

## Staging Encounters

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■ Catherine Malabou's philosophical thought stages a new and restless encounter with form and so transforms the possibilities of philosophy for thinking contemporary politics, law, and justice. In a series of books, most of which have been recently translated into English, she has pioneered a distinctive mode of reading the Continental philosophical tradition, revealing a new materialism that survives and brings to restored relevance Hegel, Heidegger, Derrida, Irigaray, Deleuze, Foucault, and Freud, among others. Traversing the philosophical groundwork of these thinkers, Malabou uncovers and exposes elements of their work that metabolize and metamorphosize concepts and logics that otherwise appear to be unmoving, if not static. The restless form that survives philosophical critique, which she explores with her signature concept of *plasticity*, has its material counterparts in socioeconomic structures such as neoliberal capitalism, the science of neurobiology, the theory and practice of psychoanalysis, the experience and expression of subjectivity and identity, and the political organization of sovereignty. Oriented firmly against the naturalization of these enterprises, Malabou asks us instead to see each institution engaged with a kind of immanent thought that materially grounds its potential metamorphoses. The form of thought today, she argues, is ontologically plastic; self-transformation is built into our bodies, it suffuses our possible readings of philosophy, and it promises us new perspectives on political and social change.

Decades after a Continental turn away from structuralism, Malabou's scholarship invites us to imagine what we might gain by reconceptualizing form and bringing it back into philosophical and political grammar. In this new metamorphic structuralism,<sup>1</sup> might we find an emergent

legal form more attuned to justice? Might the constant alteration of social identity and sexuality that has animated so much contemporary politics provide a more robust ethical basis for social policy than the political languages of recognition and equality have hitherto provided? Can the rapid changes in form, and form's almost explosive reversals, tell us more about the psychoanalytic subject than eros and the persistence of the libidinal economy of drives has revealed? "Form is the metamorphizable but immovable barrier of thought,"<sup>2</sup> Malabou has argued, and in different ways, this collection of essays tests the explosive potential of this plastic frontier as it asks these questions.

If the point, Marx once reminded us, is not only to interpret the world but ultimately to change it,<sup>3</sup> in which ways might we grasp Malabou's central concept of plasticity to facilitate political praxis? In the making of this volume, we asked the authors to liberally but critically explore the economic, psychoanalytic, and sociocultural dynamics that Malabou has also identified as her political field. All the authors share concerns regarding the limits and potentials of contemporary neoliberal economics and the reconfiguration of sovereign power that engender techniques of accumulation and dispossession relying upon the flexibility of labor, the porosity of national borders to flows of capital but not working bodies, and juridical apparatuses that riddle the rule of law with exception.<sup>4</sup> This neoliberal flexibility is accompanied by forms of violence that reinscribe colonial relations of subjection. What intellectual directions might Malabou's thinking about change, metamorphosis, and destructive plasticity provide in our attempts to disrupt these structures? How might we use her work to reconceive the philosophical foundations of a globalized capitalism, as Alberto Toscano asks in this volume? What philosophical resources might her thought provide in our excavation of the originary, foundational subject that is constituted through racial-scientific knowledges, this subject that persists, stubbornly refusing to vacate its sovereign place in the ontological *grundnorms* of a Western episteme, as Fred Moten queries? Does the plasticity of being offer a means to deconstruct the anthropocentrism of our episteme, as Renisa Mawani asks? Do forms of law and justice exhibit a plasticity that harbors the promise of newly relational, perhaps even emancipatory, political practices, as Michael J. Shapiro pursues? These questions are articulated in and throughout the essays in this volume and structure the primary concerns elaborated in this introductory chapter: form, materialism, and subjectivity.

Form is a concept that has had uneven histories within and among various disciplines. In the dialectical tradition, form is an energy—for Fredric Jameson, the “jumping of a spark between two poles, the coming into contact of two unequal terms, of two apparently unrelated modes of being”<sup>5</sup>—which at various times has illuminated the connection between law and political economy,<sup>6</sup> narrative and historical representation,<sup>7</sup> identity and colonialism,<sup>8</sup> among other unions. Yet in these accounts form often represents structural antinomies that ethically must be transcended or eliminated. In many of the human sciences, particularly in North America, form has also been depicted in irresolvable tension with historical, empirical, and behavioral disciplines whose pragmatic spirit sought to undo a nineteenth-century concern for the aridity and purity of metaphysical thought.<sup>9</sup> The influence of poststructuralist thought has also submerged the (often Saussurian) attention to form<sup>10</sup> or deterritorialized it to scrub its connections with dialectical thought.<sup>11</sup> Form has perhaps endured longest within cultural studies and political theory that have emphasized a post-Kantian concern for aesthetics and its formal dependence on a distance or gap between the subject and its political or artistic objects.<sup>12</sup>

Thinking instead through the scientific (and materially *with* the) neurological synaptic gap, Malabou seeks to philosophically recover form by grasping it as always already in restless motion. She is foremost a philosopher of change: a thinker of the concept of transformation as it contaminates the dialectical logic of Hegel, the destructive reason of Heidegger, the deconstructive philosophy of Derrida; the potential for and realization of transformation that inheres in the bios and the biological; the destructive, annihilating force of change that contours the psychic life of those who have suffered neurological trauma. We have most often turned to narrative to reveal the potential of metamorphic change: a story told by Ovid or Hegel or Kafka,<sup>13</sup> a cinematic trick. The symbolic image of a hybrid—a centaur or minotaur—that can disclose the spatial and visual character of immanent change cannot work as well, suggesting that plasticity’s potential exceeds the aesthetic bounds of the eponymous plastic arts. As Caroline Bynum notes: “Unlike hybridity there is, to be sure, a certain twoness in metamorphosis; the transformation goes from one being to another, and the relative weight or presence of the two entities suggests where we are in the story. At

the beginning and end, where there is no trace of the otherness from which and to which the process is going, there is no metamorphosis; there is metamorphosis only in between. Nonetheless metamorphosis is about process, mutation, story—a constant series of replacement-changes, . . . little deaths.”<sup>14</sup>

Seizing a fragile point of access, an ironic process of giving weight to that which is weightless within a philosophical oeuvre that she calls the “fantastic,” Malabou seeks to make these little deaths again visible as form and, hence, accessible to philosophy and politics beyond the aesthetic register.<sup>15</sup> However, just as the form of the synaptic gap gains its neuroscientific significance through its weightless potentials (to fire or not, to rearrange its circuits of influence), so does it demonstrate the fantastic philosophical potentials between biology and history, determinism and freedom.<sup>16</sup> As Malabou writes in *The Heidegger Change*, “simultaneously a mode of visibility and manifestation, the fantastic . . . designates . . . the phenomenality of ontico-ontological transformations—those of man, god, language, etc.—which unveil the originary mutability of being while revealing at the same time that being is perhaps nothing . . . but its mutability.”<sup>17</sup>

If, in Malabou’s words, “to behold essence is to witness change,”<sup>18</sup> how can we know the value of this mutability? Commodities also change and exchange, in formal ways that Marx once similarly called metamorphic and fantastic.<sup>19</sup> Scientific truths and technology likewise persistently transform themselves, as do many aspects of law, democracy, and identity. How can we grasp what is radical and new, that which promises an alternative to capitalism, to sovereign power, to the influence of the norm, especially where capitalism, sovereignty, and governance constantly reinvent themselves? What can we secure when all that is solid melts into air? Malabou answers that there is form and then there is *form* and we must philosophically distinguish the two. One reformulates its elements in an infinitely flexible, malleable, or elastic manner akin to “hypercapitalism,” adding only a supplement to metaphysics,<sup>20</sup> while the other demonstrates that “form can cross the line.”<sup>21</sup> This other is the plasticity of form, that character of metamorphosis (repeated throughout her work as the tripartite motif of plasticity: the giving, receiving and exploding of form) that is simultaneously resistant to and open to change and capable of annihilating itself. “If form cannot cross the line, then there is no alterity for metaphysics. In a sense, there is no alterity at all. I’m laying my bets for the meaning of my work on the success of

the first term of this alternative. In other words, I believe in the future not of the other of form but of the other form, a form that no longer corresponds to its traditional concept.<sup>22</sup>

Where form crosses this line, the line in turn becomes form. This transubstantiation is, for Malabou, “precisely the other of the idea—a non-ideal form that is at once both the condition and the result of change”; form, still, because it is a product of “creative minds giving form to the line; the form of a life that is from here out revolutionized, reversed, and opened in its middle.”<sup>23</sup> As her phrasing suggests, crossing the line is a spatial metaphor with a complex shape, but it is also clear that such intricacies—the reversals, the simultaneity of cause and result—draw as well on new temporalities and their contributions to new forms of self-perception. In Malabou’s early book *The Future of Hegel*, she reads time such that there is both a future of Hegel and a future for Hegel, a time of plasticity in which temporal forms are themselves placed in motion.

It is not a matter of examining the relations between past, present and the conventional sense of the future presented in the discussions of time in Hegel’s different versions of the *Philosophy of Nature*. Rather, these texts themselves demand that we renounce the “well-known” definition of time. The possibility that one temporal determination, the future, can be thought differently, beyond its initial, simple status as a moment of time, from “that which is now to come,” makes it immediately clear that time for Hegel cannot be reduced to an ordered relation between moments. By “plasticity” we mean first of all the excess of the future over the future; while “temporality,” as it figures in speculative philosophy, will mean the excess of time over time.<sup>24</sup>

As this quote makes clear, Malabou reads the Hegelian subject as anticipatory and thus riven by distinctive notions of time: the first a classical teleological sense connoting necessity; another as the modern time of representation that does not move forward.<sup>25</sup> In this philosophical register, Malabou shows how reading is itself a plastic enterprise, a constant renewal and transformation of the Hegelian text. “Reading Hegel amounts to finding oneself in two times at once: the process that unfolds is both retrospective and prospective. In the present time in which reading takes place, the reader is drawn to a double expectation: waiting for what is to come (according to a linear and representational thinking), while presupposing that the outcome has already arrived (by virtue of the teleological ruse).”<sup>26</sup> These distinct senses of time

establish gaps within which contemporary forms of thought and subjectivity continue to strive. “[The Hegelian] discourse—where . . . times meet and intersect—is beholden to the very thing it is trying to describe: that speculative suppleness which is neither passion nor passivity, but plasticity.”<sup>27</sup>

Working within these gaps, Malabou presents us with a mode of reading Hegel’s thought that demonstrates its capacity for transformation. In subsequent work she has originated a reading of Heidegger that emphasizes a similar mobility. Concentrating on elements of Heidegger’s thought that have hitherto not received very much attention, particularly his ethics and the instabilities of *Dasein*, Malabou has uncovered the insistent presence of the triad *Wandel* (change), *Wandlung* (transformation) and *Verwandlung* (metamorphosis) in his philosophy. This is a triangulation that exposes, in her view, the “transformative rupture” that Heideggerian destruction presents, “the moment by which thinking henceforth ‘prepares its own transformation.’”<sup>28</sup>

Malabou’s attention to the excesses of temporality and futurity, according to Derrida, has “inscribed a mutation, or even better, an absolute heterogeneity between the two senses or meanings of the same word, between the two concepts, and the two concepts of time, and the two concepts of the future.”<sup>29</sup> Similar mutations drawn from temporal complexity emerge as well in Malabou’s work on mourning and history in Freud and Nietzsche, where she argues for a mourning of the impossible;<sup>30</sup> on the complex and nonlinear meaning of generations in the biology of the crocus and the reflective poetry of Apollinaire and anthropology of Lévi-Strauss;<sup>31</sup> and on the genetic stem cell manipulation that advances life by reactivating once lost functions and, in returning to the past, allowing for the recovery of a new pathway.<sup>32</sup> Temporality is also the theme of “From the Overman to the Posthuman,” her third chapter in this book, where she asks whether it will be possible to cease our revenge against time. In these varied sites, plasticity is revealed as an immanent characteristic of life and its apprehension.

Malabou suggests that disruptive temporalities emerge in the form of the accident, an idea central to her notion of destructive plasticity. Destructive plasticity challenges the easily assimilable idea of a reparative or positive plasticity that responds to life’s “vagaries and difficulties, or simply the natural unfolding of circumstance, appear[ing] as the marks and wrinkles of a continuous, almost logical, process of fulfillment that leads ultimately to death. In time, one eventually becomes

who one is; one becomes only who one is.”<sup>33</sup> Instead, destructive plasticity cuts this time from its mooring; a stroke or other brain trauma instantly makes one “a stranger to the one before,”<sup>34</sup> suffering because of the lack of suffering: “an indifference to pain, impassivity, forgetting, the loss of symbolic reference points.”<sup>35</sup> Yanked out of the familiar times of life, destructive plasticity, like Freud’s death drive, reveals the “power of change without redemption, without teleology, without any meaning other than strangeness.”<sup>36</sup> Deleuze, too, addressed the accident, but he sees it as an aspect of everyday occurrence, opposed to the ideal Event.<sup>37</sup> Malabou pushes against Deleuze’s reading, in which the accidental is recuperated as form stripped of its ideal essence, a limit to true metamorphic possibilities. Rather than the philosophical conservatism of metaphysical form, Malabou suggests, the accident reveals that form is not the problem; it is rather that form is thought separately from essence.

The critique of metaphysics does not want to recognize that in fact, despite what it claims loud and clear, metaphysics constantly instigates the dissociation of essence and form, or form and the formal, as if one could always rid oneself of form, as if, in the evening, form could be left hanging like a garment on the chair of being or essence. In metaphysics, form can always change, but the nature of being persists. It is this that is debatable—not the concept of form itself, which it is absurd to pretend to do without.<sup>38</sup>

Destructive plasticity, initiated by the accident, reveals the challenge to philosophy: to acknowledge it as “a law that is simultaneously logical and biological, but a law that does not allow us to anticipate its instances.”<sup>39</sup>

In endless and creative motion to recover a new path, plasticity flourishes in the excesses of philosophical reason, promising an antidote to what Malabou has diagnosed as the growing contemporary sense of ideological and metaphysical closure. Malabou describes this closure as the “contradictory couple” of saturation and vacancy. Saturation captures the social, theoretical, and figurative meanings of a rapidly globalizing future in which no event can be marginal, a condition heralding the end of speculative philosophy and of other vital tasks. This simplification of the world that Hegel first described reveals in the sense of vacancy—that there is “nothing left to do”—but it paradoxically reveals the promise of novelty, “a promise that there are forms of life which must be invented.”<sup>40</sup> Plasticity is what designates the possibility of this promise, and it serves as a creative response to the contemporary experience

of closure. Where plasticity emerges—within the biological and psychological maintenance of organisms, within the social and political institutions that maintain contemporary life, and within philosophical thought—and under what conditions it can be read occupies much of Malabou’s work grounded in her autobiographical inquiries into the transformations of her own subjectivity in her philosophical and professional encounters, her own attempts to grasp herself.<sup>41</sup>

Malabou’s reaction against closure is shared with much post-1968 French philosophy, notably the work of Gilles Deleuze and the scholarly lines of flight he inspired, as well as the return to Spinoza, Bergson, and Nietzsche that infuses much of the work of the New Materialists.<sup>42</sup> But where Hegel’s dialectical system and the atemporal and static notions of form that it traditionally generated have often been pictured as the totalizing and conceptually fecund foils against which a new vibrant materialism is oriented,<sup>43</sup> Malabou creatively reads Hegel as open to the surprise of such a vitalist future. This has consequences for transformative readings of French philosophical traditions, as well as a fundamental recuperation of the subject, endlessly deconstructed or shunned in much French poststructuralist thought<sup>44</sup> and now invited to cognize her own subjectivity as plastic and transformative. What potentials does this dialectic within a new materialism bring?

## NEW MATERIALISMS

Exploring the materialist dimension in Malabou’s work is central to understanding her philosophical project and situates her in conversation with contemporary political concerns about the linkages among capitalism, democracy, and the fashioning of political subjects. Malabou’s materialism is rooted in an attempt to rethink the relationship between neuroscience and philosophical conceptualizations of consciousness and the self. In *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* she asks whether neoliberalism’s reliance upon and cultivation of flexibility as one of its key organizing concepts and drivers is equivocal with a neuronal plasticity that provides a biological justification for contemporary modes of alienation and exploitation.

Malabou interrogates historically predominant concepts of the brain (e.g., Henri Bergson’s idea that the brain functions like a telephone exchange and later analogies to the computer) and explains how neuroscientific explanations of the brain’s inherent plasticity reveal each indi-

vidual's inherent capacity to remake herself. She argues that this shift in the way in which we understand the brain and, in turn, ourselves has the capacity to alter our current alienation from our consciousness that results from modeling our brains as rigid, mechanical entities that are entirely genetically determined, even where our neurological circuits are understood to be decentralized and diffuse. By relating our knowledge of our brains to consciousness, Malabou reveals what is at stake in embracing our own neuroplasticity. If we understand how our brains have been interpellated (as structurally rigid entities overdetermined by genetics or as docile facilitators of the capitalist mode of production) and if we instead embrace our brains as plastic ("as something modifiable, 'formable,' and formative at the same time"),<sup>45</sup> it then becomes possible to change our relationship to history through a different relationship to the self. The neuroscientifically aware subject, gaining consciousness of her own plastic potentialities, "produces the conditions for a new world of questioning,"<sup>46</sup> a new capacity for revolt. "To talk about the plasticity of the brain means to see in it not only the creator and receiver of form but also an agency of disobedience to every constituted form, a refusal to submit to a model."<sup>47</sup>

Our brains are unruly; biology can break the symbolic realm into which our thinking is plunged. The vital importance of this insurgent biological materialism, for Malabou, is the need to escape the endless cycle of capitalism's absorption of its own critique into what Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello have called the "spirit of capitalism" capable of reengineering its production of value. If a critique of capitalism such as environmentalism can be digested into "green" commodities, if globalized circuits of production continually engulf other modes of production, and if capitalism "now includes, as its condition of possibility, the deconstruction of presence, nomadism or deterritorialisation,"<sup>48</sup> then there is no real "outside" and no transcendental position from which to launch a critique of capitalism. Even Marxism, Malabou suggests, belongs, paradoxically, to the "voracious monster" of capitalism.<sup>49</sup>

I think if we continue today to affirm the priority of the symbolic, political criticism has no chance to escape its assimilation by the capitalist system. The similarity of thought and capital lies precisely in the production of surplus value. The symbolic supplement is the equivalent of the theory of profit. The two surpluses unite in the possibility of fetishism. Boltanski's right. The "spirit" as it is thought as

surplus (surplus of meaning, excess of ideology) forms the hyphen, the indistinguishability between capitalism and criticism because it is the mark of their synonymy. Surplus value—meaning and economic value—is precisely what constitutes the spirit of capitalism. In this sense, the symbolic is the best ally of capital.<sup>50</sup>

This symbolic closure sets up the problem that plasticity seeks to resolve. Can philosophy break the priority of the symbolic with a concept such as plasticity? Is plasticity sufficiently material so that it can effectively grasp a robust notion of the historical? Malabou suggests that developing a consciousness of our individual brain plasticity may allow us to think “a multiplicity of interactions in which the participants exercise transformative effects on one another through the demands of recognition, of non-domination, and of liberty. . . .”<sup>51</sup> By associating plasticity with the rupturing and refiguring of the symbolic, Malabou critiques a neuronal ideology that relies on a reflexive relationship between neoliberal forms of capitalism and brain plasticity: “The mental is not the wise appendix of the neuronal. And the brain is not the natural ideal of globalized economic, political, and social organization; it is the locus of an organic tension that is the basis of our history and our critical activity.”<sup>52</sup>

In light of a sordid history of the convergence of biology and economics, including the scientific racism and sexism of social Darwinism and sociobiology<sup>53</sup> and more recently the convergence of consumer choice and biology in the field of neuroeconomics,<sup>54</sup> the denaturalization of the relationship between biology and the social-cultural traits of neoliberal capitalism is an important intervention into the language utilized to describe and structure contemporary forms of labor exploitation, managerialism, and consumerism. However, in reinventing the way we understand and think the brain and, accordingly, our critical capacities and understanding of history, a question arises as to whether the absence of engagement with dialectical materialism retains a concept of consciousness that appears untouched by Marx’s crucial interventions into Hegelian idealism. There is a parallel within psychoanalysis as well. Lacan’s notion of the Real, which exceeds and escapes the symbolic realm of the law, is, as Fredric Jameson has argued, “simply History itself,” a history that takes us directly to the problems posed by Marx.<sup>55</sup>

Malabou begins *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* with a reference to Marx’s famous statement from *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. However, Malabou renders Marx’s words as follows: “humans make

their own history, but they do not know that they make it . . .”<sup>56</sup> One common translation of Marx’s statement reads, “Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given, and transmitted from the past.”<sup>57</sup>

This slippage between knowing and making history draws attention to a fundamental difference between a historical materialist understanding of political subjectivity and of its relationship to history and Malabou’s materialism. While Marx invokes a consciousness about historicity, as Malabou points out, he does this in order to reveal how the political and economic conditions in which humans act, live, labor, and revolt are ones that constrain and deracinate the rich and potentially explosive germ that lies in revolutionary movements. In what ways can neuronal plasticity dispel the symbolic weight of the past, what Marx poetically called the “tradition of all the dead generations [that] weighs like a nightmare on the brain on the living?”<sup>58</sup> What would it take for a critique of neuronal ideology to account for the material conditions of alienation that not only work to disorient and disembodiment consciousness of one’s potential as a political agent of change and transformation but rely on actual, structural relations of exploitation (of labor) and dispossession (of land and resources)?

This raises another query that is taken up in more detail in the consideration of subjectivity. To note this briefly here, however, the role of habit and repetition, learning and memory, in the formation of individual human brains<sup>59</sup> points to the ways in which class, race, gender, and sexuality materially render the neuronal subject. How do social relations of inequality affect a political potentiality based in a “nervous circuit [that] is never fixed” but rather is constituted by and through synapses that are “reinforced or weakened as a function of experience,”<sup>60</sup> as a result of particular histories?

Beginning with faint echoes of Marx, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* ends with a turn to Hegel. Exploring the relationship between the brain and the mind, neuronal plasticity has the potential to create new forms of consciousness through the recognition of its essentially unmodelable, or deconstructed, nature. The plasticity of the Hegelian dialectic shows the transformation of the mind’s natural existence (in her idiom, the brain; in his, the “natural soul”), into its historical and speculative being. “If there can be a transition from nature to thought, this is because the nature of thought contradicts itself.”<sup>61</sup> And thus Malabou’s

materialism is one that focuses on consciousness, which is material insofar as it refers to the matter of the brain but appears to remain ideal in that it does not confront the materialist critique rendered by Marx. “A reasonable materialism, in my view, would posit that the natural contradicts itself and that thought is the fruit of this contradiction. One pertinent way of envisaging the “mind-body problem” consists in taking into account the dialectical tension that at once binds and opposes naturalness and intentionality, and in taking an interest in them as inhabiting the living core of a complex reality. Plasticity, rethought philosophically, could be the name of this *entre-deux*.”<sup>62</sup>

The idea of a “reasonable materialism” is a significant philosophical problem today, and it animates several contributions to this volume. Malabou insists that we must critique neuroscience that converges with political economy, making a strong claim that the epistemology of neuroscience must be tempered by a primary ontological commitment. When the brain’s plastic potential becomes an object of value—as have so many biological materials today<sup>63</sup>—science itself has no neutral ground on which to fix reality. As Alexander Galloway recently argued, to ask Malabou’s political question—which he rephrases as “What should we do so that thinking does not purely and simply coincide with the spirit of capitalism?”<sup>64</sup>—requires that we affirm the “aligned” ontological commitments of materialism espousing that “everything should be rooted in material life and history, not in abstraction, logical necessity, universality, essence, pure form, spirit, or idea. . . . The true poverty of [realism is] its inability to recognize that the highest order of the absolute, the totality itself, is found in the material history of mankind. To touch the absolute is precisely to think this correlation, not so much to explain it away, but to show that thought itself is the correlation as such, and thus to think the material is to spread one’s thoughts across the mind of history.”<sup>65</sup>

Toscano’s and Pottage’s chapters in this volume amplify some of these concerns while taking particular aim at Malabou’s reliance on philosophy as a key to exposing the potential of a new, neuroscientific materialism. We discuss Pottage’s chapter in the next section and consider Toscano’s contribution here. Toscano interrogates the logics of capital, social forms, and forces that push philosophy outside of itself, a condition of being under capital “which implies the *expatriation* of philosophy.” Malabou is right, he argues, to urge us to rethink the dialectic of contemporary social forms. But if we are to understand the hold that

neoliberal models take on the potential of neuroplasticity and thereby to criticize the limits arbitrarily imposed on this discourse by scientists, philosophers, journalists and others,<sup>66</sup> then we must build a critique that is immanent and dialectical but not beholden to capital. Toscano thus brings that old materialist, Marx, back into play in the new materialism of Malabou. Marx's critique was that the essence and history of philosophy could not meaningfully be its own object, that philosophy fought "phrases" only with "phrases," "in no way combatting the real existing world."<sup>67</sup> In what ways, Toscano asks, is Malabou's attempt to recover a philosophical concept of transformation capable of doing more than turning phrase or analogical model against the real existing world of capital that she targets?

Toscano points out that Malabou's efforts to examine the articulation of exchangeability as a capitalist and metaphysical principle is at the heart of her interrogation of Heidegger, risking a conceptual anchor in the Western philosophical "originary" rather than the real relations of economic exchange. One element of this philosophical risk for Toscano is apparent in Malabou's emphasis upon changes to capitalism's "spirit," following Boltanski and Chiapello, a concern skeptical of the impact that a new "motor scheme" heralded by plasticity may bring to critical analysis and practice. Stepping away from historical materialist analysis and taking perspective from neuroplasticity risks seeing too much ideological consistency within actually existing capitalism and a nondialectical perspective forced by an analogical and ultimately philosophical lens. Malabou's rejoinder and her affirmation of the need to incorporate Marxism only with Derridean deconstruction and Heideggerian destruction can be read in the interview that concludes this volume. Another alternative based in the materialism of Althusser can be found in chapter 2, "Whither Materialism? Althusser/Darwin."

#### SUBJECTIVITY, JUSTICE, AND THE END OF SOVEREIGNTY

If the age of grammar is being replaced by an age of plasticity, as Malabou suggests, what might it mean to see oneself today in neuronal terms? The decentering of the subject within poststructuralist theory, perhaps expressed most ardently by Deleuze and Guattari as the subject's "becoming" and its potential "nomadism" open to its own reconstruction, has its analogue in the neuroscientific recognition that the mind is located "everywhere and nowhere" in the brain and that brains

are not just replete with genetically organized neurons but are, in the end, grown through movement, action, and accident. Brains express the very histories of embodiment, and to see oneself in this history is to recognize the political ambivalence of emancipation and control that embodiment establishes.<sup>68</sup> The potential for political ruptures—of inequality, exploitation, and alienation—that a transformative subjectivity might enact raises a more specific question, namely one of justice that lingers in any discussion of political metamorphosis.

New sexualities illustrate one aspect of this issue. The proliferation of new sexual identities since the 1970s has emerged hand in glove with new political demands. Some gay and lesbian identities have been voiced as matters of biological diversity, subjects realizing their true essences and on these grounds demanding rights and recognition. Yet from some quarters the granting of recognition for gay rights, such as same-sex marriage, as well as the recognition of an economic niche for sexual citizenship,<sup>69</sup> has been argued to be another straitjacket,<sup>70</sup> a homonormativity<sup>71</sup> that is ultimately unable to escape the discursive and juridical power over the body. What happens in the name of sexual freedom when the elimination of one norm, strictly heterosexual marriage, becomes another: sexual constancy regulated through marriage?<sup>72</sup> Queer theoretical alternatives have turned away from law, premising liberation on the basis of deconstructing biological essentialism and the norms for bodily comportment.<sup>73</sup> They demonstrate that sexuality and gender, as much as sex itself, are not naturally given “but rather an ideological norm whose function is to regulate and control behavior and identity codes.”<sup>74</sup> Malabou’s insistence on a materiality to subjectivity raises important questions of justice here. If there is no biological essence, there are no “women” in whose name feminist struggles for justice are waged and no sexual differences to liberate. “Antiessentialism destroys any claims by theory to displace the traditional limits of theory, to exist as a space of the feminine, to separate from the beehive, to be anything other than another cell in the honeycomb.”<sup>75</sup>

Malabou has argued that the recovery of valid political struggle involves rejecting the current understanding of essence, which is, on the one hand, naturally given and therefore easily regulated and, on the other hand, merely the effect of extant norms. In order to plastically apprehend essence, Malabou proposes a concept of essence based on neuroscience: ontological and biological yet without presence.

We must rethink the relation of philosophy and science today, not in order to isolate a “feminine” contingent that would be, for example, the mechanics of fluids, but rather to show, always according to the hypothesis of an originary transformability of presence and nature, that *the place of sex has moved*. . . . Today, the brain is becoming the place of affects, passions and drives, delocalizing “sexuality” from the central, etiological role—both psychic and genital—with which Freud endowed it. This does not mean that gender identity is only developed by neurons, but that the space of play between (anatomic) sex and gender, between the so-called “biological essence” and “cultural construction” of identity, has profoundly changed meaning. . . . To construct one’s identity is a process that can only be a development of an original biological malleability, a first transformability. If sex were not plastic, there would be no gender. If something were not offered for transformation in the natural and anatomical determination of sex, then identity construction would not be possible.<sup>76</sup>

This type of deconstructed essence locates within metamorphosis and transformation a form of resistance—with potentialities, Malabou suggests, for political transformation.

Malabou has explored the relationship between subjectivity and resistance in other areas as well. In *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing*, she has conceptualized her own intellectual autobiography through her encounters with the philosophy of plasticity. “I am just trying to show how a being, in its fragile and finite mutability, can experience the materiality of existence and transform its ontological meaning. The impossibility means first of all the impossibility of fleeing oneself. It is within the very frame of this impossibility that I propose a philosophical change of perspective that focuses on closure as its principal object.”<sup>77</sup> Malabou’s rejection of fleeing from oneself brings to the fore a substance of the self—whether autobiographical, psychoanalytic, or biological—where a material resistance to flexibility can be activated.

#### AESTHETICS AND THE MATERIAL SUBJECT

Michael J. Shapiro’s chapter in this volume demonstrates that this materialism may also be significant at the aesthetic level. Shapiro analyzes Mathias Énard’s novel *Zone* (2010), written over five hundred pages as a single sentence, by reading philosophical and literary concepts against

its distinctive flowing grammar in order to reveal a discursive relief through which subjectivity is formed. Between the literary concepts of Bakhtin, which stress a narratological plasticity in the changing form of the novel as it strives to interrogate the mutable life world, and the philosophical concepts of Malabou lie the possibilities of what Shapiro calls an aesthetic subjectivity and a conceptual persona capable of self-fashioning and releasing passions signaling new appraisals of the world. The mix of genres is essential to Shapiro's plastic reading of the novel, a technique that he notes to be evident in Malabou's and Bakhtin's own oeuvres. "Political discernment derives from the mixing of idioms," he argues.

Shapiro emphasizes the significance of archives for the novel's emplotment; they also model the novel's own form: it too becomes an archive. Utilizing Foucault's concept of the *dispositif*, Shapiro unfolds what a "justice *dispositif*" might be composed of: a "heterogeneous amalgam" of different narrative forms, of a protagonist's journeys both symbolic and territorial, of the desire to map both a philosophical and literary plasticity. The political potential of plasticity resides, for Shapiro, in the archive. The complex temporality of an archive is plastic "inasmuch as although aspects of the past shape it, the very form of the record keeping in turn reshapes the way the past is understood." Shapiro's reading builds the archive as a new material basis on which to conceive the political potential of plasticity, as it alters the number and kinds of voices included in what he calls "zones of justice." While archives are textual and ideological, they are also sites of reading the self for literary characters and readers, both revealed as aesthetic subjects. Shapiro shows that aesthetic subjectivity can be understood as material, and he demonstrates that this subject has a radical plastic potential to escape ideological formation in encounters with the archive.

Silvana Carotenuto's chapter also explores the aesthetic dimensions of plasticity by reading philosophically the work of Zoulikha Bouabdellah, a Maghrebian artist, who has herself grappled with the concept of plasticity in an effort to artistically come to grips with the revolutionary potentials of the Arab Spring. Examining Bouabdellah's paintings and the writing she has produced about her work leads Carotenuto to ask to what degree Malabou's philosophy has fully metabolized Derrida's deconstruction and whether his critique of the Hegelian dialectic, in signature concepts such as dissemination and the persistence of writing, might signal resistance to the motor scheme of plasticity. In exposing

philosophy again to its own death, Carotenuto argues, Malabou hinges plasticity on a form of mourning. Derrida, however, is interested less in the transformation of the philosophical system than in its “‘deferment’—dis-location, dis-adherence, post-ponement—capable of bringing ‘elsewhere’/ailleurs all instances of vital affirmation and their surviving ghosts.” Paper may be shinking, Derrida has argued,<sup>78</sup> but it remains spectral in its withdrawal, revealing that “the modes of its appropriation are not disappearing”: it explains the foundation of our anxieties over risks to identity theft in a digital age and what moves attention to Maghrebian immigrants and other *sans-papiers*. Carotenuto argues that these remnants show that paper can “continue to provoke the permanent desire of transgressing it” as well as force a swerve around a plastic reading, provoking instead a retrospective interpretation that is “the anterior future of the past resources of paper itself.”

Carotenuto applies this Derridean temporality to her analysis of Bouabdellah’s experimental art, which appears, in several ways, to confront Malabou’s assumption that “*Writing will never abolish form. The trace will never pierce the figure.*”<sup>79</sup> Bouabdellah’s art, she shows, juxtaposes writing of various forms with image in an effort to reconnect figurative representation and nonrepresentation, not only in the finished pieces, but also in her philosophical musings on the aesthetics that she constructs. By piercing the surface of her sculptural and painted figures through probing, cutting, scraping, filing, sewing, shredding, stitching, and other techniques, she strives to see herself on the other side of her art. This offers, in Carotenuto’s words, “a ‘chance’ to ‘chance.’” And in so doing, she remains plastically and deconstructively open to the difference that the revolutionary future can bring.

## PSYCHOANALYSIS AND MATERIALISM

If the psychoanalytic subject can be thought of as an intervention into the stories we tell ourselves,<sup>80</sup> Malabou’s interrogation of psychoanalysis is framed by the question of its adequacy to comprehend a materialist basis for subjectivity beyond its aesthetic concepts of plasticity and, by extension, its competence to critique contemporary subjectivity in the interest of therapeutic healing. Freud’s theory of the indestructibility of the psyche and the fluidity of the libido—its ability to shape itself in cathexis but detach from and move on to various objects throughout life—represent the giving and receiving of form that characterizes

two aspects of plasticity. So too does the psychic process of mourning (and its historical counterpart of memorialization) that seeks to balance forgetting and detachment with preservation of the lost object.<sup>81</sup> Malabou's criticism of Freud's psychoanalytic model stems from his inability to incorporate the death drive—that which lies beyond the pleasure principle—into his concept of psychoanalytic plasticity.

Freud's failure, according to Malabou, results from an inability to model the simultaneity of life and death that characterizes the "time of materiality" in which we must live. While the life drive—eros—creates forms, the death drive destroys them. While Freud argues that the organism fashions or forms its own death, this is not plastic but only elastic—an oscillation between the impossibility of preserving a form and a rigid attachment to a form, a form ultimately constituted only by the life drives. Freud's attachment to elasticity is insufficiently materialist, in Malabou's thinking, because it cannot escape the limitations of an aesthetic frame. Freud's models for the death drive retain this aesthetic presence, while plasticity demands a form of resistance.

If aesthetics is a dimension of plasticity's ability to receive and donate form, destructive plasticity seems to hint at another scale of relief, a more complicated "fold" within discourse.<sup>82</sup> Destructive plasticity, in the form of the disassembly of neural circuits preparatory to reassembly, is part of neurological functioning, but so are traumatic accidents and the diseases of aging that seemingly destroy the self and overthrow the sovereignty of the brain.<sup>83</sup> Unlike the aesthetic gaps in which the self synaptically forms itself, destructive plasticity "enables the appearance or formation of alterity where the other is absolutely lacking. Plasticity is the form of alterity when no transcendence, flight or escape is left. The only other that exists in this circumstance is being other to the self."<sup>84</sup> The radical metamorphosis that results from destructive plasticity is the *real* form of being; it is "well and truly the fabrication of a new person, a novel form of life, without anything in common with a preceding form."<sup>85</sup> Malabou's recent work on destructive plasticity suggests that aesthetic models of the interstitial gap between temporal modes, philosophical traditions, and psychoanalytic drives of life and death are thus insufficient to escape the ideological deformations and power over the subject, the closure against which plasticity is levered. This is significant for the therapeutic potentials of psychoanalysis. "To be flexible is to receive a form or impression, to be able to fold oneself, to take the fold, not to give it. To be docile, to not explode. Indeed, what flexibility lacks

is the resource of giving form, the power to create, to invent or even to erase an impression, the power to style. Flexibility is plasticity minus its genius.”<sup>86</sup>

Malabou’s rereading of psychoanalysis links this materialist notion of form’s spontaneous transformation—its genius—to reconceptualizing Freud’s death drive. If the death drive is understood in aesthetic terms by Freud, Malabou’s substitution of cerebrality for the sexuality in which the Freudian psychoanalytic subject is conceived is designed to account for a radical otherness; it “allows for the possibility of a disastrous event that plays no role in an affective conflict supposed to precede it.”<sup>87</sup> This is not, she argues, a head-on attack on Freud but rather a rethinking of the psychic event. For Freud, the psychic event is always tied to love; the death drive remains formless and thus devoid of plasticity, represented, at best, by sadomasochism, another form of love.<sup>88</sup> The promise of cerebrality, of thinking the subject from the perspective of trauma beyond the pleasure principle, is to place the subject “beyond the will to know.”<sup>89</sup> The traumatic vacancy of the brain-damaged subject with no reference to her past is indistinguishable from the trauma of natural catastrophe, sensory deprivation, or torture in the modern penal institution. The new wounded, as she calls these sufferers, signal a new age of violence that has superseded the reparative possibilities of psychoanalysis.

Catherine Kellogg’s chapter argues against too quickly closing the case file on Freud’s and, subsequently, Lacan’s and Žižek’s materiality of the subject. For Lacan, she argues, who overtook Freud’s reticence to fully theorize the pleasure in death, this “fold” beyond the pleasure principle is not death but *jouissance*, the surplus of pleasure beyond pleasure. *Jouissance* threatens the loss of the symbolic, potentially collapsing the distance between the “real” and its symbolization. The resultant anxiety is, in this perspective, less fear of the loss of an object than dread over the failure of the order of symbolization in which the subject is constituted. “The conflict in anxiety is not a matter of conscious or unconscious thought, but rather a matter of the *discontinuity between the real of the organism and the imaginary unity of the body.*” In this manner, Kellogg argues, the Lacanian subject has already survived a death, making Lacan’s subject Malabou’s object but without a conceptual detour through neuroscience.

If Malabou emphasizes the destructive possibility of the loss of subjecthood, what might we lose, asks Kellogg, were we to ignore the loss already encountered within psychoanalysis? The answer to this profound

question seems to hinge on what ontological meaning can be derived from the kinds of loss that Malabou emphasizes as the central questions for subjectivity today and on how well the psychoanalytic story serves its plastic promise of repair. Malabou writes, “Destructive plasticity deploys its work starting from the exhaustion of possibilities, when all virtuality has left long ago, when the child in the adult is erased, when cohesion is destroyed, family spirit vanished, friendship lost, links dissipated in the ever more intense cold of a barren life. . . . The history of being itself consists perhaps of nothing but a series of accidents which, in every era and without hope of return, dangerously disfigure the meaning of essence.”<sup>90</sup> An accidental essence stripped of the child within: how do we tell these stories of ourselves, psychoanalytic or not?

#### BEYOND LAW AND SOVEREIGNTY

While Malabou’s work remains for the most part firmly registered in the discipline of philosophy, explicitly political concerns about recognition, sexual equality, sovereign power, and neoliberal forms of capitalism run throughout her oeuvre.<sup>91</sup> As a philosopher of transformation, she continually thinks against ontological, epistemological, and material closures that she confronts in her deconstruction of the thought of Hegel, Heidegger, Derrida, and Freud and, more recently, in her work on Foucault and Agamben. Many of these political concerns are shared by scholars engaged in the field of critical legal theory. Here, we ask what intellectual resources and directions might the thought of plasticity offer contemporary theories of law, justice and politics.

Influenced by Marxist theory, early Anglo–American critical legal scholars sought to denaturalize and expose the relationship between law and politics in liberal societies. Examining the ways in which law structures capitalist relations of exploitation and ownership, critical legal scholarship cast its attention to the role played by law in maintaining capitalist hegemony.<sup>92</sup> With growing attention to the work of Foucault and Derrida, critical legal theory shed its preoccupations with Marxist theory in order to consider the way in which law is constituted through diverse and multiple forms of power (political, economic, and social), as well as law’s politically productive limits. Understanding law as text in a deconstructive sense brought with it rich analyses of the minor jurisprudences embedded within law, as well as legal studies of literature, visuality, travel writings, and other genres.<sup>93</sup>

The other recent major innovation in critical legal theory stemmed from identifying the co-constitutive relationship between the emergence of modern law and colonialism.<sup>94</sup> This field of inquiry has focused on the politics of law in colonial settler societies and their contemporary formations, including the nature of sovereign power in colonial and imperial contexts.<sup>95</sup> In the United States, critical race theory emerged in the 1980s to explore the racial dimension of legal forms and introduced groundbreaking shifts in legal pedagogy and forms of writing that reflect marginalized histories and experiences normally invisibilized within law's purview.<sup>96</sup> This brief overview would be incomplete, of course, without mention of feminist legal theory and the more emergent field of queer legal theory, which place gender and sexuality at the forefront of a very diverse range of work that extends from legal reform and policy analysis to philosophical critiques of the hetero-phallogocentrism of the law.<sup>97</sup>

Despite the vast differences among these fields of inquiry, the preoccupation with justice—as a political objective, ethical matter, aesthetic concern, philosophical concept, or a combination thereof—persists across the domain of critical legal theory. This attention to justice appears in many guises; one manifestation of it appears as a consideration of that which is inescapable when one enters the juridical frame.<sup>98</sup> It is a consideration that cuts across philosophical, political and legal terrains and goes to the fundamental question of who and what are cognizable as legal subjects. This is the question of recognition.

This is one concern that Bhandar and Goldberg-Hiller, in their chapter in this volume, consider in light of colonial encounters. Where law has been deployed as both the agent of civilization (particularly in its reformation of “unruly” sexualities, as well as its codification of individual property rights) and as the mode through which indigenous peoples are encouraged to press for political relief (sometimes embraced as “reconciliation”), the problem of recognition is made stark. Is the form of recognition that stems from the conquest of land and power capable of achieving justice in light of continuing settler power?

While Malabou identifies recognition explicitly as a political concern in *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, her rethinking of the Hegelian dialectic exposes the plasticity inherent in the temporal dimensions of his philosophy and offers a space for rethinking the limits of legal-political recognition. In *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality and Dialectic*, Malabou uncovers the plasticity in Hegel's dialectical logic that breaks

with the reception of Hegel's thought as effecting ontological closure. She does this, as previously mentioned, by contesting the idea that there is a mechanical inevitability to this formulation of the dialectical logic and the emergence of the subject who arrives at the end point of a long struggle for recognition. Her argument for a "future" time that exists within Hegelian thought rethinks the subject "as a structure of anticipation, and, by the same token, a structure of temporalization."<sup>99</sup> In other words, the Hegelian subject is in some sense structured by its capacity to temporalize itself. Bhandar and Goldberg-Hiller suggest that this temporalization may not be sufficiently plastic for indigenous justice, particularly because settler colonial states exploit this temporal divergence, limiting the demands that indigenous peoples can legally make for future consideration to concerns of an imagined past. While such a past is creatively incorporated into many aspects of contemporary indigenous identities and practices, the law has, in numerous ways, precluded political demands on the legal impossibility of this ontology.

Malabou has also explored the corporeal aspects of Hegelian recognition in a piece, jointly written with Judith Butler, entitled *Sois mon corps*, or "You Be My Body for Me: Body, Shape, and Plasticity in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*."<sup>100</sup> In this dialogue, Butler and Malabou locate the body smuggled into Hegel's argument about self-consciousness. Dispossessed of itself, the imperative to "be my body for me" is both a plea and command issued by the subject, who refuses the violent ontoepistemic closure of recognition through the simple fact of *being*. Bhandar and Goldberg-Hiller conclude that indigenous ontologies that figure the body in ways distinctive from Western assumptions may be useful sites to consider this plastic potential.

Malabou's recent work applies these ontological questions of justice to the critique of sovereignty and its relationship to political and biological life. In chapter 1 in this volume, "Will Sovereignty Ever Be Deconstructed?" Malabou interrogates Foucault's assertion that we must develop a political philosophy "that isn't erected around the problem of sovereignty." Malabou begins with the assertion that despite the critical interventions of Foucault, Agamben, and Derrida, this has not yet happened. In other words, the king's head has yet to be finally severed.

Malabou argues that Foucault's notion of the biopolitical—that *dispositif* remaining after the removal of sovereign power—operates as a critique of sovereign power in that it both challenges the latter's very structure and also hides behind the traditional ideological mask of

sovereignty.<sup>101</sup> Biopower, by “inaugurating the reign of the norm,” ultimately retreats behind the “old figure of the law.” Thus, she sets as her task to deconstruct this deconstructive tool, the biopolitical, “to unveil it and resist its ideological tendency.”

The reinstantiation of the partition between the biological and the symbolic occurs with its exposure to a logic of sacrifice. Malabou argues that whether one considers Agamben’s notion of bare life, Foucault’s concern for biological materials, such as blood, that become abstracted into symbolic value, or the place of the empty signifier in the structural anthropology of Lévi-Strauss, there remains a body who, structurally, is exposed to death through sacrifice. This sacrificial impulse urgently needs to be challenged, Malabou claims, and she seeks to identify resources for political resistance to this logic of the exposure to death in the biological body. Malabou observes that many juridical and political formations, such as the nation, rely on this kinship between the symbolic and the biological. Consider, for instance, the nationalist politics of “blood and belonging” that fuse an ethnoracist discourse of biological unity with the transcendent and abstract concept of the nation.<sup>102</sup>

Malabou’s provocative engagement with Foucault, Agamben, and Derrida opens up several avenues of inquiry about the juridical, sovereign forms of power and political resistance. One question is about the place of law in her theorization of biological resistance to sovereign forms of power. If what are at stake in this engagement with Foucault’s theory of the biopolitical are popular sovereignty and democracy, the question arises as to what form law and juridical power might take if the partition between the symbolic and the biological were to be truly deconstructed. Might this open a space for a form of immanent critique of the law and sovereign juridical power?

Peering into this space, the notion of destructive plasticity presents us with a queer notion of law, one governed more by its own self-displacement than sovereign self-mastery. Thinking in the idiom of identity, destruction (in the sense of destructive plasticity) properly belongs to the species of accident:

Destruction remains an accident while really, to make a pun that suggests that the accident is a property of the species, destruction should be seen as a species of accident, so that the ability to transform oneself under the effect of destruction is a possibility, an existential structure. This structural status of the identity of the accident

does not, however, reduce the chance of it happening, does not annul the contingency of its occurrence, which remains absolutely unpredictable in all instances. This is why recognizing the ontology of the accident is a philosophically difficult task: it must be acknowledged as a law that is simultaneously logical and biological, but a law that does not allow us to anticipate its instances. Here is a law that is surprised by its own instances. In principle, destruction does not respond to its own necessity, and when it occurs, does not comfort its own possibility. Strictly speaking, destruction does not come to pass.<sup>103</sup>

This radical contingency that is imported into the “law” of a destructive plasticity opens space for thinking of conceptual structures that tug the biological reality of being from under the symbolic realm governed by the thought of sovereignty.

Alain Pottage’s chapter, “Autoplasticity,” challenges Malabou’s contention that the symbolic and the biological are necessarily preserved in the work of Foucault, implying that sovereignty may have to find another avenue of deconstruction. The emergence of epigenetics, on which much of Malabou’s scientific and philosophical reflections rely, Pottage argues, demonstrates a communicative process that is itself plastic. Pottage relies upon Niklas Luhmann’s “systems” theory of autopoiesis, which was developed from biological studies of organism and environment<sup>104</sup> in order to cast skepticism on the possibility or need for direct access to the biological itself.

Epigenetics, thought poietically and biologically, raises questions about the nature of the relative environment. As a metabolic process, its contexts include both the cellular tissue and the organismic system. This reveals, as Pottage shows, that environments are correlative to an organism and, simultaneously, functional and mobile. Understood philosophically, poiesis demonstrates that there is no such thing as an objective environment for living systems or for social systems. Luhmann argued that this was true for all systems of communication, with the consequence of radically deontologizing all objects. As Pottage demonstrates, this radical position is true of Foucault’s work on “ethopoiesis” as well.

Ethopoiesis, one of the “techniques of the self,” is a means of discriminating knowledge that would enhance the right character of a self from that which would not, unfolding the character of the self from the horizon, or environment, of the world. Techniques such as meditation

and memorization were Stoical versions of ethopoiesis, and writing made the self absorb these techniques into the constitution of the self. Foucault's self, Pottage claims, is not ontic but poietic: the self consists in making.

The consequence is subversive. Malabou's critique of Foucault in chapter 1 accounts for ethopoiesis, but she claims that in the final accounting, Foucault remains committed to a division between the symbolic and the biological body, making power always a less vital issue than the body. Yet from Luhmann's autopoietic perspective, one that would ultimately "environmentalize" biology, biopower is rendered evanescent. "If life, nature, or biology are no longer ontic or universal realms, but dimensions whose sense and configuration are dependent on the fashioning of the self that is correlative to the environment, then there is no such thing as 'life itself,'" Pottage writes.

Pottage's argument is addressed to Malabou's arguments about sovereignty and biopolitics, but it has interesting implications for Malabou's own practices of self-reflection and autobiography, as well as for the question of what may emerge beyond an age of plasticity. Malabou has argued that plasticity is itself plastic, susceptible to its own destruction, a consequence of our own communicative potentials and our attention to other ways of organizing our environments.

The question of whether these environments are always human are raised by Renisa Mawani in "Insects, War, Plastic Life." Malabou's efforts to deconstruct the divide between biology and history is an opportunity, Mawani claims, to think the human/nonhuman divide that has passed without question among many critics of biopolitics. Insects constitute an interesting subject for plasticity, Mawani shows: they are metamorphic and often complexly social creatures, designated as both expendable and killable by humans yet conscriptable into human military functions. Insects are also a trope for humans who themselves are seen as expendable, particularly in colonial contexts. What might we gain from exploding the species differentiation that persists in biopolitical conceptions of life and death?

Mawani's chapter asks us to think of the contemporary global closure, which Malabou sees as the condition of the age of plasticity, as also a moment "produced through uneven circuits and circulations of power. Thus, the 'ontological combustion' of plasticity harbors the potential to explode its own possibility, reinforcing existing geopolitical divides while also producing new ones that ultimately constrain and

even eliminate itineraries for emancipatory politics.”<sup>105</sup> These geopolitical divides are, in the end, colonial, and their environments are increasingly diffuse and manipulated by nonhuman agents. Insects, as Mawani shows, may be trained to sniff chemicals, detect explosives, and observe enemies in the “war on terror.” They have become a dispositif incorporated into other discourses and technologies of global security. Plasticity that runs through all forms of life emerges, then, as deeply ambivalent: both liberatory and subjectifying. Extending Bergson’s notion of vitalism beyond the human, Mawani identifies this plasticity as political vitality. In the context of contemporary geopolitics, this implies that plasticity may also be generative of dystopic worlds “always already situated within uneven distributions of life and death.”

Jairus Grove’s chapter exposes the dystopic fears of neuroscience; he both historicizes Malabou’s work on neuronal plasticity and draws out some of the political risks of destructive plasticity. Grove explores the double fold inherent in Malabou’s “adventurous” neuronal materialism, which is the epistemological and philosophical challenge posed by Malabou’s assertion that we are constituted as and by our brains. Grove explores how this double fold raises troubling questions for settled philosophical separations of the brain as mere noumena from the human capacity for thought. The notion that the brain is not under the absolute command of the faculties of the individual human actor challenges Kantian, neo-Arendtian, and other humanist traditions that “see the recourse to the brain as the death of man.” Grove, dispensing with these enfeebled humanists and their attachment to a human (and humanity) who never existed anyway, attempts to push Malabou’s concept of destructive plasticity to new limits.

By situating Malabou’s work on neuronal plasticity alongside the work of cyberneticists and other writers, Grove explores how neuronal plasticity is at the heart of scientific and literary experimentation involving the brain and human systems. Taking up mid-twentieth-century concerns with control, security and the capacity for understanding and transforming the cognitive behavior of individuals and populations, Grove engages the political context and concerns of a generation of scientists. Ultimately, he argues that Malabou’s concept of destructive plasticity invites us to confront the “horrors” of political plasticity and that lesions, decay, dementia, Alzheimer’s, and shock therapy reflect life’s indifference to radical change that leaves no trace of what preceded it. He

argues that “decay and catastrophe” are sovereign, not the human subject. Any attempt to think of life’s relation to the political, then, must necessarily acknowledge a mode of change that *forgets* the loss of form and its symbolic points of reference and thus appears to us an entirely un- if not posthuman mode of alienation.

In *Changing Difference*, Malabou also searches for a posthuman alterity, looking beyond ontology, even where ontological difference is pluralized, as it is by Derrida and Levinas.<sup>106</sup> Alterity is incalculable, she argues, but locatable in the “flesh of difference.”<sup>107</sup> The notion of flesh exceeds an ontological register plagued by myths of origin and originary exclusions; it falls outside the two domains of the biopolitical: the technological manipulation of things and signs (linguistics and science) and Foucauldian technologies of domination and the self. These two spheres are identified by Fred Moten, in chapter 12, as ones that the field of black studies takes responsibility “for forging an understanding between.” Moten renders a critique that obliquely touches that of Malabou, although he points to something she omits: spaces not of opening but of collapse amid spheres otherwise bifurcated. Moten writes that the double edge of the constitution of techniques of self-care, of self-concern, exhibit a “kind of anoriginal potential that is often constrained to submit to what it generates, to what represents or gives accounts—where giving an account is a taking stock of oneself that is inseparable from a taking stock of one’s things.”

Moten’s chapter questions the political adequacy of a plasticity conceived within the gap between brain and society without recognition of the ways in which the deconstruction of a centralized executive in the brain is reconstructed in the privileged position of neural matter. Doesn’t the emphasis on the brain, he asks, reinscribe the executive? “Isn’t the deconstruction of biopolitical deconstruction still a sovereign operation? Isn’t the brain . . . where the sovereign now resides?” Moten’s concern is not only for the political models of sovereignty condensed in the model of brain function but also for the genealogy of brain science that has always imagined a particular (white, male, European) privilege of rationality. However much it shares the significance of affect to interrogate the symmetry of brain and self, Moten’s argument rubs against the inventive freedom of Shapiro’s post-Kantian aesthetic subject as it aims for an alternative biological reference to neuroplasticity. For him, the flesh that exceeds the brain and the self must become the

locus of any biological imagination of resistance to the biopolitical and its symbolic structures. This is a subjectivity designed for those historically denied the symbolism of the brain.

In the chapters that follow, Malabou's interlocutors are sandwiched between three original chapters by Catherine Malabou and an interview in which she reengages some of the themes and considers criticisms brought out by the writers of the chapters within. Malabou has written of her own philosophical reading that she seeks to find "a childhood to come in the text. . . . Childhood is an age that does not belong to either metaphysics or to its superseding and that, just like 'metamorphosis,' is both before and after history, mythic and ultrahistorical at the same time."<sup>108</sup> The reader is invited to take this same spirit of a plastic reading that the authors published here have applied to Malabou's own texts.

#### INTRODUCTION TO MALABOU CHAPTERS

Chapters 1 through 3 are written by Catherine Malabou; originally prepared as lectures, they offer multiple perspectives on the relationship of plasticity to politics and law. In "Will Sovereignty Ever Be Deconstructed?" Malabou asks whether the critique of sovereignty begun by Foucault, Agamben, and Derrida might unwittingly have resuscitated sovereignty instead. Her argument focuses on the symbolic potential of biology, which theories of biopolitics have relegated to a political veil for sovereign power. What would happen, Malabou inquires, if we read the biological not just as a concealment for the normative basis of biopower but as its own plastic symbolic system? Might we then, finally, be in a position to orient our political theories beyond any vestiges of sovereignty?

In her chapter, "Whither Materialism? Althusser/Darwin," Malabou asks us to consider another materialism, one that is contingent or aleatory and glimpsed in the philosophy of Althusser and the biology of Darwin, as grounds for a new politics. Rather than the conservative force of social Darwinism and sociobiology, two uses of the biological that see the function of social selection as the reproduction of order, Malabou urges us to embrace a new balance between variation and selection that a plastic reading of this new materialism can provide.

Chapter 3, "From the Overman to the Posthuman: How Many Ends?," raises important questions for legal and political theory. If our own universal conception of the human subsumes and erases particular differ-

ences, might our critical engagements with the category of the human merely reproduce the concept in its essential form? Might this repetition of the human—seen in such issues as human rights, which have been extended to encompass women’s rights and gay rights, among others originally excluded from the category—be its essence, Malabou asks? And if so, might law and our ideas of justice be little more than symbols of this repetition? If one promise of plasticity is repair, how should we now reorient ourselves and our legal notions to prevent repeating violence in the name of the human?

## NOTES

1. Malabou writes about this structuralism, “By ‘structure of philosophy,’ I mean the form of philosophy after its destruction and deconstruction. This means that structure is not a starting point here but rather an outcome. Structure is the order and organization of philosophy once the concepts of order and organization have themselves been deconstructed. In other words, the structure of philosophy is metamorphosized metaphysics.” Malabou, *Plasticity at the Dusk*, 51; italics in the original. See also Martinon, *On Futurity*.

2. Malabou, *Plasticity at the Dusk*, 49.

3. Marx, “Concerning Feuerbach,” 423 (Thesis XI).

4. See Weizman, *Hollow Land*; Sassen, *De-facto Transnationalizing*; Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception*.

5. Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, 4.

6. Pashukanis, *Law and Marxism*; Balbus, “Commodity Form,” 571.

7. White, *Content of the Form*.

8. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*; Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism*.

9. White, “Revolt against Formalism,” 131–52; Purcell, *Crisis of Democratic Theory*.

10. Derrida, “Form and Meaning,” 155–73.

11. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*.

12. Kant, *Critique of Judgement*; Gasché, *Idea of Form*; Rancière, *Disagreement*; Panagia, *Political Life of Sensation*.

13. See Malabou, *Ontology of the Accident*, 1.

14. Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity*, 30. See also Paul Ricoeur’s compatible arguments about the necessity of narrative to the comprehension of time. Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*.

15. Malabou understands this process of becoming fantastically visible to reveal what she has called *ontological transformability*. Malabou, *Heidegger Change*, 269. As one of her translators, Peter Skafish, has observed, her language reaches to but not within the aesthetic. She uses “a poetic style rich

enough to evoke a vivid picture of transformation but unobtrusive enough to not make the image seem like an artifact of language.” Malabou, *Heidegger Change*, xiv.

16. See chapter 8.

17. Malabou, *Heidegger Change*, 11.

18. Malabou, *Heidegger Change*, 16.

19. “The commodity form, is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things.” Marx, *Capital*, 165. Marx liberally uses the term metamorphosis when discussing the commodity.

20. The visibility of ontological transformation in this form of form “does not allow for the . . . supersession [of metaphysics], and modern technology simply closes the loop of a generalized equivalence where everything is of equal value . . . and everything possible—every manipulation, bargain, direction, and ideological advance.” Malabou, *Heidegger Change*, 272.

21. Malabou, *Heidegger Change*, 193.

22. Malabou, *Plasticity at the Dusk*, 50.

23. Malabou, *Heidegger Change*, 279.

24. Malabou, *Future of Hegel*, 6.

25. Malabou, *Future of Hegel*, 19, 192.

26. Malabou, *Future of Hegel*, 17.

27. Malabou, *Future of Hegel*, 20.

28. Malabou, *Heidegger Change*, 9.

29. Derrida, “Preface,” xxxi.

30. Malabou writes, “The world thus bears the mourning of that which has not arrived, the worse trace or what is unaccomplished in the actual event. But as the non-event has precisely never taken place, and is by definition not historical, its mourning cannot exist in the order of idealization. The mourning of the possible, in the double sense of the genitive, can only be the conservation of the possible itself which does not reify it in an image or a phantasm. Thus conserved, the possible remains forever possible, and to this extent the not having happened is also the resource for that which can arrive, the resource of all faith in the future, of all confidence in another becoming of the world.” Malabou, “History and the Process of Mourning,” 20.

31. Malabou, “Following Generation,” 19–33.

32. Malabou writes, “Cette plasticité implique donc la possibilité d’un retour en arrière, d’un effacement de la marque, de la différence, de la spécialisation, effacement dont il faut, paradoxalement, retrouver la piste. Il s’agit de retrouver la trace du processus même d’effacement de la trace.” [“This plasticity implies the possibility of turning back, the deletion of the mark of difference, of specialization, a deletion that requires, paradoxically, the need to rediscover

the path. It is a question of recovering the trace of the same process of erasing the trace.”] Malabou, “Les Régénérés,” 537.

33. Malabou, *Ontology of the Accident*, 1.

34. Malabou, *Ontology of the Accident*, 18.

35. Malabou, *Ontology of the Accident*, 18.

36. Malabou, *Ontology of the Accident*, 24.

37. Deleuze writes, “Events are ideal. Novalis sometimes says that there are two courses of events, one of them ideal, the other real and imperfect—for example, ideal Protestantism and real Lutheranism. The distinction however is not between two sorts of events; rather, it is between the event, which is ideal by nature, and its spatio-temporal realization in a state of affairs. The distinction is between *event* and *accident* . . . [an effort to] thwart all dogmatic confusion between event and essence, and also every empiricist confusion between event and accident.” Deleuze, *Logic of Sense*, 53–54.

38. Malabou, *Ontology of the Accident*, 17.

39. Malabou, *Ontology of the Accident*, 30.

40. Malabou, *The Future of Hegel*, 192.

41. Malabou, *Changing Difference*; Malabou, *Plasticity at the Dusk*.

42. Coole and Frost, *New Materialisms*; Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*; Thacker, *After Life*.

43. See Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*; Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*. But see also the rejoinders in Malabou, “Who’s Afraid?” 114–38; Malabou, “Eternal Return,” 21–29.

44. Nancy, “Introduction,” 1–8.

45. Malabou, *What Should We Do?*, 5.

46. Malabou, *What Should We Do?*, 54.

47. Malabou, *What Should We Do?*, 6.

48. Malabou, “Préface,” 23.

49. Malabou, “Préface,” 20, 22.

50. Malabou, “Préface,” 26, 27.

51. Malabou, *What Should We Do?*, 31.

52. Malabou, *What Should We Do?*, 81.

53. Gould, *Mismeasure of Man*.

54. Glimcher, *Foundations*; see also the critique of Fine, “Development as Zombieconomics,” 885–904; Fine and Milonakis, *Economic Imperialism*.

55. Jameson writes, “Nonetheless, it is not terribly difficult to say what is meant by the Real in Lacan. It is simply History itself: and if for psychoanalysis the history in question here is obviously enough the history of the subject, the resonance of the word suggests that a confrontation between this particular materialism and the historical materialism of Marx can no longer be postponed.” Jameson, “Imaginary and Symbolic,” 384.

56. Marx originally wrote, in German, “Die Menschen machen ihre eigene Geschichte, aber sie machen sie nicht aus freien Stücken, nicht unter selbstgewählten, sondern unter unmittelbar vorgefundenen, gegebenen und überlieferten Umständen.” The usual translation in French is “Les hommes font leur propre histoire, mais ils ne la font pas arbitrairement, dans les conditions choisies par eux, mais dans des conditions directement données et héritées du passé.” Malabou’s rendition in French is “Les hommes font leur propre histoire mais ne savent pas qu’ils la font.” Here, she substitutes *savoir*, “to know,” for *faire*, “to make.” Malabou’s language is drawn from phrasing popularized by Raymond Aron: “les hommes font leur histoire, mais ils ne savent pas l’histoire qu’ils font” (Aron, *Introduction*, 168; see also Mahoney, *Liberal Political Science*, 131).

57. Marx, *Eighteenth Brumaire*, 10.

58. Marx, *Eighteenth Brumaire*, 10.

59. Malabou, *What Should We Do?*, 24.

60. Malabou, *What Should We Do?*, 24.

61. Malabou, *What Should We Do?*, 81.

62. Malabou, *What Should We Do?*, 82.

63. Pitts-Taylor, “Plastic Brain,” 635–652; see also Rajan, *Biocapital*; Waldby, *Visible Human Project*.

64. Galloway, “Poverty of Philosophy,” 364.

65. Galloway, “Poverty of Philosophy,” 366.

66. Rand, “Organism,” 353.

67. Marx and Engels write in *The German Ideology*, “The most recent of [the Young Hegelians] have found the correct expression for their activity when they declare they are only fighting against ‘phrases.’ They forget, however, that they themselves are opposing nothing but phrases to these phrases, and that they are in no way combating the real existing world when they are combating solely the phrases of this world.” Marx and Engels, *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels*, 30.

68. On embodiment and plasticity, see Papadopoulos, “Imaginary of Plasticity,” 432–56. See also Watson, “Neurobiology of Sorcery,” 23–45.

69. Evans, *Sexual Citizenship*; Hennessy, *Profit and Pleasure*.

70. Warner, *Trouble with Normal*.

71. Halberstam, “What’s That Smell?,” 313–33.

72. Franke, “Domesticated Liberty,” 1399–426.

73. Butler, *Gender Trouble*.

74. Malabou, *Changing Difference*, 1.

75. Malabou, *Changing Difference*, 104.

76. Malabou, *Changing Difference*, 137, 138.

77. Malabou, *Plasticity at the Dusk*, 81.

78. Derrida and Reader, “Paper or Myself.”

79. Malabou, *Plasticity at the Dusk*, 49; italics in original.

80. Felman, "Beyond Oedipus," 1021–53.
81. Malabou, "Plasticity and Elasticity," 85.
82. The idea of a fold within discourse is attributed to Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*. Malabou addresses this concept in *Plasticity at the Dusk*, 56; "Eye at the Edge," 16–25.
83. Malabou, *Ontology of the Accident*, 39–54.
84. Malabou, *Ontology of the Accident*, 11.
85. Malabou, *Ontology of the Accident*, 18.
86. Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, 39.
87. Malabou, *New Wounded*, 189–202.
88. Malabou, *New Wounded*, 205.
89. Malabou, *New Wounded*.
90. Malabou, *Ontology of the Accident*, 89–91.
91. See esp. Emmanuelli and Malabou, *La Grande Exclusion*.
92. Fine et al., *Capitalism and the Rule of Law*; Thompson, *Whigs and Hunters*; Feinman and Gabel, "Contract Law as Ideology," 373.
93. Goodrich, *Law in the Courts of Love*; Halder, *Law, Orientalism*; Dore, "Law's Literature," 17–28.
94. Fitzpatrick's *Mythology of Modern Law* was a seminal text, if not *the* seminal text, in the field of postcolonial legal theory.
95. Fitzpatrick, *Mythology of Modern Law*; Darian-Smith and Fitzpatrick, *Laws of the Postcolonial*; Anghie, *Imperialism*; Borrows, "Frozen Rights," 37–64.
96. Lawrence, "The Id," 317; Matsuda, *Where Is Your Body?*; Crenshaw, "De-marginalizing," 139.
97. Davies, "Queer Property," 327–52; Cooper, *Sexing the City*; Herman, *Antigay Agenda*.
98. Butler, *Undoing Gender*.
99. Malabou, *Future of Hegel*, 130.
100. Butler and Malabou, *Sois mon corps*; Malabou and Butler, "You Be My Body."
101. Malabou, ch. 1, 36.
102. Balibar and Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class*; Butler and Spivak, *Who Sings the Nation-State?*
103. Malabou, *Ontology of the Accident*, 18.
104. Luhmann, *Social Systems*.
105. Mawani, ch. 8, 161.
106. Malabou, *Changing Difference*, 36.
107. Malabou, *Changing Difference*, 36.
108. Malabou, *Plasticity at the Dusk*, 54.