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## Queer Phantom Critters: Varieties of Causality in Agential Realism and Psychoanalysis

### Keywords

Joan Copjec, Jacques Lacan, Karen Barad, agential realism, causality, microbiology, science, queer theory

### Abstract

What are the contemporary forms of the Foucauldian historicism that *Read My Desire* sought to correct? In the theoretical humanities, the most insurgent variant is surely the revival of the turn not to the real, but to reality; to the material or phenomenal and, ultimately, to being as such. Generally speaking, this contemporary orientation of thought aims either to emancipate humanity from the determinative distortions of subjectivity, of the transcendental constitution of apperception, or else dislodge this human function from the privilege of its presumed centrality, thereby relegating it to the same plane occupied by every other animate and inanimate being. As this paper argues, the agential realist's definition of causality, despite its claims to complexity and indeterminacy (not to mention a lineage that connects back to the same structuralist linguistics that shaped Lacan's thought), is ultimately guilty on the charge of historicism. Precisely in their allergy to the strange causal faculty of negativity, the argument's conceptions of "material-discursive interactions" and "intra-agential spactimematterings" are the crime's telltale clues. In short, the ambiguously defined relation of discourse to a consistently indeterminate idea of matter, and the subsequent disappearance of discourse's non-closure or incompleteness from the causal field, not only obfuscates the signifier's retroactive creationist powers, but also renders illegible what we might call the desire of the empirical natural sciences in both their humanist-progressivist and properly unconscious forms.

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## Kvir fantomska bitja: raznolike vzročnosti v agentnem realizmu in psihoanalizi

### Ključne besede

Joan Copjec, Jacques Lacan, Karen Barad, agentni realizem, vzročnost, mikrobiologija, znanost, kvir teorija

### Povzetek

Katere so sodobne oblike foucaultovskega historicizma, ki ga je knjižni projekt *Read My Desire* poskušal popraviti? V teoretski humanistiki je danes zagotovo najbolj prodorna različica omenjenega historicizma oživitev obrata ne k realnemu, temveč k realnosti, skratka, k materialnemu oziroma fenomenальнemu in navsezadnje k biti kot taki. Na splošno je cilj te sodobne miselne usmeritve bodisi emancipirati človeštvo od določujočih popačenj subjektivnosti, od transcendentalne konstitucije apercepcije, bodisi tej človeški funkciji odvzeti privilegij njene domnevne osrednje vloge in jo s tem zvesti na raven, ki jo zasedajo vsa druga živa in neživa bitja. V članku avtor trdi, da definicija vzročnosti, kot jo poda agentni realizem, kljub trditvam o svoji kompleksnosti in nedoločenosti (da ne omenjam linije, ki se navezuje na isto strukturalno lingvistiko, ki je oblikovala Lacanovo misel) na koncu pade pod obtožbo historicizma. Prav zaradi svoje alergičnosti do nenavadne vzročne zmožnosti negativnosti so pojmovanja »materialno-diskurzivnih interakcij« in »znotraj-agentnih prostorsko-časovnih pomenov« v argumentu agentnega realizma indic njegovega zločina. Skratka, dvoumno opredeljeno razmerje diskurza do dosledno nedoločene ideje materije in posledično izginotje diskurzivne nezaključenosti oziroma necelosti diskurza iz polja vzročnosti ne le zamegljuje retroaktivno kreacionistično moč označevalca, temveč tudi dela neberljivo tisto, kar bi lahko imenovali želja empiričnih naravoslovnih znanosti, tako v njeni humanistično-progresivistični kot tudi v resnično nezavedni obliki.

### Prelude: Historicism's Tenacity

Apart from the realization that I had unwittingly plagiarized our text of concern slightly more often than I would have guessed, a recent rereading of Joan Copjec's *Read My Desire* delivered one overarching observation: In the three decades since its original publication, the fields in which it boldly intervened—film and literary studies, philosophy and critical theory, feminism and gender

studies, architecture and political thought—have almost entirely failed to reckon with the consequences of its pathbreaking argument.

I recall my initial reading of the book upon its release shortly after I had begun to study Freud and Lacan seriously and become enamoured with Slavoj Žižek's early work. It was impossible not to notice that the discussion was leaps and bounds ahead in accuracy and nuance of predecessor volumes like Jane Gallop's *Reading Lacan*, Elizabeth Grosz's *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* or even, on a notably higher level of quality, Kaja Silverman's *Male Subjectivity at the Margins. Read My Desire* provided a disarmingly direct and uncommonly rigorous argument for what was still, for me, only an intuition: The implicit, pragmatic message of the vast majority of my then (and future) professors—that the cultural text should be methodologically primary; that the array of late twentieth-century theoretical humanities discourses is a toolbox from which one may choose the instrument most apparently appropriate to the interpretative task at hand; that the elaboration of concepts is determined by the empirical and historical specificity of the object of inquiry onto which they are applied—did a disservice both to theoretical inquiry and to the text itself.

These assumptions were now stood on their heads to most salutary effect. The texts of culture became not only symptomatic expressions of psychosocial antagonism, a view already familiar to both psychoanalytic and Marxist literary and cultural studies, but also means of properly theoretical inquiry by another name, provided you knew how to read them—to read their desire, as it were. Further, despite the demonstrable existence of rudimentary anticipations in the intellectual tradition, Freud's formulation of the unconscious subject, especially as refined and formalized by Lacan, became singularly revolutionary, untranslatable into the idioms of any prior or subsequent thought system without consequential distortion. Finally (and most importantly in my view both then and now), conceptualization—precise and contextualized, even if concepts can never fully be reduced to context—was shown to matter: Lacanian and historicist iterations of “the gaze,” for example, produced wildly incompatible understandings of what we used to call the apparatus, with immediate practical consequences for, among other things, the feminist analysis of spectatorship.

That Laura Mulvey's “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” rather than Copjec's “The Orthopsychic Subject” is not only, judging by its copious reprinting in

critical anthologies, the more canonical essay, but also the one in my experience more familiar to the current generation of advanced students, might appear to be cause for dismay. Is the future of psychoanalytic theory in the transdisciplinary humanities even more inauspicious today than it has been deemed to be, quite consistently, since *Read My Desire*'s appearance on the critical scene? To be sure, we can see in the book's emphatic enunciative opposition to a then-dominant but hardly moribund Foucauldian discourse/power/knowledge instrument an expression of psychoanalysis's institutional marginality, which of course continues today, even if this marginality is surely inseparable from the decline of the humanities more generally in the age of corporate austerity in higher education and the relentless advance of a neofeudalistic cloud-based postcapitalism.<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile, outside academic circles and in the clinical milieu, the culture wars appear to have deepened (Lacanian) psychoanalysis's sense of its relative cultural marginality. In a response to a French media firestorm set off by Paul B. Preciado's 2019 address to the *École de la cause freudienne* in Paris, Jacques-Alain Miller decried how what he terms "the trans crisis" has further hegemonized the proprietary epistemologies of identity politics by framing the psychoanalytic act of interpretation not as the indexation of language's internal limit or impossibility, but rather as an expression of a "detestable"—and precisely late-Foucauldian—instantiation of "power-knowledge."<sup>2</sup> Miller's discourse rightly insists on questioning the assumption that the proper analytic response to the more activist register of trans discourse is to be "docile." Indeed, a careful reading or his essay exposes the gulf that separates the hostile (and paranoid) analysis-as-panopticon scenario from the clinician's ethical commitment to listen carefully to trans patients—at least the ones that "express the desire to be listened to"<sup>3</sup>—as they come. However, Miller's intervention veers towards the apocalyptic as it conjures a kind of queer-trans Inquisition that threatens to burn the guardians

<sup>1</sup> The allusion is to Yanis Varoufakis's recent (and persuasive) argument: The economic system that supports the digital platforms, specifically in this system's extraction of cloud rents (via fees for platform access or shares of sales revenues) and free labour, marks the end of the capitalist system as we know it and the emergence of a kind of virtual neofeudalism. See *Technofeudalism: What Killed Capitalism* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2023).

<sup>2</sup> Jacques-Alain Miller, "Docile to Trans," trans. Philip Dravers, Pamela King, and Peggy Papada, *The Symptom* 18 (2019): <https://www.lacan.com/symptom/docile-to-trans-by-jacques-alain-miller>.

<sup>3</sup> Miller.

of (allegedly) patriarchal and heterosexist knowledge systems at the stake. The strong language leaves the impression that psychoanalysis today finds itself on the ropes, bruised and battered by the decline of the phallic function's authority as new fundamentalist waves from both left and right threaten to converge in a paroxysmal tsunami of hateful, death-bearing jouissance.<sup>4</sup>

Far from baseless, Miller's discourse nonetheless overstates—somewhat melodramatically, one might add—the extent of the crisis. Those among us who have toiled in Anglo-American academia for decades now no doubt will shrug and say, “‘Twas ever thus.” The small group of psychoanalytic students of my generation, the one that came of intellectual age precisely at the time of *Read My Desire*'s publication, already felt that we had arrived too late, that we had missed the heyday of psychoanalysis in the theoretical humanities. In consequence, we felt tremendous pressure demurely to acquiesce at those inevitable moments in job interviews when you are cued to acknowledge that no, in fact, you do not take psychoanalysis or Lacan quite as seriously as your cover letter or early publications might suggest, and that on the contrary you are theoretically flexible, promiscuous in fact. One central realization afforded by the passage of time since *Read My Desire*'s initial appearance is that whatever sense of decline may have hung in the air during this period was based on a retrospective illusion. Indeed, if the decade beginning in the late 1970s had witnessed an undeniable *engouement* for Lacan in feminism, sexuality studies, and film theory in both the US and the UK, then this was largely (though not exclusively, of course) due to the fact that Lacan had been thoroughly misrepresented, either as an improperly or insufficiently politicized Foucauldian historicist or as a Derridean deconstructionist (or proto-Deleuzian) yet to rid himself of the retrograde accoutrements of Oedipal phallogocracy.

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To be sure, Freud himself was acutely aware of the difficulty of propagating a praxis whose fundamental tenets include the inevitability of resistance to its

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<sup>4</sup> Those with more knowledge of the French clinical field than I have might wish to cite here a decline in the social system's support of clinical practice and the rise of racist right-wing extremism in French culture to justify Miller's pessimism. My basic point, however, is that such hindrances to the vitality of clinical practice have always existed in most national situations where Lacanian psychoanalysis is present. On the assumption that it is now over, the golden age of state support for, and general cultural interest in, clinical psychoanalysis in France is very much an exception to the historical rule.

thoroughgoing assimilation. Freudian psychoanalysis, in other words, was the discourse that not only anticipated, but also theorized, its own recursive failures in advance. In so doing, it surely guaranteed the resilience of the most unceasing reproach against it: the unfairly “tautological” nature of its notion of resistance, that is, which adherents can fling back at all possible counterarguments. But psychoanalysis’s awareness of its weak discursive position may also have helped to secure its paradoxical survival into perpetuity in a quite peculiar form: never institutionally stable, but also always surviving in the interstices, on the margins; never properly integrated into academic orthodoxy, but also spectrally transdisciplinary, subverting dominant theories and methods from within; perennially on life support, perhaps, but also never definitively dead.

As psychoanalysis instructs, that familiar, lonely feeling of not being heard, of addressing oneself to an Other who lacks the knowledge required for understanding, is a structural rather than an occasional or circumstantial affect. Indeed, as Lacan himself drily remarked on the topic of his teaching, voicing an impression unfamiliar to no public advocate of psychoanalysis, “*Je parle aux murs*” (literally: “I’m talking to the walls”).<sup>5</sup> If, however, to remain blind to the evidence of psychoanalysis’s marginality today, to the seemingly insurmountable quality of the obstacles it faces, is naive; if these obstacles seem more forbidding at present than in some actual or imaginary past, then this is surely because its lessons are as urgent, necessary, and precious as they have ever been since its inception.

If there is any merit to this general sense of things, then the application of *Read My Desire*’s insights to today’s dominant discourses should prove enlighteningly productive. What, then, are the contemporary forms of the historicist deviationism that Copjec’s book sought to correct? The suspects are far from lacking. On the level of popular social discourses, we might wonder if the mutually reinforcing agencies of a resurgent identity politics and a hateful intolerance of difference are not best conceived as a kind of illiteracy in desire. Indeed, the multiplying fronts of the recent past’s culture wars have demonstrated how advocating for the freedom to define myself and my community unilaterally through

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<sup>5</sup> This is the title of a collection of addresses Lacan gave at the chapel of the Sainte Anne hospital in Paris in 1971 and 1972. See Jacques Lacan, *Je parle aux murs* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2012).

the workings of a kind of egoic, proprietary epistemology; imposing inviolable conditions for the Other's impingement on my consciousness, on my thoughts; or refusing to acknowledge any limit to my right to *jouissance*, or indeed to my *capacity* to enjoy, each disavow my own otherness to myself by figuring psychological space as both immune to the defiles of the signifier and "realtight,"<sup>6</sup> to borrow *Read My Desire*'s concise and widely applicable term.

In the worlds of philosophy and the theoretical humanities more generally, however, the most insurgent iteration of historicism has probably been the revival of the turn not to the real, but rather to reality; to the material or phenomenal and, ultimately, to being as such. Generally, this contemporary orientation of thought aims either to emancipate humanity from the determinative distortions of subjectivity, of the transcendental construction of human apperception, or else dislodge this function from the privilege of its presumed centrical position, thereby relegating it to the same plane occupied by every other animate and inanimate object. In general, mathematics and the natural sciences have figured as the royal roads to the "great outdoors" that would finally purify thought of its congenital (human) species-centrism.

I will take as an especially consequential example of this tendency the work of Karen Barad (and one of her collaborators), and more specifically her doctrine of agential realism, singling out its finely argued, postclassical conception of a queer causality as well as the performative ontology that shapes its conceptualization. Among other things, Barad's admirable project aims to incorporate the Derridean motifs of performativity, iterability, and *différance* into the world of the natural sciences, bringing to bear insights derived from Derrida's subversive reading of structuralist linguistics on the question of matter, defined empirically as the realm of phenomena of a quantum physical, electromagnetic, or microbiological nature, for instance.

To the dramatic difference of the work of Quentin Meillassoux or Alain Badiou, in which ontology is either partly (for the former) or purely (for the latter) an *a priori* question of mathematics, in Barad's framework the data generated by the technological measurement of natural phenomena hold direct consequences for the inquiry into being. In this light we can see how Barad's working definition

<sup>6</sup> Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists* (London: Verso, 2015), 14.

of the ontology she rejects—and more specifically its references to “discrete entities that interact with one another,” “locally determinate causal” relations, as well as “the motion of entities moving through space in accord with the linear flow of time”—is classical only in a specifically modern sense.<sup>7</sup> This is the sense that took hold in earliest modernity after our concept of science shifted from the Platonic study of nonsensuous forms to its experimental meaning: the inquiry into empirical phenomena, what the Greeks called *phusis* (φύσις): the physical world of natural matter.

Agential realism is an appropriate system to test for traits of historicism because, just like *Read My Desire*’s project, it aims to give an account of generative principles, of the mechanisms of matter’s very materialization. This assertion’s validity holds even after we acknowledge that Barad’s discourse broaches the question, from its own perspective at least, more broadly; in a way, precisely, that includes both the social and the physical-material realms, or rather deconstructs or “genealogizes” the distinction between the two. In a different idiom, what is at issue in the first instance is the matter of causality, or more precisely the matter of the causality inherent in matter. Recall that Copjec elegantly defined its historicist variety as a form of immanentism: based, that is, on a “conception of a cause that is immanent within the field of its effects.”<sup>8</sup> Lacan himself put this same idea more colloquially: “There is cause only from what doesn’t work (*Il n’y a de cause que de ce qui cloche*).”<sup>9</sup> The suggestion here is that though causality is a legitimate category for thought, there is a kind of hiatus or difference in register that dissociates effect from cause: To place them on the same plane is to commit a category error inasmuch as the determinism involved in their relation is faulty, though it remains operative *as faulty or dysfunctional* nevertheless.

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To lay my cards on the table, I argue in what follows that Barad’s understanding of causality, despite its claims to complexity and indeterminacy (not to mention a lineage that connects back to the same structuralist linguistics that shaped Lacan’s thought), is ultimately guilty on the charge of historicism. Precisely, in their allergy to the strange causal faculty of the negative, the agential realist’s

<sup>7</sup> Karen Barad, “Nature’s Queer Performativity,” *Qui Parle* 19, no. 2 (January 2011): 146.

<sup>8</sup> Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 6.

<sup>9</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse* (Paris: Seuil, 1973), 30; my translation.

conceptions of “material-discursive interactions” and so-called “intra-agential spactimematterings”<sup>10</sup> are the crime’s telltale clues. In short, the ambiguously defined relation of discourse to a consistently indeterminate idea of *phusis*, and the subsequent disappearance of discourse’s non-closure or incompleteness from the causal field, not only obfuscates the signifier’s retroactive creationist powers, but also renders illegible what we might call the desire of the empirical natural sciences in both their humanist-progressivist and properly unconscious forms. As I aim to show, the divergent varieties of causality in agential realism and psychoanalysis are informed respectively by a notion of the *indeterminacy* of matter and an idea of the *incompleteness* of discourse as well as being itself.

### Causality sans Object?

As Barad presents it, agential realism has two primary goals. First, as we have already seen, it aims to delegitimate the hard conceptual distinction between nature and culture. This is the distinction responsible for structuring, among other things, the sex and gender concepts that characterized a certain generational iteration of feminist theory and was later attacked, beginning in the late 1980s, in the earliest arguments of queer theory. Though she routinely cites Judith Butler’s work as an inspiration for what she describes as her performative account of materialization, it is important to note that Barad, in keeping with her empirical orientation, does not merely claim that any conception of presumptively prediscursive matter (such as the idea of biological sex targeted by Butler) is always-already discursive. Rather, the problem in Barad’s view lies in the quality of the distinction between matter and discourse, which assumes separate physical and linguistic realms that pre-exist the distinction’s operationalization in a specific context: experimental, discursive, or normally some complex concatenation of the two. Though nature and culture, or matter and discourse, are not precisely the same thing for agential realism, they have no existence as separate entities before a particular iterative enactment of their relation is put in place. “What is needed,” Barad writes, “is an analysis that enables us to theorize the social and the natural together [...] in a way that clarifies the relationship between them.”<sup>11</sup> Though its component poles are inseparable in

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<sup>10</sup> Barad, “Nature’s Queer Performativity,” 125.

<sup>11</sup> Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 25.

an absolute sense, the matter/discourse distinction retains its truth value within specific, localized empirical contexts.

These last contentions inform what Barad wants to convey through her key notion of intra-action. Whereas modern science has classically conceived of physical matter as composed of networks of relations between preformed entities or objects, agential realism engages a number of perplexing natural phenomena to demonstrate a fundamental “ontological indeterminacy”: the notion, that is, that nature is composed not of discrete things, but rather of “entanglements” of an awesomely complex “spacetime matter” that finally invalidates the conventional distinction between *physis* and its media.<sup>12</sup> For Barad, this compound concept that goes without the intuitive idea of object radically undermines “the foundational notions of classical ontology,”<sup>13</sup> including most consequentially its account of causality. Defining intra-action as “the mutual constitution of entangled agencies,”<sup>14</sup> Barad rejects both the classical atomic parcellation of matter as well as unidirectional and determinate causal relations.

From a psychoanalytic perspective indebted to Copjec’s work, we can say that agential realism’s blind spot is to be located neither in its iterative account of discourse/matter relations nor in its performative view of matter’s mediation in space and time. Rather, the problem lies in its silent and indeed comparatively classical assumption that both *physis* and discourse, however inconsistent or indeterminate, are consistently so; that is, that they are not divided from themselves by an unplaceable negativity that renders even the determination of their indeterminacy uncertain. In sum, being is not merely indeterminate, as agential realism would contend; more consequentially, it is *incomplete*: thwarted by a lack that distorts and undermines its very realization. As I develop below, the consequence of agential realism’s overhasty judgment of a generalized material indeterminacy—a determinate indeterminacy, you could also say—is the empiricist neo-objectivism that informs its inability to conceive of a variety of subjectivity that would impact scientific practice while remaining distinct from the self-present and self-centering “Cartesian” humanist consciousness that it rightly wants to reject.

<sup>12</sup> Barad, “Nature’s Queer Performativity,” 125.

<sup>13</sup> Barad, 125.

<sup>14</sup> Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 33.

Now this cursory overview will already have alerted readers attuned to evidence of the unconscious that agential realism's unqualified hostility to the properly *a priori* premise of a relationality between identifiable objects puts it at odds with not only psychoanalysis, but also the structuralist linguistics from which it also, via Derrida, takes inspiration. To be sure, from Freud's *Vorstellungsrepräsentanzen* to Lacan's signifiers and letters, psychoanalysis has relied on a conviction in the existence of discrete entities, however defined by difference and therefore incapable of forming a unified whole, of a properly signifying nature. Moreover, these entities leave their mark on all possible knowledge of nature, even if we grant that this nature, "in itself" as it were, is indeed devoid of identifiable objects as such. In the spirit of Barad's empiricism, we might call these minimal unities upon which psychoanalysis insists *quanta of "signifyingness"* (as opposed to "signification": too defined and final a term), and they do in fact enter, however problematically or precariously, into relations amongst themselves of the kind Barad wants to dismiss as unempirical: controverted, in other words, by the findings of contemporary science. To illustrate what might be lost to our conception of scientific knowledge as well as its causality in this post- or anti-semiotic orientation of thought, we can take as a context-defining example Barad's discussion of a recent controversy in the world of microbiology, as well as the more in-depth empirical research on which it is based.

## Agential Realism and Microbiology

*Pfiesteria piscicida* is a predatorial, normally unicellular dinoflagellate whose claim to scientific fame is its capacity to behave as both plant and animal, exhibiting both photosynthetic capacity and heterotrophic behaviour (i.e., they eat other organisms). It drew the attention of microbiologists during the 1990s when questions emerged about its likely involvement in massive fish kills in the coastal estuaries of North Carolina. The characteristics and behaviours of these mixotrophic creatures, so called because of their confounding duality, varies in accordance with environmental vicissitudes. For example, they reproduce sexually or asexually depending on external conditions. The difficulty of squaring the organism's traits with existing microbiological categories led most researchers to the conclusion that science lacks the knowledge required to pin down its nature precisely. Going against the grain, Barad enlists for support the work of collaborator and science studies scholar Astrid Schrader, who rightly argues that the taxonomic conundrum reflects an uncertainty that pertains not to our

limited knowledge, but rather to the being of the critter itself. “Its very species being is indeterminate,” Barad writes, with the consequence that the organism’s “*epistemological uncertainty*” must be reconceived as a properly “*ontological indeterminacy*.<sup>15</sup> This pivot in Barad’s discussion from epistemology to ontology is characteristic of agential realism’s more general contention that the consequences of contemporary scientific practice refigure questions related to the limits of knowledge as assertions concerning being’s inherent indeterminacy.

The key information provided to illustrate the congenital vagueness of the organism’s species-being is the predatorial attribute indicated by its scientific name: *piscicida*; it kills fish. As it turns out, however, *Pfiesteria* only kills fish if it has previously been exposed to them. This means that its toxicity cannot be predicted by a thorough synchronic (atemporal or ahistorical) study of its environmental conditions. In Schrader’s words, “the dinos act differently towards fish depend[ing] on how recently they have been in contact with [them],” and Barad concludes from this that the organisms “do not respond to deterministic models of causality.”<sup>16</sup> Additional factors contribute to the difficulty of establishing the dinoflagellate’s identity as well as its suspected role in the fish kills. Not only does *Pfiesteria* have twenty-four distinct life stages and three life forms—flagellated, amoeboid and encysted—but it has proven impossible to determine which of these stages are inherent and which are context-dependent.

The important corollary of this indeterminacy is that no rigorous distinction can be drawn between the organism and its environment insofar as this environment will alter the fundamental characteristics upon which taxonomic determinations are customarily made in microbiological discourse. Adding to the conundrum is the fact that laboratory practice has struggled to catch *Pfiesteria* in the act of killing: They are nowhere to be found in the fish they presumably kill, and soon after a kill the toxic zoospores morph into benign cysts. Further, because the zoospores rely on endosymbiotic bacteria for energy, they cannot be isolated from other organisms and therefore are not amenable to development in the pure cultures upon which microbiology conventionally relies to establish

<sup>15</sup> Barad, “Nature’s Queer Performativity,” 134; emphasis in original.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted from Schrader’s unpublished draft in Barad, 136. Schrader’s argument concerning the *Pfiesteria* controversy, which extends well beyond Barad’s use of it as an example of agential realism, will be considered in more detail below.

toxicity experimentally. And finally, on the assumption that *Pfiesteria* do indeed kill fish, microbiologists have thus far even failed to determine how they do it: by secreting a water-soluble neurotoxin or by physically attacking their victims, for example.

For Barad and company, this is the ethical consequence of all these experimental and taxonomic complications: Laboratory practice must elaborate models and procedures that allow for the “agential performances of the organism,”<sup>17</sup> taking care, that is, not to impose classically deterministic models of causality on phenomena involving patterns of intra-action between organism and environment so complex that they call into question the very distinction. Sceptical readers might wonder already why the argument lends so much weight to these classical models that rely on immediacy, synchronicity, or direct consequential action; why intra-action, in other words, is opposed so selectively to alternative models of causality including, for example, those involving diachronic delays or, more significantly from a psychoanalytic point of view, retroaction (a “backwards” causality that impacts the conceptualization of a prior reality).<sup>18</sup>

Indeed, when it comes to defining the properties of this intra-active causality, the discussion noticeably struggles. We read for instance that the choices on offer to understand what is at stake in explaining *Pfiesteria*’s alleged toxicity “are not simply deterministic causality, acausality, or no causality.”<sup>19</sup> I take this to mean that if the variety of causality in question is not deterministic—if, in other words, toxicity cannot be established in accordance with conventional epidemiological criteria<sup>20</sup>—then the classical category is not simply inappropriate to the *Pfiesteria* phenomenon, and there remains some manner of causal relation between the organism and the kills. But the indeterminate causality brought

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<sup>17</sup> Barad, 137.

<sup>18</sup> To be fair, Schrader’s consideration of the causality involved in the fish kills is significantly more complex than what Barad’s summary allows. Nonetheless, Schrader does wind up endorsing the same model of causality premised on generalized indeterminacy that Barad develops in her theoretical account of agential realism.

<sup>19</sup> Barad, 136.

<sup>20</sup> According to the classical, now in places discredited, guidelines known as Koch’s Postulates, the infectious organism must be present in the affected host and then isolated and grown in pure culture. This culture must induce the disease again when introduced into a new, healthy host and then, isolated a second time, be shown to be the same organism as the one found in the original host.

forward by agential realism as an alternative to the classical models operates without assuming the existence of discrete objects in matter and for this reason forbids any notion of an autonomous and identifiable cause.<sup>21</sup>

Now a concept of causality that fails to distinguish categorically between cause and effect will surely appear suspect to many, including psychoanalytic readers. But why, precisely? One way of exploring this question is to investigate the divergent ways in which agential realism and psychoanalysis consider what Barad calls a “cut.” Essential to agential realist doctrine is the distinction it draws between indeterminate matter “in itself” and the localized performative subject-object or social-natural resolutions that a particular experimental apparatus or measuring technology will put into effect on the level of the phenomenon. In other words, though agential realism rejects the existence of discrete entities in matter as such, it allows for these entities’ phenomenal existence at the local level of a specific set of experimental conditions. The scientific apparatus, in other words, will enact iterative determinations of phenomenal objects and, though Barad’s conception of laboratory practice includes discourse and meaning within its orbit, these factors, on the rare occasion when their agency is given pride of place, always act in tandem with the more commonsensically “material” workings of experimental technologies and practices.

Whereas agential realism accounts for the creation of objects of matter/knowledge via a hybrid conception of the experimental apparatus with which these objects are “agentially” enmeshed, psychoanalysis instead focuses squarely on the (dysfunctional) productive power of language and discourse, which are marked most consequentially not by indeterminacy, but rather by an inherent lack. This lack of closure in language, this negativity between signifiers, causes *not* the phenomenon’s determination as in agential realism’s lab practices, but rather the *subject of science* whose desires, both conscious and unconscious, will inevitably shape not only any possible experimental design, but also the interpretation of the data that the experiment will generate. Indeed (and quite preposterously from a psychoanalytic perspective), Barad’s theory, in its aim to salvage a form of scientific objectivity from the ravages of poststructuralist relativism, explicitly disconnects the measured properties of a phenomenon from

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<sup>21</sup> Barad, 149.

“the desires or will of the experimenter.”<sup>22</sup> As I argue in this essay’s conclusion, this allergy to the subject as psychoanalysis defines it (as a properly unconscious subject) leads agential realism to elaborate an ethics in which, contradictorily, binding normative judgments concerning the comparative value of scientific initiatives are forbidden in a squarely relativistic way.

With the indeterminacy it posits as the hallmark of discourse and spacetime matter’s complex mutual entanglements, agential realism leaves the independent determinations of language, and ultimately language’s inherent determinative failure, unacknowledged. As far as the *Pfiesteria* controversy is concerned, science requires a signifier quite literally to create the object of knowledge whose relative degree of correspondence to the microbiological phenomena under observation might then be put up for debate. This act of creation is the purely semiotic “cut” that psychoanalysis would posit in lieu of the phenomenal one performed by the experimental apparatus in agential realism. As Barad’s and Schrader’s considerations make abundantly clear, microbiologists have struggled to know exactly what they are talking about in their learned discussions of *Pfiesteria*. Nevertheless, the existence of a signifier in language to signify the microorganism in an objective way is necessary even if its actual or presumed ontological indeterminacy conditions the discussion as such and, further, even if this signification can only materialize differentially in relation to all the other taxonomic signifiers for related organisms in the discourse of microbiology.

In this precise sense, a variety of scientific objectivity—purely nonempirical in nature—is to be situated at the level of the signifier, not in the local phenomenal determinations effected by technologies of measurement. Whereas agential realism posits an entangled, mutually affecting relation between discourse and matter, psychoanalysis, in its dual emphasis on the autonomous material creativity of language and language’s structural incompleteness, gestures towards a view of nature itself as inherently lacking, of being as constitutively incomplete. What Barad calls *Pfiesteria*’s performativity should therefore be situated in the act of naming that retroactively creates its species-being in scientific discourse, however empirically problematic, not in the spatially and temporally mediated material nature whose relations with discourse in agential realism are left causally (and casually) ill-defined.

<sup>22</sup> Barad, “Meeting the Universe Halfway,” 19.

## The Dinoflagellate's Demand

Schrader's in-depth account of the microbiological research into the *Pfiesteria* controversy offers a level of nuance that Barad's exemplificatory use of it is unable to provide. Its consideration here will bring welcome precision to our discussion of the ethical and political ramifications of agential realism. The main interest of Schrader's exacting article is to gauge how responsibility in scientific practice is impacted by what she calls the "temporalization" of the scientific object.<sup>23</sup> Before considering the ethical question, however, it will be helpful to note how Schrader's analysis broaches the problem of discourse's role in the construction of epistemological objects with a view to fleshing out the subtle but consequential differences between agential realism and psychoanalysis on this issue.

As Schrader outlines, *Pfiesteria*'s species identity can be established with the help of available genetic testing technology. However, the markers singled out in such testing feature in both toxic and nontoxic populations of the organism and therefore fail to pin down its perplexing indeterminacy. The discordance between a genetically defined identity and the absence of any common characteristics or behaviours that remain invariant in space and time motivates Schrader's criticism of the numerous experiments that have "construct[ed] the essence of *Pfiesteria*'s being as an atemporal object," or as a determinate one in the broader context of agential realist theory.<sup>24</sup> On this basis, Schrader concludes that *Pfiesteria* is devoid of an ontological identity that would pre-exist the establishment of the laboratory apparatus's spatiotemporal parameters. This insight allows Schrader to acknowledge the power of taxonomic discourse to define the organism according to microbiological convention. Her discussion even recognizes that the act of scientific naming establishes identity negatively through differential relations to other taxonomic categories: "Without connection to anything established," she writes, "a new species, genus and family would cease to be meaningful."<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Astrid Schrader, "Responding to *Pfiesteria piscicida* (the Fish Killer): Phantom Ontologies, Indeterminacy, and Responsibility in Toxic Microbiology," *Social Studies of Science* 40, no. 2 (April 2010): 278.

<sup>24</sup> Schrader, 287.

<sup>25</sup> Schrader, 289.

Clearly, however, Schrader's argument for taxonomic contingency is not what proves problematic from the perspective of *Read My Desire*'s critique of historicism. Rather, the difficulty arises from the specific ontological consequences she draws from it. For the conundrum around *Pfiesteria*'s identity and toxicity is the result of neither a misrecognition of the phenomenal impacts of experiment-specific spatiotemporal relations nor a hypostatization of the organism's identity via the idealist abstraction of its being from what Schrader calls its "doings." Since, due to the agency of discourse, any post-experimental interpretation of the data—necessarily discursive, of course, even if rendered mathematically—will retroactively posit the identity of the organism in question, there will always be friction, a disjunction, between the empirical evidence and the taxonomic definition of scientific objects like *Pfiesteria* that do not yet, and may never, exhibit either consistently verifiable inherent characteristics or environment-independent behaviours.

Crucially, these interpretations will inevitably insert the organism in question, figured in the form of a signifier/knowledge object, into a discourse that features an element of subjectivity tethered (unconsciously) to a particular ideological point of view.<sup>26</sup> In short, for the human subject of science—the desiring subject of which agential realism can only fail to take account—discourse inserts a gap into physical matter that lends to its epistemological objects not a generically knowable indeterminacy, but rather an identity that subverts itself, a unity that fails fully to come to be. This dynamic—or dialectic, properly speaking—of identity and its immanent subversion raises the question, in its relation to subjectivity, of science's desire. This desire's expression gives rise to a set of intentional and unintentional impacts on experimental practice that shape both the environment and the human community that inhabits it.

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<sup>26</sup> Critical theory, a discourse with which Barad's thought does not substantively engage, makes a very similar point about "traditional" theory's confusion of two questions: "the mediation of the factual through the activity of society as a whole, and [...] the influence of the measuring instrument, that is, of a particular action, upon the object being observed." Max Horkheimer, "Traditional and Critical Theory," in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Mathew J. O'Connell et al. (New York: Continuum, 2002), 201. Both pre-critical theory and agential realism effectively isolate the latter from the former, as if experimental design had nothing to do with a socially and subjectively mediated selection of what agential realism itself calls "matters of concern." More simply put, the scientist will "concentrate on some particulars while failing to notice others." Horkheimer, 201.

To further explore the ethical and political consequences of this key question of science's desire, we can return to Barad's and Schrader's presentations of the social contexts surrounding the fish kills. To be sure, the sense in which agential realism should be qualified as an empiricist or scientistic variety of historicism must be set against, however paradoxical this might at first appear, properly contextual considerations. As we have already seen, the microbiological inquiry into *Pfiesteria* came on the heels of an ecological disaster involving more than a billion dead fish in North Carolina's coastal estuaries. Though no definitive or incontrovertible evidence has ever been produced, *Pfiesteria piscicida* figured as the prime suspect for the triggering of the red tides whose toxicity was hypothesized as the carnage's cause. The expanding corpus of scientific knowledge about the confounding organism was catalyzed in the first instance by a desire to stem the devastation of North Carolina's coastal fish stocks and to mitigate the severe economic consequences for the fishery and the livelihoods of the many who depend on it.

If the set of progressive and humanistic initiatives undertaken to stem the devastation of the red tides can be qualified as a desire, however, it is probably not an unconscious one. Turning to psychoanalysis, we can speculate about the desiring latencies inherent in agential realism's reading of *Pfiesteria* discourse by focusing on Barad's association of queerness with what she calls the "critter," the general concept that her consideration of Schrader's work aims to exemplify. As is well known, Lacan's rigorous definition of desire's causality references what he called *objet petit a*: a strangely negative, "anticonceptual and indefinite"<sup>27</sup> object distinct from both *physis* and the signifier (and in this sense neither material/physical nor discursive) that retroactively produces, as we have already considered, an object of knowledge for scientific inquiry: the concept that differentially designates *Pfiesteria*'s confounding species-being. What then causes science itself to coin, to invent, this signifier? To put the same question a different way: What is the desire that drives microbiological interest in the dinoflagellate? And finally, what desire can we read between the lines of Barad's recruitment of *Pfiesteria* to serve as the symbol of an inherent queerness in nature?

In answering these questions, we might wonder if Barad's definition of the critters she lovingly describes might reveal—if not for Barad "herself" (surely this

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<sup>27</sup> Lacan, *Les quatre concepts*, 30; my translation.

would be too psychologizing a reading), then for microbiology as agential realism figures it—properly psychical, as opposed to empirical, traits. As far as the science itself is concerned, considered apart from agential realism’s consideration of it, we can ask this question: If microbiology has been so interested in pinning down the authentic species-being of so taxonomically confounding and seemingly destructive a creature, could this be because it wonders, unconsciously of course, what we as a species could be *for it*? If this hypothesis has any merit, then it should be possible to trace in Barad’s discourse distinctive incarnations of the critter-object that signal both the idealized form it takes in the ego structure as well as a more nefarious mode that threatens to undermine that structure’s stability from within. To what extent does the idealization of *Pfiesteria* as the material embodiment of a “queer” indeterminacy in nature (including its political consequences for human sexuality) depend on the repression of the discursive conditions for agential realism’s relative degree of interest in the social and environmental impacts of its likely toxicity?

We can discern the former, idealized incarnation of *Pfiesteria* in the way Barad’s discourse appeals to empirical evidence from the natural world in political defense of the legitimacy of a human form of queerness even if, as someone like Tim Dean would be sure to argue, that queerness’s connection in the discussion to the lived experience of human sexuality remains contingent and vague.<sup>28</sup> Not only does the category of the critter muddle the distinction between human and animal, animate and inanimate, but it also unsettles the ontological identity of the conception of nature itself which, in the human world, serves as the rhetorical foundation for the well-known normative constructs responsible for

<sup>28</sup> I have in mind Dean’s (justly) withering review of Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman’s *Sex, or the Unbearable* in which he argues that the authors indulge in such abstractly theoretic musings that sex’s connection to anything related to lived experience becomes impossible to discern. See “No Sex Please, We’re American,” *American Literary History* 27, no. 3 (Fall 2015): 614–24. Compare Alenka Zupančič’s defence of a properly intellectual view of sex in her incisive inquiry into the unsettling ontological consequences of the psychoanalytic approach to the question in *What Is Sex?* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017). In my own view, though psychoanalysis very clearly (and radically) problematizes the reduction of sex to the common-sense understanding of sexual practice, there remains a link between the theoretical or philosophical assertion of sex’s connection to a fault in being and the contested, contradictory, and confusing meanings taken by the term in ordinary discourse, not to mention the many difficulties the lived experience of sexuality poses for individuals. I would add that the latter two are a direct consequence of the first.

the phobic acts of abjection that Barad's discourse rightly maligns. In short, there is a kind of transferential identification onto *Pfiesteria* on the very level of its species indeterminacy—a paradoxical supposition of knowledge of being's non-identity “in” the dinoflagellate—that works to cancel the traces of the organism's malignancy from the enunciation of Barad's “queer performative” account of its implication in the ecological disaster involving the red tides.

Barad's elevation of the microorganism into an emblem for politically meaningful queerness sidelines any normative acknowledgment of the environmental crisis that set off the scientific interest in its probable toxicity. Moreover, crucially for the question of causality, this idealization also obscures the dissimulated passivity characteristic of the unconscious subject of microbiology with respect to its epistemological project to define the organism's essence and establish its toxicity experimentally. Unconsciously as it were, microbiology, not to mention agential realism's engagement with it, asks these questions: In allegedly contaminating our waters, what could *Pfiesteria* be after? What nefarious design could possibly motivate the organism to kill so many nutrient-rich and delicious fish? In the end, the object-cause of the agential realist's desire in its microbiological manifestation is the non-phenomenal, *a priori* difference that structures the properly psychical distinction between the good critter whose queerness reveals what is excluded by the conditions of materialization, thereby providing validation for the lifestyle or identity of the human queer, and the bad critter whose probable if uncertain toxicity threatens the viability of our natural environment. The idealization of *Pfiesteria* in Barad's discourse—the abstraction of its “queerness” from its probable toxicity—marginalizes the social and environmental contexts of the scientific controversy, subsuming the concern for ecological destruction under the overriding ethical imperative to witness this organism's iterative morphs and phantomatic being.

Pivotal details of Schrader's scrupulous work on *Pfiesteria* can serve further to illustrate this dynamic of dissimulated subjective passivity which, as I have proposed, informs agential realism's ethical relativism and scientistic neo-objectivism. The status of *Pfiesteria* as a distinctively psychical object emerges most clearly when the microorganism is figured as issuing to science *a demand*: that it enable the organism's autonomy with respect to the constraining designs and determining machinations of (unethical) laboratory practice. In this way, Schrader's doctrinal call for what she calls “response-ability” obscures the effects of

microbiology's properly subjective desire by equating scientific ethics with this gesture of recognition rather than with, for example, a self-reflexive interrogation of the aims and impacts of investigation, or else a normative judgment about which matters of concern would be most beneficial to the human community and the broader ecological systems in which it is enmeshed.<sup>29</sup>

In an illuminating passage, Schrader enlists Derrida's much commented-upon motif of the phantom to describe *Pfiesteria*'s confounding properties. The prose divulges the logical connection in agential realism between, on the one hand, its ill-defined assumptions about the creative agency of language and, on the other, the ambition of objectivity or neutrality that underpins its scientific methodological relativism. Averring that the phantom appears only as a trace in accordance with the investigative priorities operationalized by a specific experimental apparatus, Schrader emphasizes science's pre-eminent ethical duty to acknowledge the power of microbiological organisms to self-actualize:

Phantoms do not emerge 'as such'; they appear as traces and are associated with specific matters of concern. Importantly, a phantom is not an empty signifier, whose meaning is simply deferred until the controversy may become settled. Phantoms are 'agentially real'; they contribute to their own materialization and *make demands on us* to be accounted for. Responsibility in scientific practices hinges on *how* their 'agencies' are taken into account.<sup>30</sup>

The first thing to note in this key passage is the assumption that to consider *Pfiesteria* as a signifier implies—with seeming necessity; analytically in Kantian terms—that science will one day find an associated signified that would fully disclose the microorganism's being. The psychoanalytic argument, by contrast, is notably subtler: If a signifier, in its differential relations with other signifiers, contains within itself the promise of completed meaning, then this meaning will always fail to disclose itself in full. In this sense, the signifier marks truth as impossible, amenable only to partial revelation. Instead, for agential realism, to argue that the invention of a taxonomic name creates a properly epistemological object is to assume (mistakenly) the eventuality of this object's complete saturation by knowledge and in consequence the imminence of a reliable ontological

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<sup>29</sup> Schrader, "Responding to *Pfiesteria piscicida*," 277.

<sup>30</sup> Schrader, 279; emphasis added.

ground. The argument moves directly from its semiological premise to an epistemological consequence already conjoined with the unproblematised “classical” ontology that agential realism, rightly of course, rejects.

Indeed, Schrader will explicitly dismiss an alternative corollary to the idea of the signifier’s creative epistemological power, the one that more accurately captures the consequences of discursive agency in scientific inquiry. Her work distinguishes between its own agential realist doctrine of ontological indeterminacy and a rival view of “epistemological uncertainties” that issue forth from the “incompleteness of human knowledges.”<sup>31</sup> Evidently, the premise of epistemological incompleteness for agential realism carries no properly ontological consequences. Or if it does (as Schrader elsewhere will also suggest), these consequences can only be thoroughly classical, grounded in the same ontology of presence—pure, self-present being; or, in the microbiological context, a perfectly defined critter-essence—that Derrida thoroughly eviscerated in his deconstructive project.

The second notable element of the passage is of course the ethical consequence drawn from agential realism’s indeterminate ontology. To be sure, a psychoanalytically-inclined reader cannot fail to note how the discussion portrays responsible experimental practice as a response to a demand from an Other: a microorganism, in this instance, endowed with the capacity to morph and materialize of its own volition and thereby to frustrate the designs of a classical model of empirical inquiry that assumes neatly divisible matter and distinct empirical objects. Yet this assertion of *Pfiesteria*’s prodigious agency is not precisely what is historicist in Shrader’s discussion from the point of view of Copjec’s critique. Instead, the argument runs aground where it equates scientific objectivity with a gesture of passivization that occludes the subjective function. Agential realism effects this occlusion by positioning microbiological inquiry as the instrumental satisfaction of *Pfiesteria*’s demand that any experimental engagement dutifully enable, witness, and account for its category-defying feats of self-materialization.

If such an act of witnessing is the paramount ethical responsibility of laboratory practice in agential realism, then there can be no legitimate normative

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<sup>31</sup> Schrader, 283.

prioritization of any one set of concerns over any other. Though both Schrader and Barad make significant gestures in the direction of the importance of the human and ecological factors associated with the fish kills, their arguments’ subsumption of inquiry to the microorganism’s sovereignty prevents them, strictly speaking, from claiming these as especially worthy of investigative attention. Granted, Schrader’s analysis will nicely foreground the strange, future anterior temporality involved in establishing the repeatability of the kills attributed to *Pfiesteria* when their involvement can only be established after the fact through the observation of their inherited toxicity in laboratory conditions. When the assertion about this temporality’s ecological and political relevance is made, however, it is left unspecified, evoked only as one of many possible matters of concern in which scientific inquiry might take an interest.<sup>32</sup>

Indeed, a lay observer—not to mention a worker who depends on the viability of the estuarine fish stocks—might suggest that an investigation into the impacts of industrial agricultural runoff, especially the contaminants produced by the pork and poultry industries, might be an especially urgent matter of concern that merits methodological foregrounding.<sup>33</sup> Some might even confess to harbouring no ethical concerns over an inquiry that would prioritize the generation of evidence of these impacts over the respectful acknowledgement of *Pfiesteria*’s powers of self-transformation. By figuring the phenomenal ambiguity of the protist’s ambiguous being as a demand for ethical acknowledgment that must be satisfied, agential realism relativizes—and thereby discourages—interrogation of the desire of science, including the properly political question of the vested human interests that will always inform experimental design.

In the end, the indeterminate causality that informs agential realism fails to depart substantively from the Derrida- and Foucault-inspired deconstructive-historicist framework that has so influentially informed Butler’s work, from which Barad and company will draw significantly while at the same time critiquing it for its inability to move beyond the social realm to inquire into its intra-active relations with matter. Even though, through their inquiry into the epistemological

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<sup>32</sup> Schrader, 296.

<sup>33</sup> For important context around the continuing impact of industrial agricultural runoff on North Carolina’s coastal estuaries, see Rick Dove’s *Riverlaw* website: <https://www.riverlaw.us>.

and ontological consequences of contemporary empirical science, Barad and Schrader meaningfully augment Butler's theory by including *phusis* within the realm of what avails itself of performative self-materialization, their conceptions of both discourse and matter remain "realtight" in Copjec's specific sense: However indeterminate (because they are susceptible only to phenomenal subject/object or nature/culture localizations), they remain consistently so, devoid of the lack, the negativity, for which the subject must inevitably compensate through the agency—the *performative* agency, why not?—not of an intra-active discourse/matter amalgam, but rather of fantasy and the unconscious desire that molds it.

Left unaccounted for in agential realism is the strange causal agency of a properly psychical object irreducible to both *phusis* (nature) and language (the signifier). This object is included within what we might call, in an expansion of Barad's Germanesque compound term, "*spacetimematterdiscourse*" only as its internal limit, as its exteriority to itself. The regrettable ethical consequence of this oversight is the unacknowledged subjective passivity that subjugates scientific responsibility to both environment and human community to an imperative of microbiological recognition. This imperative is enabled by a gesture of "queer" idealization that dangerously relativizes the political and ecological consequences of *Pfiesteria*'s likely toxicity, delinking through abstraction the idea of queerness from the lived experience of human sexuality.

### **Data availability statement**

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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