human—in doing theological anthropology—we are "accept[ing] the challenge of becoming creators of ourselves and of the entire living world."¹³ So, although we are in and of the dirt of the earth, we are also uniquely formed as thinkers and charged with co-creating our world. Gebara has her reasons for saying this, of course: this is deliberately edifying rhetoric. But do we humans have to be unique and better than everything else in order to be inspired to act in ecologically sound ways?

Of course, the creative capacity of human beings that Gebara points out cannot be ignored. It is one of the most notable traits of our species. Yet this creativity is both found throughout life and also morally ambivalent. As Robert Corrington has observed, creativity not intrinsically beneficial. He has critiqued theologies that promote worshipping "creativity" as a driving force in the universe; from a Darwinian perspective, this is basically nonsensical since what creativity actually looks like in the universe is mutation, and mutation is, most of the time,

¹² Jacob J. Erickson, "Doxological Diversities and Canticle Multiplicities: The Trinitarian Anthropologies of David H. Kelsey and Ivone Gebara," in *Divine Multiplicity: Trinities, Diversities, and the Nature of Relation*, ed. Chris Boesel and S. Wesley Ariarajah (Fordham University Press, 2013), 186.

¹³ Gebara, *Longing for Running Water : Ecofeminism and Liberation*, 67 (emphasis added).

disastrous.¹⁴ Yet perhaps the error is not whether it is a driving force but whether it ought to be considered a definite good. It is undeniable that life has developed by way of these mutations. Our creativity may not be like that of any other living species, but it is like the process of evolution itself—a tendency toward random changes that are often disastrous and sometimes highly beneficial. Our creativity is another way we share in the structure of Being itself, and does not divide us from our participation in materiality. Rather than lifting up creativity as unique to humankind and continuing to hold humans apart from the rest of the world in order to motivate ethical action, one could imagine alternative uplifting words that say, “like all life, the drive to keep living asserts itself in surprisingly resilient ways.” That we share a certain tenacity with all things could be a source of encouragement even more than the fact of our divergent cerebral cortex development compared to other primates.¹⁵

Can we imagine what it would be to draw strength from our *similarity* to the earth rather than from our *difference*? As I mentioned, it is not uncommon for ecotheologians to appeal to human specialness to motivate their readers to do better, or to give them hope that all is not lost. The common sentiment is “but as humans, we have the unique capacity to [imagine, change, go against instinct, have great compassion, and so forth.]” It is meant unite us as a species and inspire action, and yet I find that there is something profoundly lonely about this concept. Though the language is upbeat and exhortatory, the focus on special human abilities actually exacerbates a sense of being fundamentally alone. My position is that there is a way to frame our

¹⁴ Robert S. Corrington, “Deep Pantheism,” *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 1, no. 4 (2008): 135.

¹⁵ Robert Barton, “Primate Brain Evolution: Integrating Comparative, Neurophysiological, and Ethological Data,” *Evolutionary Anthropology: Issues, News, and Reviews* 15 (2006): 224–236, <https://doi.org/10.1002/evan.20105>.

very *nonexceptionalism* in such a way as to motivate and account for ethical action. I contend that it would be much more heartening to know that, in drawing upon the strength to act rightly, we are actually tapping into the primordial nonidentical-nondifference of Being itself—that is, that we are part of the flesh of the world. In that system, coursing through us is the interrogative movement of Being, of which our consciousness is but one of many variants. The anthropology I have developed can, then, not only make sense of our knowledge and responsibility in a nonexceptional way, but also provide *impetus* for ethical action without resorting to exceptionalist language.¹⁶

I have also argued against focusing on transcendence and advocated instead for relating to the world in a movement of “inscendence.” Yet ethics have typically seemed to require a transcendence of the material order. Given prevailing assumptions of the barbarity of the material world, human culture and human subjectivity in particular had to transcend the local materiality of our existence in order to forge an ethical habitus. Barbara Jane Davy notes that, for Emmanuel Levinas, “it is only as much as we are human, transcending our animal nature, that we act responsibly.”¹⁷ Some sense of transcendence is thus connected to how we understand ethics, but I have been arguing against any theological anthropology that founds our humanity on a purported transcendent capacity. Does a non-transcendental, non-exceptional anthropology have room for ethics? Must ethics entail transcendence? Naturally, in the barest and most

¹⁶ Furthermore, there is arguably an inherent ethics to the flesh itself. Molly Jensen argued in her dissertation that the flesh can give rise to ethical norms of the relational variety, and that, hence, bodies can be the site of a certain kind of ethics. There is a way to locate the source for ethical norms of relationality within bodies, and that could be another path to pursue in trying to develop a nonexceptionalist ethics. Jensen, “Fleshing out a Relational Ethics.”

¹⁷ Davy, “An Other Face of Ethics in Levinas,” 43.

functionalist sense of the word, a certain movement away from the mundanity of the moment occurs whenever one imagines something different than one's current situation. But rather than being a climbing-beyond oneself or one's situation, what would happen if we imagine an ethical movement spurred by a climbing-within? Here, ethics could be the result of inscendence.

My theological anthropology would ideally lead to the kind of ethics for which Davy advocates, because of the open-bordered nature of this apophatic anthropology that precludes separation of others into persons and nonpersons:

Ethics arise when I meet the Other as a person before allowing the themes I might apply to them to totalize the Other into something that cannot speak or be said to have a face. If the capacities of the Other are irrelevant to my being inspired to ethical action, the ability of the Other to speak, or their possession of a literal face, cannot be required for ethics to come to pass between us. If ethics do not come before epistemology, before thematization, they may not arise at all, leaving us stuck in an anthropocentric view of the world.¹⁸

The movement of inscendence could be considered an ethical movement toward recognizing the our nonhuman others—both individuals and the totality of the Earth—as being possessed of intrinsic ethical valences.

Once we stop avoiding our ontological nonexceptionalism, we are able to find another way to live in and with the earth. If we imagine our strength to create change coming from commonality with rather than from difference from the nonhuman world, it would be heartening, motivating us to identify more with *nature* than with *industry* (though this category of “nature” of course, has been deconstructed)—we would, from the beginning, be in solidarity with what was formerly the separate concept of nature. Drawing our strength therefrom, we would have the

¹⁸ Davy, 60.

strength to work together for the good of all. But in working toward the good, we implicitly recognize that there is a “bad.” What are we working away from? Is it possible to have a sense of “evil” without requiring some absolute human uniqueness?

The Problem of “Evil”

The concept of “evil,” as it pertains to the character of human nature, takes on different valences in this kind of anthropology. Though a complete analysis of the way good and evil can be considered will have to wait for a more systematic treatment of a Merleau-Pontian theology, at this stage I would like to touch briefly upon how human evil in particular is affected by my nonexceptionalist anthropology. For the sake of illustration, I will look at how Karen Baker-Fletcher discusses what good and evil are in her womanist ecotheology, in which she emphasizes human beings’ earthiness. Although she comes to an en-worlded sense of humanity via different means than I, the way she interprets evil is illustrative for how a rigorously embodied anthropology grapples with the problem, and also allows me to highlight how my approach differs.

Baker-Fletcher’s anthropology shares many characteristics with mine. In a 2004 essay, she argues, “the earth is our common ground. We are each made from the earth and depend on it. This common ground is not something we need to find. This common ground is *something*; we must learn to see we are on it and it is in us. We are it and to it we all shall return.” In other words, there is no radical discontinuity between human and world. It is similar to what I have attempted to develop with the concept of “incendence”: you could say incendence is this act of living into the common ground. Baker-Fletcher frames ethical responsibility as an issue of liberation, a theme she draws from the womanist tradition. She asks, “How willing are we to

liberate ourselves as the earth, to participate in healing renewal in the here and now?” Our liberation and earth’s liberation are one and the same. This is an example of ethical action motivated by commonality—liberating ourselves *as* the earth, a co-participation in the present moment that does not wait for a future time or treat the earth as something separate from us. We are liberating ourselves and the earth from the way of nothingness, or nihilism, and returning to “God’s initial aim.”¹⁹ Though I do not adopt her stance on this particular point, given that it seems to imply that there must have been something special about human beings that allowed us to stray from our intended path—which, as I have mentioned, risks feeding into the narrative of human exceptionalism that has enabled and justified ecological destruction for so long—I find her way of speaking about evil itself to be particularly helpful to my project.

Baker-Fletcher further elucidates a way of thinking about evil in her 2006 work, *Dancing with God*, in which she acknowledges that “evil” can result from the actions of many things besides humans. She writes, “human beings are not the only creatures whose actions result in experiences of nihilism.” She gives examples of tsunamis, hurricanes, fires, disease, and so on. These are all “examples of what human beings and other creatures threatened by such phenomena experienced as ‘evil.’” We are not alone in experiencing things as evil, but we are alone in being accountable for the evil we commit. Like McFague, Baker-Fletcher locates the lynchpin for responsibility in awareness. “Human beings as complex creatures of high intelligence and consciousness, however, are accountable for their contributions to the problem

¹⁹ Karen Baker-Fletcher, “Something or Nothing: An Eco-Womanist Essay on God, Creation, and Indispensability,” in *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature, Environment*, ed. Roger S. Gottlieb, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2004), 436.

of evil.”²⁰ For me, the wording of this particular claim holds the key to understanding evil within a materialist framework. There is a kind of natural that exists as part of the make up of the universe—an occasional tendency toward nothingness—and many things and entities contribute to it. Humans, with our combination of power and awareness, are *accountable* to our contributions to it in ways that, say, toxic blue-green algae overgrowths are not. This understanding of evil removes it from the metaphysical (and inherently human-exceptionalizing) realm, and situates it in the physical, broadly understood. “Evil,” then, is contextualized into the flesh. Evil is a nodule in the nexus of knowledge, power, and action, in which one participates by adding to nihilism for self and others. Thus, rather than a formulation in which human beings do evil things and therefore we are exceptional, we can instead begin with the assumption of humans as fundamentally natural and from there argue that the evil that we do or in which we participate is part of the nature of reality.

The concern still remains, however, that, if we are a species of animals among other animals, our destructive tendencies may be innate, and there may be little room for change in our behavior. David J. Bryant observes that ecotheologians like McFague have based their arguments in “the view that human abuse of nature is mostly if not entirely rooted in *cultural constructs that encourage people to think of themselves as separate from and more important than nature, and hence free to exploit it for their ends,*” and that the solution to this sense of entitlement is to change the culture to one of respect and veneration.²¹ My own work in this project to cultivate a framework of “flesh” is an example of an attempt to change attitudes by changing a cultural

²⁰ Karen Baker-Fletcher, *Dancing with God: The Trinity from a Womanist Perspective* (Chalice Press, 2006), 94.

²¹ Bryant, “The Human Animal and Christian Ecotheology,” 87 (emphasis added).

thought-construction. However, if, as I have maintained with throughout this project, there is nothing “unnatural” about culture, then that must mean that even our culture of exceptionalism is basically “natural.” This is troubling because we can expect changes from culture, but we typically accept that nature will be as it will be. Bryant asks: if we and all our flaws are natural, then how can we expect to change? What if it is our “nature” to overrun everything in this way, to produce culture that creates these constructs?²² The question itself still bears the marks of the nature-culture dichotomy; when this problem is considered truly outside of a nature-culture dichotomy, as in an ontology of the flesh, we see that changes in our culture are also changes in nature. Moreover, another aspect of our “nature” is our mental plasticity adaptability, meaning that multiple modes of living and relating to the world are and can be possible.²³ In response to a more favorable ideological climate, our natural, adaptable minds can no doubt shape themselves to practices of eco-respect over one of eco-destruction.

Feminist Dimensions of Nonexceptionalist Anthropology

Above, I have discussed how my anthropology relates to the eco-ethical element of ecofeminist theology, but what about the feminist element? Can a nonexceptional, apophatic anthropology be coherent with feminist values? I contend that it can, not only because it is a turn

²² Perhaps we will also continue to expand until death and destruction limit us as with all other introduced species whose advantages over native life forms allow them to multiply out of control. If this is the case, is the human species an extinction-level event in slow motion? Are we less like other animals and more like volatile elements or exploding stars (especially considering our nuclear capabilities)? I think there is another way to see our behavior in an ecological context.

²³ Branka Hrvoj-Mihic et al., “Evolution, Development, and Plasticity of the Human Brain: From Molecules to Bones,” *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* 7 (October 30, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2013.00707>; Chip Walter, *Last Ape Standing: The Seven-Million-Year Story of How and Why We Survived* (New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2014).

to the material, which is a natural off-shoot of feminist thought, but also because the Merleau-Pontian ontology from which it is developed already lends itself to feminist discourse, albeit not entirely uncritically. In Chapter 1, in conversation with Anne Elvey, I discussed the fact that the material turn is a generative direction of growth for the ecofeminist emphasis on embodiment. But what does this mean for the social, political or ontological situations of actual women? To address this, I look briefly at feminist concerns about the core ontological component of this anthropology (Merleau-Ponty's flesh) and then explore what this anthropology as a whole could potentially have to say in conversation with the gendered component of intersectional oppression.

Synthesizing the critiques of Luce Irigaray and Iris Young, Elizabeth Grosz summarizes a common feminist position on Merleau-Ponty:

Merleau-Ponty's integration of the mind/body duality and his attempts to accord perception a primacy in psychical and biological life have provided a crucial set of strategic terms which feminists can use as they will in their attempts to think a radical notion of sexual difference. Although, like psychoanalytic theory, Merleau-Ponty's work provides a set of powerful insights and a broad methodological framework in which to rethink the body outside of dualism, his work remains inadequate for understanding the differences between the sexes.²⁴

That is, his work provides useful tools for feminist analysis, but cannot serve as a stand-alone feminist framework. Specifically in question are aspects of what it means to inhabit a body marked as female in "a sexist society." As Iris Young details, in Grosz' account, possession of visible secondary-sex characteristics mark women as both subject and object, meaning that "the relations between immanence and transcendence, between owning and being a body, between subject and object or one subject and another, are not the same for women as for men, in ways

²⁴ Elizabeth A. Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Indiana University Press, 1994), 109.

that Merleau-Ponty seems unaware of.”²⁵ But, importantly, most feminist reflection that shares this perspective has been on his earlier work, with less attention on his ontology of the flesh.²⁶ Meanwhile, Molly Hadley Jensen has observed that Judith Butler and Jeffner Allen have recognized potential in Merleau-Ponty’s late work for overcoming gender dualism.²⁷

Rather than attempting to address all the feminist philosophers who have reflected upon Merleau-Ponty, I want to focus on those specific aspects of his thought that inform the theological anthropology of nonexceptionalism here discussed. What are the feminist implications of this view of personhood? One main concern is his use of the concept of “the body” in a generalizing sense. Can the differences between the embodied experiences of male-identified and female-identified individuals be elided so easily, or are women’s bodies simply overlooked? Specifically, can an anthropology based on an ontology that does not question the norms of its embodiment really represent all people, especially the women who constitute the “other” of that unquestioned male norm? Sonia Kruks has argued that, though it may seem that he treats the body as “generic” at first glance, upon closer inspection we find that Merleau-Ponty “does not demand the erasure of particularities,” because, for him, what it means to be an embodied subject is “always *at once* general and particular.” It is *particular* in the sense of my particular past, my background, or my personal situatedness, among others.²⁸ Obviously, the

²⁵ Grosz, 108.

²⁶ Grosz, 103.

²⁷ Jensen, “Fleshing out a Relational Ethics,” 127.

²⁸ Sonia Kruks, “Merleau-Ponty and the Problem of Difference in Feminism,” in *Rereading Merleau-Ponty: Essays beyond the Continental-Analytic Divide*, ed. Gail Weiss and Dorothea Olkowski (Amherst, N.Y.: Humanity Books, 2000), 37.

quality of being female (if that can even be satisfactorily defined) does not unite all women in identical embodied experience: race, age, class, size, reproductive status, and many other factors differentiate women's experiences. From this diversity of women's experiences, Kruks is able to illustrate how a certain level of shared experience could arguably be found across differences through Merleau-Ponty's embodiment concept. Although each body is different in its particularity, we share the quality of existing physically in this world—of being impacted by our differing traits and situations, which could be helpful for engendering understanding across different situated realities. In sum, Merleau-Ponty's ontology (and an anthropology derived therefrom) does not have to be inherently sexist even though he himself may have had sexist tendencies. Indeed, elements of his take on the primacy of embodiment, far from excluding the female, actually make a bridge between male and female (and other gender) experiences, in the same way that they enable intra-gender solidarity amidst differences.

Beyond the issue of the body in general, future work will also need to address the issue of *primal* embodiment relative to gender identities. There is debate amongst feminist scholars around this question.²⁹ Merleau-Ponty's system constitutes subjects in such a way that, as embodied, they "inhabit an anonymous or prepersonal realm, later called *flesh*, which includes both the flesh of bodies and the flesh of the world." Olkowski observes that a not insignificant number of feminists feel that "the concept of the flesh describes the general atmosphere of intersubjective communication prior to cognition and so prior to social or gender stratification."³⁰

²⁹ Such as those contributing to Dorothea Olkowski and Gail Weiss, *Feminist Interpretations of Maurice Merleau-Ponty*, Re-Reading the Canon (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006).

³⁰ Olkowski, "Introduction," 23.

This opens up another whole field for discussion, depending on where one situates gender identity vis-à-vis cognition, and could even be read as a means by which a Merleau-Ponty-inflected anthropology contributes to the ongoing work of troubling formerly rigid sex and gender divides. It would be particularly interesting to see how an apophatic, nonexceptional theology grapples with queer theory.³¹

My own position is that Merleau-Ponty contributes more to feminist work than he detracts, though care must continue to be taken to attend to implicit assumptions in his treatment of bodily awareness. Jensen devotes a chapter of her dissertation to exploring feminist responses to Merleau-Ponty, and although I disagree with her contention that ecofeminists have an aversion to bodies, I appreciate her point that Merleau-Ponty can serve as a resource for embodied thought in general:

Merleau-Ponty offers a general account of bodily relation and richness that reaches beyond the categories of dualism and surmounts the obstacles that confound ecological feminists. He illumines the capacity in all beings for relation and frees this capacity from a particular construction of gender. [...] Merleau-Ponty at once affirms the rootedness in and complex relation of all bodies while disrupting restrictive categories, roles and identities that link only some beings with bodies. With the flesh, he allows ecological feminists and feminists in general to understand the body not as an inescapable oppressive identity—as a problem to be averted and a basis of exploitation—but as a possibility in each being for new identities, disruptive assertions and alternative and relational guiding norms. Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of the flesh can recover for ecological feminists the power and potential of bodies as sites of relation and resistance.”³²

The salient point here is that Merleau-Ponty’s work facilitates new and creative approaches to thinking the body, which is ultimately a point in its favor for feminist work. Moreover, the flesh

³¹ In particular some of the biological issues raised in Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality*, Revised ed. edition (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2000).

³² Jensen, “Fleshing out a Relational Ethics,” 131.

allows us to interpret bodies in such a way as to accentuate latent materialist tendencies in feminist thought, and to move feminist work further into a materialist sphere, as Anne Elvey has recommended. Overall, I hold that certain core priorities of feminism are served by an ecotheological anthropology like the one developed here, in spite of the fact that there remain problematic elements of its founding ontology that deserve further consideration.

Theological Implications: What Does This Mean for Talking about God?

Toward the end of the previous chapter I focused on the problem of understanding the human experience of God—that is, the way human beings receive experiences or intuitions of God from outside in. Although I declined to make any statements about God *per se* in that chapter, here I take a preliminary look at what theology *could* say about God if we begin from an apophatically embodied sense of ourselves. In this section, I argue that the phenomenological approach I have taken offers resources for beginning to speak theologically from the foundation of my nonexceptional anthropology. I draw from David Dillard-Wright’s discussion of what he considers to be Merleau-Ponty’s “implicit theology” to explore how this can be the case.

In Chapter 4, I stressed that human religious experience needs to be understood as something that occurs at a bodily level. Religious experience is, if nothing else, a physical experience located in the body.³³ This means that human embodied experiences would have to be the starting point for saying anything about God. According to Dillard-Wright, “just as the lived body is the precondition for idealism and empiricism, it is also a precondition for the idea of ‘God.’ God can only mean anything for us by virtue of embodied perception; the condition for

³³ Not necessarily just the human body, at that. For more, see Schaefer, *Religious Affects*.

the existence of God is situation within the world”—that is, the quality of being situated within the world.³⁴ In other words, in order for God to exist *to me*, I have to be situated within the world, because all of my experiences, including those that feel more ethereal, cognitive, or abstract, are grounded in my body. The concept of God is dependent on our embodied existence. Because our bodies (which include our minds, as discussed in Chapter 3) are animal bodies, this means that the concept of God is also, in a sense, inextricable from this material world. As Dillard-Wright puts it, “the lived body of [Merleau-Ponty’s] phenomenology shares features with animal bodies, so that ‘God’ is a concept ultimately derived from animal existence.”³⁵ By beginning with this in mind, theology can have nonexceptionalism built into it from the outset. We then need not even rhetorically abstract human existence from the world. There is more to it than that, however. It is not just that God is an animal concept, but that “God” as a concept emerges from the material world.

In Chapter 3 I enlisted Ted Toadvine to argue that human meaning-making can be viewed phenomenologically as a process of the flesh. A point I made there but did not emphasize at the time was the fact that this means that the world has intrinsic meaning. Meanings are not placed upon the world by exceptional humans but rather pre-date us in the world and eventually emerge in the words and ideas we generate, or as Dillard-Wright puts it, “the world itself contains meanings within it which are assumed in our dealings with the world and later made explicit in thought and language.” This can also be read to apply to the erstwhile guarantor of all meaning,

³⁴ David B. Dillard-Wright, *Ark of the Possible: The Animal World in Merleau-Ponty* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009), 27.

³⁵ Dillard-Wright, 14.

the concept of God. Human meanings, theological and otherwise, are “continuous with the latent meanings inherent in extrahuman processes.” They did not emerge fully formed as from the forehead of Zeus but are, rather, coiling up at all times from the Flesh of the world. The implication of this continuity of meaning is that “there can be no strictly private meaning, conceived in isolation from the lived matrix of incarnation.”³⁶ Here I take it that Dillard-Wright means “incarnation” in the sense of being-enfleshed, and that meaning cannot be conceived without the constant context of this fleshiness. Any meaning that I as a human or we as a species have is shared with the world—or, more accurately, is something the world shares with us. The directionality is ambiguous because of the chiasmic nature of the human-world relationship.

There is a sense in which those who create signs and symbols are doing something on a completely different plane than that occupied by, say, rocks and leaves. Indeed, there is a meaning in human linguistics (and dolphin clicks and bee dances) that is distinct, but this meaning is not extraneous to the world. All of these meanings “partake in a prior layer of meaning which is predicated on the body’s connection to the world.”³⁷ That is, the meaning that is inherent to Being itself is the source of the meaning created by individuals. “God” as a meaningful concept is something that exists in our language, and to a certain extent in the most interior seat of knowledge for many people. By the logic above, then, “God,” must be, in Dillard-Wright’s words, “a meaning that emerges from the density of the world itself, a phenomenal

³⁶ Dillard-Wright, 23.

³⁷ We often restrict “language” to humans, extending it begrudgingly to certain great apes who are able to communicate with sign language. Intriguingly, however, researchers are discovering that dolphin clicks and other signals are potentially a form of language. Vyacheslav A. Ryabov, “The Study of Acoustic Signals and the Supposed Spoken Language of the Dolphins,” *St. Petersburg Polytechnical University Journal: Physics and Mathematics* 2, no. 3 (October 2016): 231–39, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.spjpm.2016.08.004>.

ideality that arises out of the effulgence of latent meanings.”³⁸ God is in this sense inextricable from the world. This is a way to have God be part of the world without risking totalizing monism. However, it is not without its own problems.³⁹

Although the above argument might at first seem to tie the god-human-world triad together in a neat, fleshy bow, this argument is problematic for the fact that it could be used to apply to any abstract concept. Yes, it would work well if we look simply at grand concepts like “God” or “love”—to say “love emerges and is inextricable from the world” sounds, well, *lovely*. But by this same logic we could say the same thing of any conceptual meaning that appears to exist primarily in human minds; it would be no less true to say, “*zombies* emerge and are

³⁸ Dillard-Wright, *Ark of the Possible*, 23–24.

³⁹ This human nonexceptionalism is also tied up in a nonseparate divinity, as mentioned in the previous chapter. One concern that emerges when such a concept is broached is the risk of “Spinozism.” Is that what this is? As discussed in Chapter 4, Schleiermacher was adamant that his notion of *Schlechthinige Gefühl* was not in relation to the world or the cosmos as a whole but was definitely pointing to something greater, that upon which the world was contingent. His argument served not only to account for a reasonable approach to dependence and freedom as conceived in a pre-phenomenological ontology, but also to distance himself from charges of Spinozism. For the purposes of this critique, I define Spinozism as monistic pantheism, in which god, human, and world are absolutely identified. There are, no doubt, much more nuanced readings of Spinoza that could ultimately read my argument in a plethora of ways. However, given that Spinoza is not the subject of this dissertation, I will content myself with the more superficial understanding of Spinoza that prevailed in the minds of those trying to avoid being associated with him. Could God-talk proceeding from this theological anthropology, because it is based in the ontology of the latter, amend the theology of the former without simply becoming Spinozism? My answer, unsurprisingly, is yes. Merleau-Ponty actually shows how to achieve world-primacy while avoiding monism; in a sense, Merleau-Ponty is the key to solving Schleiermacher’s problem, as his ontology enables a self-generating nature that is nevertheless diverse and differentiated. Julia Lamm, meanwhile, has an in-depth study of the influence of Spinoza on Schleiermacher, which complicates the picture in ways that, likewise, are outside the scope of the current work. Julia A. Lamm, *The Living God: Schleiermacher’s Theological Appropriation of Spinoza* (Penn State Press, 2010). Merleau-Ponty, in addition to avoiding Cartesian dualism and the nihilism he saw as endemic to modern philosophy, was also consciously trying to steer clear of Spinozan monism.³⁹ Unlike Spinoza, Merleau-Ponty allowed for a kind of “reversibility between the [*Natura*] *naturans* and [*Natura*] *naturata*.” William S. Hamrick and Jan Van Der Veken, *Nature and Logos: A Whiteheadian Key to Merleau-Ponty’s Fundamental Thought* (Albany: State Univ of New York Pr, 2011), 101. The form of the chiasm would thus, for Merleau-Ponty, lie between what Spinoza had called nature-naturing and nature-natured, which would crisscross over each other in a way that complicates any simple one-ness.

inextricable from the world,” which, to me, cheapens the significance of the God concept.⁴⁰ However, that does not have to be the end of this line of thinking. The point, after all, is not to prove God by making this argument, but rather to show how the concept of God, far more powerful and important than the concept of zombies, cannot be considered in abstraction from the world, and, indeed, that we are always unavoidably considering the world whenever we consider God. This is not only a pleasant option for an ecotheologian, but also, in Dillard-Wright’s interpretation of Merleau-Ponty, the only way to endow the concept of God with material meaning.

Dillard-Wright sees this understanding of the locus of meaning as a way to avoid making the meaning of God static, which is important, because for him the greatest crime is to allow the concept of God to “ossify.” One is reminded of Mary Daly’s jeremiad against the tendency of patriarchal religion to reify God as a noun rather than making room for the dynamism of God the Verb.⁴¹ Being world-emergent allows the concept of God to have flexible and adaptable roots. Dillard-Wright sees this way of talking about God as the only way to restore real meaning to the concept. Such meaning can only be found if the concept is allowed to “return again to the lived context of bodily perception.”⁴² This is obviously a controversial argument that would not ring true for a lot of committed Christians and other theists. However, I view it in the context of trying to make the concept of God meaningful when beginning with a material approach to

⁴⁰ Though on the other hand, zombies, while a fiction invented by humans, *do* in a sense emerge from the world, insofar as fungi in the *Ophiocordyceps* genus produce zombie-like behavior in ants.

⁴¹ Daly, *Beyond God the Father : Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation*, 19ff.

⁴² Dillard-Wright, *Ark of the Possible*, 24.

reality that does not admit of any supernaturalism. Like John Caputo, as will be discussed later in this chapter, I have been attempting something of a “religious materialism,” and I see Dillard-Wright as similarly trying to find a space for “God” to have meaning within a comparable framework. It is a way to provide meaning to the concept of God when one is committed to prioritizing matter. While Caputo follows a deconstructive path to find meanings for “God” in his gesture toward “religious materialism,” Dillard-Wright, via Merleau-Ponty, follows a phenomenological path to find a way for God to be meaningful within a materialist ontology.

Because “the concept of God is derived from lived experience,” as discussed above, it follows that the doing of theology is a kind of second-order activity that makes explicit something hidden within the fabric of the world. That is, the same phenomenological approach that describes, as Merleau-Ponty does, paintings as “gestural attempts to uncover latent meanings in their subjects,” could, Dillard-Wright suggests, describe theological language as verbal attempt to reveal meanings within the world that have been their all along, but that become clearer to the human gaze through theological writing.⁴³ I propose that this means that the concept of God, if we are to attempt God-talk from this fleshy starting point, is dependent on an anthropology of human-world continuity, emerging from human beings⁴⁴ through human-world inter-relationality. Merleau-Ponty has shown that “the body already processes and arranges information, is already extracting ideal content before the process of formal thinking.” I agree with Dillard-Wright, whose position is that “the world, too, is already ideal, in that it contains

⁴³ Dillard-Wright, 27.

⁴⁴ Not necessarily *exclusively* from human beings, though for now it is only for human beings that we can say theology exists with certainty.

significance in its own right before the synthesizing process of engaged action and subsequent reflection.”⁴⁵ Then, just as music emerges from the combination of the organist’s body and the physical presence of the organ itself, it is the “interplay” between human and world “that is the basis for conceptualization, even for the heights of abstraction required to posit an invisible God who is behind or within things.”⁴⁶ Our theological approximations, sometimes crude and sometimes as sublime as a *Toccata and Fugue*, have always been an emergent property of human-world continuity, and are even, in some sense, the product of human nonexceptionality.

From the Merleau-Pontian theological anthropology that I have developed in this project, there are implications for expanding theological work beyond the human species as primary subject.⁴⁷ Because God relies on embodiment, as discussed above, and because our bodies are animal bodies, God therefore is enabled by this corporeal animality, in the ontology of the Flesh. Following the logic of the phenomenological body, Dillard-Wright has reasoned that God is a concept that has sprung from animality, and from the world as a whole.⁴⁸ It is then only natural

⁴⁵ Dillard-Wright, *Ark of the Possible*, 28.

⁴⁶ Dillard-Wright, 29.

⁴⁷ And, perhaps, for expanding our understanding of what the *object* of theology can be considered to be, as well. In “Theopoiesis and the Pluriverse: Notes on a Process,” in *Theopoetic Folds: Philosophizing Multifariousness* (Bronx: Fordham University Press, 2013), 187, Keller has written that she seeks a theology in which transcendence has not been reified, a theology without “objectifiable referents.” This statement spurs me to ask whether there can be a theology in which there *is* an objectifiable referent, but in which objectifiability carries different connotations. It is true that one way to gain greater theological relationality without risking monism is to un-objectify the theological referent to the extent that it can be everywhere and nowhere. However, I suggest that a similar result could be obtained by a theology operating out of a Merleau-Pontian ontology. In this ontology, theology could claim an objectifiable referent that is nontranscendent and also mysterious, and objecthood could be reconceived via the ontology of the flesh, and therefore as not objectifiable in the way certain ideas or personas were classically reified in theology. The benefit would be a more explicit turn toward lived physicality and the physicality of mental and ideal processes.

⁴⁸ Dillard-Wright, *Ark of the Possible*, 29.

for theology to begin from human nonexceptionalism. It could even be argued that *not* to use human inter-being with the world as the foundation of a theology is to incapacitate that theology. The concept of God emerges from our animal existence and is not possible without the body. God is not necessarily something invented by humans, a propos of nothing, as in a kind of “strong” atheist version of human exceptionalism, but God may be something emergent from human-world entanglement.

Meanwhile, my theological anthropology can take this kind of latent theology and make a more constructive argument. The idea of God exists because it is in the world with us; it is subtended by our own physical existence. Ideas are invisible, yet are intimately connected to the visible world. An idea forms within the visible world, within existence, and is guaranteed by the duration of myself and of others; thus, “behind the idea, there is the unity, the simultaneity of all the real and possible durations, the cohesion of one sole Being from one end to the other.” What this means is that the “fabric of experience,” which Merleau-Ponty also names “the flesh of time,” lies beneath the idea.⁴⁹ Yet, as we know, ideas have great power over us, and sometimes seem larger than any individual person or institution. This is because the invisible of ideas—musical, sensible, or theological ideas—is “negativity or absence circumscribed.” That quality makes it such that we cannot possess them; their nature as absence makes it that “they possess us.”⁵⁰ It is because the idea, like the beginning of a musical phrase, according to Merleau-Ponty, suggests from its very beginning that there is somewhere else that it needs to go; the idea similarly buoys us along on the trajectory contained within its first conceptual note. There is potential for

⁴⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 111.

⁵⁰ Merleau-Ponty, 151.

constructive theological work here, as this understanding of the idea of God could be interpreted as suggesting that God is like music animating us and everything. However, that line of thinking will have to wait for another project for consideration.

For now, what I want to highlight is the fact that this reminds us not only of human nonexceptionalism, which speaks to the significance of the world to anthropological identity, but also of a kind of *divine* “non-separationalism,” at least vis-à-vis human beings; that is, of the importance of the world to human approaches to God. The world does not get in the way of human-divine communion, in this sense, but rather is the only source thereof. The invisible—in this case, the idea of God—*requires* the visible. In this fleshy existence, we do not see now as through a glass darkly; we see as clearly as possible, for we need our eyes in order to see. As Merleau-Ponty says, “truths are not...invisible in fact but which we will one day be able to see facing us.” Rather, that which appears to be obscuring the truth is actually the *necessary medium* through which it is known to us; just as sound cannot pass through a vacuum, the air that transmits those vibrations is not “in the way,” but actually is the only way they reach us. “There is no vision without the screen: the ideas we are speaking of would not be better known to us if we had no body and no sensibility; it is then that they would be inaccessible to us.”⁵¹ Our human bodies, in their ties to and shared identity with the earth, are the source of theological ideas and discourse. My anthropology of human nonexceptionalism is able to bring that to the fore. But talking like this is to renounce any claims to certainty, which raises the questions: where can we find hope? and What room is there for faith? That is what the final section of this chapter will discuss.

⁵¹ Merleau-Ponty, 150.

Human Affective Implications: Living a nonexceptional anthropology

In this section, I discuss some of the problems around and possibilities for hope in a material, nonexceptionalist anthropology. The previous chapter advocated for placing emphasis less on the temporally transcendent and more on the spatially inscendent. But given that hope is generally understood as an orientation toward something “to come,” does my spatial inscendence obviate any potential for human hope? In examining this question, I look at Janet Martin Soskice’s analysis of the issue. Soskice has also observed that negation of a transcendent deity as classically conceived can give rise to a state of epistemological hopelessness. Her conclusion is based on humans being what she considers to be “mere” perceptual apparatuses; however my anthropology has shown how perception actually forms the basis for a rich anthropological construction. I discuss how hope needs to be reconceived in light of this construction. As the shadow side of hope, I provide a reading of the meaning of grief and mourning within this kind of anthropology. Working from Judith Butler’s take on mourning, I argue that mourning confirms our apophatic humanity, and taps into an affective dimension that can pave the way for a spatially, rather than temporally, oriented hope, that takes the form of John Caputo’s faithless faith.

Hopelessness: The Pit of Epistemological Despair

Borrowing from Charles Taylor, Janet Martin Soskice argues that the problem with classical epistemology is that it is “representational,” and that the anthropology this epistemology implies is one in which “the knowing agent is somehow set apart from, maybe outside of, the world that is known.” Clearly, this is the same problem that I have been

addressing throughout this dissertation. A representational epistemology results in the subject being “disengaged” from nature, society, and even from her/his own body.⁵² In this way, epistemology and exceptionalism reinforce each other. Being exceptional was tied up in being privy to special knowledge; losing that exceptionalism (because of what science has told us about being “perceptual apparatus[es]”) means losing that special knowledge. According to Soskice, this can easily lead to hopelessness. The ways of talking about God that are coherent with my theological anthropology do not generate a construct of God that stands apart from humans and the earth, which, by Cartesian logic, means that there can be no pure, objective, human realm of knowledge, which would have been guaranteed by such a God. From Chapter 3, we recall that Descartes had said “the certainty and truth of all knowledge depends alone on the knowledge of the true God...before I knew him, I could not have a perfect knowledge of any other thing” (Meditations, V). Yet a materialist, nonexceptionalist anthropology prioritizes the perceiving body rather than the knowing mind, and does not reason its way toward a transcendent deity, nor toward any kind of epistemological certainty. For Soskice, accepting our nonexceptionalism and accepting that we can have no perfect, guaranteed knowledge go hand in hand, and the combined situation can lead us to feel hopeless and in the dark.

The main reason that the removal of the divine epistemological guarantee raises the question of hope for Soskice is because, without that guarantee, the human being is no more than a “perceptual apparatus.” There is no longer any link to privileged knowledge—we have to rely on our senses. Because of this, Soskice argues that Nietzsche’s proclamation of the death of God

⁵² Janet Martin Soskice, “The Ends of Man and the Future of God,” in *Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. Graham Ward (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2008), 74.

actually derived its potency from the fact that it entailed the death of “Man”; “Man,” as “he” had been conceived metaphysically, was no more. It was science that made such a revelation possible. Again, the problem is not that “science has proved that God is dead, but rather that science has proved that man is dead.”⁵³

The reason, according to Soskice, that the Death of God is another way of expressing the Death of Man is because it marks not only “the end of theism,” but also, “in a sense, the death of any claim to absolute value...any transcendental grounding of values,” because we can no longer think of ourselves as having exclusive access to knowledge that is “underwritten by God.”⁵⁴ This is my point exactly. I have mentioned already that God guarantees our status as exceptional, and a big part of that is God guaranteeing our right and ability to seek knowledge that ever more closely approximates God’s own. Thinking that we have an outsized ability to know, that we could have objective knowledge, is tied up with a kind of anthropology in which we stand outside the world in a fundamental way. I have argued that there *is* no outside the world and we are inextricably in and of it, but because my approach involves questioning the way the human being is defined, I reach a different conclusion than Soskice. For Soskice, the death of Man brings with it the realization, as proved by science, “that all we really are is perceptual apparatus of a particular sort, destined for extinction like all other life.”⁵⁵ In saying this, as mentioned above, Soskice glosses over the very key to escaping from that hopelessness: our perceptual

⁵³ Although gender is not part of her argument in this essay, I read into her choice of the word “man,” as deliberately referring not only to human beings but in particular to a special category of human beings who are the closest to god and to this special knowledge.

⁵⁴ Soskice, “The Ends of Man and the Future of God,” 74.

⁵⁵ Soskice, 73.

capabilities. A Merleau-Pontian anthropology, as I have shown, is able to find meaning and depth in our perceiving and perceived natures. Saying that it is “all we really are” and using the word “apparatus” belies an inherent operationalism, which is inconsistent with Soskice’s argument, as such operationalism only makes sense in the very objective epistemological scheme that she describes as debunked.

What Chapter 4’s anthropology demonstrated was that there is an alternative to being an exceptional creature, whose epistemological capabilities connect us to the God-guarantor, and that that alternative is more than just being a spiritless, perceiving machine. Our perceptions constitute both our being and our connectedness to the world. The problem that Soskice pulls out of this conundrum is more than epistemological; it is the problem of hope. If we are just any other creature, she asks, what hope do we have? Her answer is that we need to use this humbling experience as a confirmation that we are not God, and as a reason for renewed hope in God.

The humbling “death of man” is the death of a “fiction—that of man as completely rational, completely wise, and completely in control.” In accepting the death of man, we accept that we do not have total control; we must relinquish any fantasies of mastery. In that relinquishing is a “letting go” that is the key to hope. Soskice derives a connection between hope and letting go from both Karl Rahner and Paul Ricoeur. “In its openness to the future of God, hope is far from being a deadening opiate, rendering us passive and immobile in the face of our present challenges. On the contrary, hope is angry for a better world, and it is that which both commands and enables us to move forward.”⁵⁶ She recognizes the temporal dimension of hope, but sees it channeled through present action. “Hope, like faith and love, is a state of readiness

⁵⁶ Soskice, 76.

which is displayed in action.” She provides the example of parents undertaking the quotidian tasks of preparing food and washing clothes for their children—actions that imbued with love for their children, who are the reason these actions exist.⁵⁷ This is the kind of hope in God that Soskice advocates. It is not a “transient and optimistic *emotion*. It is a readiness to act, a directedness, a commitment, a passionate practicality. Hope is attentive and it changes your life.”⁵⁸ Hope, then, is an active and affective way of living in the present. This kind of hope is acceptable to the aims of my project. It is the deadening hope, hope that posits all human energy in an unrealized future, that I am against; by contrast, hope that is in Soskice’s words “angry for a better world” might be exactly what we need. Soskice does not make it clear whence that hope cometh, however—she simply states that it is necessary. My answer is that hope can be derived from the connectivity that Merleau-Ponty’s ontology reveals, via an inscending, apophatic anthropology. To inscend is to delve deeper into our materiality, into our connections. An apophatic anthropology of nonexceptionalism may leave us without any hope of epistemological certainty, not only about things of the world but also about the very borders of our own identities, but it also opens us up to the wellspring of our connectedness with agential and fructiferous Being.

Mourning: Becoming Inscrutable to Oneself

The other side of hope, and what is arguably necessary *for* hope, is a capacity for mourning. The cry for hope comes only from an acknowledgement of mourning. Ecologically

⁵⁷ Soskice, 78.

⁵⁸ Soskice, 78 emphasis added.

speaking, we mourn the worldview that we have lost and the deaths for which our species is responsible. On a basic level, part of what it means to be beings based in perception is the impact that other life forms' existence and passing away have on our affective realities. For many, climate change has both precipitated the realization that we are not granted special status, and also confronted human beings with a sense of ambivalent helplessness in the face of our combined victimhood and complicity for environmental destruction (which was the framing problem of this whole investigation). Mourning can provide the catalyst for action within the reality described by this anthropology, functioning as a first step in working toward that shared agency for change mentioned above, and making a space for hope. Addressing the reality of anthropogenic climate change while moving away from human exceptionalism affects how grief and mourning can be conceptualized. I have pointed out the difficult position that humans partaking in the Global North find ourselves in, as we begin to feel the effects of climate change and experience ourselves simultaneously as victims and perpetrators. These feelings are arguably a kind of unacknowledged *Weltschmerz* over the state of things, an inability to process our losses. Judith Butler's relational take on mourning is congruous with the relational identity constitution of my anthropology, and provides a way to understand what happens in this time of extinction within which we find ourselves.

Butler writes, "it is not as if an 'I' exists independently over here and then simply loses a 'you' over there, especially if the attachment to 'you' is part of what composes who 'I' am. If I lose you, under these conditions, then I not only mourn the loss, but I become *inscrutable to myself*."⁵⁹ Here, Butler is referring to what it means to lose one or more human others, and asks

⁵⁹ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, Reprint edition (London ; New York:

who gets to count as a life worthy of our grief. But her language around the composition of the self being interwoven with the being of another echoes a Merleau-Pontian fleshy enmeshment: without the world that I sense, how can I know what I am? Moreover, when the loss of the other causes me to become “inscrutable” to myself, is that not an example of a deepening or at least confirmation of our apophatic anthropology? That is, my boundaries are already unspeakable in the sense that they could not clearly be said to be here or there; even so, there is a certain stability of the perception of myself contained within this vagueness, enough so that, without intentional focus upon those mutual imbrications, one can intuit a solid, unassailable selfhood. However, when I experience an ecological loss that strikes me at a personal level—a beloved animal species has become extinct, the Great Barrier Reef’s colors have been perhaps irreparably muted by coral bleaching, or it is too warm for the sugar maples by my house in Ohio to produce syrup anymore—do I not also find it hard to understand who I am anymore? Granted, this kind of loss cannot possess the same acuity as the loss of a close family member (human or otherwise), but produces, rather, a subtle yet troubling disturbance upon the surface of my allegedly solid self. This vague discomfort is an ineluctable reminder of the role of nonhuman others upon my self-constitution: my own identity is clouded by the current degradation, which is evidence that I was always already constituted by the world, as I have been arguing. The apophysis of my anthropological identity is brought to the surface as parts of myself are being distorted and removed in this time of climate change.

The fact that mourning has in many ways been denied us in American society is part of the culture of human exceptionalism, and “anthropocentric individualism has accompanied the

Verso, 2006), 22.

denial of mourning.”⁶⁰ Vast ecological losses have not traditionally been considered grievable, although certain segments of society entertain discourse that is more permissive of ecological grief. Of anthropocentric individualism, Butler cautions that “its displacement does not guarantee a mindful alternative. But it makes it possible.”⁶¹ We cannot simply assume that a relational, nonhierarchical understanding of the human being is going to promote full acknowledgement of our entanglement and the mourning that losses in this web provokes. Indeed, Butler suggests that a careless theory of blanket human-world relationality could actually occlude the significance of specific individuals. I agree with Catherine Keller that, in this way, Butler raises a valid challenge to ecological ontologies of interrelationality.⁶² Specifically, Butler asks, “Is it possible that in our ways of reversing and displacing anthropocentrism we overlook the singularity of loss?”⁶³ If it is all one, if we are all connected, do we further deny ourselves the right to grieve individual losses, and the loss of any one given individual? No, because instead of making mourning impossible, this individual-world enmeshment actually facilitates a greater sense of the value of each individual.⁶⁴ This is another area where the concept of shared flesh allows for

⁶⁰ Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible*, 235.

⁶¹ Keller, 235.

⁶² Keller, 234.

⁶³ Judith Butler, “On This Occasion...,” in *Butler on Whitehead: On the Occasion*, ed. Roland Faber, Michael Halewood, and Deena Lin (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2012), 15, <http://public.eblib.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=1046288>.

⁶⁴ It would not be unreasonable to fear that, in highlighting the irreplaceability of nonhumans, we lose the sense of a given human individual as discreet and grievable. Yet as Keller notes, “our singularity—in loss and in flourishing—does not depend upon the anthropocentric separation.” Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible*, 235. That is, human exceptionalism is not a prerequisite for individual worth. It is not one or the other—there is no zero sum game of mourning or singularity. We do not have to subjugate nonhumans in our value systems in order to find the unique value of our fellow *Homo sapiens*. In fact, I would even contend that it heightens our awareness

individuality within continuity.

In an anthropology in which each individual is constituted by its perceptions and relations, no two sets of accumulated experiences could ever be the same, and no one individual could ever fully take the place of another. Laurel Schneider has provided a thought experiment in which we consider two identical human clones. She asks: what makes them different? Obviously, the fact that they do not occupy the same space at the same time, which leads us to realize that space and time—environs and actions, in other words—are at least partially determinative of what comprises individual identity. Moreover, it is not just what the world does to the two identical organisms over the course of time, but also, how they impact the world. “Their multiplicity is a differing occurrence in the world. They alter the world, making heterogeneous difference in the world.”⁶⁵ Difference not only makes me, but I literally *make* (a) difference in the world. As I mentioned in Chapter 4, I have meaning to the world: I impact a world that is sensitive to my action, and vice versa. That is part of what has been missing from Cartesian, inert-matter ontologies; so focused were they on the actions that we do or do not take upon this world, that they overlooked the fact that our being implicitly “matters” and influences the world, even without our deliberate intent. Not only this one person, but also this one pet, this one ash tree, or, as in Schneider’s example, this lone crocus, cannot be completely replaced and will never come again.⁶⁶ Such an understanding could inspire a greater attitude of conservancy, as well as a

of human irreplaceability .

⁶⁵ Laurel Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism: A Theology of Multiplicity*, 1 edition (London, England ; New York: Routledge, 2007), 166.

⁶⁶ This can also be considered part of a larger conversation on animal ethics, with regard to Peter Singer’s critique of the “replaceability argument.” Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 3 edition (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 106.

restored faith in the significance of one's own individual self that is continuously constituted by our chiasmic relationship with the world. Reconsidering "grievability," then, provides a new avenue for powers of hope; the way of hope is paved with mourning.

Hope: Finding Faith to Carry On

Given the reality of our grief, the denial of our epistemological security, for what can we hope? As mentioned above, hope can begin to be kindled in the realization of our own nonexceptional grievability that we share with all things, which implies our irreplaceable importance within a web of actions and interactions, of perceiving and being perceived. In order for this hope to fully germinate, however, requires a kind of "apo-theistic" (that is, other-than-theistic) faith. Our earthly survival may depend upon this faith: the faith to care for the world *as though* it is not a lost cause, even though it seems that there is no way that the cause could be won.⁶⁷ It may seem ironic, given that I began this dissertation determined to do theology that is grounded in what we can know, that I end by advocating for faith, which is by definition predicated on not knowing. Yet the initial goal was, after all, to address the emotional plight of existing in this situation; and it is in emotions, or affect, that I locate this faith.

I turn to John Caputo for a template for how to think of faith, because Caputo has been working in a vein that parallels the ecofeminist-to-materialist move I discussed in Chapter 1. Being able to bring these two sides of the "religion versus materialism" debate together is fundamental to the "possibility" of radical theology, for Caputo, insofar as that debate pits materialism's sense of the finality of death with "some version of personal survival,

⁶⁷ A little like a nonsupernatural version of Kierkegaard's Knight of Faith.

reincarnation, immortality, or bodily resurrection.”⁶⁸ That is, defining materialism as an orientation to death as final—which he places in contrast to religious supernaturalists for whom there is some kind of afterlife—Caputo works toward a religious materialism that is religious without entailing a concept of life after death. The faith that is coherent with a radical theology such as this (and such as my theological anthropology) is what Caputo calls a “cosmo-theopoetic faith in life.” It is a faith that does not depend on something beyond this life. He defines this apophatically at first: this kind of faith is neither fideism, nor Kant’s ethical faith, nor confessionism. This faith, by contrast, is what Caputo calls “the unsafe faith,” the faith that

animates or...haunts...a religion without religion. [...] This faith, which cannot insulate or immunize itself against un-faith, is a faith in life that does not know how to keep life safe from death. This is faith in the promise/threat. It fails to be either safe or saving, and in fact maintains our exposure to the worst. It begins and ends in the confession, in the circum-fession, that nothing keeps us safe, that the stars do not know we’re here. It does not claim to circumvent the law of entropy [...]. It struggles against death but it does not taunt death and ask where its victory is, which is all too clear.⁶⁹

This is the kind of faith for a religion without religion, and I propose that it can also serve for an anthropology without anthropology—that is, my Merleau-Pontian apophatic anthropology.

This “faith” is defined outside of the usual dichotomy of faithful versus faithless. The faith that Caputo has in mind is not, he says, the faith that stands “in opposition to un-faith but in utter dependence upon it.” It is needed precisely *because* we are “so deeply unbelieving,” just as hope is necessitated by a state of hopelessness.⁷⁰ But this is not faith only as an intellectual

⁶⁸ Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, 228.

⁶⁹ Caputo, 229.

⁷⁰ Caputo, 230.

exercise, a stubborn, paradoxical faith that exists just for the sake of not being un-faith. This is faith *in* something—but in what? It is faith in life itself: life as that combination of life and death, and as the potential for novelty.⁷¹ We have faith, which Caputo also understands as a form of love, in life. I hold that the “life” that Caputo has in mind is a metonym for the totality of the Flesh as a whole. That is, faith in life is not some “biophilia,” perpetuating a patriarchal fear and denial of death. The nonliving are not excluded from this love; he uses the term “life” out of respect to the fact that one has to be alive to love them.⁷² One could even consider the words in a different meaning. Faith in life could mean not just that I put some measure of trust or belief in life; it could also mean that there exists, within life, faith. Faith emerges out of life, and, like the coils of the flesh, folds over itself from life and toward life, a state of mind arising from life and directed toward life, whose fulcrum is the human chiasm.

I diverge from Caputo’s line of thought when he focuses this faith on “the chance for a new being,” as it fits into his *event-ual* theopoetics and his sense of “perhaps.”⁷³ Novelty, ever emergent from the present, is undoubtedly a significant component of the operation of the flesh. Yet the anticipation of the event, as I have said in previous chapters, directs attention to a temporal not-yet, which enables us to overlook our personal continuity with the here-now. The founding question of this project was: how can we live in this climate-changing world? Faith is something we need in these times, but not something that we need *in time*. Like hope whose

⁷¹ And, I might add, perhaps in an Arendtian “natality,” which, as I discuss in the Conclusion, is one of the directions in which I would like to take this work in the future.

⁷² Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, 237.

⁷³ Caputo, 237.

energy is focused on present actions, the faith we need is spatial rather than temporal.

It is not faith *that* something will or could happen, but rather, faith *in* this existence happening now and in the present and future significance of actions taken in the here and now. Temporal faith can abstract us from this reality. Now, Caputo maintains, with Derrida, that this faith is in a “coming God which is not conflated with a future actuality.”⁷⁴ That is, we are not literally expecting a realized event in the future to be taking place. Yet it is still a forward-looking *mood*, at the very least.⁷⁵

I agree with Ruether’s critique of future-oriented theologies and ideologies. In discussing historical eschatologies and Marxist millennialism (which, while not the same thing as the event discussed by Caputo, share enough similarities as to make this criticism applicable), Ruether’s position is that:

This desire to keep history open and able to constantly transcend itself is an important concern, but it is still based on a model of endlessly stretching forward into the future. God, the ideal human and ideal world, exists only in the unrealized future...this endless flight into the future idolizes change and fails to respect the relational pattern of our bodies as ground of holy being.⁷⁶

Although contemporary ecomaterialisms strive to incorporate relationality into their schemes, change and futurity continue to be the locus of the holy. By contrast, I advocate for also cultivating a spatial faith, an *inscending* faith that delves into our interconnected identity and reality for support. Though there is of course a temporal element to all of this, but I want to

⁷⁴ Caputo, 286n10.

⁷⁵ Of course it is necessary at times for an individual to have such an orientation in order go on living, to see it through to the other side of a situation that seems unbearable. It is also the case that this same quality of future-orientation can also be used to encourage submission and complacency.

⁷⁶ Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 253–54.

direct the emphasis of faith away from a hope in the future and toward a present awareness of our spatial interconnectedness.

In spatial faith and active hope, our respect to time is paid not in revering something as-yet-unknown to come, but in feeling our physical place as fully material beings. There is obviously a futural dimension to this insofar as space and time are the warp and weft of the universe, but the emphasis of human longing is here directed to an awesome connectedness rather than a future way out. This is complicated by the problem of climate change, because climate change is about an ongoing shift from a relatively predictable global status quo to an uncertain, volatile future of extreme weather events. Understanding climate change requires us to grasp the implications of past and present actions on present and future living conditions, and so temporality is built into that conception. Yet, as I have been arguing, a sense of being exempt from the laws of nature is what underlay the attitudes and actions that brought us to this point. Any anthropology that points to change and futurity as the loci of our hope continues to redirection human energy from the reality of our connectedness.

All we have is the present moment, and we find ourselves facing it again and again. In order to act ethically within each given moment, we need to value the space in which we find ourselves, the materiality of ourselves and of those around us. Apophatic anthropology and incandence can help cultivate a sense of this physical relatedness, and thereby enable us to act in ways that are less harmful and that could help us bear the changes we have wrought with greater equanimity.

Faith in this present relationality looks like the irrational position of not despairing over our relative powerlessness in the face of climate change. It is believing that it is worth carrying on in some way, even though the data suggest that patterns of irreversible glacier melt may have

already begun and the seas will inexorably rise; it is faith to continue into this unknown with the world that we have altered. Faith is believing that that we as a species can change, in spite of the fact that we have created this situation with our as-yet unabated fossil-fuel addiction—but not because we are waiting for change, but rather because we are embracing an immediate and engaged way of living into our materiality. It is faith to care for the world *as though* it is not hopeless, to find an active and affective hope on the other side of mourning, and to care for ourselves in the balance between vulnerability and culpability, feeling a profound kinship with this altered climate both because of our culpability and because the patterns of our own lives have been altered. Perhaps by cultivating such faith, a faith in our individual lives within this flesh of life and death, we powerful, knowledgeable, yet nonexceptional humans can find a way to carry on. Perhaps we will find a way in this destabilized climate, in this time of rising seas, to live into greater mutual flourishing for all.

Conclusion

I have argued that a new theological anthropology is necessary in the face of Earth's changing climate, which has put us in the position of needing not only to change our actions but also to find a way to understand what it means to be human given that we can no longer deny that we depend upon systems greater than us. The human nonexceptionalism that ecofeminists propounded is needed more than ever, and to a greater degree, to help us understand who we are at this time. Ecofeminist theology has been morphing into ecomaterialist theology, but neither has adequately addressed what it means for human beings to be ontologically nondifferent from the world. This dissertation has taken the foundational principles of ecofeminist theology, and made a foray into ecomaterialism in a different way in order to construct a theological

anthropology that can speak to our times.

Specifically, I showed that ecofeminist theology articulated the need to undo the “big lie” that those things that were most life-supporting were least valuable, a lie which has contributed to exceptionalist anthropologies. I have argued that I am doing work in the spirit of that ecofeminist critique by pushing past the lingering exceptionalism I identified even within ecofeminism itself, and the functional exceptionalism of ecomaterialism that overlooked the significance of this anthropological shift. Identifying the causes of this lacuna in the issues of consciousness and transcendent experience, I “stay with the trouble”⁷⁷ of the human-world non-divide, and address those issues with Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of the flesh.

In Merleau-Ponty, I found a way to bridge the scientific understanding of the human with our affective questions of meaning. Merleau-Ponty provides the means to understand the human in the world via a modality of the Flesh, whose folds, via the structure of the chiasm, are able to account for consciousness (the inside-outside problem), transcendent experience (where do I find meaning?) and the apparent gaps between bodies within an enriched materiality. I bring this phenomenological approach to human perceptual experience to theology via a method I dub “radical, naturalistic theology,” in order to justify an approach to theology that begins in experience and rejects absolute revelatory claims.

The result has been a nonexceptionalist anthropology that presents the human in non-hierarchical continuity with animals and the universe as a whole, and does not have to place human cognition or emotion outside of that framework. This achieves Sallie McFague’s goal of restoring a sense of being at home on the earth, and reinterprets theology itself as a reflection of

⁷⁷ Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Duke University Press, 2016).

the inherent movement of being itself into interrogatory folds. It has implications for theology (method and content), as well.

Noting that a significant concern for such an anthropology is that it could be dependent on an ontology that permits for no real difference between entities, I show how the Flesh does, in fact, allow for diversity within unity, which means that it therefore allows for relationality and, hence, ethics in general. However, I raise the issue that *ecofeminist* ethical charges concerning the environment have continued to rely on certain assumptions of human exceptionalism, and I contend that there is actually a more sustainable case to be made for ethics coming from a nonexceptionalist starting point.

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