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# A PANTHEOLOGY OF PANDEMIC: SEX, RACE, NATURE, AND THE VIRUS

Mary-Jane Rubenstein

## I. Punitheology

The explanations started pouring in even before the virus attained “pandemic” status in March of 2020: we were being punished. According to a vocal subset of Evangelical pastors and ultra-Orthodox rabbis, the death-dealing virus was divine retribution for the sins of (who else?) LGBT-identified people and their allies, who aggressively violated what the pastors and rabbis called “the order of nature.”<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, their left-leaning counterparts argued that the sin in question wasn’t so much sexual as ecological: in the words of one Roman Catholic commentator, the coronavirus was God’s punishment for “our unfettered domination attitude toward nature.”<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, an equally vocal throng of secular environmentalists called the virus nature’s own punishment for our manifold violations against her—in particular, the extractivism, pollution, alleged overpopulation, deforestation, carbon emissions, and industrial slaughterhouses that allowed the zoonotic strain to break out among humans in the first place.<sup>3</sup> Depending on whom

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1. Lee Brown, “Evangelical Pastor Claims Coronavirus Is God’s ‘Death Angel’ to ‘Purge a Lot of Sin,’” *New York Post* <https://nypost.com/2020/01/29/evangelical-pastor-claims-coronavirus-is-gods-death-angel-to-purge-a-lot-of-sin/> (January 29, 2020); Will Peischel, “One of Trump’s Favorite Pastors Says, ‘All Natural Disasters Can Ultimately Be Traced to Sin,’” *Mother Jones* <https://www.motherjones.com/coronavirus-updates/2020/03/one-of-trumps-favorite-pastors-says-all-natural-disasters-can-ultimately-be-traced-to-sin/> (March 14, 2020); Margaret M. Mitchell, “How Republican Politicians Get Schooled on the Bible,” *Sightings* <https://divinity.uchicago.edu/sightings/articles/how-republican-politicians-get-schooled-bible> (April 6, 2020); Toi Staff, “Israeli Rabbi: Coronavirus Outbreak Is Divine Punishment for Gay Pride Parades,” *The Times of Israel* (March 8, 2020); USA Christian Church, “March Is ‘Repent of Lgbt Sin Month,’” *ChristianNewsWire* (March 4, 2020).

2. Bill Scholl, “Coronavirus: It’s Not Nice to Mess with Mother Nature,” *The Leaven* <http://theleaven.org/coronavirus-its-not-nice-to-mess-with-mother-nature/> (May 8, 2020). Scholl cites Pope Francis’s previous and contemporary encyclicals as eco-theological allies: Francis, “Laudato Si: On Care for Our Common Home,” [http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_encyclica-laudato-si.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_encyclica-laudato-si.html) (May 24, 2015); Francis, “Urbi Et Orbi,” <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2020-03/urbi-et-orbi-pope-coronavirus-prayer-blessing.html> (March 27, 2020).

3. Michael T. Klare, “Is the Covid-19 Pandemic Mother Nature’s Response to Human Transgression?” *Tom Dispatch* <https://tomdispatch.com/michael-klare-what-planet-are-we>

you ask, then, the disaster we've come to encapsulate as COVID-19 is either godly or natural retribution for our manifold sins against "nature."

Although these sacred and secular *punitheologies* are not equivalent, they bear striking similarities to one another thanks to the monotheistic heritage of the concept of "nature" itself. As we will see, whether it is invoked by pastors, politicians, activists, or scientists, "nature" in the Western-descended world is presented as singular, nonwhite, and feminine; morally normative; and prone to abuse. Nature is often capitalized, often maternalized, and reliably distinguished either from a disembodied male God, a universalized "humanity," or both. Nature, in short, carries immense ideological freight. Specifically, it installs and polices the work of what Kelly Brown Douglas calls "theo-ideology": a "sacred legitimation" for a social order that seeks to present itself as unquestionable.<sup>4</sup> And "nature" does this unparalleled ideological work thanks to the *freedom* it keeps promising from ideology: "your" way of being might be constructed, distorted, historical, subjective, contingent, artificial, cultural, or indeed sinful, but "ours" is natural—which is to say universally, even transcendently, true.

Whether it comes from the mouths of angry clerics or righteous ecologists, then, the call to *get right with nature* is a call to adhere to one or another self-concealing social arrangement—to a set of interests and values whose power derives from its seeming so "natural." For this reason, many contemporary thinkers recommend abandoning the term altogether. Donna Haraway suggests we try the non-binary and carefully pluralized "naturecultures"; Bruno Latour proposes "critical zones," and Timothy Morton pivots to ecological *practice* which, he insists, can only function if we let go of the romantic delusion of "nature."<sup>5</sup>

Regardless of nature's conceptual integrity, it is important to attend to the term in order to account for its rhetorical force and ubiquity—for the polyphibious presence of "nature" within the left and right-wings of science, religion, and politics alike. In this article, I will decode some of the recent, theologically

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-on/(April 2, 2020); Rebecca Rafferty, "A New Play Asks, 'Is Coronavirus Mother Nature's Revenge?'" *Rochester City Newspaper* (April 24, 2020); Damian Carrington, "Coronavirus: 'Nature Is Sending Us a Message,' Says Un Environment Chief," *The Guardian* (March 25, 2020); Emmanuel Alloa, "Coronavirus: A Contingency That Eliminates Contingency," *Critical Inquiry: In the Moment* <https://critinq.wordpress.com/2020/04/20/coronavirus-a-contingency-that-eliminates-contingency/>(April 20, 2020).

4. Kelly Brown Douglas, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2015), 50.

5. Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet*, Posthumanities (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2007); Jonathan Watts, "Interview: Bruno Latour: 'This Is a Global Catastrophe That Has Come from Within,'" *The Observer* (June 6, 2020); Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

retributive appeals to *nature* within early, informal, literary responses to the COVID-19 outbreak in the US. In the process, I hope to unearth some of the mythic norms of race and gender that this concept both entrenches and conceals in the American imagination. Finally, I will ask what happens when we start messing with these categories, beginning with the mirroring chasms between humans and nature, and nature and God. How might we start to think pantheologically about this unrelenting pandemic, and why would anybody want to?

## II. Sins against Nature

As Catherine Keller noticed as early as April 2020, American pundits across the political spectrum immediately attributed COVID-19 to the relentless justice of an angry God.<sup>6</sup> It is perhaps America's favorite theological maneuver: explaining natural and social disasters as the product of divine vengeance. From Jonathan Edwards's spider to Fred Phelps's funeral protests, American preachers and political commentators have got a long-standing knack for putting the fear of God into a suffering nation. (Even my home insurance policy washes its hands of those events it continues to call "Acts of God," which would presumably be my own damned fault.)

What have Americans done to deserve this or that deployment of divine wrath? Most often, we have committed one or another "sin against nature," a category that includes such alleged misdeeds as miscegenation, non-reproductive sex, women's leadership, the prevention or termination of pregnancy, and—perhaps a surprising member of this series—the alleged over-valuing, or "worship," of nature itself. According to American punitheology, ecology is just as much a sin against nature as are women's ordination, masturbation, and LGBTQIANess. Yes, along with the anti-racists, the feminists, and the queers, modern-day vegans, composters, and water protectors are turning the nation into a latter-day Sodom and Gomorrah. We can hear a particularly clear instance of this entanglement of nature worship, sexual misconduct, and divine vengeance in Jerry Falwell's infamous theorizing of the attacks on the Pentagon and World Trade Center as God's vengeance upon "the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle."<sup>7</sup> But whence this persistent association? What does ecological advocacy have to do with sexual insurrection?

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6. Catherine Keller, "The Pandemic: What Is God Doing?": <https://www.douglasjacoby.com/a-letter-from-catherine-keller/>.

7. Laurie Goodstein, "After the Attacks: Finding Fault," *The New York Times* <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/09/15/us/after-attacks-finding-fault-falwell-s-finger-pointing-inappropriate-bush-says.html> (September 15, 2001).

According to a particularly Pauline reading of Genesis, animals are subordinate to humans; women are subordinate to men; and nature is subordinate to God. And according to anti-ecological Christians, *ecology divinizes nature*, thereby displacing its Creator, as well as its human overlords. In this light, they argue, ecology operates according to the same perverse structure as “unnatural” sex: both of them put the wrong beings on top. In short, just like feminism, abortion, and queer and inter-racial sex, idolatrous “nature-worship” is a sin against nature.<sup>8</sup> And God always punishes sins against nature.

For Christians, the key to this interpretive maelstrom is Paul’s Letter to the Romans, which opens with a condemnation of the theological infidelity escalating among Jews and Gentiles alike in the time leading up to the incarnation.<sup>9</sup> “Claiming to be wise, they became fools,” Paul writes, “and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles” (1:22–23[NRSV]). Insofar as God created the world, humans according to Paul are “naturally” monotheistic. Yet in the course of time, Jews and Gentiles alike “exchanged” their creator for “his” creation, and worshipped things they could see in the natural world. Reliably, the creator took his revenge:

For this reason, God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for the unnatural, and in the same way also with the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error (1:26–27).

Although the nuance is often lost on contemporary pundits, sexual misconduct in this passage is the punishment for the crime, rather than the crime itself. The crime is idolatry, often equated with “paganism,” which is to say worshipping creatures rather than the creator. And the punishment is divine abandonment, the result of which is the disordered revolt of human desire that produces “unnatural” sex. As Pauline scholar Elizabeth Castelli encapsulates this strange morsel, “the people were idolaters, so God made them gay.”<sup>10</sup>

A sign of its lasting power, Paul’s dizzying mixture of religious error, sexual misdemeanor, and divine retribution regularly breaks into American political-religious discourse. God’s judgment for this or that combination of idolatry

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8. On the connection between idolatry and improper sex in the Hebrew Bible, see Jennifer Wright Knust (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 113–52.

9. Romans 1:18–3:26 (NRSV). Subsequent references will be cited internally.

10. Private conversation. For a less colloquial explication of Paul’s argumentative strategy in *Romans*, see Elizabeth Castelli, “Paul’s Letter to the Romans,” in *Searching the Scriptures, Vol. 2: A Feminist Commentary*, ed. Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1994).

and bad sex has breathed fire into the lineage that stretched from Mather and Edwards through Graham and Falwell, and that reached an absurd culmination in late March of 2020 when Evangelical pastor and Trump advisor Ralph Drollinger addressed the escalating coronavirus crisis by asking, “Is God Judging America Today?”<sup>11</sup>

On the cover of an eight-page Capitol Ministries Bible Study guide for the Cabinet and Congress, Drollinger leads with his conclusion: “I do not believe America is experiencing the forsaking wrath of God,” he writes, “but yes, American [sic] is experiencing the consequential wrath of God.”<sup>12</sup> The mildest category in a fairly recent American theological catalogue,<sup>13</sup> “consequential wrath” can be visited upon people regardless of the state of their souls. Even if they have not done anything wrong, Drollinger admits, Americans are contracting the coronavirus, falling ill, and even dying. But clearly *someone* has done something wrong; namely, those “homosexuals” and “environmentalists” who, thanks to their persistent perversions of nature, have incited a far worse category of divine rage, namely, God’s “forsaking wrath.”

By means of a detailed reading of the first chapter of *Romans*, Drollinger shows that God’s forsaking wrath has always targeted those who display, in his words, “a swapping [of God] for environmentalism” and “a sensation toward homosexuality.”<sup>14</sup> Clearly, he assures his readers, most Americans have nothing to do with either of these sins. But thanks to the alleged burgeoning of eco-idolaters and queer folks in America’s “highest positions of influence,” God’s forsaking wrath has become so rampant that a “consequential wrath” is falling even upon “the righteous.”<sup>15</sup> In short, God is allowing COVID-19 to course through the American population thanks to the nation’s tolerance and even exaltation of “a small minority of individuals who are grossly disobedient to God.”<sup>16</sup>

When Drollinger’s diagnosis incited a minor outcry from LGBT activists, the professional basketball player-turned-pastor pivoted, predictably, from

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11. Lee Fang, “Teacher Blames Coronavirus Pandemic on God’s Wrath,” *The Intercept* (March 24, 2020).

12. Ralph Drollinger, “Is God Judging America Today?” *Capitol Ministries* <https://capmin.org/is-god-judging-america-today/> (March 23, 2020).

13. Drollinger’s five categories (Eternal, Eschatological, Cataclysmic, Forsaking, and Consequential Wrath) can be traced to John F. MacArthur, “A Nation Abandoned by God,” *Grace to You* <https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/GTY109/a-nation-abandoned-by-god> (May 31, 2007).

14. Drollinger, “Is God Judging America Today?” 4.

15. Drollinger., 7.

16. Drollinger, 7.

sex to race. “A biblically astute evaluation of the situation strongly suggests,” Drollinger blogged, “that America and other countries of the world are reaping what China has sown.”<sup>17</sup> And although he briefly named that nation’s sin as “a lack of candor and transparency,” his invocation amplified the resonant racism of then-President Trump’s constant dismissals of “the Chinese (or China) Virus,” high-profile vilifications of “bat eating,” and pious leftist rants against “wet markets,” all of which had produced an alarming rise in hate crimes against people of Asian descent, people perceived to be of Asian descent, and the BIPOC Americans who disproportionately constitute “essential” workers.<sup>18</sup>

The target, then, is mobile, leaping from tree-huggers to queers to Asians to immigrants to Indigenous, Black, and Brown bodies. The reason any of them might be the source of the problem is that all of them are: as the virus has pranced indiscriminately from bat-gut to pangolin to an estimated 60% of the human lungs on the planet, the whole order of species, sex, class, and race is not just transgressed but imploded. Just as they are in most Pauline accounts, the crime and the punishment here are hard to untangle: thanks to our manifold sins against nature, God has abandoned us to a nature-undone. In other words, the world we’ve made is *itself* the divine punishment.

### III. Nature against Sins

Functionally speaking, God actually does very little in Pauline retribution theology. Unlike his *direct* assaults in the stories of the Flood, the Plagues, or Sodom and Gomorrah, God’s wrath in the Book of Romans consists simply in leaving humans to reap the consequences of what they’ve sown. In the context of the pandemic, then, God’s punishment for human sins against nature is simply to abandon us to the nature we’ve upended. This is the reason right-wing Christian jeremiads collide so spectacularly with the secular environmentalism they decry. It is a remarkably small step from “God is punishing us by leaving us to the nature we’ve abused,” to “Nature herself is punishing us” for abusing her. Functionally speaking, “God” doesn’t make a big difference at all.

Both acknowledging and disavowing this proximity, peace and security expert Michael Klare presents environmental science as a kind of grown-up theology.

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17. Ralph Drollinger, “The Coronavirus Pandemic: Is the World Suffering God’s Wrath?” *Capitol Ministries* <https://capmin.org/the-coronavirus-pandemic-is-the-world-suffering-gods-wrath/?fbclid=IwAR2ecjSdmYKhrEu0MjRmkChvGJLISYfqmYXpp4QnUzPM0WcsGe1X5EcqKsA> (March 21, 2020).

18. Darren Chang and Lauren Corman, “From Wet Markets to Meatpacking: Why Animal Advocacy Fails without Anti-Racism,” *Sentient Media* <https://sentientmedia.org/from-wet-markets-to-meatpacking-why-animal-advocacy-fails-without-anti-racism/> (August 26, 2020).

Faced with the pandemic's unprecedented crisis of public health, economic collapse, and political insecurity, he reasons that we're bound to ask *why* we are suffering so. "Understandably," Klare writes, "our forebears came to view such calamities as manifestations of the fury of gods incensed by human disrespect for . . .the natural world."<sup>19</sup> Clearly, he continues, this sort of explanation will no longer do for "educated people" who, he says, "generally dismiss such notions." But thankfully, "scientists" can provide a more satisfying answer than theologians can. And ironically, this *scientific* answer starts with sin.

As Klare explains, "human impacts on the environment, especially the burning of fossil fuels, are producing feedback loops causing increasingly severe harm to communities across the globe." In his account, "the global coronavirus pandemic" is the product of one of these feedback loops: anthropogenic climate change, mechanized agriculture, deforestation, mass migration, and urbanization—combined with "vestiges of the countryside" like so-called wet markets—have allowed SARS Co-V-2 to unleash itself upon the very humans who created these disastrous conditions. "Mother Nature," Klare warns, "is striking back." In the face of this maternal smack-down, Klare plays Prophet and calls on the people to repent: "Suppose that the coronavirus is nature's warning," he asks, "its way of telling us that we've gone too far and must alter our behavior. . . ? What then?"

This naturalized narrative of sin and atonement, which continues to structure articles, micro-blogs, and college syllabi across the left-leaning world, found an early, everymannish articulation in Jason Odell Williams's online One-Act play, "Social Distancing," which premiered on March 22, 2020.<sup>20</sup> The sole character, an unnamed, white New York vlogger played by Ralph Meranto, provides a rundown of the peri-apocalyptic state of the things on "day 243 of the COVID quarantine": *The New York Times* has gone under, Trump's been re-elected, a "mob of looters" roams downtown, and the few remaining grocery stores in the city are out of anything a person might want or need.

Haltingly, apologetically, the speaker arrives at what he calls the "tiny" matter of the "dark thoughts" he's been having in the middle of his sleepless, doom-scrolling nights: "What if this virus," he asks, "and all the collateral damage it's doing—what if this is the Earth's way to self-correct?" After all, the insomniac reminds us, "we've been on this collision-course with climate change for decades. Scientists warned us; some political leaders warned us—at least the ones on the left . . .sorry; not gonna get political—that the earth would become

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19. Klare, "Mother Nature."

20. Jason Odell Williams, "Social Distancing: A World Premiere Monologue Play," [https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=3264092983618799&ref=watch\\_permalink](https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=3264092983618799&ref=watch_permalink) (2020).



uninhabitable.” But we still wouldn’t listen: “factories in *China, India*, and the U.S. pumping out [toxins] every hour on the hour,” he fumes, until the ice caps started to melt, fires burned states and even continents, hurricanes worsened, and “climate migrants became a thing.”

The history Williams tells through his nerdy junior naturalist is a familiar one: a universalized “humanity” has been mistreating a singularized and feminized “nature” for far too long. “Mother Nature” keeps sending prophets to get us to change our ways. The humans, led by the nonwhite inhabitants of China and India, persist in their destructive behavior until, as our speaker proposes in a sudden burst of messianism, “Nature” began to “hurt herself” for us. All those fires and hurricanes were Nature’s way of sacrificing herself so we might change our ways. And when we refused to heed even those suicidal warnings, our Mother “went from hurting herself to hurting us directly.” In other words, because we wouldn’t take steps to make the planet inhabitable again, she is now doing it for us: “*by thinning the herd.*”

However apologetically presented, the conclusion of “Social Distancing” embodies what environmentalist blogger Deja Newton has exposed as a resurgence of “ecofascism” among white, middle-class COVID commentators. “Ecofascism is nothing short of the marriage between environmentalism and white supremacy,” Newton explains. “To an ecofascist . . . people of color and immigrants must sacrifice themselves for the good of the planet.”<sup>21</sup> In the lonesome imaginings of Jason Odell Williams’s white, home-officed, child-free Peletonner who says he’s “in the best shape of [his] life,” “social distancing” is ultimately “the price we pay” for the healing of the Earth. Just think, the narrator rhapsodizes, of those sudden fish in Venetian canals, the clear skies in the perennially denigrated nation of China, and the idle cars on the empty streets of Brooklyn. “And as the herd gets thinner and we hold our breath for this crisis to pass,” the vlogger intones solemnly, “the Earth finally gets a breather. Literally.”

In the logic of this particular exchange, members of “the herd” are sacrificed for the well-being of “the Earth.” Meanwhile, a third party, innocently named “we,” waits safely inside until the storm has passed. This “we” unconsciously comprises those predominantly white and exclusively wealthy humans who are able either to work from home or not to work at all; the ones who are able to “hold [their] breath” while “the herd” loses theirs so that “the Earth” might regain

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21. Deja Newton, “The Dark Side of Environmentalism: Ecofascism and Covid-19,” *University of San Francisco, Office of Sustainability* <https://usfblogs.usfca.edu/sustainability/2020/04/15/the-dark-side-of-environmentalism-ecofascism-and-covid-19/> (April 15, 2020).

it. In the unfortunate metaphoric of this white rumination, “the herd” refers to those perennially animalized Black, Brown, Indigenous, and working-class (sub-)humans who have disproportionately fallen ill and even more disproportionately died from respiratory complications of COVID-19. Who, even before this particular outbreak, were crying to an abusive state, “I can’t breathe.”<sup>22</sup> What Georges Bataille would call “the accursed share” of Williams’s “herd”<sup>23</sup>—the ones consigned to death so the rest of “us” might live—ultimately consist of those food service, postal, utilities, transportation, sanitation, childcare, and health-care workers who do not have the luxury of staying distant. Dark, animalized, agglomerated, and headed for slaughter, “the herd” cannot enjoy the dismal day spa of “complete and total isolation” our vlogger is stuck in as he waits out Mother Nature’s revenge on his tricked-out Peleton.

By juxtaposing Ralph Drollinger’s jeremiad and Jason Odell Williams’s . . . well, jeremiad—two admittedly unremarkable pieces of pandemic literature—I am hoping to lay bare the theological infrastructure of the colloquial American concept of “nature.” In both the conservative Christian framework and the liberal-secular framework, human suffering is said to be the result of human “sins against nature.” In both frameworks, some humans will suffer more than others in the hands of the nature they’ve disordered. In both frameworks, this “accursed share” of humanity is presented animalistically, and in perversely sexed and raced terms. Most fundamentally, in both frameworks, a privileged segment of “humanity” is stubbornly distinguished from the “nature” in question. *We* have abused *nature*; *nature* is warning *us*; *we* need to stop breathing so *nature* can breathe—as though “nature” weren’t the very breath in us and “we” weren’t bacteria-ridden animal-mineral-vegetable assemblages, just as natural (and cultural, and plastic-filled) as anything else.

Theologically, this perennial distinction between “humans” and “nature” is the product of the more cosmogonically fundamental distinction between God and creation. Made in the image of God, (some) humans appoint themselves godlike rulers of a passive, singular, feminine “nature.” Pop-ecologically, this

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22. See Gabriel O. Apata, “‘I Can’t Breathe’: The Suffocating Nature of Racism,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 37, no. 7–8 (2020).

23. It is always the purpose of sacrifice to give destruction its due, to save the rest from a mortal danger of contagion. . . . The community is saved from ruination. The *victim* is given over to violence. The victim is a surplus taken from the mass of *useful* wealth. And he can only be withdrawn from it in order to be consumed profitlessly, and therefore utterly destroyed. Once chosen, he is the *accursed share*, destined for violent consumption.

Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*, trans. Robert Hurley, vol. 1: Consumption (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 59.

same distinction renders “nature” a similarly passive, singular, feminine object of human action who gradually gains a vindictive hyper-agency in response to human transgression. In the nouveau theology of secular ecology, “Mother Nature” is a silent, long-suffering goddess who has finally turned against her children and must be appeased through the sacrifice of a dispensable segment of humanity.

To be sure, it is neither possible nor desirable to cleanse language of its origins, mythic or otherwise. Nor is it possible to start from scratch or to stitch new words onto old concepts and hope they function differently. But the mess of sin, salvation, and sacrifice that “nature” tends to weave might prompt us to ask whether we might find within this old Latinate concept any other way to account for the material-discursive world. Is it possible to think of “nature” as neither God-given nor God-abandoned, neither suffering object nor retributive subject, neither set against “humanity” nor exalting it? Is it possible that “nature” might rather entangle these ancient opponents of God, humanity, and world? And might such entanglement *expose* theo-ideologies of race, gender, and species, rather than naturalizing them?

#### **IV. God, or Nature**

In one of the first works of secular biblical criticism, Baruch Spinoza tries, among other things, to correct the damage that bad hermeneutics has done to the concept of nature. The problem, he explains, stems from what we would now call “anthropocentric” readings of Scripture, which are the product of a general misunderstanding of the Torah. Written over thousands of years, the Torah reflects its authors’ and redactors’ divergent political aims, limited scientific understanding, and lofty poetic aspirations. And yet “the multitude,” which Spinoza describes in consistently derogatory terms, thinks this patchwork literary production was written either by Moses or God himself, and as such provides a literal account of the creation of the world *for them*. Hence the people’s misunderstanding of “nature,” which is to say, everything that is, has been, and is to come. “They imagine nature to be so limited,” writes Spinoza, “that they imagine man to be its chief part.”<sup>24</sup> This cosmic narcissism extends both “down” and “up” the alleged universal hierarchy, so that a deluded “man” appoints himself the ruler of “nature” and the (inferior) carbon-copy of God. In this strained analogical governance, man rules nature just as God rules man, who is both part of, and transcendent to, nature.

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24. Baruch Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1998), 73.

The disastrous result of this cosmic egotism is an anthropocentric “nature” on the one hand and an anthropomorphic creator on the other. The material world is said to exist solely for the “use” of human beings, who think God looks like (a perfect version of) themselves. As Spinoza writes, “Thus they imagine that there are two powers quite distinct from each other, the power of God and the power of Nature.”<sup>25</sup> God is understood to be active, male, and instrumentalizing, while Nature is passive, female, and instrumentalized. God rules like “some royal potentate” while Nature does his bidding with the power that she derives from him.<sup>26</sup>

As feminist philosopher of religion Grace Jantzen argued, this opposition between God and nature goes on to hold in place the divisions between spirit and matter, mind and body, light and darkness, male and female that stem from it. And although Spinoza attributes this theological blunder to what he calls “the fickle and unstable Jewish multitude,” it frankly structures the entirety of Western theology and philosophy, with the exception of a few renegades like Spinoza, who are usually ridiculed, excommunicated, or executed.<sup>27</sup>

In the face of the West’s nearly unanimous cosmic dualism, Spinoza infamously insists that “the power of nature” is nothing other than “the power of God.” In the *Ethics*, he goes so far as to call this equivalency *Deus, sive Natura*: God, or Nature (*Ethics*, 145). After all, he reasons, anything we attribute to one of these terms can be attributed to the other: like God, nature is eternal, infinite, and universal (at least, that’s the way nature *seemed* from Spinoza’s perspective); like God, nature is the source of, and life in, all things.<sup>28</sup> And although he stopped short of some of these conclusions during his lifetime, the trajectory was clear to anyone who was paying attention. Spinoza’s notorious excommunication from his Jewish community in Amsterdam turned on the sin of teaching “that God has a body”—namely, the body of nature itself.<sup>29</sup>

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25. Spinoza, 72.

26. Spinoza, 74.

27. For a more careful elaboration of this admittedly enormous claim, please see Mary-Jane Rubenstein, *Pantheologies: Gods, Worlds, Monsters* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 1–28.

28. See Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, 445-6 FIX; Baruch Spinoza, “Ethics,” in *Ethics, Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect, and Selected Letters*, ed. Seymour Feldman (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1992), 31; Baruch Spinoza, “Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being,” in *Complete Works*, ed. Michael L. Morgan (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2002), 42.

29. Cited in Rebecca Goldstein, *Betraying Spinoza: The Renegade Jew Who Gave Us Modernity* (New York: Schocken, 2006), 17.

This particular heresy—the equation of God and nature—is known in the Western canon as “pantheism.” With very few exceptions, pantheism has tended over the last four centuries to be dismissed the moment it is detected, associating as it does the traditionally male, disembodied, immutable, light-soaked creator with the traditionally feminine, bodily, changeable, dark earth.<sup>30</sup> Theists accuse the position of idolatry while atheists accuse it of redundancy—of dressing up nature’s mindless atomic concourse with the lofty name “God.”<sup>31</sup> With very few exceptions, nobody likes pantheism.

Hence the persistent suspicion surrounding the pantheological Gaia hypothesis, proposed in the late twentieth century by chemist James Lovelock and microbiologist Lynn Margulis. The theory is multifaceted and under continual revision, but for our purposes, Gaia aims to transform the Western concept of nature by enlivening it.<sup>32</sup> According to this hypothesis, nature is not an inert backdrop to some divine, human, or even organismic drama. Creatures do not appear upon an Earth pre-programmed with all the climatic and chemical properties those creatures need to exist and flourish. Rather, organisms themselves engineer the “environmental” conditions that allow them to live (and to engineer environmental conditions.) In Lovelock’s words, the natural world is “a complex entity involving the Earth’s biosphere, atmosphere, oceans

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30. See Rubenstein, *Pantheologies*, 1–20.

31. Arthur Schopenhauer, *Parerga and Paralipomena*, trans. E. F. J. Payne, 2 vols., vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 99; Nancy Frankenberry, “Classical Theism, Pantheism, and Pantheism: On the Relation between God Construction and Gender Construction,” *Zygon* 28, no. 1 (March 1993): 44; Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Mariner Books, 2008), 40.

32. Gaia is hardly alone in this regard; it just happens to be one of the most recent and least anthropocentric in a long line of efforts to unseat Aristotelian and then Newtonian mechanism. On the mechanistic account of nature, see Jessica Riskin, *The Restless Clock: A History of the Centuries-Long Argument over What Makes Living Things Tick* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016). On pre-modern, early-modern, and “new animist” vitalisms, see Rubenstein, *Pantheologies*, 63–98; On Gaianic prefigurations in Ernst Haeckel and Alexander von Humboldt, see Whitney Bauman, “Ernst Haeckel’s Creation: The Religious Underpinnings of Modern Ecology,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Religious Naturalism*, ed. Donald A. Crosby and Jerome A. Stone (New York: Routledge, 2020); Andrea Wulf, *The Invention of Nature: Alexander Von Humboldt’s New World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015); On the secular-theological turn to “religious naturalism,” see Jerome A. Stone, “Defining and Defending Religious Naturalism,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Religious Naturalism*, ed. Donald A. Crosby and Jerome A. Stone (New York: Routledge, 2020); On the queer, anti-racist possibilities of naturalism, see Carol Wayne White, “Polyamorous Bastards: James Baldwin’s Openings to a Queer African-American Religious Naturalism,” in *Meaningful Flesh: Reflections on Religion and Nature for a Queer Planet*, ed. Whitney A. Bauman (New York: Punctum, 2018); For a resonant, less singularizing, less pronounceable alternative to Gaia, see Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

and soil; the totality constituting a feedback or cybernetic system.”<sup>33</sup> With the help of a classicist colleague, Lovelock named this cybernetic system after the Greek Earth Mother, Gaia.

Less comfortable than her collaborator with the notion of totality (or, for that matter, the goddess), Lynn Margulis insists on the symbiotic multiplicity of nature. Every organism, she explains, is constituted by hosts of other organisms that can neither be reduced to individuals nor aggregated into a singular whole.<sup>34</sup> So the Gaia hypothesis countenances no stark divisions between agents and patients, spirit and matter, organisms and environment, humans and “nature,” or creator and created. Rather, all beings participate in what Donna Haraway calls those “sympoietic” processes that make and unmake the natureculture they *are*.<sup>35</sup>

To be sure, the Gaia hypothesis constitutes another cosmogony, complete with its own heroes and villains, gods and monsters, authors and redactors, historical contexts and primordial pretensions. As such, it is both descriptive and prescriptive, naturally explanatory and socially normative. The question, then, is not so much whether, in Gaia, the West has finally got a *true* creation myth, but rather whether, in Gaia, the West might have a myth that its neighbors can live with. Whether, like so many other cosmogonies suppressed and ridiculed as “animist,” “pagan,” and “polytheist,” the pluralist pantheism of Gaia might ground an *ethical ethic* and a *functional ecology*.<sup>36</sup> As a test-case, we might ask how this pluralist-pantheist framework, which I tend to encapsulate under the neologism “pantheology,” might help us interpret the eco-politico-epidemiological disaster that’s still got us in its grip.

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33. James Lovelock, *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 11.

34. Lynn Margulis, *Symbiotic Planet: A New Look at Evolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1998), 115; On the resistance of this fundamentally multiple “Gaia” to singularity and anthropomorphism, see Isabelle Stengers, *In Catastrophic Times: Resisting the Coming Barbarism*, ed. Tom Cohen and Claire Colebrook, trans. Andrew Goffey, Critical Climate Change (London: Open Humanities Press, 2015); For a more singularizing, anthropomorphizing, and unintentionally divinizing account, see Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*, trans. Catherine Porter (Medford, MA: Polity, 2017); For a map of these resonant and dissonant conceptions of Gaia, see Rubenstein, *Pantheologies*, 118–36.

35. Haraway, *Trouble*, 33.

36. On the ethical differences between western and indigenous cosmogonies, see Vine Deloria Jr., *God Is Red: A Native View of Religion* (New York: Fulcrum, 2003), 77–96; Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teaching of Plants* (Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed, 2013), 3–10; Sylvia Marcos, *Taken from the Lips: Gender and Eros in Mesoamerican Religions* (Boston: Brill, 2006); Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, “Exchanging Perspectives: The Transformation of Objects into Subjects in Amerindian Ontologies,” *Common Knowledge* 10, no. 3 (2004).

## V. A Pantheology of Pandemic

“Hang on a minute,” I hear you cry. “A pandemic pantheology? You’ve got to be kidding me. Haven’t you heard of the problem of evil? Doesn’t the pandemic stand as powerful evidence *against* pantheism, what with its millions of deaths, millions more illnesses, and billions more miseries, anxieties, and apocalypses?”

Yes, I have heard of the problem of evil. And I understand that, at this juncture, many readers might find themselves siding with C. S. Lewis, who said in response to pantheism’s alleged divinizing of cancers and slums, “don’t talk damned nonsense.”<sup>37</sup>

I will nevertheless begin my response provocatively, by saying that the problem of evil is an alien imposition upon any pluralist pantheism. Evil, I would argue, is only a philosophical problem for those monotheisms that insist upon starting with the singularity, omnipotence, and benevolence of God. It is only if one begins by insisting on the existence of a perfectly unified, totally powerful, and perfectly good creator that one is led to ask why anybody suffers within it. And as Spinoza knew, such frameworks must also assume the anthropomorphism and humanocentrism of this single, omnipotent, benevolent, and persistently male divinity. This God must be primarily concerned with human beings (specifically the human beings he chooses), such that *their* joys and sufferings surpass in significance the joys and sufferings of any other creature. After all, the joyous gatherings that many of us celebrate yearly with our families are murderous for turkeys, chickens, and cows; poisonous to the Earth; and often commemorative of the slaughter of pagans and Indigenous nations. Conversely, the very vexations and sufferings that trouble me might well delight the lion who is eating me, the river that is flooding me, the bacteria happily replicating in my GI system, or indeed the viruses passing promiscuously from my hands to yours.

So here is the answer to C.S. Lewis. Pantheologically speaking, none of the great axioms of monotheism is the case. If divinity takes shape as all the forces that make and unmake worlds, then God is neither one nor humanoid nor humanocentric—nor, crucially, good. Rather, pantheological makings and unmakings simply *are*. Now I would like to be as clear as possible here: this does not mean that a pluralist pantheism likes or loves or celebrates evil, or suffering, or destruction. It simply means that evil and suffering and destruction are not *theoretical* problems for such pantheisms; rather, they are *practical* problems. The question is not where misery comes from; the question is what we ought to do, in all our singular multiplicities, to make misery less miserable.

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37. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2001), 37.

The idea that the divine forces of the universe are both helpful and harmful to any given creature comes as no surprise to the vast majorities of people outside the monotheistic fold. What Christians in particular call evil is not a theoretical problem for Native American or Black diasporic trickster narratives, for instance, or for Aboriginal stories of the Dreaming, or for Greek or Norse mythologies. Rather, these accounts attribute to the weavers of the world the same mix of traits we find within it. As Sylvia Marcos explains of Mesoamerican cosmogony, such stories “included both the positive and negative aspects of nature, the creative as well as the destructive, the nurturing and the annihilating forces. . . . There is no sentimentality in their perception of the earth. Earth is a great nourishing deity and an unpredictable, fearsome monster: in all cases, it is necessary to move about the earth with care.”<sup>38</sup>

Again, such immanent, pluralistic theologies see evil as a practical problem but not a theoretical one. The question is not (*pace* Rabbi Kushner), “why does God let bad things happen to good people,” but rather, in any given situation, what is it that contributes to the flourishing of creatures, what destroys it, and how best to intervene. At this point we can ask, not so much whether a pluralist-pantheist framework is “true” (how would we ever know?), but whether it is practically compelling in the face of our ongoing, shared disaster.

Understood pantheologically, the outbreak of Sars-Co2 among human communities worldwide is not God’s punishment for sin—whether sexual, idolatrous, or ecological. Nor is it Mother Nature’s revenge against her abusive children. After all, we humans are not external to the biosphere we’ve abused, nor to the convulsions it is undergoing. If it is genuinely impossible to disentangle humans from nature, nature from culture, and any of it from divinity, then the dizzying pandemic we are all still inter-going is the result of the irreducibly sympoietic entanglements that make and unmake our cultural-natural world. These entanglements include the symbiosis of most viruses with their hosts (in this case, maybe, bats), the nutritive practices of mammals, deforestation, poaching, factory farming, industrial slaughter, market forces, global corporate travel, political secrecy, bureaucratic incompetence, pharmaceutical profiteering, unsafe working conditions, masculinist anti-maskery, racist violence, unequal access to healthcare, corporate bailouts, school closures, domestic abuse, handshaking, hugging, singing, and breathing. All of these porous entanglements, in their natural-cultural-agential-receptive-creating-created interactivities, are the cause, substance, and effect of the global disaster we inadequately encapsulate as “COVID-19.”

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38. Marcos, *Taken from the Lips: Gender and Eros in Mesoamerican Religions*, 39.



Under the jurisdiction of this pantheological mythology, the imperative can be neither war nor atonement nor sacrifice, since each of these presumes an external, monotheistically modeled, arbiter. Rather, within the stubborn immanence of a pantheological “nature,” the imperative can only be responsible cohabitation. As Achille Mbembe insists, “we must answer here and now for our life on Earth *with others* (including viruses) and our shared fate.”<sup>39</sup> The structure of this with-ness has been laid bare, with unprecedented clarity, by the respiratory circuitry of the virus itself—its passage from lungs to lungs along the natural-cultural channels of infrastructure, aerosols, ventilation systems, and social practices. Our very breathing now threatens our very breathing.

For Mbembe, this disaster is the culmination of Western modernity’s “interminable war on life,” which is to say on dark bodies, working bodies, and the biosphere itself. “Soon,” he predicts, “it will no longer be possible to delegate one’s death to others.” In other words, soon the Western myth of a subordinate “nature” will threaten even those self-appointed “masters” of nature. From this perspective, it is existentially imperative not just to rethink “nature,” and not simply to apologize to “it,” but to *be* nature differently—to follow the tortuous channels this crisis lays bare and open up the airways wherever they’re threatened. To change more or less everything about the way the industrialized world heals, houses, punishes, farms, eats, travels, shops, and educates. Not to “save nature” and not to appease it, but to *enact* it: by *being* the fragile, limited, interdependent co-creators we—along with our gut bacteria, companion species, toxic bloodstreams, and anxious-depressive minds—embody.

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39. Achille Mbembe and Carolyn Shread (trans.), “The Universal Right to Breathe,” *Critical Inquiry: In the Moment* <https://critinq.wordpress.com/2020/04/13/the-universal-right-to-breathe/> (April 13, 2020).

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