> Politics and art, like forms of knowledge, construct "fictions," that is to say *material* rearrangements of signs and images, relationships between what is seen and what is said, between what is done and what can be done ... They draft maps of the visible, trajectories between the visible and the sayable, relationships between modes of being, modes of saying, and modes of doing and making.
>
> – Jacques Rancière, *The Distribution of the Sensible*[1]

Elizabeth A. Povinelli

After the Last Man: Images and Ethics of Becoming Otherwise

Huddled within one of the most influential theories of human desire and the destiny of democracy is an image of history and its future. This image is of a horizon. In lectures delivered at the École Pratique des Hautes Études from 1933 to 1939, Alexandre Kojève argued that the horizon of universal human recognition ("democracy") was already in the nature of human desire but, paradoxically, had to be achieved through concrete struggles that intensified political life. These struggles were dependent on and waged against the background of human finitude. Yet, at the end of these battles, when the horizon had been breached, the world and the humans within it would be a form of the undead.

What *was* the future of this image? And what is its future now? Is it "huddled within," or is it the architectural framework on which affective and institutional futures were built and now face us? What other imagistic architecture of human being and politics might have made an alternative history and future of political action? Here I extend a set of thoughts first published in a previous essay on a very different image and grammar of social and political life – the bag and embagination.[2]What would happen if we replaced the transcendental architecture of the horizon with the immanent architecture of embagination? And how is embagination not replacing other images of immanent becoming – the fold and the rhizome – but rather confronting them.

1.

We can begin with the fall of a wall and a set of proclamations that followed. That is, the difference between the fall of the Berlin Wall and claims about the meaning of this material collapse. Who better to illustrate this difference than Francis Fukuyama? In *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992), Fukuyama asserted that the fall of the Berlin Wall demonstrated that "a

remarkable consensus concerning the legitimacy of liberal democracy as a system of government had emerged throughout the world over the past few years, as it conquered rival ideologies like hereditary monarchy, fascism, and most recently communism."[3] For Fukuyama, liberal democracy – we might also say "neoliberal capitalism" – constituted the "end point of mankind's ideological evolution" and the "final form of human government."[4] As such, it marked the "end of history" and the emergence of "the last man."

Fukuyama was a student of Allan Bloom and a disciple of Leo Strauss, two prominent intellectual leaders of the neoconservative movement in the US. But to understand what is at stake in Fukuyama's proclamation about the "end of history," we must travel across the Atlantic and back in time. Fukuyama's reading of this material collapse depends on the philosopher Alexandre Kojève's reading of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*.[5] Interpreting Hegel through Marx, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, Kojève argued that the history of humankind would come to an end when equal recognition had been universalized in the form of liberal democracy. Why? Because the desire for recognition is what differentiates human and nonhuman animals – what defines the human *qua* human – and constitutes the motive force of history.

Much depends on the difference between animal and human desire. The animal – and the animal part of man – becomes aware of itself as it experiences a desire, such as the desire for food, which is the consequence of finding itself in a state of hunger. This state of hunger creates in the animal a sentiment of self, a rudimentary "I" that says, "I am hungry." In this sense, desire is empty: desire is the experience of lack. This experience of emptiness is, however, a positive force, for it rouses and disquiets being, moving it from passivity into action. In other words, desire creates in human and nonhuman animals a "sentiment of self": an awareness of the existence of the self as an "I" at the moment when the emptiness of desire asserts itself over being.

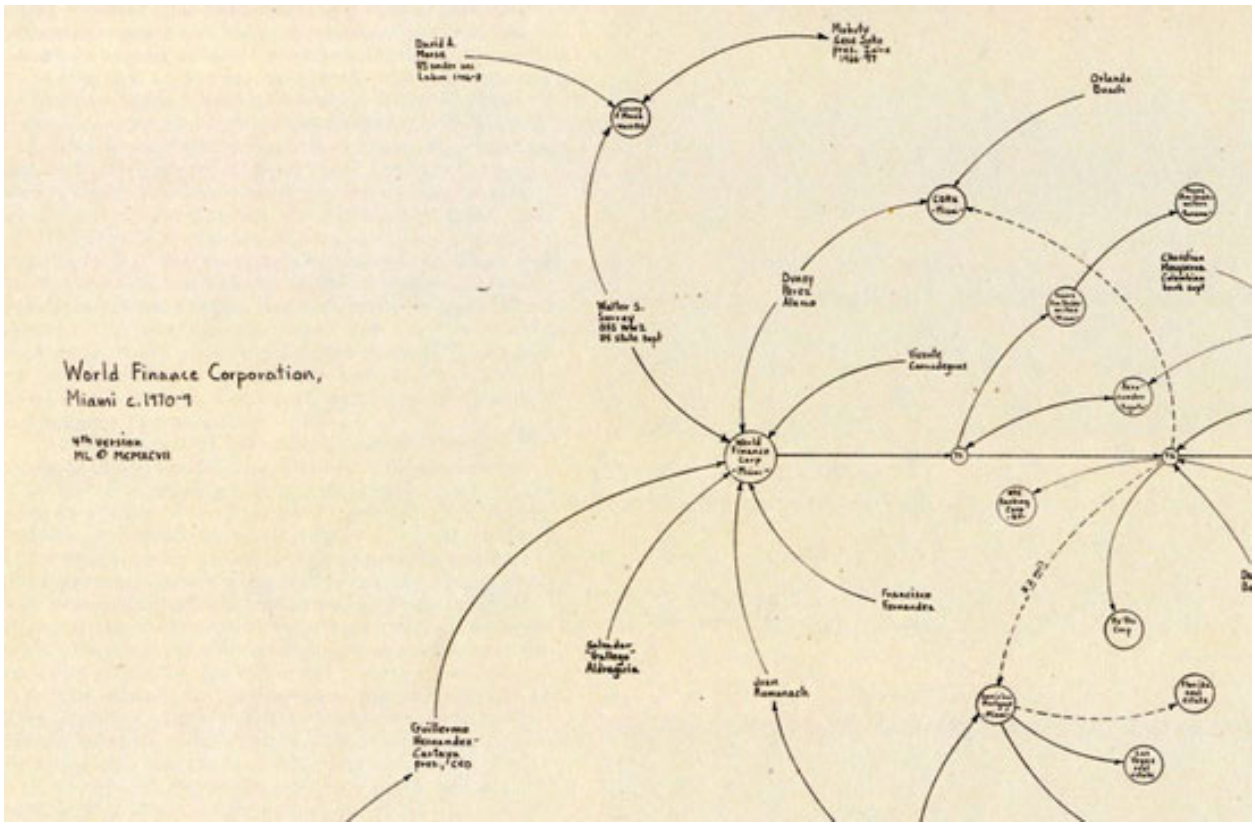
But whereas animal desire satisfies itself merely by consuming what is in the world, human desire looks beyond what is already at hand. For Kojève, the differentiating mark of the human – what makes man a *human* animal; his "anthropological machinery," to paraphrase Agamben – is that his desire doesn't seek something that already exists in the world but something that doesn't *yet* exist. [6] Human desire

Hiroshi Sugimoto,*Tyrrhenian Sea, Conca,* 1994.

is doubly empty. It is awakened by the experience of a lack, but the form of satisfaction it seeks goes beyond the given world of things, forms, affects, and so forth. What might this nonexistent object of desire be? According to Kojève, it can only be another human's desire, equally as empty and as ravenous for satisfaction. This is the atomic kernel of the battle for recognition: the desire is to be the object of another's desire. I want to be what you want. What I want is to have you want "me." And "me" is what I desire to be in the world, my vision of the world. You want me to do the same, and thus there is a battle over whose vision will prevail. It is this duel between the ravenous empty dualities of desire that leads to the intensification of politics and is the motive force of human history.

From this simple diagram of desire and recognition comes the material dialectical unfolding of the world of liberal democracy – or neoliberal capitalism – which begins in the confrontation that produces the master-slave relationship and ends in the universalization of equal recognition. The battle of recognition, which is a battle to be the object of the other's desire, is what for Kojève intensifies political and social life and thrusts the human being towards the horizon to which human history has always been leading – namely, a form of governance in which recognition is mutual and universal. Most importantly, Kojève did what Kojève theorized. He put his theory into practice through specific bureaucratic battles to institutionally shape the political and economic world of Europe and the US.[7] Kojève *materialized* a theoretical image (imaginary) by seducing others into thinking his desire was their desire – and that this desire was the truth of the future in the present and not merely one image among many of human being and history.

But if the dominant image of this theory of desire and democracy begins as a horizon, it ends as something very different. If liberal democracy is the *horizon* of desire already inscribed in the fight for recognition (the orientation and end of human becoming, and thus the end of history itself), then when liberal democracy has been universally achieved, human historical becoming collapses into a satisfied human state of being. The horizon then becomes what I will call a *surround*, a form of enclosure without a wall or gate. The surround is without an opening. It is an infinity of homogeneous space and time. It is an "everywhere at the same time" and a "nowhere



Mark Lombardi, *World Finance Corporation and Associates, ca. 1970-84: Miami, Ajman, and Bogota-Caracas*, (1999).

else." One can go here or there in the surround but it really makes no difference because there are no meaningful distinctions left to orient oneself – to determine where one goes or what one believes or holds true. To paraphrase Nietzsche, there is no shepherd or herd in the surround. Everyone wants the same because they are the same. Even the hope of the madhouse, as the place where difference is interned, is lost because difference no longer exists.[8]

But when I say "the human in the surround," I misspeak. When humankind finally reaches the horizon it has been producing through the battle for recognition, the thing that emerges is not the same thing that had created it. What had distinguished humans from nonhuman animals changes. The thing that inhabits the surround is not an animal. But it is also not human. The Last Man is the end of Man. The surround is inhabited by what Agamben calls a "nonhuman human," something that seems quite similar to the contemporary televisual obsession with the undead – a kind of being which is deceased and yet behaves as if it were alive. Kojève and his students understood this. In losing the horizon of desire, man became a kind of post-man. When the wall falls and the horizon collapses, man receives the package he had sent himself when first starting out on his journey. But the recipient is as foreign to the human who sent the package as the human was from the animal.

In debating what was the sensuous and affective nature of the last man left in history's wake, Kojève and his students demonstrated how thoroughly they themselves had become dominated by their own dominant image. Kojève described the affect of the Last Man as satisfaction, which he distinguished absolutely from enjoyment. Raymond Queneau tried to capture the existential state of satisfaction in his novels, and Georges Bataille attempted to find some way of intensifying life in the surround of satisfaction through blood and sacrifice, entrails and excrement. But rather than determining the sensuous affect of this state of being in the surround, Kojève, his bureaucratic colleagues, and his students used theory, literature, and bureaucratic practice to materialize the image as a circuitry connecting institutions, significations, and affects in such a way that they produce hopes and expectations, disappointments and rage – and perhaps most important of all for a critical politics – senses of justice and the good. And lest we think our political imaginaries have transcended this image, we can turn to Lee Edelman's scathing critique of the film *Children of Men*, which assumes that without the future as a horizon of being, figured in the promissory note of the child, all pleasure and drive would collapse like so much air in a punctured balloon.[9]

And here I think we can see how a dominant image of human history, and human *political intensification* in particular, has come to dominate human becoming. It does not matter whether the horizon is out there in a reachable or unreachable form. It does not matter whether the horizon is there before we start our journey or is constituted from the activity of walking. It does not matter whether the horizon is figured as a wall, a frontier, a checkpoint, or a fence. The human production of an image of human becoming and being as a future in which a limit – or condition – has been achieved has led to a reduction of our capacity to imagine alternative images of human becoming. While we might not agree with Rancière's aesthetic periodizations, his understanding of the politics of aesthetics as the entanglements of power and visibility and of sensuous embodiment, of affects and energies, is right. Images of history have a habituated *feeling* to them.

The habituated affects of the image of a horizon were on full display in two material collapses that occurred decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Dominated by the image of the horizon of history, what wonder then that 9/11 and 2008 were *exciting*, not merely *dangerous*, moments? Perhaps history had not ended, perhaps a limit, a front, a back, a horizon, and a border had miraculously appeared in the "clash of civilizations" and the crash of the financial markets, and with them an opening, a gate, a direction, a movement of becoming. Perhaps universal recognition either had not arrived in the form of Western democracy, or this system had a radical new context in which to unfurl its form, meaning, and legitimacy. Maybe we were not in a *surround* but were instead surrounded by something that could be overcome. Maybe something could still be done. Note how these questions do not disturb the political imaginary of recognition so much as they merely change its clock.

Events since 9/11 and 2008 have not supported this hope. Being remains enclosed, if not by a political form of government (democracy), then by an economic form of compulsion. Celebrations of democratic spring across the Arab world were soon followed by the installation of technocratic rulers in Italy and Greece, with global pundits celebrating the ability to bypass the democratic function. And in China, the supposed inevitable conjoint of liberal market and government remains a receding horizon as the country's economic power seems ceaselessly to expand. Rather than neoliberal finance unveiling its internal limits in a global market, democracy has all but given way throughout Europe and has never seemed to be

needed in China. If democracy is the back of history, there seems to be no front to neoliberal being. How do we think about the sources of the political otherwise when being seems trapped in an enclosure rather than having a front or a back? Where are the sensuous modes of becoming within the global circulations of being that have defined modern politics and markets, if not in a *horizon*?

2.

For some time now scholars have been thinking about the concept of circulation in relationship to the making and extinguishing of social worlds. Why do some forms move or get moved along? What are the formal/figurative demands placed on forms as the condition of their circulation in and across social space? What are the materialities of form that emerge from, and brace, these movements, and that make "things" palpable and recognizable inside the contexts into which they are inserted? And finally, how is social space itself the effect of competing forms and formations of circulation?

Given the profound influence of my indigenous colleagues and friends on my thinking, it is no surprise that the dominant image of circulation I have is of a stringbag, or *wargarthi* in Emiyenggel, an indigenous language of the northwest coast of Australia. A stringbag is formed through a reflexive, dense to semi-dense weave. It is capable of dynamic expansion and contraction and has a load-sensitive shaping. The stringbag has a formal mouth but the body is composed of openings that can anchor new weavings or ensnare objects. (The same basic weave and technology is used to make fishnets.) And, depending on their material composition, these bags are likely to decompose in different ways under different conditions. In other words, the stringbag is a mode of circulation insofar as it is a *reflexive form* with *figurative material force* that constitutes and obligates everything in and between it, and yet it is shaped by that which it tries to contain and can be reshaped by tying new strings and anchors into its body. It is the stringbag I see in Tomas Saraceno's architectural environments and Mark Lombardi's drawings of the social networks that compose modern power.

But bags are only experienced as bags – as something capable of holding something else – when the things that fit into them fit in a more or less compatible way. Thus we might think of the functionality of bags as dependent on the things that will enter them. But what if we thought of embagination as the process by which things themselves come into being and then come to have a residence, a domicile? What if the formations of a specific form of reflexive movement were the conditions in which new life forms emerged and found domicile – though at the price of extinguishing other forms?

In his *Playing and Reality*, the British psychoanalyst Donald W. Winnicott describes the case of a young boy of seven who had "become obsessed with everything to do with string."[10] Not string per se, but what string seemed to allow him to overcome – the separation of objects due to a diminution of the forces that had previously held them together. Whenever his parents would enter a room, "they were liable to find that he had joined together chairs and tables; and they might find a cushion, for instance, with string joining it to the fireplace." The parents only became disturbed, rather than simply bemused, when a "new feature" of his tethering practices emerged. "He had recently tied a string around his sister's neck."[11]

For Winnicott, these elaborate webs were "transitional objects" that manifested the young boy's denial of maternal separation.[12] His patient used string to reintegrate material that was on the threshold of disintegration and to confine the forces responsible for the disintegration. Thus the string tied around his baby sister, the object that posed the first serious threat to his bond with his mother.[13]

Winnicott first became aware of the psychic side of the boy's obsession during a "squiggle game." In his work with children, Winnicott would draw a squiggle and ask the child to complete the drawing. In the represented space of Winnicott's notebook, the young boy's creations looked like webs, but in the lived space of the boy's home the webs were more like badly constructed bags. He *embagged* space as he wove together new object forms and dependencies, hoping to save a world he had already lost. In the process he conditioned how things could move in and through this new world; how things – such as himself – could be held in it; and whether things – such as himself or his sister – could exist in it. What resulted was neither what had been nor what currently was. Nothing he did could undo the damage done by the arrival of his sister. But in trying, the boy created new habitations, new ways of being held. He did not mean to do this, but his refusal was a creative act. It provided an environment for alternative possibilities of life. Cushions were no longer able to be manipulated, visibly or tangibly, independent of the fireplace. The fireplace now had the cushions as one of its internal organs. The cushions had the bricks. Winnicott's job was to normalize these possible trajectories – impose on them the proper image of singularities, difference, and development.

The thresholds of being and separation that

Yayoi Kusama, *The Passing Winter (detail)*, 2005. Photo: Tate Photography.

the boy saw and the new thresholds of being he created are the same thresholds that many adults come to forget, repress, or attempt to destroy – or perhaps they give them a clinical diagnostic such as the persistent denial of reality. Adults accept a given assemblage as natural to the world, and experience this assemblage as a pre-existing collection of objects and subjects independent of the embagged space that has created it. As such, it is little wonder that many adults see these object/subjects as the anchor around which other things are tied. But the boy had an intuition, or an irritation, that the cushion and fireplace were not there first, nor the string after, but are themselves effects of a kind of tethering whose conditions he does not understand and whose immanent undoing he is equally at a loss to explain. The boy knows that the world he has inhabited – which has securely held him – will no longer be habitable if the underlying woven pattern takes on a new form. So he uses string as a form of communication in an older sense of *inter*course – a *reflexive form* with *figurative force* that mutually constitutes and obligates everything in and between it. His sister probably experienced this intercourse as a kind of stranglehold. But the boy finds himself in a bind. From his perspective, her arrival has created a new circuit of care that is suffocating him. He knows it takes force to hold something in place. The boy sees his options as either to strangle or be suffocated.

Winnicott may have thought his young patient was using his strings to slowly reconcile himself to the natural progression of maturation. But the young boy intuited that demanding environments are not held in place by the natural order of things. They are historical arrangements (*agencements*) that depend on a host of historically formed interlocking concepts, materials, and forces that include human and nonhuman agencies and concepts. Because we are merely one mode of being in one location of being, we cannot and will never be able to understand or explain the conditions that make up our world or what causes its immanent undoing. Thus, as we try to secure it – or to remake it – we create and extinguish. And, like this young boy, the reflexive movements shaping space nonetheless have a figurative force. Our spaces sag, impede, irritate, or scare others.

In other words, in trying to secure or disturb a world, we also do two additional things. On the one hand, we mark the itinerary of our desire as an obligation to something rather than a battle for recognition for something, as a composition and decomposition, but without the dominating image of a horizon. On the other hand, we extinguish one world in the very act of trying to keep another world in place, to return to this place, or to create new places. And this second point is crucial: the topologies we compose to hold and give domicile always have the figure of the sister as their ethical counterpoint.

3.

Since the late 1960s a number of images have challenged the dominance of the dialectical horizon – especially Deleuze's image of the fold and Guattari's image of the rhizome. Deleuze saw the image of the fold as combating a model of subjectivity and being that contrasted forms of interiority and exteriority, or placed them in dialectical tension. For Deleuze, the interior of being does not come up to an edge, border, or frontier that defines what is outside itself. Rather, interiority is itself complexly composed of "forces of the outside." All interiority can be understood as *extimite* ("extimité"), a term Lacan coined in order to describe the intimate exterior.[14] Deleuze extends the concept of the extimite outside human subjectivity, making it a general condition of all entities. In other words, at the heart of an assemblage – the subject-objects that the parents of Winnicott's patient assumed to preexist their child's string play, or the subject-objects that will emerge from it – is this folding of the external into the intimate internal. In some way the rhizome simply provides an organic foundation to, and elaboration of, the image of the fold.

Unlike arboreal images, a rhizome can be severed and yet still be productive. But most importantly for Deleuze and Guattari, the rhizome represents radical potentiality existing on the plane of pure immanence. "Unlike the graphic arts, drawing, or photography, unlike tracings, the rhizome pertains to a map that must be produced, constructed, a map that is always detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable, and has multiple entranceways and exits and its own lines of flight."[15] There is no horizon simultaneously within the rhizome and towards which it inexorably moves.

Insofar as this image conjures the hope for a radical potentiality that exists on the plane of pure immanence, it is in line with Deleuze's long engagement with Spinoza – more specifically, his reworking of Spinoza's concepts of *conatus* and *affectus*. Deleuze is not the only one who has reevaluated these key concepts of Spinoza. Weaving together the writings of Deleuze and Irigaray, Rosie Braidotti has noted the "implicit positivity" of the "notion of desire as *conatus*," and through it a new form of politics.[16] For Deleuze and Guattari, this implicit positivity dwells not merely in all actual things, but also in all potential things – the body with organs and the body-without-organs within every organic

arrangement.[17] And in his effort to develop a positive form of biopower, Roberto Esposito has recently linked Spinoza's notion of *conatus* to his claim in the *Political Treatise* that "every natural thing has as much right from Nature as it has power to exist and to act."[18]

It is exactly here that the image of the fold and rhizome have lost their political nerve and we return to our little boy madly tying together various pieces of his domicile in a perhaps desperate attempt to return it to its previous form and in that form find a dwelling. Note that Esposito places the emphasis on "the intrinsic modality that life assumes in the expression of its own unrestrainable power to exist" rather than on what might be a more Nietzschean reading, namely, the relative power that *restrains* the existence and actions of various bioformations in a given field of often opposing striving actors (actants).[19] What if one striving potentiating meets and opposes another? Can progressive politics avoid this question – and thus the problem of extinguishment? How would the sign "progressive" read if it were understood as always actively maintaining, producing, and *extinguishing* worlds? In its refusal of the repressive hypothesis, how has progressive politics avoided the politics of its own practice's extinguishment, and in avoiding these politics, lost its ethical depth?

The problem is especially acute if we do not return to the image of the horizon already within us that nonetheless necessitates a building. This image of the horizon elevates into transcendental truth a kind of affect (a combative desire for the desire of the other), a form of life (universal recognition), and a shape of governance (liberal democracy). All is adjudicated from the perspective of these cardinal measures. The fold and rhizome were meant as a politics and ethics grounded on radical immanence – the becoming community – in which "immanence is no longer immanence to anything other than itself."[20] Pure immanence is a life – not to life or the life. All forms of life are immanent in this sense and all life is a form of life. This is what Winnicott's patient intuited and desired: *a* life, not life. But his sister sat to one side. From her side of the room, his attempt to potentiate a life threatened her own, or more precisely, the form of life that was her life at that point. How much more intense might the conflicting embaginations be when the life that is a life is more fully formed, elaborated, self-aware? When the girl is the boy become a man? When the seedling is the plant that becomes the rainforest that my friend dreams of finding amid a growing web of deforestation from multinational mining?

What are the ethical grounds of these conflicting forces of embagination against a background of finitude that is without transcendental value? In my previous essay on routes and worlds I tried to suggest how the material heterogeneity within any one sphere, and passing between any two spheres, allows new worlds to emerge and new networks to be added. This heterogeneity emerges in part because of the excesses and deficits arising from incommensurate and often competing interests within any given social space. But these heterogeneities and their "interests" press materiality toward different fabricated futures. How can we imagine pure immanence and radical potentiality without becoming blind to the extinguishments of forms of life that every actual world entails?

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1
Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), 39.

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See Elizabeth A. Povinelli, "Routes/Worlds," *e-flux journal* 27 (September 2011), http://www.e-flux.com/journal/routesworlds/.

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Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993), xi.

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Ibid., xi.

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Alexandre Kojève, *An Introduction to a Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. James H. Nichols (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University press, 1980).

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Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

7
After the Second World War, Kojève left his position at the École Pratique des Hautes Études and took up a position in the French Ministry of Economic Affairs, where he was one of the chief ideologues for the European Common Market, the bureaucratic predecessor of the European Union. See Dominique Auffret, *Alexander Kojève, La Philosophie, l'état, la fin de l'Histoire* (Paris: Grasset, 1993).

8
Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Adrian Del Caro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). Given Fukuyama's mutual admiration of Kojève and Leo Strauss, it is important to note that these two disagreed about the inherent difference between philosophy and politics and the goal of mutual recognition. See Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny*(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

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Donald W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London: Routledge, 1982), 17.

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Ibid.

12
Donald W. Winnicott, "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 34 (1953): 89-97.

13
Playing and Reality, 19.

14
In an essay on the extimite, Jacques-Alain Miller describes the intimate as parasitical on the externality of the Other. See Jacques-Alain Miller, "Extimity," *The Symptom* 9 (2008).

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Rosie Braidotti, *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics* (London: Polity Press, 2006), 150.

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Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, trans. Sean Hand (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

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Roberto Esposito, *Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy*, trans. Timothy Campbell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 185.

19
Ibid., 185-6.

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Gilles Deleuze, *Pure Immanence: Essays on A Life*, trans Anne Boyman (New York: Zone Books, 2001), 27.