

**The Parody of Matter:
Bataille, Pu'ito, Tlazolteotl, and
the Filth to Come**



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It is clear that the world is purely parodic, in other words, that each thing seen is the parody of another, or is the same thing in a deceptive form.¹

Whole libraries could articulate their volumes on the hinge of this sentence; writers like Jorge Luis Borges and Walter Benjamin know intimately. George Bataille, however, opening his “Solar Anus” to the salvo of clarity will waste no time to clarify parody’s provenance and stakes, to clarify its clarity. He will not clarify what prevents parody from encroaching upon clarity and revealing the latter as deception. For, if it is clear that the world is parodic, that parody is a universal or mondial condition, the clarity of the world is also in jeopardy. Before things become things, and as soon as there is world, clarity will prove deceptive. Accordingly, Bataille’s open-

1 Georges Bataille, “The Solar Anus,” in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1933*, ed. Allen Stoeckl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 5.



ing sentence exhibits its deceptive clarity as an act of self-consumption. It is an act of ouroboric cannibalism, in which the tail of the sentence eats the head, and the anus devours the mouth. Not only does the latter stand for the former, but it also performs its function. From the start, a parody of parodies invites a contemplation of the solar anus. It invites a meditation on filth.

Bataille the Parodist: Base Matter contra Matter as Base

Should one entertain the perverse fancy of considering filth, few beginnings would be more propitious than Bataille's work on base matter, a matter "so repulsive that it resisted not only the idealism of Christians, Hegelians, and Surrealists, but even the conceptual edifice-building of traditional materialists."² The "heterogeneity" of this matter constitutes its capacity to parody.

Before turning to this heterogeneity, therefore, the function of parody needs to be probed, for it is unclear whether parody should be distinguished from satire, travesty, caricature, or pastiche and more generally from figures such as synecdoche and metalepsis, in a word: metonymy. Perhaps one thing can stand for another, yet why, in what sense, should this standing be distinctly *parodic*? What is this poetic side street (*para + odos*) that worlds the world, that connects every destination to every other departure?

If only perhaps with caution, it is nonetheless possible to interpolate into Bataille's semantics of parody nuances such as Nabokov's: "satire is a lesson, parody

2 Allen Stoekl, "Introduction," in *Visions of Excess*, xi.

is a game.”³ Indeed, matter does not teach a lesson, or if it does, it is a lesson in a limited, cruel sense. Rather, the parody of matter shows the game of the world, or in a different light, it shows the feast of the world, the feast upon which being itself feeds, without “feedback,” without “feedforward.”

All the same, such semantic nuances, significant—literally and figuratively—as they are in themselves and within given contexts, fail to account for Bataille’s broader gesture in figuring matter as parody. Bataille invokes and utilizes the term “parody” with little circumspection because of a perceived urgency; “parody” is the hammer that offers itself most readily for the task at hand, the demolition of hierarchies. It is in a similar gesture that Mikhail Bakhtin interchanges the term “parody” with “travesty” when writing, for example, that there “has never been a genre without its own parodying or travesty double.”⁴ Another implement might have been used to show the inherent instability of every theoretical edifice that claims to be self-identical, self-sufficient, and transcendent, beyond subversion.⁵ Bataille, like Bakhtin, chooses parody—and the effects of this choice, semantic and tactic, will be significant. But these effects did not and could not have pre-determined the strategic-functional exigency of the destabilization of the world.

Indeed, this destabilization gives itself to laughter as it does to violence, disgust, and terror. One quickly loses

3 Alfred Appel and Vladimir Nabokov, “An Interview with Vladimir Nabokov,” in *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature* 8, nr. 2 (1967): 138.

4 Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 53.

5 Leslie Boldt-Irons, “Bataille’s ‘The Solar Anus’ or the Parody of Parodies,” in *Studies in 20th Century Literature* 25, nr. 2 (2001): 355.

oneself in the labyrinth of signs where the theriomorphous awaits. This is the fear invoked by the archontic orders of Gnosticism, the dead serious parody of Platonism that Bataille adopts and adapts. In Gnosticism, Bataille discovers matter as “an *active* principle having its own autonomous existence as darkness (which would not be the simple absence of light, but the monstrous *archontes* revealed by this absence), and as evil (which would not be the absence of good, but a creative action).”⁶ The same logic that leads Plotinus to condemn matter and later Proclus to recover it merely as a *parhypostasis*, the quasi-substance afforded as the last, unavoidable emanation of the One, propels Gnosticism to celebrate in matter the obscure and the formless. An inversion of hierarchies is at work in the most literal sense. In the archontic forms of the despot and the beast, an “illegitimate” principle becomes operative, which philosophy, morality, and the state cannot allow to constitute an *arche*. Yet from such an obscure principle, summed up in the indefinite figure of matter, Bataille draws solace in the surrounding darkness.

Importantly, this solace is not a future-oriented hope. For a time, surrealist automatic writing will provide Bataille with a means to do away with goals and with the “vision of the future,” which thought and language assert, in order to replace the present that remains inaccessible to them.⁷ This solace is in and of the present; it is the solace that darkness gives to the light. In a late work like Maurice Blanchot’s *The Madness of the Day*, this

6 Georges Bataille, “Base Materialism and Gnosticism,” in *Visions of Excess*, 47.

7 Georges Bataille, “Surrealism and How It Differs from Existentialism,” in Georges Bataille, in *The Absence of Myth* (London: Verso, 1994), 65–6.

experience resolves into a tranquil joy in the cool of the night. But in these early writings of Bataille, the play of light and darkness is provocative, visceral, filthy.

Texts such as the “Solar Anus,” “Rotten Sun,” and “The Pineal Eye” do not merely unmoor representation from its aspirations, but they dissolve the visible and vision itself into radiant presence. The figure of the solar annulus, the ring of light around the sun during an eclipse, which concludes the “Solar Anus,” combines, as Leslie Anne Boldt-Irons observes, the two principal motions that the essay establishes: circularity and palindromic linearity. The first corresponds to the Hegelian movement of the idea and of all-encompassing love, the second to the syncopated movement of life, or alternatively *eros*, the back-and-forth of sexual motion. Bataille uses the figure of the locomotive to drive the co-implication of the two movements: The wheels’ unending rotation precedes and succeeds, conditions, and is conditioned by the intermittent thrust of the pistons.⁸ The locomotive, a virile-virulent figure of industrial-technical progress and of the future at large, is replaced then, at the close of the essay, by the solar annulus: “this image of a black center surrounded by a brilliant circle of light suggests that the sun has been penetrated by a shaft of darkness. Circularity has been broken by a linear stroke, but the ray of blackness at the center is encircled by light.”⁹

Darkness and light, filth and the sublime, punctuation and enchainment. Bataille’s project does not merely exchange the hierarchic positions of these figures, nor does it attempt to synthesize them: “filth does not ‘replace’ God: there is no system of values, no new hierarchy.”¹⁰

8 Bataille, “The Solar Anus,” 6.

9 Boldt-Irons, “Bataille’s ‘The Solar Anus,’” 372.

10 Allan Stoekl, “Introduction,” xiv.

Base mater is precisely what breaks (with) the system by contaminating that which it elevates; like the big toe supporting the erect body, it constitutes the indelible reminder of muddied, revolutive beginnings.¹¹ As such, matter is always base, the self-undermining base of every reality.

Indeed, the ideas of deconstruction and self-deconstruction already germinate in this casting of matter as a third term,¹² a term which escapes both the original and the inverted order and shows their insufficiency.¹³ As a materialist, Bataille reveals what is problematic in materialism,¹⁴ in a movement of thought caught up between wariness against mere inversion and the tactical, if not strategic, necessity of undoing idealism but also dislodging the residual hierarchic idealizations of most materialisms.¹⁵ In effect, Bataille's matter exists only as that "*nonlogical difference* that represents in relation to the economy of the universe what crime represents in relation to the law."¹⁶ In its criminal instability, matter does not lend itself to a Marxist structure and superstructure articulation, but rather remains in flux—a torrential flood of base subversion.

Understanding matter as what parodies and subverts hierarchies as well as what subverts their subversion will help us approach two indigenous divinities of the Amer-

11 Benjamin Noys, "George Bataille's Base Materialism," in *Cultural Values* 2, nr. 4 (1998): 500.

12 Julian Pefanis, *Heterology and the Postmodern* (London: Duke University Press, 1991), 4.

13 Jacques Derrida, *Positions* (London: The Athlone Press, 1987), 41–2.

14 Pierre Macherey, *The Object of Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 113.

15 Georges Bataille, "Materialism," in *Visions of Excess*, 15.

16 Georges Bataille, "The Notion of Expenditure," in *Visions of Excess*, 129.

icas: Pu'iito and Tlazolteotl. Bataille, the thinker of myth, does not discuss either, but thinking with Bataille, we can carry these figures into the future, not as a promise, but precisely as abiding, salvaging subversion.

“How People and Animals received their Anus:”

Pu'iito the Subverter

In 1905, Theodor Koch-Grünberg recorded an origin myth told among the Taulipang Indians of Guiana which relates the story of Pu'iito, in Koch-Grünberg's appraisal, “undoubtedly the weirdest personification of which we have record.”¹⁷ The weirdness of the myth—as a whole—indicates, perhaps, a second-order subversion; first, however, we must attend to the fable, worth recounting at length:

In the deep past, animals and people lacked an anus with which to defecate. I think they defecated through their mouths. Pu'iito, the anus, wandered around, slowly and cautiously, farting in the faces of animals and people, and then running away. So the animals said: “Let's grab Pu'iito, so we can divide him up between us!” Many gathered and said: “We'll pretend that we're asleep! When he arrives, we'll catch him!” So that's what they did. Pu'iito arrived and farted in the face of one of them. They ran after Pu'iito, but couldn't catch him and were left trailing behind.

The parrots Kuliwai and Kaliká got close to Pu'iito. They ran and ran. Finally they caught him and tied him up. Then the others who had been left behind arrived: tapir, deer, curassow, Spix's guan, piping guan, dove. They began to share him out. Tapir eagerly asked for a piece. The parrots cut a large piece and threw it to the other animals. Tapir immediately grabbed it. That's why his anus is so huge.

17 Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, “Immanence and Fear: Stranger-Events and Subjects in Amazonia,” in *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 2, nr. 1 (2012): 31.

The parrot cut a small, appropriately-sized piece for himself. The deer received a smaller piece than tapir's. The doves took a little piece. Toad arrived and asked them to give him a piece too. The parrots threw a piece in his direction, which stuck on his back: that's why even today the toad's anus is on his back.

That was how we acquired our anuses. Were we without them today, we'd have to defecate through our mouths, or explode.¹⁸

Indeed, the weirdness of the myth cannot be dissociated from the fact that it presents itself as offering a solution to what does not purport to be a problem — humans and animals lack an anus, but they are not debarred from defecation; the lack of an anus is not in any way construed as a problem. Indeed, the incentive that propels the animals to pursue, capture and dismember Pu'iito is not the affliction of digestive discomfort or metabolic incapacity but a comic irritation with Pu'iito's farcical farts. The anatomy of the anus is the resolution of a bad joke. Nonetheless, the fear of explosive constipation lurks at the edges of this text, as does the tacit approbation of, if not disgust with, oral defecation.

Reading the fable through *Anti-Oedipus*, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro discovers in it the pre-organized, or pre-organic, co-existence of animals who have not yet been fully speciated, their bodies not fully territorialized since their organs are still only partial, loci of alternating repulsion and attraction.¹⁹ For Deleuze and Guattari, "it is the collective investment of the organs that plug desire into the *socius*," a desire that modern societies have

18 Sérgio Medeiros, *Makunaíma e Jurupari. Cosmogonias ameríndias* (São Paulo: Perspectiva, 2002), 57; E. Viveiros de Castro, "Immanence and Fear," 30.

19 Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, "Immanence and Fear," 31.

sought to regulate through the privatization of organs—the first privatized organ being the anus.²⁰

This interpretation might indicate that this myth, the letter and transmission of which cannot be queried at present, points to the time before the “binding” and apportioning of Pu’iito, when every animal, as much as every human, would not, in fact, defecate through their own mouth, but all life defecated through Pu’iito. Or, rather than challenging the form of the myth, a different reading might be probed. Indeed, not only are different species explicitly distinguished in the text, but their form, traits, and character determine their role in the capture of Pu’iito and in his apportioning. It might be countered that the absence of humans in the allotment of the anus is a corollary of the generalized anthropomorphism of the animal world, making the presence of humans superfluous both on the narratological and ontological level. Indeed, if animals are like humans in all apparent regards (they speak, deliberate, plan, and so on), speciation is not so much an incomplete process as it is a condition and an impossibility at once: Receiving a segment of the anus is called to determine the animal which was already a tapir and will remain “human.”

Nonetheless, an event does take place—the fable of Pu’iito is a parody in Bataille’s sense. It does not so much confirm the necessity of the speciated, albeit perhaps not yet individuated, possession of an anus as it destabilizes the certainty of this necessity and invokes an originary time pre-dating it, a time when the necessity of the anus was unnecessary, the mouth being both the origin and destination of nourishment, as much as the

20 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 142–3.

origin of the fable. Indeed, the story shows Pu'iito as the third—neither a human, nor an animal, but a spirit, albeit a quasi-mortal one—a poor parodist with limited powers. As spirit, Pu'iito, the “divine anus,” connects the in-corporated rectum with the privileged mouth and opens up the immanence of nourishment and waste into a circuit. Pu'iito, the runner who could not escape, sets the economy of digestion into motion. Even when captured, he remains the errant member that continues to unsettle this economy and its by-products, for his capture might signal for humans and animals the end of the insult of being mere receivers of farts, but not without replacing it with the shame of being their authors. Henceforth, humans and animals will carry the responsibility for Pu'iito's parody since they will carry a tatter of his body on theirs.

We conclude this section with two vignettes of divide parody which hinge on nothing more than the errancy that the passage across languages can never avoid. Nonetheless, or precisely because of this, they carry forward the mouth-anus economy that Pu'iito's myth sets in motion. The first comes from Bataille's appropriation of Gnosticism—he writes:

Thus the adoration of an ass-headed god (the ass being the most hideously comic animal, and at the same time the most humanly virile) seems to me capable of taking on even today a crucial value: the severed ass's head of the acephalic personification of the sun undoubtedly represents, even if imperfectly, one of materialism's most virulent manifestations.²¹

The ass steps into the fray to configure an asininely theriomorphic god and, in doing so, subverts two intertwined expectations: That the sun-god and the ass should retain their respective places and their heads;

21 Georges Bataille, “Base Materialism and Gnosticism,” 46.

instead, in this exchange of heads, this capital exchange, the acephalic sun receives a severed part of the ass, who is thereby deified. In absolute parody, but also in absolute phonetic and noematic fidelity, one discovers the anus in the English “ass.” An anus-headed god would have been a step too far for the Gnostics: Their parody of a predominantly Hellenic world-image is brutally serious. But this is precisely what we are called to think with Bataille—the point where the mouth and the anus meet—the point before Pu’iito’s capture. The moment of originary explosion.

Here opens the second vignette. In the name of *sol invictus*, the invincible sun, whose head the Gnostics were keen to sever and replace with that of an ass, echoes the Latin word of nourishment, *victus*, the victual. In an etymological and semantic parody, “*sol invictus*” signifies accordingly the inedible or indigestible sun. But if the sun cannot be metabolized, it is because his head is not yet that of an ass. Beyond the scope of myth, the need for the sun to obtain an anus corresponds to the need to extend the thermodynamic gradient of solar energy into a metabolic structure that can negentropically hold on to and articulate helio-power. The “solar anus” encapsulates the free passage from celestial dissipation to terrestrial dissemination. Myth anticipates this passage.

Divine Filth: Tlazolteotl the Converter

“Holy Shit!”—the exclamation constitutes, as Cecilia Klein notes, a profane oxymoron for occidental sensibility.²² Dante’s flatterers are not accidentally placed in the eighth circle of Hell, “dipped in excrement that seemed

22 Cecilia F. Klein, “Teocuitlatl, ‘Divine Excrement’: The Significance of ‘Holy Shit’ in Ancient Mexico,” in *Art Journal* 52, nr. 3 (1996): 20.

as it had flowed from human privies.”²³ For Christianity, the mere insinuation of an infringement of filth upon the divine constitutes profanity. Modernity’s triumph of biopolitical hygiene seems thus less of a break with a pre-modern paradigm of life as its fulfillment. “Cleanliness is next to godliness” might have come into vogue as godliness waned and cleanliness waxed, but this does not indicate the abandonment of an onto-theological paradigm, as much as it indicates its transformation: purity remains the uncontested, incontestable value.

The Mesoamerican civilizations took a different course. The figure of Tlazolteotl remains enigmatic and fascinating in equal measure: Here is a divinity whose name is often rendered into “Goddess of Filth,” but which can also be read as “Divine Filth,” or even “Divine Excrement,” indeed, “Holy Shit.” The name does not originate from the Nahuatl word for excrement or *cuitlatl* but from *tlazolli*, which denotes primarily an “old, dirty, deteriorated, worn-out thing,” but also connotes filth, garbage, and human feces.²⁴ The implications of this wider semantic scope are important, and they might be in part attributable to the provenance of the Goddess. Before its adoption by the Aztecs, Tlazolteotl was worshipped by the Huastec, a people of Mayan descent, conquered and subjugated by the Aztec empire. What little survives from the Huastec is doubly mediated and distorted by the Aztec and later Spanish conquerors, which further complicates the tantalizingly complex figure of Tlazolteotl. The following pursues only a few of the threads that weave the fabric of this divinity and the socio-religious context that drew on and made her worship possible among the Aztecs.

23 Klein, “Teocuitlatl,” 20.

24 Klein, “Teocuitlatl,” 21.

One of the most troubling difficulties in the cultural mediation of Tlazolteotl is her casting as the “patron” (indeed “matron”) goddess of the wayward and the sinful (prostitutes, sodomites, and so on). Not only is patronage a Roman practice absorbed into Christian hagiology, but the parallels of Tlazolteotl’s role to that of the Virgin Mary are too numerous and suspicious to ignore. Indeed, the very translation by the Catholic priests and administrators of *tlazolli* into “sin” (rather than “filth” or “waste”) anticipates an impossible identification: Tlazolteotl is made to serve the same function as Mary while “inverting” the immaculate persona of the latter into a photographic negative of depravity. A final touch in this syncretic portraiture is the confession that sinners were expected to make to an Aztec priest, in order to be absolved from the from the impurity Tlazolteotl had herself germinated in them. With enough circumspection, however, differences might be set into relief:

The Aztecs are well documented as having believed that a last-minute “confession” to Tlaelquani [one of Tlazolteotl’s personas] of one’s sexual transgressions could stave off the imminent threat of physical danger or death. Such “penitents” reportedly not only removed their clothes so as to expose Tlaelquani to their “evil odor,” but swallowed their own stench, their own filth, as well. They did this because, in Aztec thought, filth could be used to ward off or offset filth, restoring both moral and physical equilibrium.²⁵

There is no divine economy that leads Tlazolteotl to engender vice, in order, in turn, to redeem it while she herself remains untainted by the surrounding muck. Tlazolteotl’s power to absolve or purify is not simply “uncontaminated” by filth but originates in it. Unlike Mary, Tlazolteotl is not the intercessor of absolution but its conductor—the impassive converter of purity

25 Klein, “Teocuitlatl,” 22.

and filth. This bivalence runs throughout Aztec social and religious life. When for example, boys and girls were assigned to the *calmecac* (school of priests and the elite, equally open to both sexes), they were instructed and expected to abstain from vice and filth.²⁶ Nonetheless, upon entering the priesthood, one was expected to embrace filth:

Physically and psychologically divorced from his family unit, an Aztec priest was the human intermediary with a hostile and foreboding force, which required constant appeasement with gifts of blood. Dedication to priesthood was an appalling reality in which priests were permanently marked with the filth of their duty. Forbidden from combing or cleaning their hair, occupied in private and in public with violent rituals, the priests were covered with both their own and their victims' blood. Their hair was matted with the blood that dripped from their ears, pierced where they had offered themselves as a sacrifice.²⁷

Bedecked in encrusted blood and ceremonial soot (bitumen pours out of Tlazolteotl's mouth and was thus smeared by priests on their mouths and the rest of their bodies), these figures find perhaps their closest counterparts in those executioners, who, from the European Middle Ages to Edo Japan, formed hereditary castes of untouchable outcasts. Called upon to waste life and spill blood to ensure the purity of the body politic, their own lives were contaminated by the filth they vanquished. One can see this vilification carry over into the racial-economic pariahs that undertake the sanitation of modern life, thought of and even at times named by the rest of the public with monikers that denote garbage or

26 Caroline Dodds Pennock, *Bonds of Bloods: Gender, Lifecycle and Sacrifice in Aztec Culture* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), 85.

27 Pennock, *Bonds of Blood*, 75.

waste.²⁸ Although, in both instances, the vocation taints the one who fulfills it, the Aztec priest occupies a position of absolute eminence, a state of exception on the antipode of the despised executioner and the submerged sanitation worker.

The logic of the bivalence of filth that informs priesthood extends to all aspects of Aztec lay life. During an eighty-day period of mourning, widows do not wash their clothes, face, or head “and the dirt, mingling with their tears, cake[s] their skin in a thick layer.”²⁹ This temporary ordeal gives their mourning form and brings them into proximity to the gods. At the conclusion of this period, the casting aside of filth constitutes a relief and a recovery;³⁰ however, once again, this is not a recovery *from* filth but a recovery *due* to it; henceforth, death lets life live.

Bataille calls this “letting” a “laboratory,” as it constitutes a reaction and transformation, a conversion: “in history as in nature, decay is the laboratory of life.”³¹ It is no surprise then that in one of her figurations as “Eater of Ordure” in Thelma Sullivan’s rendition, Tlazolteotl-Tlaelquani functions as a mother goddess, reigning over both humanity and the earth. Whereas the Greeks saw in childbirth “the filth that distances man from the gods,”³² the Aztecs entrusted this filth to the goddess,

28 The treatment of Roma, in that regard, in Romania, is telling. Cf. Elana Resnick, “The Limits of Resilience: Managing Waste in the Racialized Anthropocene,” in *American Anthropologist*, 123, (2021).

29 Pennock, *Bonds of Blood*, 159.

30 Ibid.

31 Georges Bataille, “The ‘Old Mole’ and the Prefix Sur in the Words *Surhomme* [Superman] and *Surrealist*,” in *Visions of Excess*, 32.

32 Louis Moulinier, *Le pur et l’impur dans la pensée des Grecs d’Homère à Aristote* (Paris: Librairie C. Klincksieck, 1952), 70. Translated by Pennock in Pennock, *Bonds of Blood*, 63.

who was able to convert it to life. Humanity procreates *in filth because* of filth, just like the earth brings forth a fecund harvest from the mud or humus that the Aztecs considered as filth (*tlazollalli*),³³ aided by its own rotting products and animal excrement. Indeed, the Aztecs collected human feces and urine (seen as akin to rainfall) from public toilets along major roads to use as fertilizer for the earth.³⁴

It comes then perhaps as less of a surprise that Aztecs also understood gems and minerals as excrement. Gold, the most precious metals for the Aztecs that was also used for medicinal purposes, was called Tonatiuh, “the excrement of the sun,” being deposited by the latter in the earth during his passage through the underworld.³⁵ But the Aztecs could already perceive what became painfully apparent after the arrival of the Spanish, namely that gold could also become an “instrument of torment,” a “deadly thing,” and a “deceiver.”³⁶ This link of excrement to deception, what Bataille would call parody, is integral to the Aztec understanding of filth, something that the Spanish generals and merchants could not fathom as they wallowed in excremental gold. They would be the new *teuhio* (dirty) and *tlazollo* (filthy), words previously reserved for deceiving Aztec rulers.

Deception, the final nexus in the weave of sense that holds the figure of Tlazolteotl together, allows us to reappraise the relation of excrement to sexuality and the cycle of life. If, for example, an unknown woman appears in the Codex Telleriano-Remensis (pl.11) holding excrement while she weeps or bleeds from the eyes,

33 Klein, “Teocuitlatl,” 21.

34 *Ibid.*, 22.

35 *Ibid.*, 25.

36 *Ibid.*, 26.

under the name *Inxetli*, meaning “Ashes [in the] Eyes” this might be understood as punishment for her sexual transgressions (having “gathered flowers”); it might be equally well understood as absolution from their burden, for although sex is filth and thus the cause of blindness (the extremity of deception), it is also filth that will cure this blindness.³⁷

It is difficult not to cast *Tlazolteotl* into a dispenser of the *pharmakon* of filth. The conversion of poison to remedy is ubiquitous: One finds, for example, in the *Codex Borgia* (pl.12) a squatting man swallowing his own excrement while he empties at the same time his bowels into a blindfolded deity identified as *Tezcatlipoca-Ixquimilli*, “a male deity of night and punishment, whose name means roughly ‘Smoking Mirror with Covered Eyes.’”³⁸ The same scene also figures in *Codex Vaticanus B*, but this time the squatting man is also urinating on the receiving god below him.³⁹ Clearly, an economy of filth is here at work, an economy in which excrement, rather than being a mere metaphor, is “invested through metonymy with real power,” a power capable both of disrupting and restoring health and harmony.⁴⁰ *Bataille* called this metonymic power “parody,” which encompasses both the subversion of the high into the low, but also the conversion of the low into the high. *Pu’iito* stands thus on the one end of the spectrum as the subdued god of subversion, while *Tlazolteotl* emerges as the glorious goddess of conversion.

37 *Ibid.*, 23.

38 *Ibid.*

39 *Ibid.*, 23–4.

40 *Ibid.*, 25.

The Filth to Come: Radical Metabolics as Quotidian Practice

The schematism of subversion-conversion embodied by Pu'iito and Tlazolteotl remains, however, insufficient both in itself and in the face of our techno-environmental predicament. The market machine has incorporated both divinities: The Pu'iito of advertisement farts on our attention and runs—we strive to relieve the irritation by grabbing a piece of the brand; meanwhile, the Tlazolteotl of the by-product economy converts nauseating waste to golden excrement, consecrating them with a logo—one wears proudly a recycled this, handles a repurposed that.

Neither irony nor monetization of waste will keep the tide of filth at bay. For in truth, the filth to come has already arrived. Perhaps it has always been here. Yet whereas filth would in the past accumulate at the heart of the empire, in Rome, for example, or London, it is now carefully relegated to the margins, invisible to all except those that inhabit these margins. Since, in more than one sense, trash is “matter without place,”⁴¹ in the era of radical waste, the earth is transformed into a network of non-places. It is a matter of environmental justice, not only because of the national, class, and race divides, but first and foremost, because of the divides of the space itself. Insofar as filth becomes a matter of distribution, a politics of space will be unavoidable. Such a politics will, however, never be able to undo its premise, confined to debating the *where* of these non-places instead of querying their *why* and *whether*.

41 Greg Kennedy, *An Ontology of Trash: The Disposable and Its Problematic Nature* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2007), 7.

The statement “man is a wasting animal”⁴² is, at its heart, antinomic. To be human means to be exemplarily wasteful; indeed, it means to continuously resignify the meaning of waste. At the same time, to be human is to be like everything that metabolizes: To have to proliferate biological entropy for the sake of local negentropic metastability. Caught up in the most extreme and perilous moment of this antinomy, our task is not simply to re-appropriate and invest what is filthy or foul, which, inflected through the German *faul*, means equally lazy or unproductive, into new chains of consumable objects.

We must begin with parody in order to destabilize unremittingly the logic of the by-product. We must observe patiently the wisdom of the foul cat that licks its fur nearly half of its waking time to appraise the stakes of our hygiene regimes. We must contemplate the flow of the river, which depends, precariously, on both the liquid quickness of its water and the solid topology of its bed. We must understand that filth is a correlate of its environment—urban sweat does not smell like tropical sweat. Taking pride in Pu’iito legacy and hailing Tlazolteotl’s miracles, we must enter an onto-epistemology of radical metabolics which effects a conversion of matter, and by the same token (*meta + ballein*), the subversion of the order that pre-configures it.

42 John Capie Wylie, *The Wastes of Civilization* (London: Faber, 1959).

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it in a Manner quite buried under Ground with Filth and Rubbish. In the Dutchy of Spoleto, I have seen a small ancient Temple, which at first was built in a Plain, that is now almost wholly buried by the raising of the Earth; that Plain reaching to the Foot of the Hills. But why should I mention Buildings that stand under Mountains?

— Leon Battista Alberti, *De re aedificatoria* (1485)

At the end of the Quest there waited thus not a revelation but a riddle. The anthropologist seems condemned either to journey among men whom he can understand precisely because his own culture has already contaminated them, covered them with “the filth, our filth, that we have thrown in the face of humanity”, or among those who, not so contaminated, are for that reason largely unintelligible to him. Either he is a wanderer among true savages (of whom there

are precious few left in any case) whose very otherness isolates his life from theirs or he is a nostalgic tourist “hastening in search of a vanished reality ... an archaeologist of space, trying in vain to repiece together the idea of the exotic with the help of a particle here and a fragment of debris there.” Confronted with looking-glass men he can touch but not grasp and with half-ruined men “pulverised by the development of Western civilisation”, Lévi-Strauss compares himself to the Indian in the legend who had been to the world’s end and there asked Questions of peoples and things and was disappointed in what he heard. “I am the victim of a double infirmity: what I see is an affliction to me; what I do not see a reproach”.

— Clifford Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures* (1973)