Deleuze’s concept of life is valorized in the humanities today for its ability to grant *agency* or *activity* to non-human entities. This essay argues that, in fact, Deleuze sees the concept of life as a kind of *passive creation* which escapes the traces of subjectivity remaining in agency.

Against ‘vital materialism’: the passive creation of life in Deleuze

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A recent publication on bioethics and biopolitics begins with the claim that “we seem to have reached a moment in history where every distinction and opposition is made no longer in relation to life, but within it, and where life is a problem inextricably theoretical and practical, ontological and political.” (Bianco and Beistegui 5). One of the most well known proponents of the centrality of ‘life’ is Gilles Deleuze. Deleuze’s work has helped to spark an interest in life, a concept which has become paradigmatic in the humanities today. Deleuze’s concept of life has been to used to collapse the oppositional distinction between a ‘passive’ matter and an ‘active’ life-force and to grant a specific type of activity to ‘things’. This is the primary argument put forward in Jane Bennett’s influential book *Vibrant Matter*, an argument for which she makes significant use of Deleuze’s work with Félix Guattari. The wider aim of Bennett’s collapse of the matter/life distinction is one which is found across much of the contemporary work in the humanities: problematizing the borders between the human and the nonhuman. The argument put forward in this essay is that the privileging of activity by Bennett and others is contrary to Deleuze’s own notion of life and that it ends up extending the dominion of the human upon the nonhuman by imputing traditional aspects of ‘human subjectivity’ to things.

The argument will begin by unpacking the decisive definition of vitalism Deleuze gives towards the end of his life: “a force that ‘is’ but does *not* act” (*What is Philosophy?* 213). This *inactivity* at the heart of life goes against the most influential readings of Deleuze, which emphasize active creativity. Twenty five years before defining vitalism as a non-active force, Deleuze had given an in-depth account of it in his philosophical masterpiece, *Difference and Repetition*. We find a strong consistency in terminology between the early and late investigations of life, a consistency which is rarely found across Deleuze’s vast and varied oeuvre. This consistency signals that these concepts are central to Deleuze’s thought. Deleuze’s vitalism and his conception of life will be defined by a non-active force, which is essentially a passive creation. In the essay, I first lay out the relationships between the virtuality of time, matter and life. Then, I deal more substantively with the notions of passivity and activity as they pertain to the readings of Jane Bennett and John Protevi, whom I will term “vital materialists”. The key claim that I make is that these readings of Deleuze’s notion of life mistakenly emphasize the primacy of activity as opposed to passivity, and thus they impose a Bergsonian vitalism onto Deleuze. I clarify the difference between these active and passive vitalisms through Quentin Meillassoux’s precise location of Deleuze’s break with Bergson, and I end with a possible solution to the problem of anthropomorphism by thinking about the way in which language can turn against the borders it inevitably imposes upon life.

Life and time are almost identical in Deleuze’s thought. To begin to understand what Deleuze means by life, then, we must understand time. Time is, for Deleuze, following Hamlet, fundamentally “out of joint”; this means that time is never just a hinge upon which a present moment slips into the past and a future moment enters the present (“On Four Formulas” 27). Instead of being simply the individual moments which revolve around the ‘joint’ or hinge of time, Deleuze thinks these moments are ‘out’ of joint, which means that it is the *joints themselves* which are affected by time. The dimensions of time, the past, present and future, are themselves transformed by time, so that there can be no passage from the present to the past without those dimensions being transformed. Rather than time being a joint or hinge around which moments move through the various dimensions, time is in fact the transformation what it means for something to be in the past, present, or future. In this way, rather than just being a succession of moments moving from the future through the present to the past, time is what actually ‘splits’ the dimensions up in the first place. The constant splitting of time into the three dimensions is what Deleuze calls “pure virtuality” (*Cinema 2* 83).

The ‘splitting’ of time into three dimensions can be understood best through the question: how does a present moment become a past moment? This problem found perhaps its oldest expression in Zeno’s paradoxes: given that the present (the Tortoise) has always moved on as soon as we think we have made the past (Achilles) merge with the present, how can the past ever catch up with the present? The problem arises in its modern form, specifically in Bergson and Deleuze, when we realize that memoriesare constantly being created *in the present*: memories are not just ready-made for us to access, they have to be *produced* at some point, and that point always has to be a ‘present’ point. In the present, then, there must be a split which makes that present ‘fork’ or split off into the past. There must also be another ‘fork’ of time which makes the future pass into the present (“Actual and Virtual” 151). Deleuze does not think that these forks are like predictable and harmonious joints through which moments pass, in such a way that we could use what is present to programmatically calculate the past and the future. For example, the present does not become past in a consciously rational manner, whereby an experience might be compared explicitly with other experiences in order to form a harmonious and clear system of memories. For Deleuze, the splitting of time is not so clear; rather, it is impossible to determine in advance how a memory will be created or which possibilities of the future will transform the present; all we can say is that time will split, not how it will split (148). Of course, we live out our practical, everyday actions in a kind of determinate, clear, fixed world; this is pure ‘actuality,’ or the pure present, which is completely determinate, stable and predictable. However, this constant, calculable present is constantly being broken up and then produced once again in a new manner by the splitting in time. The division between the indeterminate splitting of time and the determinate actuality of the present is the most fundamental division of Deleuze’s entire philosophy. We can begin, here, to glimpse the reason why passivity might be privileged over activity in Deleuze’s account of life: the ‘splitting’ of time involves a breaking apart of the present, which has a kind of negativity to it, a falling apart, an explosion, as opposed to a smooth joint which would actively operate upon various moments. The reason that Life is a key concept for Deleuze is that what he calls “non-organic Life” is identical with the passive splitting of time (*Cinema 2* 81, 91). The burning question is then: why use the word life here? This question is answered by looking at what is, for Deleuze, the most basic constitution of all existence: matter.

In *My Struggle*, Karl Ove Knausgaard writes of leaving the repetitive unchangingness of his bourgeois family life: “all of a sudden I am beset by every conceivable thought about what was said, what was seen, what was thought, hurled, as it were into that uncontrollable, unproductive, often degrading, and ultimately destructive space where I lived for so many years” (30). This chaotic besiegement by all possible thoughts in one moment of life is the human manifestation of Deleuze’s conception of materiality. Matter is comprised of instantaneous actions, acting and reacting instantly upon one another, without a gap, without hesitation or delay (*Difference and Repetition*, 74). The lack of hesitation reveals a connection between matter and the pure presence or actuality outlined above, in which everything was calculable and predictable. This link between matter and time is important, because it means that Deleuze does not have a notion of matter which is primarily spatial, perceptible or sensible, but, rather, one which is *temporal*. The basic constitution of existence is a multiplicity of actions and reactions, and these are not spatial but temporal. Matter consists in *instants* in which actions occur. We might now ask: how is possible for an action to happen without it being essentially spatial? In the *Cinema* books Deleuze tells us that these ‘actions’ are conscious: “all consciousness is something, it is indistinguishable from the thing” (*Cinema 1* 61). To make sense of this apparently strange identification, we can add that consciousness is ultimately *appearance*. Matter is therefore all appearances in which actions occur, as opposed to being an elementary set of spatial things which are calculable by mathematical formulas. Deleuze sees the overcoming of the appearance/thing duality as Husserl’s key insight. And yet, with Bergson, Deleuze goes beyond Husserl to suggest that matter, as consciousness, is never “revealed” to anyone, except for other figures of consciousness: there is no central, ultimate subject which gives meaning to appearances (60). As such, matter, or appearance, is “diffused everywhere and yet does not reveal its source”. All we can say is that a field of instantaneous actions and reactions appears in a “movement” which is propagated “without resistance and without loss” (60). Matter or appearances act and react *immediately*, without delay, in all of their parts, and thus matter forms what we earlier called “pure actuality,” that which is purely present and completely determinate. This matter, the purely actual, is not strictly alive; rather, life, the splitting of time, continually breaks apart and recombines matter. We must now ask, in more detail, about the effect of life upon matter, in order to see why life is identical with the splitting of time.

One important feature of the material of instantaneous action outlined above is that it has no memory, no soul, no reflection, no understanding. As such, matter-instants would remain a purely present mass of determinate actions and reactions if it were not for the operation of something non-material and non-instantaneous. *Organic* life introduces an ‘interval’ between actions and reactions which would otherwise be instantaneous. When a ‘gap’ is introduced into matter, it is no longer purely instantaneous. This ‘gap’ is introduced by a *fusion* of matter. Fusion is an *affirmation* of similar instants; the similarity which is affirmed in the instants means that they are ‘fused’ together. Similarity does not involve physical or spatial fusion, but *temporal* fusion, consistent with the temporal nature of matter. There is a *retention* of instants which resemble one another and there is also an *anticipation* of similar instants which will occur in the future (*Difference and Repetition* 81). Because there are now instants which are retained, there is no longer a purely present mass of actions, but a *gap* between the past action and the present action which is linked to it through resemblance. By retaining and expecting similar instants, there is both a fusion of matter across time into a lived present and a gap is formed between the past and the future. As Deleuze puts it, fusion is a “primary vital sensibility”, in which the “lived present” “constitutes a past and a future in time” (73). Such a fusion does not ‘split’ time into a preserved past and a passage to the future; rather, it holds time together, it joins time into a smooth succession of moments which are all similar. For the dimensions of time to be split apart, *non-organic* life is required, because this life goes beyond the basic organic temporal dimensions of past and future. The affirmation of the similarity of some instants means that there are also distances between actions which are not similar to one another.

In order to see, later, how non-organic life goes beyond mere retention and expectation, we must first note that retentive and anticipatory fusion is constitutive of the *organism*. First, we must ask in more detail about how the organism preserves the past, and in the process we will see how the past is transformed rather than merely preserved. A part of the action an organism receives from the outside is usually *absorbed (Cinema 1* 65*).* This absorption of actions from outside the organism is how the organism gives itself a present in which a past is retained: in order to ‘fill ourselves’ with an “image of ourselves”, we must contemplate and absorb something other than ourselves. Deleuze writes, for example, that wheat is a contraction of “the earth and humidity” that it has absorbed in the past, and that “the lily of the field” by its existence alone “sings the glory of the heavens, the goddesses and gods” which are outside of it (*Difference and Repetition* 75). When the organism draws something from the things outside of it, it also makes a difference to those things: the contemplation of the outside goes beyond the sum total of the parts. The grain of wheat is nothing but humidity and earth, but there is also a transformation of the elements it fuses. This transformation is not an active choice by the organism; it is an event which occurs through the hesitation of the organism.

The difference between the contemplation of the organism and that which it contemplates results from a hesitation about how it should react to outside elements. This is like a ‘question’ the organism puts to its outside: how should I hold all these elements together? Such a questioning manner of absorbing things which are outside is the most basic form of the preservation and transformation of the past. Without such a questioning preservation, the lived present would merely present identical cases of what had been perceived before. We see this in a much more complex way in Knausgaard’s exploration human memory in *My Struggle*. He poses the *question* to his past of why certain memories ‘stick’ and others fade, asking “why did I remember this so well?” and proceeding to pursue several possibilities regarding his own past (402, 432). This questioning in writing, prompted by the involutary, Proustian nature of memory, interrupts the ‘unchangingness’ and repetitiveness of bourgeois family life, and consists in the transformation of the past, just as the wheat introduces a difference into the elements it contracts.

We have three modes of time at this point: the chaotic instantaneousness of matter, the repetition of similar instances in the lived present, and the introduction of a non-similar instance, when a questioning hesitation is put to the outside. The key difference in the two modes of time related to the organism is between the retention of instants which are *similar* on the one hand (as with the fusion of the living present), and the transformation of the past into something *different* on the other hand (as with the question put to the outside by the organism). Here, we can see the famous concepts of difference and questioning which Deleuze takes from Heidegger and installs at the most basic level of existence. Simply put, although the organism ‘retains’ similar instants in order to form habits by which to give some order to its existence, it can also hesitate about *how* this retention should occur. In this hesitation, something happens which is out of the control of the organism: a difference is made to the elements which are absorbed. The event which occurs in the hesitant absorption of outside elements is something like ‘non-organic’ life.

Having seen how a difference can be introduced into the past through the hesitation of an organism in relation to the elements which sustain it, we must now look at how the temporal dimension of the future can be disrupted in such a way it is no longer merely expected as the repetition of a similar instance. The present opens onto a future through the organism insofar as the living present can fall apart, under the strain of fatigue. As we found earlier, the fusion of instants in the organism is contemplation, and within that contemplation, a passive ‘contraction’ of these various instants occurs. Contemplations do not involve memory, reflection or understanding; they are, rather, the place where contraction occurs. Contemplations are not chaotically instantaneous in the way that matter is; they bring some order to actions, constituting a past and future around the present. Now we can add that the organism, when it fuses things outside of itself, can become subject to *fatigue*. The fatigued organism can no longer fuse the various elements outside of itself (*Difference and Repetition* 77). The grain of wheat, for example, can no longer fuse the water it absorbs into itself when there is an excess in a flood. In fatigue, the organism contemplates things outside of itself, but it is unable to fuse them all into a living present with retentions and expectations which resemble that present. The wheat, in a flood, can no longer grow tall and strong as it usually would; it withers and droops in exhaustion. Yet, when we reach the point of extreme fatigue or the point of ‘need’, due to an excess of outside things to contemplate, we can no longer contract or fuse any of those things, and the living present falls apart or ‘erupts’. Need is thus the ‘limit’ of the present. Each present only ever extends between two eruptions of extreme fatigue. In the case of the wheat, it must mutate in order to survive a flood: certain strains of wheat might survive, and those are strains which can forge a new fusion of the present, a fusion which involves an excess of water. In order for a genuinely new present to emerge, the organism must be fatigued to the point of *need*, so that a new present might arise. This is the second ‘jet stream’ of time, the passage to a new present.

We can now clarify what is ‘non-organic’ about the ‘life’ that Deleuze says *is* time ‘out of joint’. The organism produces a similarity between various elements outside of it, in order to constitute a ‘lived present’ in which the past and the future are ‘organized’, and thus are habitual and livable. On the other hand, in certain encounters with outside elements, the organism is forced to put into question the ‘similarity’ of the present instant to the past instants it took to be regular; for example, the problem of responding to abnormal temperatures for a wheat plant. This problem introduces a ‘difference’ into the past time of the organism. Furthermore, when the elements contracted by the organism overwhelm and exhaust it, there arises the collapse of the present and thus the necessity of a new present. Time is no longer the repetition of similar instants, but is rather interrupted by a difference and forced to transform its present, arises out of an encounter between the organism and its outside. This interruption and collapse is a *disruption* of the organic, lived present, and it is in this sense the product of a ‘negation’ of the organic, which is why Deleuze necessarily refers to *non*-organic life, as opposed to a positive principle of life.

Already in *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze makes the connection between life and time. He claims there that time itself is a synthesis of various presents. How do various presents come together? Only through the new presents which arise through the extreme fatigue of the organism. Life thus expresses the two jet streams of time in the drawing off of a difference from prior instants and in the eruption of the present in need. We must note that, in *A Thousand* Pleateaus and in the *Cinema* books, Deleuze admits that matter, in specific “forms” does plays an “essential role” in a “primeval soup” from which living beings emerge, and thus the explicit ‘gap’ which living images involve is prefigured in a certain ‘tendency’ of matter itself (*Cinema 1* 63). However, this tendency does not involve the splitting of the present that living things carry out, we see the basic way in which living images *are* time, in its most basic form.

Jane Bennett, in *Vibrant Matter*, has taken up Deleuze’s concern with a life which is not organic and which is immanent to non-organic matter, coining the phrase “vital materialism,” following earlier materialist Deleuzians such as Manuel DeLanda and John Protevi (xvi). The heart of the book takes up Bruno Latour’s idea of the “actant” as a source of action, but attempts to take Latour even further by lavishing attention upon the capacities of material configurations (viii). Material configurations, for Bennett, have a “thing-power”, which is the power of things to act, to “produce effects,” or to “alter” the “course of events” (viii). Bennett’s hope is that we will no longer think of agency as a human privilege, and this hope is surely a noble one. Yet, in transporting agency into things, I claim that we not only betray Deleuze’s key insights into life, we also take the human agency we are destabliizing and project it into the world in ways which merely *amplify* the anthropocentrism of all things. Bennett obliquely admits doing this when she claims that we need to “cultivate the idea that human agency has some *echoes* in nonhuman nature” to “counter the narcissism of humans in charge of the world” (xvi). When Bennett claims to *sometimes* “stretch” “agency, action and freedom” to the limit, as opposed to shattering those notions, she betrays the fundamental anthropocentrism which remains in her attempt to continue Deleuze’s project of a vital matter.

The most fundamental point of divergence of my reading of Deleuze with Bennett’s is that action is always *constituted by* the contemplative fusion of instants we outlined above. That contemplation, as Deleuze famously stresses, is a *passive* synthesis. It is true that the passive contraction of various outside elements does *lead* to a “completely novel” event, but this contraction itself *does* nothing, it does not act (*Difference and Repetition* 75). In a beautiful turn of phrase, Deleuze writes that the “little selves” which contemplate are “little witnesses which contemplate within us: it is always a third party who says 'me'” (75). Although he does deal in detail with action and activity, Deleuze is clear: however complex action gets, it is always in relation to a contemplative soul adjacent to the subject of the complex action.

John Protevi, one of the most influential Anglophone readers of Deleuze, frames his position in the same terms as Bennett, insofar as he attempts to move away from the passive conception of matter and also from traditional vitalism as a spirit imposed upon passive matter (247). In an essay intended as an overview of Deleuze’s conception of life, and therefore not as part of a wider project like Bennett’s, Protevi considers contraction as “activity” and describes the contracting being as playing a “role”, something like an actor (241). He does consider the nature of fatigue, as we did above, but he incorrectly reduces it to the “anticipation of the future” (242). Anticipation is a much more *active* concept than fatigue and need, both of which indicate a certain kind of passivity. Protevi’s emphasis on activity, on the actor, and on anticipation of the future fundamentally distort Deleuze’s conception of time; Deleuze himself, in an interview many years later, highlights only the passages on “fatigue” as the ones he still likes in *Difference and Repetition*, incidentally the book that Protevi relies on. For Protevi to reduce fatigue to anticipation seems a crucial point. As I pointed out above, fatigue occurs when the external elements cannot be contracted by the organism, and thus in fatigue there is an explosive, unexpected *opening* to a future present, as opposed to an active anticipation of a future. To ignore this point obscures Deleuze’s fundamental belief that life can be equated with the *splitting* of time, a rupturing into past and future to which anticipation is completely antithetical. These comments on Protevi might seem small linguistic differences, but as Deleuze says in *Difference and Repetition*, the smallest linguistic shift can signal an upheaval or rupture in a concept, and I will now show how these shifts have ripple effects throughout Protevi’s interpretation.

Deleuze has already told us the key concept of his vitalism is contraction, and I claim that the effects of Protevi’s overemphasis on activity in contraction are mirrored elsewhere in his more general reading of life. Protevi believes that life is a “capacity”, in other words an ability, an active potential for novelty in the “self-organization of material systems” (248). This active capacity for self-organization leads to a definition of life as “creativity” or “creative self-organization” (248). In support of his view of life as creativity, Protevi cites a passage in which Deleuze and Guattari write that life “*disrupts*” “orders, forms, and substances” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 336). However, in his own text Protevi replaces the word “disrupts” with “the novel creation of” orders, forms and substances (248). The slightly hasty use of the term creation, as opposed to disruption, mirrors an overuse of the term ‘creation’ in some Deleuzian secondary literature. This is one of the main reasons, I contend, why Deleuze is mistakenly considered by many as a thinker who gives *activity* to matter, as opposed to giving passivity to life and creation; as Deleuze and Guattari write in *What is Philosophy?*: “contemplating is creating, the mystery of passive creation, sensation” (212). The privilege given to activity is confirmed explicitly in Protevi when he appeals to Developmental Systems Theory to claim that organisms “actively shape” the environment and when he discusses the organism in terms of its “the action” on its environment (253-4). Protevi at another point also explicitly tries to shift Deleuze and Guattari’s talk of “mutation” as creative to a notion of free selection. In the movement away from mutation and towards freedom, Protevi seems to be expounding a vitalism closer to Bergson’s, with his notion of the free selection of the living being, than Deleuze’s passively mutating contractions. I will now appeal to Quentin Meillassoux to sharpen the distinction between the two types of vitalism at play, and to show how Bennett and Protevi come much closer to Bergson than to Deleuze.

Meillassoux is responsible for a large part of the recent shift in focus in “theory” generally construed towards “things,” which Bennett is part of, and of which Protevi was a forerunner. Life is key for Meillassoux, because, as he claims in in his infamous *After Finitude*, Deleuze’s concept of Life is a “relation between subject and object” which therefore is a “vitalist hypostatization” of the correlation between being and thought. Life ties Deleuze to the major trend of European philosophy since Kant, which Meillassoux wants to overcome (*After Finitude* 37). Yet, in an extremely precise reading of Deleuze’s notion of life in an essay separate to his main work, Meillassoux is particularly keen to show how Deleuze precisely breaks with the notions of activity, agency and freedom which Bennett and Protevi valorize. In an interpretive move which is as yet unnoticed in the literature, Meillassoux skillfully and precisely locates Deleuze’s break with Bergson: the living being does not make a free selection as Bergson thinks; rather, the living being is the *result of* an unfree selection. Meillassoux emphasizes that a living being is an ‘impoverishment’ of the chaos of actions and reactions it finds around it (“Subtraction and Contraction” 98). Yet this impoverishment emerges *from* a tendency within non-organic life. The two tendencies are those of ‘narrowing’ or impoverishment of fluxes from the outside and the ‘broadening’ of those fluxes through openness to them. From out of these two tendencies, living beings ‘rarify’ or coalesce as contractions, in the way we described with the formation of lived presents in the similarity of instants above, and their disruption in the encounter with an overpowering outside. There is no free selection of external fluxes by life, as Bergson, Bennett and Protevi seem to think; rather, there is only an unfree selection, occurring through the two tendencies of openness to the outside and impoverishment of the outside. With ‘openness,’ we find that the concepts of “encounter, of passivity, and even of affect”, concepts of the event, take on the significance of a movement of life prior to organic beings (101). All we can say is that, in non-organic life, something happens: there is an event, as opposed to a free, agential selection or choice. Becoming is the ability to “register an increased affectivity to a number of external fluxes” on Meillassoux’s reading of Deleuze, in which the pure virtuality of time and life disrupt all action and all activity.

Meillassoux’s resolution to the problem of the narrowing of fluxes by the living being is to think the relation between life and death. He thinks we have to “conceive what our life would be if all the movements came to us in a moment, in an instant traversing us continually and instantaneously” (104). The instantaneous and continual action and reaction is the state of non-living, non-vital matter we outlined in Deleuze’s account of matter. His resolution here chimes with the central idea of *After Finitude,* thatof a thought which has no relation to being, and thus is subject to absolute chaos. Yet the absolute chaos of thought seems to pose once again the question of how any kind of discourse is possible or necessary. In this regard, at the end of his article on Deleuze and Bergson, Meillassoux mentions a thinking which would discipline a chaotic experience into writing; yet this is nothing more than a concluding conjecture. I would like to conclude by thinking through this insight into the relationship to writing as a solution to the impoverishment of the organism, a solution which is not a mere lapse into purely chaotic, instantaneous matter. In this way, it might be possible to avoid the anthropomorphizing tendencies we have found to be problematic in the notion of activity.

Recounting an incident in which Olav H. Hauge recited a poem on his driveway, Knausgaard remarks that “it was almost more than I could endure”: “the beauty of it, how to deal with it? How to meet it?” The poem forced Knausgaard to the edge of his own ‘lived presence’, to the point of a questioning hesitation and an exhaustion from the poem which “belonged to infinity”. Knausgaard reminisces that “a joke would have been apposite, at least to lend the everyday life in which we were trapped some kind of form” (339). There are several aspects at play here: the impossibility of endurance within ‘everyday life’, is countered with the *form* of a communal and habitual linguistic expression, the joke. For Deleuze and Guattari, this imposition of form upon the exhaustion of non-organic life is the primary function of language. Language in its basic function, exemplified here by the joke, institutes ‘ideal, uncrossable boundaries’ which separate bodies from one another, and thus give ‘form’ to the unstable and explosive movements of non-organic life, experienced by Knausgaard as the infinity of the poem (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 107). The boundaries set up by language and jokes prevent the breaking down of the lived present; these boundaries thus prevent organic life from being swept up by the *negativity* of an explosive moment of excess. Substances and forms are constitutive of organic, living beings; thus, in a sense, it is by language that the separation of living beings from one another is instituted. Thus, we can say that not only is non-organic life suppressed by the ‘organic’ lived present, with its habits which provide a regularity to time, it is also bound by language, with the ‘forms’ which are imposed upon it in line with ideal, uncrossable boundaries.

Knausgaard’s story about the poet Hauge indicates another character of language than merely that of the ‘form’ given to everyday life by language; this is the ‘infinity of the poem’. The everyday lived present of Knausgaard’s limited and impoverished perception, of the driveway and the ground, are saturated and exhausted by the “tufts / of cranberries in the wood, the rose hips redden / along the stone dikes, nuts fall at a touch, / and clumps of blackberries gleam in the thickets, / thrushes poke about for the last red currants / and the wasp sucks away at the sweet plums” (339).

Deleuze and Guattari account for this as the response to the ‘forms’ and borders imposed by language *within language* (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 110). Non-organic life itself gains a voice in the cranberries and blackberries poem. What occurs here is the transformation of “compositions of order” and ‘form’ into “components of passage.” There is no immediate escape from the ideal boundaries separating bodies; these boundaries must be utilized so that our ideal boundaries are continually varied. The kind of language which can free the explosive movement non-organic life is called writing: it is between lines of writing that life ‘passes,’ rather than being enclosed or ‘formed’ (201). Through variation *within* language, non-organic life manages to institute the state of *continuous variation* among borders. As it occurs in the realm of the ideal, the continuum of life is “virtual,” this virtuality consisting in what is “real” “beneath” the everyday, which unconsciously utilizes pre-existing boundaries between bodies (110). What philosophy involves, then, is pushing language “to its own limits”, which simultaneously brings bodies into a metamorphosis of their contents and an overstepping of their forms (108). Philosophy allows the co-ordinating or selective power of life to take place within language itself. Deleuze tells us in *Cinema 2* that philosophy is essentially passing through a death and going towards another death. We can now give this poetic claim its proper rigor: philosophy is passing through the ideal boundaries which separate bodies, through language, and then returning to those boundaries in a way which perhaps transforms them. In this way, we see that the relationship between life and the ‘forms’ of language is at the heart of Deleuze’s conception of philosophy itself.

We have found that the essential passivity of Deleuzian creation troubles any privileging of agency, and it does so to the point where agency remains only ever as fractured, a fracture in activity which mirrors the very splitting of time itself which disrupts all actuality. This argument against the ‘activity’ attributed to things by Bennett and Protevi might seem to lead to a position of something akin to quietism. And yet, in the discussion of language working against the death sentences it imposes upon life, we witness a possible solution to the violence of thought upon life. Language must work against itself, must attempt to constantly turn back on the borders it imposes, in order to free the explosive and differentiating potential of life. Just as Deleuze and Guattari write that “we are not responsible for the victims but responsible before them”, (*What is Philosophy?* 108) similarly we might say we are not responsible ‘for’ life but ‘before’ life. It is not "for the benefit," of life or "in place" of life, but it is "before" life that we must speak: “We think and write for animals themselves. We become animal so that the animal also becomes something else. The agony of a rat or the slaughter of a calf remains present in thought not through pity but as the zone of exchange between man and animal in which something of one passes into the other. This is the constitutive relationship of philosophy with nonphilosophy” (109).

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