



GEONTOLOGIES

A REQUIEM
TO LATE
LIBERALISM

ELIZABETH A. POVINELLI



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Elizabeth A. Povinelli

Duke University Press · Durham and London · 2016

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Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞

Designed by Courtney Leigh Baker

Typeset in Garamond Premier Pro by Westchester Publishing Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Povinelli, Elizabeth A., author.

Title: *Geontologies* : a requiem to late liberalism / Elizabeth A. Povinelli.

Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2016. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016016699

ISBN 9780822362111 (hardcover : alk. paper)

ISBN 9780822362333 (pbk. : alk. paper)

ISBN 9780822373810 (e-book)

Subjects: LCSH: Ethnology—Philosophy. | Life. | Ontology. | Liberalism.

Classification: LCC GN345.P65 2016 | DDC 305.8001—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2016016699>

Cover art: Elizabeth A. Povinelli, “Breath, 3,” 2014.

To *all* of us,
karrabing or karrakal,
gagathenibarru

SO LITTLE OF WHAT COULD
HAPPEN DOES HAPPEN.

—SALVADOR DALI

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Acknowledgments

This book represents my understanding of a collection of thoughts and analytics regarding the governance of difference and markets in settler late liberalism. This piece of writing is probably best understood in relation to my previous books. I have, nevertheless, made every effort to keep this book self-contained. There would be no thought to self-contain were it not for a world of critical thinkers and actors whom I know and have known. To most people who read this book, their names will be familiar and unfamiliar: Ruby Yarrowin, Betty Bilawag, Bobby Lane, Maudie Bennett, Agnes Lippo, Maggie Timber, Alice Wainbirri, Margorie Nuki, Ester Djarem, Tom Barradjap, John Bianamu, Frank Dumu, Cold Blood, the members of the Karrabing (including Linda Yarrowin, Rex Sing, Rex Edmunds, Cecilia Lewis, Robyn Lane, Trevor Bianamu, Sandra Yarrowin, and Claude Holtze), Nadia Abu El Haj, Julieta Aranda, David Barker, Thomas Bartlett, Sheridan Bartlett, Kathryn Behar, Lauren Berlant, Mario Blaser, Marisol de la Cadena, Jason Coleman, Jodi Dean, Dilip Gaonkar, Natasha Ginala, Sarah Coleman Harwell, Elizabeth Johnson, Liza Johnson, Eduardo Kohn, Tess Lea, Tom Sleight, Nick Shapiro, Audra Simpson, Peter Skafish, Anton Vidokle, Michael Warner, Robyn Wiegman, Elizabeth Wilson, Susanne Winterling, Brian Wood, Kathryn Yuseff, and Vivian Zihlerl. I would also like to thank the conveners and audiences at the Cogut Center for the Humanities, Brown University; the Luma Foundation Futures of Lyotard's *Resistance*; the Society of the Humanities, Cornell University; the Politics, Ethics, Ontologies Conference, Amsterdam Institute for the Social Sciences; the Climatic Unconscious Conference, sponsored by e-flux and the Remai Modern, Saskatoon; the Conference on Engineered Worlds, University of Chicago; the Center for the Study of Women and Men,

Hobart & William Smith College; More Than Human Sensoria, Chemical Heritage Foundation; the Royal Geographical Association; the Department of Social Anthropology, the University of Cape Town; the Indexing the Human Workshop, Stellenbosch University; the Center for Humanities Research, the University of the Western Cape; the Anthropology of South Africa Conference, Potchefstroom; the Perez Art Museum, Miami; the EcoMaterialism Conference, University of California, Irvine; the Critical Theory Workshop, University of Pennsylvania; the Department of Anthropology, McGill University; the Sawyer Seminar Workshop, Cornell University; the Anthropocene Project, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Challenged Lifeworlds, University of Victoria; the Canadian Association of American Studies, Banff; Gender and Cultural Studies, Sydney University; the School of Communications Summer School, Northwestern University; the Center for the 21st Century, University of Wisconsin; Comparative Politics Workshop, University of Chicago; the Institute for Science, Innovation and Society, University of Oxford; the Institute for Research on Women, Rutgers University; Theorizing Sovereignty, Yale University; the Academy of Fine Arts, Oslo; Department of Political Science, University of Queensland; Cerisy; Institute for Global Law and Policy, Harvard Law School; the Department of Social Anthropology, University of Manchester; the Department of Anthropology, Rice University; Cosmopolitics, University of California, Davis; and the Consortium of Humanities Centers and Institutes, Australian National University. I would also like to extend my thanks to the Northern Institute at Charles Darwin University and the North Australian Research Unit for making such hospitable environments for my stay in the north.

Finally, but not lastly, I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers who demonstrated that precious if rare quality of forceful critical engagement; and, of course, my long-standing editor, Ken Wissoker, and my enduring irreplaceable friend, Susan L. Edmunds.

THE THREE FIGURES
OF GEONTOLOGY

The Figures and the Tactics

For a long time many have believed that Western Europe spawned and then spread globally a regime of power best described as biopolitics. Biopolitics was thought to consist of a “set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power.”¹ Many believe that this regime was inaugurated in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and then consolidated during the 1970s. Prior to this, in the age of European kings, a very different formation of power, namely, sovereign power, reigned. Sovereign power was defined by the spectacular, public performance of the right to kill, to subtract life, and, in moments of regal generosity, to let live. It was a regime of sovereign thumbs, up or down, and enacted over the tortured, disemboweled, charred, and hacked bodies of humans—and sometimes of

cats.² Royal power was not merely the claim of an absolute power over life. It was a carnival of death. The crowds gathered in a boisterous jamboree of killing—hawking wares, playing dice—not in reverent silence around the sanctity of life. Its figure, lavishly described at the opening of Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, was the drawn-and-quartered regicide.

How different does that formation of power seem to how we conceive of legitimate power now, what we ask of it, and, in asking, what it creates? And how different do the figures seem through which the contemporary formation of power entails its power? We do not see kings and their subjects, or bodies hacked into pieces, but states and their populations, individuals and their management of health, the Malthusian couple, the hysterical woman, the perverse adult, and the masturbating child. Sure, some social formations seem to indicate a return to sovereign power, such as the US and European security states and their secret rendition centers created in the wake of 9/11, 7/7, 11-M (the Madrid train bombings), Charlie Hebdo. . . . But these manifestations of a new hard sovereign power are deeply insinuated in operations of biopower—through the stochastic rhythms of specific algorithms and experiments in social media—something Foucault anticipated in his lectures on security, territory, and population.³ Is it such a wonder, then, that some believe a great divide separates the current regime of biopolitics from the ancient order of sovereignty? Or that some think that disciplinary power (with its figures of camps, barracks, and schools, and its regularization of life) and biopolitics (with its four figures of sexuality, its technological tracking of desire at the level of the individual and population, and its normation of life) arch their backs against this ancient savage sovereign *dispositif*?

Foucault was hardly the first to notice the transformation of the form and rationale of power in the long history of Western Europe—and, insofar as it shaped the destinies of its imperial and colonial reach, power writ globally. Perhaps most famously, Hannah Arendt, writing nearly twenty years before Foucault would begin his lectures on biopower, bewailed the emergence of the “Social” as the referent and purpose of political activity.⁴ Arendt did not contrast the era of European kings and courts to the modern focus on the social body, but rather she contrasted the latter to the classical Greek division between public and private realms. For Arendt the public was the space of political deliberation and action carved out of and defined by its freedom from and antagonism to the realm of necessity. The

public was the active exclusion of the realm of necessity—everything having to do with the physical life of the body—and this exclusion constituted the public realm as such. For Arendt, the space of necessity began leaking into the public during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, creating a new topology of the public and private. She termed this new spacing “the Social.” Rather than excluding bodily needs, wants, and desires from political thought, the liberal “Social” state embraced them, letting loose *homo economicus* to sack the public forum and establish itself as the *raison d’être* of the political. Ever since, the liberal state gains its legitimacy by demonstrating that it anticipates, protects, and enhances the biological and psychological needs, wants, and desires of its citizens.

If Foucault was not the first word on the subject of biopolitics he was also not the last. As lighthearted as his famous quip might have been that this century would bear the name “Deleuze,” he would no doubt have been pleased to see the good race that his concept of the biopolitical has run, spawning numerous neologisms (biopower, biopolitics, thanatopolitical, necropolitics, positive and negative forms of biopower, neuropolitics) and spreading into anthropology, cultural and literary studies, political theory, critical philosophy, and history. Jacques Derrida and Donna Haraway would explore the concept of auto-immunity from the point of view of the biopolitical.⁵ Giorgio Agamben would put Arendt and Foucault in conversation in order to stretch the origins of the emergence of the biopolitical back to Greek and Roman law.⁶ Roberto Esposito would counter the negative readings of Agamben by arguing that a positive form of biopolitics could be found in innovative readings of Martin Heidegger, Georges Canguilhem, and Baruch Spinoza.⁷ Foucault’s concept of biopolitics has also been battered by accusations of a narcissistic provinciality.⁸ This provinciality becomes apparent when biopolitics is read from a different global history—when biopolitics is given a different social geography. Thus many authors across the global south have insisted that it is impossible to write a history of the biopolitical that starts and ends in European history, *even when* Western Europe is the frame of reference. Achille Mbembe, for instance, argued that the sadistic expressions of German Nazism were genealogically related to the sadisms of European colonialism. In the colonial space “the generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations” were the experimental precursor for the extermination camps in Europe.⁹ And before

Mbembe, W. E. B. Du Bois argued that the material and discursive origins of European monumentalism, such as the gleaming boulevards of Brussels, were found in the brutal colonial regimes of the Congo.¹⁰ This global genealogy of both the extraction and production of materiality and life has led Rosi Braidotti to conclude, “Bio-power and necro-politics are two sides of the same coin.”¹¹

But are the concepts of biopolitics, positive or negative, or necropolitics, colonial or postcolonial, the formation of power in which late liberalism now operates—or has been operating? If, paraphrasing Gilles Deleuze, concepts open understanding to what is all around us but not in our field of vision, does biopolitics any longer gather together under its conceptual wings what needs to be thought if we are to understand contemporary late liberalism?¹² Have we been so entranced by the image of power working through life that we haven’t noticed the new problems, figures, strategies, and concepts emerging all around us, suggesting another formation of late liberal power—or the revelation of a formation that is fundamental to but hidden by the concept of biopower? Have we been so focused on exploring each and every wrinkle in the biopolitical fold—biosecurity, biospectrality, thanatopoliticality—that we forgot to notice that the figures of biopower (the hysterical woman, the Malthusian couple, the perverse adult, and the masturbating child; the camps and barracks, the panopticon and solitary confinement), once so central to our understanding of contemporary power, now seem not as decisive, to be inflected by or giving way to new figures: the Desert, the Animist, the Virus? And is a return to sovereignty our only option for understanding contemporary late liberal power? This introduction and the following chapters attempt to elaborate how our allegiance to the concept of biopower is hiding and revealing another problematic—a formation for want of a better term I am calling *geontological* power, or *geontopower*.

So let me say a few words about what I mean by geontological power, or geontopower, although its scope and import can only be known in the immanent worlds in which it continues to be made and unmade—one of which this book engages. The simplest way of sketching the difference between geontopower and biopower is that the former does not operate through the governance of life and the tactics of death but is rather a set of discourse, affects, and tactics used in late liberalism to maintain or shape the coming relationship of the distinction between Life and Nonlife.¹³

This book argues that as the previously stable ordering divisions of Life and Nonlife shake, new figures, tactics, and discourses of power are displacing the biopolitical quartet. But why use these terms rather than others? Why not use meteorontological power, which might more tightly reference the concept of climate change? Why not coin the ill-sounding term “gexistent,” given that throughout this book I use the term “existent” to reference what might elsewhere be described as life, thing, organism, and being? Wouldn’t gexistence better semanticize my claim, elaborated below and in subsequent chapters, that Western ontologies are covert biontologies—Western metaphysics as a measure of all forms of existence by the qualities of one form of existence (*bios, zoe*)—and that biopolitics depends on this metaphysics being kept firmly in place? In the end I decided to retain the term *geontology* and its cognates, such as *geontopower*, because I want to intensify the contrasting components of nonlife (*geos*) and being (ontology) currently in play in the late liberal governance of difference and markets. Thus, geontology is intended to highlight, on the one hand, the biontological enclosure of existence (to characterize all existents as endowed with the qualities associated with Life). And, on the other hand, it is intended to highlight the difficulty of finding a critical language to account for the moment in which a form of power long self-evident in certain regimes of settler late liberalism is becoming visible globally.

Let me emphasize this last point. Geontopower is not a power that is only now emerging to replace biopolitics—biopower (the governance through life and death) has long depended on a subtending geontopower (the difference between the lively and the inert). And, similarly to how necropolitics operated openly in colonial Africa only later to reveal its shape in Europe, so geontopower has long operated openly in settler late liberalism and been insinuated in the ordinary operations of its governance of difference and markets. The attribution of an *inability* of various colonized people to differentiate the kinds of things that have agency, subjectivity, and intentionality of the sort that emerges with life has been the grounds of casting them into a premodern mentality and a postrecognition difference. Thus the point of the concepts of geontology and geontopower is not to found a new ontology of objects, nor to establish a new metaphysics of power, nor to adjudicate the possibility or impossibility of the human ability to know the truth of the world of things. Rather they are concepts meant to help make visible the figural tactics of late liberalism as a long-standing

biontological orientation and distribution of power crumbles, losing its efficacy as a self-evident backdrop to reason. And, more specifically, they are meant to illuminate the cramped space in which my Indigenous colleagues are forced to maneuver as they attempt to keep relevant their critical analytics and practices of existence.¹⁴ In short, geontopower is not a concept first and an application to my friends' worlds second, but a concept that emerges from what late liberal governance looks like from this cramped space.

To begin to understand the work of the concept of geontopower relative to biopower, let me return to Foucault's three formations of power and ask two simple questions, the answers to which might have seemed long settled. First, are the relations among sovereign power, disciplinary power, and biopower ones of implication, distinction, determination, or set membership? And, second, did Foucault intend these modes of power to be historical periodizations, quasi-transcendent metaphysics of power, or variations within a more encompassing historical and social framework? Let's remember that for all our contemporary certainty that a gulf separates sovereignty from discipline power and biopower, Foucault seemed unsure of whether he was seeing a shared concept traversing all three formations of power or seeing three specific formations of power, each with their own specific conceptual unity. On the one hand, he writes that the eighteenth century witnessed "the appearance (*l'apparition*)—one might say the invention—of a new mechanism of power which had very specific procedures, completely new instruments, and very different equipment."¹⁵ And yet Foucault also states that the formations of power do not follow each other like beads on a rosary. Nor do they conform to a model of Hegelian *aufhebung*; sovereignty does not dialectically unfold into disciplinary power and disciplinary power into biopolitics. Rather, all three formations of power are always co-present, although how they are arranged and expressed relative to each other vary across social time and space.¹⁶ For example, German fascism deployed all three formations of power in its Holocaust—the figure of Hitler exemplified the right of the sovereign to decide who was enemy or friend and thus could be killed or allowed to live; the gas chambers exemplified the regularity of disciplinary power; and the Aryan exemplified governance through the imaginary of population and hygiene.

We can find more recent examples. President George W. Bush and his vice president, Dick Cheney, steadfastly and publicly claimed the right to extrajudicial killing (a right the subsequent president also claims). But they

did not enact their authority in public festivals where victims were drawn and quartered, but rather through secret human and drone-based special operations or in hidden rendition centers. And less explicit, and thus potentially more productive, new media technologies like Google and Facebook mobilize algorithms to track population trends across individual decisions, creating new opportunities for capital and new means of securitizing the intersection of individual pleasure and the well-being of certain populations, what Franco Berardi has called “semiocapitalism.”¹⁷ These modern tactics and aesthetics of sovereign power exist alongside what Henry Giroux, building on Angela Davis’s crucial work on the prison industrial complex, has argued are the central features of contemporary US power: biosecurity with its panoply of ordinary incarceration blocks, and severe forms of isolation.¹⁸ But even here, where US sovereignty seems to manifest its sharpest edge—state-sanctioned, prison-based killing—the killings are heavily orchestrated with an altogether different aesthetic and affective ordering from the days of kings. This form of state killing has witnesses, but rather than hawking wares these witnesses sit behind a glass wall where a curtain is discreetly drawn while the victim is prepared for death—or if “complications” arise, it is quickly pulled shut. The boisterous crowds are kept outside: those celebrating kept on one side of a police barrier, those holding prayer vigils on the other side. Other examples of the co-presence of all three formations of power float up in less obvious places—such as in the changing public announcements to passengers as Qantas flights approach Australian soil. Whereas staff once announced that passengers should be aware of the country’s strict animal and plant quarantine regulations, they now announce the country’s strict “biosecurity laws.”

And yet across these very different entanglements of power we continue to use the language of sovereignty, disciplinary power, and biopolitics as if these formations were independent of each other and of history. It is as if, when we step into their streams, the currents of these various formations pull us in different directions. On the one hand, each formation of power seems to express a distinct relation, aesthetic, and tactic even as, on the other hand, we are left with a lingering feeling that some unnamed shared conceptual matrix underpins all three—or at least sovereign power on the one side and disciplinary and biopower on the other. I am hardly the first to notice this. Alain Badiou notes that, as Foucault moved from an archaeological approach to a genealogical one, “a doctrine of ‘fields’” began to

substitute for a sequence of “epistemological singularities” in such a way that Foucault was brought back “to the concept and to philosophy.”¹⁹ In other words, while Badiou insists that Foucault was “neither a philosopher nor a historian nor a bastardized combination of the two,” he also posits that something like a metaphysical concept begins to emerge in his late work, especially in his thinking about biopolitics and the hermeneutics of the self and other. For Badiou this concept was power. And it is exactly here that the difference between biopolitics and geontopower is staked.

Rather than power, I would propose that what draws the three formations together is a common but once unmarked ontological assertion, namely, that there is a distinction between Life and Nonlife that makes a difference. Now, and ever more globally, this assertion is marked. For example, the once unremarkable observation that all three formations of power (sovereign power, disciplinary power, and biopower) work only “insofar as man is a living being” (*une prise de pouvoir sur l’homme en tant qu’être vivant*) today trips over the space between *en tant que* and *tant que*, between the “insofar as” and the “as long as.” This once perhaps not terribly belabored phrasing is now hard to avoid hearing as an epistemological and ontological conditional: all three formations work *as long as* we continue to conceptualize humans as *living things* and *as long as* humans *continue to exist*. Yes, sovereignty, discipline, and biopolitics stage, aestheticize, and publicize the dramas of life and death differently. And, yes, starting from the eighteenth century, the anthropological and physical sciences came to conceptualize humans as a single species subject to a natural law governing the life and death of individuals and species. And, yes, these new discourses opened a new relationship between the way that sovereign law organized its powers around life and death and the way that biopolitics did. And, yes, Foucault’s quick summary of this transformation as a kind of inversion from the right to kill and let live to the power of making live and letting die should be modified in the light of the fact that contemporary states make live, let die, *and* kill. And, yes, all sorts of liberalisms seem to evidence a biopolitical stain, from settler colonialism to developmental liberalism to full-on neoliberalism.²⁰ But something is causing these statements to be irrevocably read and experienced through a new drama, not the drama of life and death, but a form of death that begins and ends in Nonlife—namely the extinction of humans, biological life, and, as it is often put, the planet itself—which takes us to a time before the life and death of individuals and

species, a time of the *geos*, of soulessness. The modifying phrase “insofar as” now foregrounds the *anthropos* as just one element in the larger set of not merely animal life but all Life as opposed to the state of original and radical Nonlife, the vital in relation to the inert, the extinct in relation to the barren. In other words, it is increasingly clear that the *anthropos* remains an element in the set of life only insofar as Life can maintain its distinction from Death/Extinction *and* Nonlife. It is also clear that late liberal strategies for governing difference and markets also only work insofar as these distinctions are maintained. And it is exactly because we can hear “insofar” that we know that these brackets are now visible, debatable, fraught, and anxious. It is certainly the case that the statement “clearly, x humans are more important than y rocks” continues to be made, persuade, stop political discourse. But what interests me in this book is the slight hesitation, the pause, the intake of breath that now can interrupt an immediate assent.

This is the formula that is now unraveling:

Life (Life{birth, growth, reproduction}v. Death) v. Nonlife.

The Concept and Its Territories

Many attribute the crumbling of the self-evident distinction between Life and Nonlife to the challenge that climate change poses in the geological era of the Anthropocene. Since Eugene Stoermer first coined the term “Anthropocene” and Paul Crutzen popularized it, the Anthropocene has meant to mark a geologically defined moment when the forces of human existence began to overwhelm all other biological, geological, and meteorological forms and forces and displace the Holocene. That is, the Anthropocene marks the moment when human existence became the determinate form of planetary existence—and a malignant form at that—rather than merely the fact that humans affect their environment. It’s hardly an uncontroversial concept. Even those geologists who support it do not agree on what criteria should be used to date its beginning. Many criteria and thus many dates have been proposed. Some place it at the beginning of the Neolithic Revolution when agriculture was invented and the human population exploded. Others peg it to the detonation of the atomic bomb, an event that left radioactive sediments in the stratigraphy and helped consolidate a notion of the earth (Gaia) as something that could be destroyed by human action and dramatize the difference between Life as a planetary phenomenon

and Nonlife as a coldness of space. Hannah Arendt's 1963 reflections on the launching of Sputnik and the lost contact "between the world of the senses and the appearances and the physical worldview" would be important here; as would be James Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis published two years later in the wake of the revolutionary Apollo 8 picture of earthrise, broadcast live on Christmas Eve 1968.²¹ Still others situate the beginning of the Anthropocene in the coal-fueled Industrial Revolution. While the British phrase "like selling coal to Newcastle" was first recorded in 1538, reminding us of the long history of coal use in Europe, the Industrial Revolution massively expanded the Lancashire, Somerset, and Northumberland coalfields in the eighteenth century, setting off a huge carbon bomb by releasing unheard-of tons of hydrocarbons into the atmosphere and resulting in our present climate revolution and, perhaps, the sixth great extinction.²² But the exploitation of the coalfields also uncovered large stratified fossil beds that helped spur the foundation of modern geologic chronology: the earth as a set of stratified levels of being and time. In other words, the concept of the Anthropocene is as much a product of the coalfields as an analysis of their formation insofar as the fossils within the coalfields helped produce and secure the modern discipline of geology and by contrast biology. But even as the coalfields helped create the modern disciplines of biology and geology, the carbon bomb it set off also slowly and then seemingly suddenly made these disciplinary distinctions differences of a different sort. From the perspective of the planetary carbon cycle, what difference does the difference between Life and Nonlife make? What new disciplinary combinations and alliances are necessary under the pressure of Anthropogenic climate change? Moreover if industrial capital was the cause of the modern discipline of geology and thus the secret origin of the new geological era and its disciplinary supports, why didn't we name and shame it rather than the Human? Indeed, James Moore has suggested that what we are calling the Anthropocene might be more accurately called the Capitalocene—what we are really witnessing are the material conditions of the last five hundred years of capitalism.²³ In Dennis Dimick's poetic rephrasing, the Anthropocene and climate change reflect nothing so much as industrial capitalism's dependence on "ancient sunshine."²⁴ Other names proliferate: the Plantationocene, the Anglocene, the Chthulucene . . .

How and why various scholars choose one geohistorical nomenclature or peg over another helps illuminate how geontopower is supported in,

and supports, natural life and critical life, and the ways in which all specific forms of existence, whether humans or others, are being governed in late liberalism. As the authors of a recent piece in *Nature* note, changes to the earth system are heterogeneous and diachronous, diffused and differential geographies that only appear as instantaneous earth events when viewed from the perspective of millions of years of stratigraphic compression.²⁵ But while all stratigraphic markers necessitate a “clear, datable marker documenting a global change that is recognizable in the stratigraphic record, coupled with auxiliary stratotypes documenting long-term changes to the Earth system,” the Anthropocene presents a specific problem insofar as it cannot rely “on solid aggregate mineral deposits (‘rock’) for the boundary”; it is “an event horizon largely lacking fossils” and thus must find a different basis for a global boundary stratotype section and point (a GSSP) “to formalize a time unit that extends to the present and thereby implicitly includes a view of the future.”²⁶ What is the clearest, materially supportable, and socially disinterested evidence of this new geological age: the carbon layer left from the Industrial Revolution, the CO₂ from the changing climate, the atomic signature that followed the atomic bomb?

Contemporary critical theorists may scoff at the idea that any of these markers are disinterested facts in the ground, but we will see that, from a specific and important angle, critical theory iterates rather than contests key desires of the natural sciences. I take up this point in the next chapter. Here it is useful merely to point out how each way of marking the key protagonists in the drama of the Anthropocene results in a different set of ethical, political, and conceptual problems and antagonisms rather than any one of these exiting the contemporary dilemma of geontopower. For instance, from the most literal-minded point of view, the Anthropocene contrasts the human actor to other biological, meteorological, and geological actors. The Human emerges as an abstraction on the one side with the Nonhuman world on the other. When did *humans* become the dominant force on the *world*? This way of sorting the world makes sense only from the disciplinary logic of geology, a disciplinary perspective that relies on natural types and species logics. From a geological point of view, the planet began without Life, with Nonlife, out of which, somehow, came sorts of Life. These sorts evolved until one sort threatened to extinguish not only its own sort but all sorts, returning the planet to an original lifelessness. In other words, when the abstraction of the Human is cast as the protagonist of the Anthropocene, a

specific set of characters crowd the stage—the Human, the Nonhuman, the Dead, the Never Alive. These characters act out a specific drama: the end of humans excites an anxiety about the end of Life and the end of Life excites an anxiety about the transformation of the blue orb into the red planet, Earth becoming Mars, unless Mars ends up having life. . . . Just as things are getting frothy, however, someone in the audience usually interrupts the play to remind everyone that Life and Nonlife and the Human and the Nonhuman are abstractions and distractions from the fact that *humans* did not create this problem. Rather, a specific mode of human society did, and even there, specific classes and races and regions of humans. After this interruption the antagonism shifts and the protagonists are neither humans and other biological, meteorological, and geological forces, nor Life and Nonlife. The antagonism is between various forms of human life-worlds and their different effects on the given-world.

But none of these ways of narrating the protagonists and antagonists of geontopower provide a clear social or political solution. For example, if we keep our focus on the effect that a mode of human sociality, say liberal capitalism, is having on other forms of life should we democratize Life such that all forms of existence have a say in the present use of the planet? Or should some forms of existence receive more ballots, or more weight in the voting, than others? Take the recent work of the anthropologist Anna Tsing in which she mobilizes the matsutake mushroom to make the case for a more inclusive politics of well-being; a political imaginary which conceptualizes the good as a world in which humans and nonhumans alike thrive. And yet this thriving is, perhaps as it must be, measured according to specific human points of view, which becomes clear when various other species of fungi come into view—for instance, those tree fungi that thrive in agri-capital nurseries such as *Hevea* root fungal parasites: *Rigidoporus lignosus* and *Phellinus noxius*. I might not want plantation capitalism to survive, but *R. lignosus* and *P. noxius* certainly do. *P. noxius* is not noxious from the point of view of nowhere but because it can be understood as the companion species to a specific form of human social existence, agricapitalism. So will I deny *P. noxius* a ballot? What will it have to agree to do and be before I agree to give it one? What else will need to abide by my rule in this new war of the world—those minerals, lakes, air particles, and currents that thrive in one formation but not another? “Sustainability” can quickly become a call to conceive a mode of (multi)existence that is pliant to our

desires even as political alliances become very confusing. After all, *P. noxius* may be the best class warrior we now have. It eats up the conditions of its being and it destroys what capital provides as the condition of its normative extension. True, it eats up a whole host of other forms of existence in the process. But class war is not a gentle affair.

When we become exhausted trying to solve this problem, we can swap our telescope for a set of binoculars, looking across the specific human modes of existence in and across specific social geographies. In other words, we can give up trying to find a golden rule for universal inclusion that will avoid local injustices and focus on local problems. Say, in the case of this book, I stake an allegiance with my Indigenous friends and colleagues in the Northern Territory of Australia. Here we see that it is not humans who have exerted such malignant force on the meteorological, geological, and biological dimension of the earth but only some modes of human sociality. Thus we start differentiating one sort of human and its modes of existence from another. But right when we think we have a location—these versus those—our focus must immediately extend over and outward. The global nature of climate change, capital, toxicity, and discursivity immediately demands we look elsewhere than where we are standing. We have to follow the flows of the toxic industries whose by-products seep into foods, forests, and aquifers, and visit the viral transit lounges that join species through disease vectors. As we stretch the local across these seeping transits we need not scale up to the Human or the global, but we cannot remain in the local. We can only remain *hereish*.

In other words, the Anthropocene and its companion concept of climate change should not be seen merely as meteorological and geological events but as a set of political and conceptual disturbances that emerged in the 1960s—the radical environmental movement, Indigenous opposition to mining, the concept of Gaia and the whole earth—and these disturbances are now accelerating the problem of how late liberalism will govern difference and markets globally. My purpose is not to adjudicate which antagonisms and protagonists we choose but to demonstrate how the object of concern has taken residence in and across competing struggles for existence, implicating how we conceptualize scale, event, circulation, and being. No matter how geologists end up dating the break between the Holocene and Anthropocene, the concept of the Anthropocene has already had a dramatic impact on the organization of critical thought, cultural

politics, and geopolitical governance in and across the global north and south. And this conceptual impact is one of the effects and causes of the crumbling of the self-evident distinction of Life and Nonlife, fundamental to biopolitics. As the geographer Kathryn Yusoff notes, biopolitics is increasingly “subtended by geology.”²⁷ The possibility that humans, or certain forms of human existence, are such an overwhelming malignant force that Life itself faces planetary extinction has changed the topical foci of the humanities and humanistic social sciences and the quantitative social sciences and natural sciences.²⁸ The emergence of the geological concept of the Anthropocene and the meteorological modeling of the carbon cycle, the emergence of new synthetic natural sciences such as biogeochemistry, the proliferation of new object ontologies (new materialists, speculative materialists, speculative realists, and object-oriented ontologies), all point to the perforating boundary between the autonomy of Life and its opposition to and difference from Nonlife. Take, for example, the humanities.

As the future of human life—or a human way of life—is put under pressure from the heating of the planet, ontology has reemerged as a central problem in philosophy, anthropology, literary and cultural studies, and in science and technology studies. Increasingly not only can critical theorists not demonstrate the superiority of the human to other forms of life—thus the rise of posthumanist politics and theory—but they also struggle to maintain a difference that makes a difference between all forms of Life and the category of Nonlife. Critical theory has increasingly put pressure on the ontological distinctions among biological, geological, and meteorological existents, and a posthuman critique is giving way to a post-life critique, being to assemblage, and biopower to geontopower. What status should objects have in various Western ontologies? Are there objects, existents, or only fuzzy assemblages? Are these fuzzy assemblages lively too? Anthropologists have weighed in on these more typically philosophical questions by transforming an older interest in social and cultural epistemologies and cosmologies into a concern about multiple ontologies.²⁹ But perhaps these academic disciplines are only catching up to a conversation begun in literature such as Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*, and certainly in the literary output of Margaret Atwood, starting with *The Handmaid’s Tale*, and continuing through her MaddAdam Trilogy. Now an entire field of ecoliterary studies examines fictional, media, and filmic explorations of the coming postextinction world.

And this leads to my second point. As we become increasingly captured by the competing claims of precarious natures and entangled existences, a wild proliferation of new conceptual models, figures, and tactics is displacing the conceptual figures and tactics of the biopolitical and necropolitical. For the purpose of analytical explication, I cluster this proliferation around three figures: the Desert, the Animist, and the Virus. To understand the status of these figures, two points must be kept firmly in mind. First, as the geontological comes to play a larger part in the governance of our thought, other forms of existence (other existents) cannot merely be included in the ways we have understood the qualities of being and life but will need, on the one hand, to displace the division of Life and Nonlife as such and, on the other hand, to separate themselves from late liberal forms of governance. In other words, these figures, statics, and discourses are *diagnostic and symptomatic* of the present way in which late liberalism governs difference and markets in a differential social geography. Therefore, the three figures of geontopower are, from one perspective, no different than Foucault's four figures of biopower. The hysterical woman (a hystericization of women's bodies), the masturbating child (a pedagogization of children's sex), the perverse adult (a psychiatrization of perverse pleasure), and the Malthusian couple (a socialization of procreative behavior): Foucault cared about these figures of sexuality and gender not because he thought that they were the repressed truth of human existence but because he thought they were symptomatic and diagnostic of a modern formation of power. These four figures were both expressions of biopower and windows into its operation. Although, when presenting his lectures, compiled in *Society Must Be Defended*, Foucault discussed the insurrection of subjugated knowledges, understanding these figures as subjugated in the liberal sense of oppressed subjects would be wrong-headed. The problem was not how these figures and forms of life could be liberated from subjugation but how to understand them as indicating a possible world beyond or otherwise to their own form of existence—how to understand them as a way station for the emergence of something else. How might the hysterical woman, the masturbating child, the Malthusian couple, and the perverse adult become something other than what they were? And how could whatever emerged out of them survive the conditions of their birth? How could they be invested with qualities and characteristics deemed sensible and compelling before being extinguished as a monstrosity?³⁰

A similar approach can be taken in relationship to the Desert, the Animist, and the Virus. Each of these figures provides a mechanism through which we can conceive of the once presupposed but now trembling architectures of geontological governance. Again, these figures and discourses are not the exit from or the answer to biopolitics. They are not subjugated subjects waiting to be liberated. Geontology is not a crisis of life (*bios*) and death (*thanatos*) at a species level (extinction), or merely a crisis between Life (*bios*) and Nonlife (*geos, meteoros*). Geontopower is a mode of late liberal governance. And it is this mode of governance that is trembling. Moreover, and this is the second point, because the Desert, the Animist, and the Virus are tools, symptoms, figures, and diagnostics of this mode of late liberal governance, perhaps most clearly apparent in settler late liberalism than elsewhere, they might need to be displaced by other figures in other places if these other figures seem more apparent or relevant to governance in these spaces. But it seems to me that at least in settler late liberalism, geontology and its three figures huddle just inside the door between given governance and its otherwisings, trying to block entrance and exit and to restrict the shape and expanse of its interior rooms. Or we can think of these figures as a collection of governing ghosts who exist in between two worlds in late settler liberalism—the world in which the dependent oppositions of life (*bios*) and death (*thanatos*) and of Life (*bios*) and Nonlife (*geos, meteoros*) are sensible and dramatic and the world in which these enclosures are no longer, or have never been, relevant, sensible, or practical.

Take the Desert and its central imaginary Carbon. The Desert comprises discourses, tactics, and figures that restabilize the distinction between Life and Nonlife. It stands for all things perceived and conceived as denuded of life—and, by implication, all things that could, with the correct deployment of technological expertise or proper stewardship, be (re)made hospitable to life. The Desert, in other words, holds on to the distinction between Life and Nonlife and dramatizes the possibility that Life is always at threat from the creeping, desiccating sands of Nonlife. The Desert is the space where life was, is not now, but could be if knowledges, techniques, and resources were properly managed. The Carbon Imaginary lies at the heart of this figure and is thus the key to the maintenance of geontopower. The Carbon Imaginary lodges the superiority of Life into Being by transposing biological concepts such as metabolism and its key events, such as birth, growth-reproduction, death, and ontological concepts, such as event,

conatus/affectus, and finitude. Clearly, biology and ontology do not operate in the same discursive field, nor do they simply intersect. Nevertheless, as I argue more fully in the next chapter, the Carbon Imaginary reinforces a scarred meeting place where each can exchange conceptual intensities, thrills, wonders, anxieties, perhaps terrors, of the other of Life, namely the Inert, Inanimate, Barren. In this scarred space, the ontological is revealed to be biontology. Being has always been dominated by Life and the desires of Life.

Thus, the Desert does not refer in any literal way to the ecosystem that, for lack of water, is hostile to life. The Desert is the affect that motivates the search for other instances of life in the universe and technologies for seeding planets with life; it colors the contemporary imaginary of North African oil fields; and it drives the fear that all places will soon be nothing more than the setting within a *Mad Max* movie. The Desert is also glimpsed in both the geological category of the fossil insofar as we consider fossils to have once been charged with life, to have lost that life, but as a form of fuel can provide the conditions for a specific form of life—contemporary, hypermodern, informationalized capital—and a new form of mass death and utter extinction; and in the calls for a capital or technological fix to anthropogenic climate change. Not surprisingly then the Desert is fodder for new theoretical, scientific, literary, artistic, and media works from the *Mad Max* films and science fiction of Philip K. Dick's *Martian Time-Slip* to the poetics of Juliana Spahr's *Well Then There Now*.

At the heart of the figure of the Animist lies the imaginary of the Indigene. Whereas the Desert heightens the drama of constant peril of Life in relation to Nonlife, the Animist insists that the difference between Life and Nonlife is not a problem because all forms of existence have within them a vital animating, affecting force. Certain social and historical populations are charged with always having had this core Animist insight—these populations are mainly located in settler colonies but also include pre-Christian and pre-Islamic populations globally, the contemporary recycling subject,³¹ new Paganism, actant-based science and technology studies, and certain ways of portraying and perceiving a variety of new cognitive subjects. For instance, the psycho-cognitive diagnosis of certain forms of autism and Asperger are liable to fall within the Animist. Temple Grandin is an exemplary figure here, not merely for her orientation to nonhuman life (cows), but also for her defense of those alternative cognitions that allow for an

orientation to Nonlife forms of existence. The Animist has also animated a range of artistic explorations of nonhuman and inorganic modes of agency, subjectivity, and assemblage, such as Laline Paul's novel *The Bees* and in the Italian film *Le Quattro Volte*. The Animist is, in other words, all those who see an equivalence between all forms of life or who can see life where others would see the lack of life.

The theoretical expression of the Animist is most fully developed in contemporary critical philosophies of vitalism. Some new vitalists have mined Spinoza's principles of *conatus* (that which exists, whether living or nonliving, strives to persevere in being) and *affectus* (the ability to affect and be affected) to shatter the division of Life and Nonlife; although others, such as John Carriero, have insisted that Spinoza uncritically accepted that living things are "more advanced" than nonliving things and "that there is more to a cat than to a rock."³² The American pragmatist Charles Sanders Peirce has also inspired new vitalist scholarship—for instance, Brian Massumi has long probed Peirce's semiotics as grounds for extending affect into nonliving existents.³³ To be sure the interest in "vital materialism," to quote from Jane Bennett's work, does not claim to be interested in life per se. Rather it seeks to understand the distribution of quasi-agencies and actants across nonhuman and human materials in ways that disturb the concepts of subject, object, and predicate. And yet it is right here that we glimpse the power of the Carbon Imaginary—the suturing of dominant forms of conceptual space in late liberalism by the reciprocal transpositions of the biological concepts of birth, growth-reproduction, and death and the ontological concepts of event, *conatus/affectus*, and finitude. The new vitalisms take advantage of the longstanding Western shadow imposition of the qualities of one of its categories (Life, *Leben*) onto the key dynamics of its concept of existence (Being, *Dasein*). Removed from the enclosure of life *Leben* as *Dasein* roams freely as a form of univocal vitality. How, in doing this, are we disallowing whatever Nonlife is standing in for to affect whatever Life is an alibi for? What are the traps that this strategic response sets for critical theory? How does this ascription of the qualities we cherish in one form of existence to all forms of existences reestablish, covertly or overtly, the hierarchy of life?³⁴

Finally, the Virus and its central imaginary of the Terrorist provide a glimpse of a persistent, errant potential radicalization of the Desert, the Animist, and their key imaginaries of Carbon and Indigeneity. The Virus

is the figure for that which seeks to disrupt the current arrangements of Life and Nonlife by claiming that it is a difference that makes no difference *not because* all is alive, vital, and potent, nor because all is inert, replicative, unmoving, inert, dormant, and enduring. Because the division of Life and Nonlife does not define or contain the Virus, it can use and ignore this division for the sole purpose of diverting the energies of arrangements of existence in order to extend itself. The Virus copies, duplicates, and lies dormant even as it continually adjusts to, experiments with, and tests its circumstances. It confuses and levels the difference between Life and Nonlife while carefully taking advantage of the minutest aspects of their differentiation. We catch a glimpse of the Virus whenever someone suggests that the size of the human population must be addressed in the wake of climate change; that a glacial granite mountain welcomes the effects of air conditioning on life; that humans are kudzu; or that human extinction is desirable and should be accelerated. The Virus is also Ebola and the waste dump, the drug-resistant bacterial infection stewed within massive salmon and poultry farms, and the nuclear power; the person who looks just like “we” do as she plants a bomb. Perhaps most spectacularly the Virus is the popular cultural figure of the zombie—Life turned to Nonlife and transformed into a new kind of species war—the aggressive rotting undead against the last redoubt of Life. Thus the difference between the Desert and the Virus has to do with the agency and intentionality of nonhuman Life and Nonlife. Whereas the Desert is an inert state welcoming a technological fix, the Virus is an active antagonistic agent built out of the collective assemblage that is late liberal geontopower. In the wake of the late liberal crises of post-9/11, the crash of financial markets, and Anthropogenic climate change, the Virus has been primarily associated with fundamentalist Islam and the radical Green movement. And much of critical thought has focused on the relationship between biopolitics and biosecurity in the wake of these crises. But this focus on biosecurity has obscured the systemic reorientation of biosecurity around geo-security and meteoro-security: the social and ecological effects of climate change.³⁵ Thus the Virus is also recognition’s internal political other: environmentalists inhabiting the borderlands between activists and terrorists across state borders and interstate surveillance. But while the Virus may seem to be the radical exit from geontopower at first glance, to be the Virus is to be subject to intense abjection and attacks, and to live in the vicinity of the Virus is to dwell in an existential crisis.

As I am hoping will become clear, Capitalism has a unique relation to the Desert, the Animist, and the Virus insofar as Capitalism sees all things as having the potential to create profit; that is, nothing is inherently inert, everything is vital from the point of view of capitalization, and anything can become something more with the right innovative angle. Indeed, capitalists can be said to be the purest of the Animists. This said, industrial capital depends on and, along with states, vigorously polices the separations between forms of existence so that certain kinds of existents can be subjected to different kinds of extractions. Thus even as activists and academics level the relation between animal life and among objects (including human subjects), states pass legislation both protecting the rights of businesses and corporations to use animals and lands and criminalizing tactics of ecological and environmental activism. In other words, like the Virus that takes advantage but is not ultimately wedded to the difference between Life and Nonlife, Capital views all modes of existence as if they were vital *and* demands that not all modes of existence are the same from the point of view of extraction of value.

The Evidence, the Method, the Chapters, the Title

It might seem odd to some that this book begins with biopower. I have rarely, if ever, mobilized the concept of biopolitics or biopower to analyze settler late liberalism. This absence is not an absence of knowledge or a simple rejection of the concept itself. Nor have Foucault, Mbembe, and others so crucial to debates in necro- and biopower ever been far from my thought. Rather, and importantly, it was never clear to me whether the concept of biopolitics was the concept that was needed to analyze the expression of liberal governance in the settler spaces in which my thought and life have unfolded, namely, a thirty-plus year, family-based collegueship with Indigenous men and women in the Top End of the Northern Territory, Australia.³⁶ Indeed, the biopolitical governance of Indigenous populations, while certainly present and conceivable, was always less compelling to me than the management of existents through the separation of that which has and is imbued with the dynamics of life (birth, growth, finitude, agency, intentionality, self-authored, or at least change) and that which settler liberalism treats as absolutely not. Do rocks listen and act intentionally on

the basis of this sensory apparatus? The major actors within the settler late liberal state answer, “absolutely not.” Do certain populations within settler liberalism constitute themselves as safe forms of a cultural other by believing they absolutely do, and acting on the basis of this belief? Absolutely. Using the belief that Nonlife acts in ways available only to Life was a safe form of “the Other” because, for quite some time, settler liberalism could easily contain such a belief in the brackets of the impossible if not absurd. As geontopower reveals itself as a power of differentiation and control rather than truth and reference, it is not clear whether this same power of belief is so easily contained. In other words, I do not think that geontopower is simply the conceptual consequence of a new Geological Age of the Human, namely the Anthropocene and climate change, and thus a new stage of late liberalism. Perhaps the Anthropocene and climate change have made geontopower visible to people who were previously unaffected by it. But its operation has always been a quite apparent architecture of the governance of difference and markets in settler late liberalism.

Instead of biopower or geontopower, I have for the most part been interested in how discourses of and affects accumulating around the tense of the subject (the autological subject) and societies (the genealogical society) act as forms of discipline that divide rather than describe social forms in late liberalism. And I have been interested in how specific discourses of and affects accumulating around a specific event-form—the big bang, the new, the extraordinary, that which clearly breaks time and space, creating a new Here and Now, There and Then—deflect liberal ethics and politics away from forms of harm more grudging and corrosive. In other words, I have been interested in the quasi-event, a form of occurring that never punctures the horizon of the here and now and there and then and yet forms the basis of forms of existence to stay in place or alter their place. The quasi-event is only ever *hereish* and *nowish* and thus asks us to focus our attention on forces of condensation, manifestation, and endurance rather than on the borders of objects. This form of eventfulness often twines itself around and into the tense of the other, impeding, redirecting, and exhausting the emergence of an otherwise. The barely perceptible but intense daily struggles of many people to remain in the realm of the extreme poor rather than slip into something worse, for instance, only lightly scratch the retina of dominant ethical and political discourse because the effort of endurance

and its incredible creative energy appears as nothing, laziness, sloth, and the unchanging—or, as two Republican candidates for the US presidency put it, getting free stuff.³⁷

I originally conceived this book as the third and last of a trilogy on late liberalism, beginning with *Empire of Love*, moving through *Economies of Abandonment*, and ending with *Geontologies*. In the end, however, I realized I was, in some serious and unexpected ways, rewriting my very first book, *Labor's Lot*, and thus completing a long reflection on governance in settler late liberalism. Indeed, throughout these chapters I make implicit and explicit reference to some of this much earlier work, including *Labor's Lot* and the essays “Do Rocks Listen?” and “Might Be Something.” Thus, this feels like the last chapter of a fairly long book begun in 1984 when I first arrived at Belyuen, a small Indigenous community on the Cox Peninsula in the Northern Territory of Australia. I was not an anthropologist then, nor was I a wannabe anthropologist. I had an undergraduate degree in philosophy under the tutelage of William O’Grady, a student of Hannah Arendt. Becoming an anthropologist became a trajectory for me at the request of the older residents of Belyuen who, at the time, were engaged in one of the longest and most contested land claims in Australia. The dictates of the land-rights legislation demanded that if they lodged a land claim then they had to be represented by both a lawyer and an anthropologist. Belyuen was originally established as Delissaville Aboriginal Settlement in the 1940s, a place in which various local indigenous groups could be interned. In 1976, the Delissaville Settlement was given self-government and renamed the Belyuen Community under the terms of the Land Rights Act. And the surrounding Commonwealth lands were simultaneously placed under a land claim. The claim was finally heard in 1989, but the Land Commissioner found that no traditional Aboriginal owners existed for the area under claim. This judgment was challenged and the claim reheard in 1995 at which point a small subsection of the Belyuen Community was found to fulfill the legislative definition of a traditional Aboriginal owner as defined by the Land Rights Act.

Since then, I have engaged in countless little and larger projects with these older men and women, and now with their children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, great-great-grandchildren. But my academic life has primarily consisted not of producing ethnographic texts that explain their culture and society to others but of helping to analyze how late liberal

power appears when encountered from their lives. My object of analysis, in other words, is not them, but settler late liberalism. As a result, the primary evidence for my claims comes from the kinds of late liberal forces that move through their lives and that part of our lives that we have lived together. Most recently these forces and forms of late liberalism accumulate around an alternative media collective, organized by the concept of “Karrabing.” As of the writing of this book, the primary media expression of the Karrabing is a film collective and three major film projects—but throughout this book, sketched out most fully in chapter 6, I also refer to our original media project, a GPS/GIS-based augmented-reality project. Let me provide a little background to this uncompleted endeavor. In 2005 I began a discussion with elder Indigenous friends and colleagues of mine about what I should do with the massive archive slowly accumulating in various offices. Some suggested I work with the Northern Territory Library, which was helping communities start local “brick-and-mortar” digital archives—community-based archives stored on dedicated computers with software that allowed members of local communities to organize viewership based on local gender, age, clan, and ritual-appropriate rules. The Northern Territory Library modeled these digital archives on Ara Irititja software developed in Pitjatjarra lands to give local groups better control of the production and circulation of their audio, video, and pictorial histories. As we were better understanding how we might utilize this software, I also explored other GIS-based formats through new digital initiatives in the United States, in particular the journal *Vectors*.³⁸

But several women and men had another suggestion—burn it. If the form of existence recorded in my archive was only relevant as an archival memory, then this form of existence had been abandoned and should be given a *kapuk* (a form of burial). In other words, they thought my archive should be treated like all other remains of things that existed in one form and now would exist in another. A hole should be dug, sung over as the remains were burned, then covered with dirt and stamped down. For many years, some would know what this now traceless hole contained. Over a longer period of time, others might have a vague feeling that the site was significant. The knowledge would not disappear. Rather it would be transformed into the ground under our feet, something we stood on but did not attend to.

In January 2007, just as we were building up a good head of stream, a violent riot broke out in the community. The cause of the riot was socially

complex, where personal grudges mixed with the legacy of a divisive land claim. I'll come back to this below as well as in chapter 3. For now just note that having been beset by chainsaws and pickaxes, thirty people—the children and grandchildren of the key, then deceased, contributors to the archive—walked away from Belyuen and well-paying jobs. The riot was reported in the local press, and the local Labour government, keen to demonstrate its commitment to Indigenous well-being and to avoid bad press, promised this group housing and jobs in their “traditional country” located some three hundred kilometers south at a small outstation with little existing infrastructure.

However, just two months after this riot of promises, the federal government forced the release of a report commissioned by the same Northern Territory government. The report, *Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle* (Little children are sacred), examined the social conditions of Indigenous children living in remote communities. While detailing an array of problems in Indigenous communities, one unquantified statement in particular set off a national sex panic that transformed the way the Australian federal government governed Indigenous people; namely, that in the worst situations Indigenous children suffered sexual abuse. The conservative federal government used this statement as grounds to justify an aggressive reorganization of the land rights era, including altering the powers of key pieces of legislation such as the Aboriginal Land Rights Act. Lands were forcibly acquired. Police were allowed to seize community computers. Doctors were ordered to undertake mandatory sex exams on children. And funding was frozen for or withdrawn from Indigenous rural and remote communities. If Indigenous people wanted funding for their cultural “lifestyle” then they would have to find it in the market. They could lease their lands to mining, development, and tourism. Or they could migrate to the cities and get low-paying jobs.

It was in the wake of this massive neoliberal reorganization of the Australian governance of Indigenous life, without any housing or jobs, and in the fragile coastal ecosystem of Northwest Australia, that my friends and I created the alternative social project called Karrabing. In Emiyengal, *karrabing* refers to the point at which the tide has reach its lowest point. Tide out! There it will stay until it turns, making its way back to shore until it reaches *karrakal*. Karrabing does not have the negative connotations of the English phrase “low tide.” There is nothing “low” about the tide reaching

karrabing. All kinds of potentialities spring forward. In the coastal region stretching from Nganthawudi to Milik, a deep karrabing opens a shorter passage between the mainland and islands. In some places, reefs rise as the water recedes. A road is revealed. While including me, Karrabing is a supermajority Indigenous group. Its governing rules state that all non-Indigenous members, unlike Indigenous members, including me, must bring tangible goods as a condition of membership. These rules are meant to acknowledge that no matter the affective relations between members, settler late liberalism differentially debits and rewards persons based on their location within the divisions of empire.

For the purpose of this book, perhaps the most important aspect of the Karrabing Indigenous Corporation is that it does not conform to the logics and fantasies of the land rights era. Indeed, Karrabing is an explicit rejection of state forms of land tenure and group recognition—namely the anthropological imaginary of the clan, totem, and territory—even as it maintains, through its individual members, modes of belonging to specific countries. Thus although most members of Karrabing are related through descent from and marriage into the family of Roy Yarrowin and Ruby Yarrowin, neither descent nor marriage defines the internal composition or social imaginary of Karrabing. Membership is instead shaped by an experientially immanent orientation, defined by who gets up for Karrabing projects. In other words, Karrabing has a constant improvisational relationship to late liberal geontology. It continually probes its forms and forces as it seeks a way of maintaining and enhancing a manner and mode of existing. And it exists as long as members feel oriented and obligated to its projects.

It might surprise readers to find that none of the following chapters explicitly unfold around one or another of the three figures of geontopower. Across the book, geontopower and its three figures flicker and flash like phantom lights on ocean waters. The Indigenous Animist (the politics of recognition and its inversion), the Capitalist Desert (mining and toxic sovereignty), and the noncompliant Virus (the Karrabing) haunt the sense of governance of late liberalism explored herein. And yet I assert that each of these figures is what creates the restricted maneuverability of the Indigenous Karrabing. This should not be too surprising. After all, one of the first battlegrounds for Indigenous land rights in Australia was over bauxite mining on Yolngu country in Arnhem Land that threatened to transform verdant wetlands into toxic deserts. Wali Wunungmurra, one of the original

signatories of the “Bark Petition” to the Australian parliament, which demanded that Yolngu people be recognized as the owners, said, “In the late 1950s Yolngu became aware of people prospecting for minerals in the area of the Gove Peninsula, and shortly after, discovered that mining leases had been taken out over a considerable area of our traditional land. Our response, in 1963, was to send a petition framed by painted bark to the Commonwealth Government.”³⁹ Over the course of the 1970s, significant legislative frameworks were put in place in order to mediate the relationship between Indigenous people, capital (initially primarily mining and pastoralism, but slowly land development and tourism), and the state through the figure of the Animist (Totemist).

Nevertheless, rather than organize this book around these three figures, I have organized it around my colleagues’ engagement with six different modes of existence and their desire that the maintenance of them be the major focus of this analysis: forms of existence often referred to as Dreaming or totemic formations: a rock and mineral formation (chapter 2); a set of bones and fossils (chapter 3); an estuarine creek (chapter 4); a fog formation (chapter 5); and a set of rock weirs and sea reefs (chapter 6). Organizing my discussion in this way avoids an overly fetishized relationship to the figures, strategies, and discourses whose unity appears only across the difference modes of geontological governance. And it allows me to stand closer to how the maneuvers of my Karrabing colleagues provide the grounds for this analysis of geontopower.

The next chapter begins with a desecration case brought against OM Manganese for intentionally destroying part of Two Women Sitting Down, a rock and mineral Dreaming. I begin there in order to sketch out in the broadest terms the restricted space between natural life and critical life, namely, the Carbon Imaginary that joins the natural and critical sciences through the homologous concepts of birth, growth-reproduction, death, and event, *conatus/affectus*, finitude. Each subsequent chapter triangulates Karrabing analytics against a series of critical theoretical positions (object-oriented ontologies and speculative realisms, normativity, Logos, informational capital) not in order to choose one or the other or to allow the nonhuman modes of existence to speak, but to demonstrate the cramped space of maneuver in which both the Karrabing and these modes of existence are confined rather than found within the critical languages we have available. While all of the subsequent chapters model the relationship be-

tween geontopower and late liberalism, chapter 7 specifically speaks to how the management of existents creates and depends on the tense of existents and how an attachment to a form of ethical and political eventfulness mitigates a more crucial form of geographical *happening*, namely, the slow, dispersed accumulations of toxic sovereignties. Between now and then I examine the governance of difference and markets in late liberalism as the self-evident nature of the biontological Carbon Imaginary violently shakes and discloses its geontological foundations.

Because of the history of using totemic existence as a means of governing “totemic people,” let me provide a cautionary note on the object-figures organizing each of the following chapters. I have rarely, if ever, used the concept of animism or totemism (*durlg*, *therrawin*, Dreaming) to typologize the analytics of my Indigenous friends and colleagues. As Tim Ingold notes, an anthropological divide separates the Indigenous Australians from the North American Inuit on the basis of their “totemic and animistic tendencies.”⁴⁰ Indigenous Australians (totemists), he argues, see the land and the ancestors as the prior source of life whereas the Inuit (animists) focus on individual spirits as being able to perpetuate life and existence. However one slices the difference between them, it’s hard to find two more fraught terms in the history of anthropology than animism and totemism. These concepts were born from and operate within a (post)colonial geography in which some humans were represented as unable to order the proper causal relations between objects and subjects, agencies and passivities, organic and inorganic life, and thus control language and experience through self-reflexive reason. Because of this ongoing history, I have, throughout my work, attempted to demonstrate how these concept-ideas function as a mechanism of control and discipline even as I differentiate them from the analytics of existence of my Indigenous colleagues.

Although I reject the practice of typologizing Indigenous lifeworlds, alongside my colleagues, I constantly struggle to find languages and practices for their analytics of existence. And this is because, as I tried to show in *Cunning of Recognition* and *Empire of Love*, settler late liberalism is not so much an inverted mirror as a funhouse mirror—distorting rather than reversing lifeworlds. There are in fact forms of existence that could be described as totems. Indeed, many of my friends use the word “totem” now as a translation of *durlg* (Batjemahl; *therrawin*, Emiyengal). And each of the following chapters does in fact pivot on a different form of *durlg* or

therrawin existence—rock formation, estuarine creek, fog, fossil, and reef. But I do so in order to highlight how late liberalism attempts to control the expression and trajectory that their analytics of existence takes—that is, to insist they conform to the imaginary of the Animist, a form that has been made compatible with liberal states and markets. The purpose of these topological extensions and distensions is not to claim what existents *are* for *them* but how all my friends and their existents improvisationally struggle to *manifest and endure* in contemporary settler late liberalism.

It is this improvisation to which, in allegiance to the alternative nature of the social project itself, this book refers but refuses to define. And yet four principles will emerge as a sort of dirty manifesto to Karrabing analytics.

- 1 Things exist through an effort of mutual attention. This effort is not in the mind but in the activity of endurance.
- 2 Things are neither born nor die, though they can turn away from each other and change states.
- 3 In turning away from each other, entities withdraw care for each other. Thus the earth is not dying. But the earth may be turning away from certain forms of existence. In this way of thinking the Desert is not that in which life does not exist. A Desert is where a series of entities have withdrawn care for the kinds of entities humans are and thus has made humans into another form of existence: bone, mummy, ash, soil.
- 4 We must de-dramatize human life as we squarely take responsibility for what we are doing. This simultaneous de-dramatization and responsabilization may allow for opening new questions. Rather than Life and Nonlife, we will ask what formations we are keeping in existence or extinguishing?

ONE FINAL NOTE: Why requiem? The book's title and organization are meant to indicate a certain affective tone but also a certain theoretical point. There have been and continue to be a variety of alternative arrangements of existence to the current late liberal form of governing existents. But whether any or none of these are adopted, the type of change necessary to avoid what many believe is the consequence of contemporary human carbon-based expansion—or the overrunning of all other forms of existence by late liberal capital—will have to be so significant that what we are

will no longer be. This, of course, is not what late liberalism ever says. It says that we can change and be the same, nay, even more of what we already are. Thus a requiem: neither hopeless nor hopeful. It might be angry but it is not resigned. It is factual but also calculated to produce some affect. My friend, the poet Thomas Sleigh, suggested the term for this intersection of affects: a requiem.

Notes

I

THREE FIGURES OF GEONTOLOGY

- 1 Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 1.
- 2 Darnton, *Great Cat Massacre*.
- 3 See, for example, Masco, *Theater of Operations*.
- 4 Arendt, *On the Human Condition*.
- 5 See Derrida, *Beast and the Sovereign, Volume 1*; and Haraway, “Biopolitics of Postmodern Bodies.”
- 6 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*.
- 7 See Esposito, *Bios*; and Campbell, *Improper Life*.
- 8 See, for comparative purposes, Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*.
- 9 Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” 14. See also Braidotti, “Bio-Power and Necro-Politics.”
- 10 Levering Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois*, see especially, 394–396.
- 11 Braidotti, “Bio-Power and Necro-Politics.”
- 12 I understand “concept” in the broad sense in which Deleuze and William James approached the work of conceptualization, namely to actualize a series of quasi-events into a threshold. See James, *Pragmatism*; Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*; and Stengers, “Gilles Deleuze’s Last Message.”
- 13 Thus the concepts of geontology (Nonlife being) and geontopower (the power of and over Nonlife beings) are meant to indicate the current phase of thought and practice that define late liberalism—a phase that is simultaneously reconsolidating this distinction and witnessing its unraveling.
- 14 I will argue that a crucial part of what is forming this cramped space is a homology between natural life and critical life as techniques, vocabularies, and affective means for creating forms of existence—a scarred homology between the drama of natural life of birth, growth, and reproduction, and the death and drama of the critical life events *conatus* and *affectus* and finitude. This cramping is not

happening in the abstract but through late liberal ways of governance of difference and markets.

- 15 Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 35.
- 16 See Esposito, *Bios*, 57.
- 17 See Berardi, *Precarious Rhapsody*. See also de Macedo Duarte, “Hannah Arendt, Biopolitics and the Problem of Violence”; and Blencowe, “Foucault’s and Arendt’s ‘Insider View’ of Biopolitics.”
- 18 Giroux, *Youth in a Suspect Society*, 83; Davis, *Abolition Democracy*. See also Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*; and Masco, *Theater of Operations*.
- 19 Badiou, *Adventure of French Philosophy*, 87, 93, 97.
- 20 See, e.g., Morgenson, “Biopolitics of Settler Colonialism”; and Mezzadra, Reid, and Samaddar, *Biopolitics of Development*.
- 21 Arendt, “Conquest of Space and the Stature of Man”; Lovelock, “Physical Basis for Life Detection Experiments.” See also DeLoughrey, “Satellite Planetarity and the Ends of the Earth.”
- 22 For some perspectives on the deep entanglements of knowledge, capital, and biological processes that occurred on account of the discovery of these fossils and fossil fuels, see Pinkus, “Humans and Fuel, Bios and Zoe”; and Yusoff, “Geologic Life.”
- 23 Moore, *Capitalocene, Part 1*.
- 24 Joel Achenbach, “Welcome to the Anthropocene,” *Washington Post*, 3 August 2010, reporting on a talk at the Aspen Environment Forum, given by Dennis Dimick, *National Geographic*, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/08/02/AR2010080203751.html>, accessed 14 May 2014.
- 25 Lewis and Maslin, “Defining the Anthropocene.”
- 26 Lewis and Maslin, “Defining the Anthropocene.”
- 27 Yusoff, “Geological Subjects.”
- 28 For some examples of the slow shift from human to nonhuman to nonlife, see Haraway, *Crystals, Fabrics, and Fields*; Chakrabarty, “Climate of History: Four Theses”; Colebrook, *Death of the PostHuman*; Cohen, “Introduction”; Grusin, *Nonhuman Turn*; and Thacker, *After Life*.
- 29 See, e.g., Myhre, “What the Beer Shows”; Vigh and Sausdal, “From Essence Back to Existence”; Holbraad, “Power of Powder”; de la Cadena, “Indigenous Cosmopolitics in the Andes”; and Descola, *Ecology of Others*.
- 30 I elaborate the above points in Povinelli, “Will to Be Otherwise/The Effort of Endurance.”
- 31 See, e.g., Hird et al., “Making Waste Management Public.”
- 32 Carriero, “Conatus and Perfection in Spinoza,” 74.
- 33 Massumi, *Ontopower*. See also Bennett, “Vitalist Stopover on the Way to a New Materialism”; Saldanha, *Sexual Difference*; and Chen, *Animacies*.
- 34 For example, Elizabeth Grosz has recently sought to situate the concept of difference in the work of Charles Darwin and, more broadly, in the contemporary

- posthuman turn. Across a rich reading of the writings of Darwin, Bergson, and Deleuze, Grosz evacuates the difference between Life and Nonlife, the organic and inorganic, by ascribing a “constrained dynamism” pulsing through both. She also differentiates the inorganic and organic by elevating one form of organic reproduction, sexual dimorphism, above all others on the basis of its complexity; it is uniquely “dynamic, open-ended, ontologically.” Grosz, *Becoming Undone*, 116.
- 35 Nafeez Ahmed, “Pentagon Bracing for Public Dissent over Climate and Energy Shocks,” *Guardian*, 14 June 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/earth-insight/2013/jun/14/climate-change-energy-shocks-nsa-prism>, accessed 7 February 2016.
- 36 See, e.g., Morgenson, “Biopolitics of Settler Colonialism”; and Griffith, “Biopolitical Correspondences.”
- 37 I am referring to Jeb Bush’s remarks at the Historical Society in Keene, Massachusetts, in 2015, echoing Mitt Romney’s prior comments when addressing the NAACP in 2012. See Max Ehrenfreund, “Jeb Bush Suggests Black Voters Get ‘Free Stuff,’” *Washington Post*, 30 September 2015, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonkblog/wp/2015/09/30/jeb-bush-says-black-voters-get-free-stuff-so-does-he/>; and Matt Taibbi, “Romney’s ‘Free Stuff’ Speech Is New Low,” *Rolling Stone*, 13 July 2012, <http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/romneys-free-stuff-speech-is-a-new-low-20120713>.
- 38 Povinelli, “Digital Futures.”
- 39 Wunungmurra, “Journey Goes Full Circle from Bark Petition to Blue Mud Bay.”
- 40 Ingold, “Totemism, Animism and the Depiction of Animals.” For a study that shatters the typical enclosure of animism in cultural belief, see Kohn, *How Forests Think*.

CAN ROCKS DIE?

- 1 *Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority v. OM (Manganese) Ltd.*, 2 August 2013.
- 2 Scamبارy, *My Country, Mine Country*.
- 3 For the percentages of contribution Australia makes to global ore and mineral trade, see www.australianminesatlas.gov.au.
- 4 The level of paramarginal resources remained unchanged at 23.1 million tons and the amount of submarginal resources also remained unchanged at 167 million tons. Inferred resources increased by 3.6 percent to 342 million tons due to the announcement of inferred resources at the contact deposit in Western Australia.
- 5 According to the Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority, “under the *NT Sacred Sites Act* 1989 the site’s custodians were ineligible for any compensation and fines