

***Isn't Bite Also Touch?* An event on Contagion and Desire**
part of *The Body-Forest* Programme
facilitated by Veronica Vickery and Jack Young
11.05.22

What does it mean to desire beyond the “human”? How might ideas of decomposition and soil regeneration expand our notions of reproduction and remediation beyond the logics of the human? Where do we draw the line between a symbiotic relationship and a parasitic one? How can we use speculative visual and textual practices to respond to the Earth’s current distressing conditions? These are some of the questions posed in the second public reading group of the Body-Forest programme.

This will be a dynamic, hybrid session including films, small group conversations and live readings from artists and writers including Adham Faramawy, Paul Samuel White, Octavia Butler and Jenny Hval. These works will be brought into an open conversation with the work of feminist thinker Maria Puig de la Bellacasa who explores how an intersectional embrace of breakdown and decay can lead to regenerative, ecosocially situated acts of care amidst contagion, exploitation and toxicity. Together we will traverse through multispecies entanglements of contagion, aging and decay, monstrosity and speculative fictions of polymorphous desire.

Excerpted texts come from three publications:

1. Octavia Butler, *Bloodchild and Other Stories* (1995)
2. Jenny Hval, *Girls Against God* (2020)
3. Dimitris Papadopoulos, María Puig de la Bellacasa, Natasha Myers (eds.), *Reactivating Elements* (2022)

This event is part of *The Body-Forest*, Jack Young’s programme developed as part of his curatorial engagement fellowship at Spike Island. *The Body-Forest* explores how thinking of the body as an interconnected ecosystem rather than the body-machine metaphor developed under capitalism, might shift the way we think about our human connection to the world. Drawing on the work of Pierre Sonigo and Shrese, among others, *The Body-Forest* programme will include participatory workshops, conversations between eminent thinkers in the field, radical history walks through local woods, a reading group series and more, asking questions along the way, such as: how might *The Body-Forest* might de-centre the human? How might it change the way we think about time, language, desire and community in an age of overlapping social and ecological crises?

West of England
Visual Arts Alliance **Spike Island**

*How might ideas of
decomposition and soil
regeneration expand our notions
of reproduction and remediation
beyond the human?*

From Papadopoulos et al. Editorial
introduction, pp.12-13

Thinking with soils, as proxies for the earth element, María Puig de la Bellacasa proposes that embracing the breakdown of matter is a way to create alternative paths that respond to the ways technoscience chokes up the biogeochemical cycling of elements. She engages with the ethico-political dimensions of a contemporary ecocultural reactivation of elements, one promoted by an imaginary of planetary elemental affinities, fed by scientific storytelling and ecological aesthetics, as well as by political theories of the elemental commons. Contesting the powerful cultural imaginary that equates life with growth and attainment, Puig de la Bellacasa engages with soils through the biochemical processes of break-down, decompounding, and decreation. Meditating on the ethical, po-etical, and poetic significance of embracing breakdown for the ongoing reshaping of "the ecological," her "panethnographic" research invokes accounts of "bioremediation" as a noninnocent, practical enactment of "breakdown ecopoethics" to contribute alternative stories of more-than-human relations that might not only celebrate common

affinity but also activate solidarity with the present struggles of soils in their actuality—neglected, sealed, and contaminated.

From Hval p.171

The virus is the standard metaphor for the diseased elements of society, which sometimes spread quickly and dangerously, and sometimes cause a slow disintegration, rotting social democracies and nation states. Black metal has been called a virus, and homosexuality and porn culture and the Southern cruisers. The disease the virus causes spreads through the body and constructs a pattern for a new shape. It's a communal, painful language that can infect us all. Influences connect people, bring us down and together, equalise us. Virus is a bond, after all.

I dig VIRUS out of the word LOVE. I dig it out of I. I'm still looking for a bond. Or is that just something I etch into my memory to get closer to you, to make you a little more me? I'm looking for someone who can bring me closer to something. Dots I can line myself up between. Is that what I'm looking for in you? We share the same virus, I carry it for you, from you, on. *Virus captivus.*

From Butler p. 20.

"I saw them eat a man," he said.

I turned to face him. "You're lying!"

"*I saw them eat a man.*" He paused. "It was when I was little. I had been to the Hartmund house and I was on my way home. Halfway here, I saw a man and a Tlic and the man was N'Tlic. The ground was hilly. I was able to hide from them and watch. The Tlic wouldn't open the man because she had nothing to feed the grubs. The man couldn't go any further and there were no houses around. He was in so much pain, he told her to kill him. He begged her to kill him. Finally, she did. She cut his throat. One swipe of one claw. I saw the grubs eat their way out, then burrow in again, still eating."

His words made me see Lomas's flesh again, parasitized, crawling. "Why didn't you tell me that?" I whispered.

He looked startled as though he'd forgotten I was listening. "I don't know."

"You started to run away not long after that, didn't you?"

"Yeah. Stupid. Running inside the Preserve. Running in a cage."

I shook my head, said what I should have said to him long ago. "She wouldn't take you, Qui. You don't have to worry."

"She would . . . if anything happened to you."

"No. She'd take Xuan Hoa. Hoa . . . wants it." She wouldn't if she had stayed to watch Lomas.

"They don't take women," he said with contempt.

"They do sometimes." I glanced at him. "Actually, they prefer women. You should be around them when they talk among themselves. They say women have more body fat to protect the grubs. But they usually take men to leave the women free to bear their own young."

"To provide the next generation of host animals," he said, switching from contempt to bitterness.

Where do we draw the line between a symbiotic relationship and a parasitic one?

BLOODCHILD

From Butler pp. 15-17.

Lomas's entire body stiffened under T'Gatoi's claw, though she merely rested it against him as she wound the rear section of her body around his legs. He might break my grip, but he would not break hers. He wept helplessly as she used his pants to tie his hands, then pushed his hands above his head so that I could kneel on the cloth between them and pin them in place. She rolled up his shirt and gave it to him to bite down on.

And she opened him.

His body convulsed with the first cut. He almost tore himself away from me. The sound he made . . . I had never heard such sounds come from anything human. T'Gatoi seemed to pay no attention as she lengthened and deepened the cut, now and then pausing to lick away blood. His blood vessels contracted, reacting to the chemistry of her saliva, and the bleeding slowed.

I felt as though I were helping her torture him, helping her consume him. I knew I would vomit soon, didn't know why I hadn't already. I couldn't possibly last until she was finished.

She found the first grub. It was fat and deep red with his blood—both inside and out. It had already eaten its own egg case but apparently had not yet begun to eat its host. At this stage, it would eat any flesh except its mother's. Let alone, it would have gone on excreting the poisons that had both sickened and alerted Lomas. Eventually it would have begun to eat. By the time it ate its way out of Lomas's flesh, Lomas would be dead or dying—and unable to take revenge on the thing that was killing him. There was always a grace period

between the time the host sickened and the time the grubs began to eat him.

T'Gatoi picked up the writhing grub carefully and looked at it, somehow ignoring the terrible groans of the man.

Abruptly, the man lost consciousness.

"Good," T'Gatoi looked down at him. "I wish you Terrans could do that at will." She felt nothing. And the thing she held . . .

It was limbless and boneless at this stage, perhaps fifteen centimeters long and two thick, blind and slimy with blood. It was like a large worm. T'Gatoi put it into the belly of the achti, and it began at once to burrow. It would stay there and eat as long as there was anything to eat.

Probing through Lomas's flesh, she found two more, one of them smaller and more vigorous. "A male!" she said happily. He would be dead before I would. He would be through his metamorphosis and screwing everything that would hold still before his sisters even had limbs. He was the only one to make a serious effort to bite T'Gatoi as she placed him in the achti.

Paler worms oozed to visibility in Lomas's flesh. I closed my eyes. It was worse than finding something dead, rotting, and filled with tiny animal grubs. And it was far worse than any drawing or diagram.

From Hval pp. 198-199 .

VENKE's and TERESE's faces change, too. The skin around their eyes swells and becomes red and sore, as if their eyelids have become lips, and their irises are split into little kaleidoscopic colour particles.

Finally brownish black goo starts oozing from all of ŠMIERĆ's orifices. It's sometimes a little lumpy, then smoother, more watery.

The girls begin to smear the gunk over his body, initially trying to get rid of it, but later just to make a bit of a mess. It starts to gently etch his skin, like oil slowly brought to a boil.

Gunk begins to bubble under the skin around the bulge on his belly.

ŠMIERĆ breathes quickly and closes his eyes in pain. The girls demonstrate birth breathing with pursed lips, which he attempts to mimic.

The girls study the bulge on the belly. It moves as a finger under a carpet would. They start to gather lichen and moss and leaves and flowers and arrange their haul at the bottom of ŠMIERĆ's belly.

The thin flower stalks and lichen flakes merge into thicker amphibian folds around the bulge. Slowly we realise that they

form an opening, a vagina. Like a sculpture, or a piece of clothing they're designing. When the girls remove their hands, you can see a hint of movement from the end pieces of the folds, like little tentacles.

Then the girls press their fingers against the vagina, which slowly begins to open. Brownblack gunk gushes over their hands.

TERESE shifts her hands up toward ŚMIERĆ's face and places a twig carefully between his teeth, so he can bite on it. She starts to breathe in his face, strong quick breaths that he tries to mimic. In the meantime VENKE sticks first one finger into the hole to feel it, then two, and then her arm deep in, as if up a cow's rectum. TERESE carries on doing the birth breathing. They shout.

VENKE and TERESE: PUSH!

ŚMIERĆ pushes and screams a long HHHHHHHHHHHHHH-HH. Black blood gunk doesn't gush anymore but pulses calmly as it flows from the vagina, continuing in beautiful lava-like streams down the sides of the belly, over the crotch and back to nature. TERESE's and VENKE's tongues swim in clear spit, and the drool runs down their chins as they work.

TERESE has turned back toward VENKE who with some effort manages to extract a small, round, white egg as ŚMIERĆ pushes one last time. All three enter into a deeper trance with the egg between their hands.

From Butler p. 24.

"I don't want to be a host animal," I said. "Not even yours

It took her a long time to answer. "We use almost no host animals these days," she said. "You know that."

"You use us."

"We do. We wait long years for you and teach you and join our families to yours." She moved restlessly. "You know you aren't animals to us."

From Hval pp. 205-206.

Form is the thing in us that stretches, that pushes the boundaries between us, against us, creating the sensation of intimacy Here in the white forest, feet are one with the ground they step on, bodies pass straight through trees, the bark and skin tickle each other, their movements synchronised. White mushroom

From Hval p. 91.

Isn't that why the underground, the avant-garde, the B movies and comics and fanzines and black metal originally emerged: to be free of the consequences and this relentless comparison to reality, and to open up to other structures? To the crawling and creeping and hissing and noisy structures? They were able to create space for a different kind of art, a different kind of writing. Or maybe they just created a new set of rules, new hierarchies? Am I stretched between spaces I can't reach, that I don't feel entitled to step into? I have to keep looking for that place that I could call *writing*, that I could call the film.

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Hval pp. 205-6

Form is the thing in us that stretches, that pushes the boundaries between us, against us, creating the sensation of intimacy. Here in the white forest, feet are one with the ground they step on, bodies pass straight through trees, the bark and skin tickle each other, their movements synchronised. White mushroom

caps growing from white sand stretch directly into our bodies, soft like porridge. We don't know if we're on our way through something or if we're stuck. We don't know if we're alive. All boundaries are rubbed out, and nothing is impenetrable anymore.

Or perhaps these descriptions don't describe the forest; perhaps they describe our own resistance to it. To describe is also to construct form and perspective; it's the reflex of mortal dread. Could language be used for something else? Aren't there other reasons to write? If we let go of the descriptions, will we discover that we're no longer moving at all, since we already exist within everything in here? We've given up shapes, our own shells and components and we're back in a flow, that gelatinous substance that ruled the earth before the harder minerals, rock types, skeletons and shells came into existence. This could be the beginning, the egg white, the original place, the original life.

I wanted to meet you in this place. I wanted to meet you where we leak, where we're almost nothing, here in someone else's story. A place where I have given up almost everything: body, self, clarity, every component. I wanted to meet you here and talk to you about love, about bonds between people, about form and content within those bonds. About how they glitter like a shortcut to something human through the dimensions; I wanted to grab it, hold it, give it space and listen to it. I wanted to meet you, but it only exists in flashes, at moments, in little eggs.

Are you here?

Butler afterword, p. 30-31.

The botfly lays its eggs in wounds left by the bites of other insects. I found the idea of a maggot living and growing under my skin, eating my flesh as it grew, to be so intolerable, so terrifying that I didn't know how I could stand it if it happened to me. To make matters worse, all that I heard and read advised botfly victims not to try to get rid of their maggot passengers until they got back home to the United States and were able to go to a doctor—or until the fly finished the larval part of its growth cycle, crawled out of its host, and flew away.

The problem was to do what would seem to be the normal thing, to squeeze out the maggot and throw it away, was to invite infection. The maggot becomes literally attached to its host and leaves part of itself behind, broken off, if it's squeezed or cut out. Of course, the part left behind dies and rots, causing infection. Lovely.

When I have to deal with something that disturbs me as much as the botfly did, I write about it. I sort out my problems by writing about them. In a high school classroom on November 22, 1963, I remember grabbing a notebook and beginning to write my response to news of John Kennedy's assassination. Whether I write journal pages, an essay, a short story, or weave my problems into a novel, I find the writing helps me get through the trouble and get on with my life. Writing "Bloodchild" didn't make me like botflies, but for a while, it made them seem more interesting than horrifying.