Divining the Sewer

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In search of water, burst pipes, or signs of civilizations past and present,[1] dowsing is an ancient practice of seeking, sensing, and divining. The dowsing—or, divining—rod, a simple apparatus, becomes a prosthetic extension of the body, one that is ever and always moving through a wider landscape. Divining detects the movements of submerged waters, of currents flowing beneath the surface. The extended body is its instrument.

What we consider divine is set—linguistically—in the same sphere as the sacred, in the realm of systems of belief. Giorgio Agamben writes that that which is sacred is "removed from the free use and commerce of men,"   and that ". . . if 'to consecrate' (*sacrare*) was the term that indicated the removal of things from the sphere of human law, 'to profane' meant conversely, to return them to the free use of men."[2] Comparatively, in feasts and festivals, rendering objects and actions inoperative or removing them from the sphere of use or exchange value inverts and suspends existing social and political relations.[3] It is such acts—of removal and return, of suspension and inversion—that construct the realm of that which we consider to be divine, or otherwise. Praxis, then, is part of the constitution of beliefs.

Agamben posits defecation as a hypothetical field for testing profanation. Defecation is a bodily function that has long been "isolated and hidden by means of a series of devices and prohibitions that concern both behavior and language."[4] Apparatuses of plumbing, the

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[1] As recently as 2017, ten of the twelve water companies in the UK admitted to using water divining to help locate pipes. Matthew Weaver, "UK Water Firms Admit Using Divining Rods to Find Leaks and Pipes," *The Guardian*, November 21, 2017. https://www.theguardian.com/business/2017/nov/21/uk-water-firms-admit-using-divining-rods-to-find-leaks-and-pipes

[2] Giorgio Agamben, Profanations (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 73.

[3] Giorgio Agamben, *Nudities* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 111.

[4] Agamben, *Profanations*, 86. See also Julia Kristeva's discussion of the abject in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

swift action of the flush, the submergence and thus rendering invisible of our bodily waste—

all of these serve to create a separate, collective private realm. For Agamben, however, to

"profane defecation" is not simply a matter of regaining "a supposed naturalness, or simply to

enjoy it as a perverse transgression (which is still better than nothing)."[5] Instead, "it is a

matter of archaeologically arriving at defecation as a field of polar tensions between nature

and culture, private and public, singular and common."[6] Agamben proposes that we must

"learn a new use for feces" and that "the forms of this common use can only be invented

collectively."[7]

What would it mean to invent a new use for feces? Here we might look to historic and

renewed uses of fecal matter for fertilization or fuel; the study of the microbiology of fecal

matter in human health; the monitoring of viruses (such as COVID-19), bacteria, and

pharmacological and recreational drug use globally and in specific localities; or even the

banking and processing of fecal matter as transplants for those whose intestinal microbiomes

are beyond the aid of other medical treatments and interventions.[8] Yet these approaches to

fecal matter, while certainly not without collective benefit, remain within a realm of use

value, a realm of that which is known—or at least, knowable.

One approach to the profanation of defecation is to divine the sewer. These edifices to

the codification of sanitation and to the shaping of the movements of water signify the

presence of human settlements and a degree of authority to establish such infrastructures.

Recall Georges Bataille's definition of architecture in *Critical Dictionary* as "the expression

of the very being of societies."[9] He writes that it is "only the ideal being of society, that

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[5] Agamben, *Profanations,* 86.
[6] Agamben, *Profanations,* 86.
[7] Agamben, *Profanations,* 86.
[8] See Jessica Leigh Hester, *Sewer* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022) for a recent discussion of the history of the sewer.
[9] Georges Bataille, "Architecture," in *Rethinking Architecture*, ed. Neil Leach (London: Routledge, 1997), 19.

which orders and prohibits with authority, [that] expresses itself in what are architectural compositions in the strict sense of the term."[10] Bataille delimits architecture as a manifest representation of social order. He chooses as a metaphor for the way monuments are constructed to pit "the logic of majesty and authority against all the shady elements," the form of the dam.[11] Presumably the dam is a suitable analogy because its function, built as a barrier to hold back water, would serve well figuratively to hold back what one would deem to be "all the shady elements," keeping them vehemently separate from the "logic of majesty and authority." Such barriers prevent what would be a deluge of the undesired, of threats to the order and organization of society. The dam, and thus architecture, enforce and reinforce the structure of society while simultaneously representing social stability. The control of disordered flows like waste, excrement, and defecation—of those unruly substances and material currents that escape from our bodies, has long been a project of state power. Here we might recall Dominique Laporte's description of the edicts and codes of public sanitation that were constructed as part of the institution of the nation state alongside the establishment of the national French language in 1539.[12] In Laporte's analysis, the standardization—and purification—of language was part of the project to unify and galvanize state power, as was the ordering of bodily waste.

If profanation "deactivates the apparatuses of power and returns to common use the spaces that power had seized,"[13] then in treating the sewer as a site for divination, we might deactivate its symbolic status, and thus begin to return defecation to a common use.

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[10] Bataille, "Architecture," 20.
[11] Bataille, "Architecture," 20.
[12] Dominique Laporte, *History of Shit* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000), 2–9. Laporte writes: "Surely, the State is the Sewer. Not just because it spews divine law from its ravenous mouth, but because it reigns as the law of cleanliness above its sewers. Cleanliness, order, and beauty, defined by Freud as the cornerstones of civilization, are elevated to new heights when embodied by the state." Laporte, *History of Shit*, 56.
[13] Agamben, *Profanations*, 77.

Invisible Infrastructures

While the state-symbolic form might call forth images of aqueducts or buttressed dams, perhaps it is what lies beneath the surface that is more revelatory of social and political currents. Even in ancient Rome (where the Latin language was used to extend and centralize power), "most aqueducts ran on arches for less than ten per cent of their total length: for the rest, the water channel ran at ground level, or, more often, buried about a meter   below it."[14] Such infrastructural demonstrations of power were not immediately visible: "In its normal form, therefore, the Roman aqueduct was distinctly unspectacular; usually, indeed, it was completely out of sight." So we find ourselves divining the monumental underground.

The use of subterranean hydro-technologies including aqueducts, qanats, and cisterns for the storage and transportation of water since ancient times has been well-documented and studied.[15] In Mesopotamian times, lavatories and installations that carried sewage away were in use at least in the middle of the third millennium BCE.[16] Qanats, found in much of the Middle East, as well as in North Africa, Spain, Central and South Asia, Peru, and Japan, were used for "transporting groundwater to lower elevation areas and delivering it to the surface."[17] In many cases, these infrastructural networks "were and are part of a sophisticated system of management, ownership, distribution and social cooperation," and "unlike other hydraulic structures, shareholders managed the qanat locally, with maintenance carried out by mutual cooperation, making decentralization of power and economy an inherent character of the qanat technology."[18] Technology similar to qanats was implemented in the construction

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[14] Trevor Hodge, "Aqueducts," in *Roman Public Buildings*, ed. I.M. Barton (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1995), 129.
[15] Mohammad Valipour et al., "Sustainability of Underground Hydro-technologies: From Ancient to Modern Times and Toward the Future," *Sustainability* 12, no. 21 (2020): 1–31.
[16] Andrew R. George, "On Babylonian Lavatories and Sewers," *Iraq* 77 (2015): 75–106.
[17] Valipour et al., "Sustainability," 12.
[18] Valipour et al., "Sustainability," 3.

of utility tunnels in urban sewer systems like those in the Roman Empire, forgotten during the Middle Ages, and "revived only later in the mid-nineteenth century."[19] Constructing these technologies underground was important for protection against "vandalism, adverse climatic conditions, and natural disasters."[20] These underground tunnel systems did not only serve as symbols of authority and power; rather, they were also manifestations of decentralized power and collective knowledge.

Alongside water, excrement, and other forms of waste, our subterranean tunnels now host—out of sight—fiber optic cables that are installed in existing tunnels to reduce the costs and disruption involved in digging new ones. Following existing conduits, these cables are installed throughout our sewer lines. Recent developments in communications technology allow for the inspection and maintenance of these pre-existing infrastructures in parallel with the installation of fiber optic cables.[21] This has also been part of efforts to increase accessibility to more users further afield or in remote, less densely populated areas. Shannon Mattern has written about how infrastructures are layered over time, rather than replaced or phased out.[22] Reflecting on the archaeology of media infrastructure and how to consider time in relation to the development of our infrastructures and cities, she writes that "our media histories are deeply 'networked' with our urban and architectural histories (and *futures*)" and that "in many cases, these cultural and technological forms are mutually constructed."[23] Sewers network together trickling waters and the fluid movements of bodies with the digital data that flows through fiber optics.

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[19] Valipour et al., "Sustainability," 12.
[20] Valipour et al., "Sustainability," 12.
[21] Sanjiv Gokhale, "Deployment of Fiber Optic Networks through Underground Sewers in North America," *Journal of Transportation Engineering* 132, no. 8 (2006): 672–682.
[22] Shannon Mattern, "Deep Time of Media Infrastructure" in *Signal Traffic*, ed. Lisa Parks and Nicole Starosielski (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 102.
[23] Mattern, "Deep Time," 102.

The layering or grafting of cloud infrastructures onto existing infrastructures like sewer systems "build not only on the material legacies of [these] pre-existing infrastructures, but also on their embedded logics, discourses and prejudices."[24] The transcontinental and transoceanic fiber optic cables that are part of the cloud network are "not only material, they are territorial."[25] Considering the layering of infrastructures begins to unravel the unevenness of their distribution, their colonial and imperial histories, their historic and current territorial and technical intertwinement with the military, and their often obfuscated material consequences for the environment, labor practices, and other industries.[26] Infrastructures must be considered in light of their imbrication with social, political, and material histories. Beyond considering infrastructures to be mere objects and counter to any evocation of the monumentality of infrastructures (like Bataille's dam), we must "grasp infrastructure as continuously 'unfolding' as non-static and indeterminate, consisting (among other things) of multiple layered invisibilities."[27]

The sewer unfolds through intersecting flows of biological and political life, as part of an extended, multi-layered, and invisible infrastructural body that is constituted not only of biological matters but also of digital activities. We can trace this intersection in the term, *diet*, or *diaita,* which in ancient medicine designated "the regime of life, the 'diet' of an individual or a group, understood as the harmonic proportion between food (*sitos*) and physical exercise or labor (*ponos*)."[28] Diet was a mode of life oriented toward living well and best practice. Agamben describes the term's other meanings, in "the political juridical sphere: *diaita* is that arbitration that decides a suit not according to the letter of the law but according to

[24] Kathryn Furlong, "Geographies of Infrastructure II: Concrete, Cloud and Layered (in)visibilities," *Progress in Human Geography* 45, no. 1 (2021): 192.
[25] Furlong, "Geographies," 191.
[26] Furlong, "Geographies," 190–198.
[27] Furlong, "Geographies," 196. See also Keller Easterling, *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space* (London: Verso Books, 2014).
[28] Giorgio Agamben, *The Use of Bodies, trans. Adam Kotsko* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), 225.

circumstances and equity (hence, in medieval and modern vocabulary, it has developed the meaning of 'a political assembly with decision-making power').["29] As one site for the intersection of biological and political life, the sewer lends itself to the examination of both excrement and digital data as the traces of beliefs—whether religious or part of a medico-scientific body of knowledge.

The intersection of life and living within the sewer can also be mapped in parallel to virtualization at the intersection of public and private. Tung-Hui Hu compares virtualization technology with the construction of Victorian sewers, which acted as "a sanitary partition between users."[30] In both digital and excremental terms, waste "is the residuum of consumption and productivity, the inevitable by-product of the circulatory networks valued by capitalism."[31] Hu discusses the "rise of this circulatory system of capital" in terms of Victorian sanitary infrastructures in which the building of pipes "targeted a population rather than specific individuals," keeping "'private' life private." The infrastructure of the networked sewer signified a "gradual shift in the topology of power away from the disciplinary state . . . toward a state that is concerned with regulating and optimizing its population even as it leaves the population to itself." The virtualization of internet networks as a system of interconnected yet individuated users has developed along the same lines.

The confluence of excremental matter and digital activity—of base materialism meets incomputable immateriality—circulates a collective body of life and living, of dietary practices, pharmacological habits, distractions, and dalliances. Our subconscious desires are traced through cookie trails and microbiota alike. What might our data trails reveal about our selves as users, next to what our excrement reveals about our bodies as consumers? Political life is transmitted in bits and bytes via fiber optic cables, carried via search terms, images,

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[29] Agamben, *Use of Bodies*, 226.
[30] Tung-Hui Hu, *A Prehistory of the Cloud* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015), 62.
[31] Hu, *Prehistory*, 62.

videos, mouse movements, screenshots, and scroll activity. Accumulated data is stored and sorted, accumulated as fodder for artificial intelligence and machine learning, collated for targeted marketing, or instrumentalized for political strategy. Yet these data are mere fragments of our selves; they are far from complete representations of our (inter)subjectivities. In the gaps, amongst the missing pieces, between intermittent flows, might we begin to construct the social *out of* the sewer?

Here, to grasp what the sewer speaks, we return to the operation of divining, which we might relate to prophecy. Thomas Huxley discusses "prophecy" as not only "foretelling," but as an operation that can also be performed retrospectively. Yet, "even in the restricted sense of 'divination,' it is obvious that the essence of the prophetic operation does not lie in its backward or forward relation to the course of time, but in fact that it is the apprehension of that which lies out of the sphere of immediate knowledge; the seeing of that which to the natural sense of the seer is invisible."[32] The sewer, as a submerged site that has accumulated the invisible layering of multiple temporalities, offers a space for sensing that which is not immediately seeable or knowable. To divine—to see *beyond* what is visible—is also to counter knowledge as extraction, ontology as certainty, and a notion of reality that is conflated with visibility. Divining the sewer is a metaphysical project towards an alternate social sensing.

Social Overflows

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[32] Thomas H. Huxley, "On The Method Of Zadig," *The Nineteenth Century: A Monthly Review, Mar. 1877-Dec. 1900* 7, no. 40 (1880): 931. See also Carlo Ginzburg, *Clues, Myth, and the Historical Method*, trans. John and Anne C. Tedeschi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989).

If to divine is to apprehend what is beyond "the sphere of immediate knowledge,"[33] if it is to attempt to grasp the unknowable, perhaps we might first attend to that which is out of grasp, that which is uncontained. Despite their initial purposeful construction as conduits that contain and convey, sewers and their pipes are not immune to leaks and lapses. For example, in the Roman Empire, "those waters also that are called 'lapsed,' namely, those that come from the overflow of the reservoirs or from leakage of the pipes" became free for use, or were subject to grants and vulnerable to theft.[34] These lapsed waters recall the shady elements that Bataille's dam holds back, the disordered currents which threaten societal control and containment. When the social exceeds order and restraint, that which leaks out overflows the body politic as a governable and legible entity. Managing such lapsed flows is akin to what Eugene Thacker describes in his study of the body politic in relation to death, decay, and dissolution. Thacker analyzes the emergence of new forms of power against the threat of multiplicity, which is "both constituted by and exists through its circulations and flows, by its passing-through, its passing-between, even its passing-beyond-movements."[35] These forms of power and governance manage the flows and circulations of unruly bodies, their parts, and their fluids, which "at least in cases of pestilence, plague, and epidemic" are part of "both the constitution and the dissolution of the body politic."[36] The fluidity of our lapsing, motile bodies is so evident, it is no wonder that the physics of fluid dynamics is applied to studying the science of crowd control.[37]

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[33] Huxley, "Method," 931.

[34] Frontinus, *Strategems, Aqueducts of Rome*, trans. Charles E. Bennett (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1925), 423.

[35] Eugene Thacker, "Necrologies; or, the Death of the Body Politic," in *Beyond Biopolitics: Essays on the Governance of Life and Death*, ed. Patricia Ticineto Clough and Craig Willse (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 153, 156. Thacker writes about necrology and the body politic in terms of epidemic and plague.

[36] Thacker, "Necrologies," 153, 156.

[37] See, for example: L.F. Henderson, "On the Fluid Mechanics of Human Crowd Motion," *Transportation Research* 8, no. 6 (1974): 509–515; Muhammad Umer Farooq et al., "Motion Estimation of High Density Crowd Using Fluid Dynamics," *Imaging Science Journal* 68, no. 3 (2020): 141–155.

Looking at the social as a circulating fluid is part of Gabriel Tarde's micro-sociology, in which society is not divided into the study of individuals and social institutions, but rather is framed as the circulation of microsocial flows of beliefs and desires.[38] According to Tarde's theory, the social field can be considered "a constellation of changing volitions and convictions that spread themselves in countless directions, interfering with each other, adapting among themselves, forming networks, producing institutions, groups, and individuals, and escaping from them in search of new connections."[39] Within this field of constantly moving, intersecting, and leaking volitions, Tarde proposes a social unit to be an "ensemble, compound, or configuration of previously disperse flows of desires and beliefs."[40] Each composition—like streaming waters—"increases or decreases as new currents join it."

The constitution of such social ensembles is similar to the way Rosi Braidotti discusses posthuman subjects and "the production of multiple actualized life-forms that are irreducibly differentiated."[41] These processes, according to Braidotti, "can only occur through networks of natural, social, political and physiological relations." Within these networks of relations there are "forces that are above, below and alongside the subjects, in a constant flow of mutual imbrication."[42] It is this constant, mutually constituted flow that we tap into when we attempt to divine the currents of the sewer.

Along with circulating bodily matter, the flow of the multitude is now met in the sewer by the flow of digital data, which together with biogenetic information constitute new dividual-individual compositions made up of "biotechnology, digital culture and the financial

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[38] Sergio Tonkonoff, "A New Social Physic: The Sociology of Gabriel Tarde and Its Legacy," *Current Sociology* 61, no. 3 (2013), 267–282; Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 13.
[39] Tonkonoff, "Social Physic," 273.
[40] Tonkonoff, "Social Physic," 275.
[41] Rosi Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge* (Medford: Polity Press, 2019), 82.
[42] Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge*, 82.

system."[43] Not limited to individualized subjectivities or contained to enclosed bodies, such overflows recall the notion of the grotesque body, which is neither recognizable nor containable: "Contrary to modern canons, the grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits."[44] The circulating fluid of social ensembles, posthuman subjects, or dividual-individual compositions overflows prior conceptions of boundaries between individual and social, body and collective, public and private. As described in Tarde's microsociology, the "social tissue always both composes and overflows the social organs."[45]

Perhaps divination might reveal the overflows of the social, of our bodies. Norbert Weiner writes that "our tissues change as we live: the food we eat and the air we breathe become flesh of our flesh and bone of our bone, and the momentary elements of our flesh and bone pass out of our body every day with our excreta."[46] Through our ingestion, digestion, metabolism, and incorporation, what we consume becomes a part of us, changes us, and leaves us. Humans are "but whirlpools in a river of ever-flowing water," changeable and temporary; "we are not stuff that abides, but patterns that perpetuate themselves."[47] Weiner describes patterns as messages that can be transmitted. As such patterns, we perpetuate ourselves not only through our biological processes and material traces, but also through our communication practices. As Mattern has noted, "the historical material record shows that people have not been mere beneficiaries of infrastructures but have actually served as

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[43] Fernanda Bruno and Pablo Manolo Rodriguez, "The Dividual: Digital Practices and Biotechnologies," *Theory, Culture and Society* 39, no. 3 (2021), 39–40. The dividual is constituted by "a myriad of relationships: with profiles, with the 'externalized' biological materialities, with bio-quantified selves, with the financial derivatives or with the applications that feature an artificial intelligence complementing the human one." Bruno and Rodriguez, "Dividual," 42.

[44] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 26.

[45] Tonkonoff, "Social Physic," 275.

[46] Norbert Weiner, *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 1954), 96.

[47] Weiner, Human Use, 96.

infrastructures themselves."[48] We are essential parts of infrastructures that transmit material processes, social practices, and communications networks, shifting the shit and producing the data that flow through our subterranean sewers.

What is it that we transmit? We transmit our selves—or a series of grotesque, overflowing versions—propagating social and material life in its constantly changing, unstable, and uncontainable configurations. The ungraspable, the excess, might be thought of in terms of surplus value. In the general economy of metabolic function, how does the sewer operate? What is the surplus value of our overflowing shit? Of our digital data? In medieval literature, the margins were spaces for the spillover of play, for drawings that might undermine the text. The margins represented the edges of the known world, acting as "zones of transformation," or "freefloating and uncircumscribed pockets of independent life."[49] Michael Camille writes about how "money, like shit, is everywhere in the margins," being passed to and between beggars, lovers, buyers, and merchants, noting that the association of excrement with money extends beyond medieval literature into modern psychoanalysis.[50] Fecal matter might also be thought of as "creative power," as the "latrines of faecal form swirling at the edges of the page" evoke "the artist's power to make forms from the 'clay' of the earth." Camille posits that our modern careful and insistent separation of defecation has made us "uneasy" with "its medieval status, interwoven with the sacred text."[51] Rather than approaching "turds" as "just what they are—matter," we have come to see them as "mysterious signs that we are unable to read, savour and enjoy with the gusto of our ancestors." [52] In other words, excrement is treated as something that holds meaning beyond what is immediately apparent or visible, something to be divined.

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[48] Mattern, "Deep Time," 106.
[49] Michael Camille, *Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art* (London: Reaktion Books, 1992), 16, 20.
[50] Camille, Image on the Edge, 115.
[51] Camille, Image on the Edge, 115.
[52] Camille, Image on the Edge, 115.

Marginal spaces are host not only to shit-read-otherwise, but also to the construction and circulation of shared imaginaries. Alongside turds and monsters, medieval margins are spaces where "every element springs into disordered life: line-endings lurch, rabbits run out from behind pen squiggles, hands emerge from holes in the vellum to play catch across the page [. . .] cooking-pots boil and pour water of their own accord, [. . .] skeletons grin and cavort in playful putrefaction."[53] The marginal zones under our own city streets are also inhabited by the wayward creatures of our collective imaginaries. In London, sewers were settings for epic journeys of dubious heroes and inhabited by Victorian swine, New York City's sewers were home to Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, and, as recorded by Aelian in *De natura animalium* (On the Characteristics of Animals), ancient Roman sewers were invaded by a monstrous octopus, creeping up at night to steal food.[54] Apocryphal alligators have swum and nested in North American sewers for more than a century. These alligators have been chronicled by Thomas Pynchon in the novel *V.* as "big, blind, albino, all over the sewer system" and sometimes "turned cannibal" due to shortage of rats, and have subsequently been transmitted through urban legends, newspapers, and folktales as unwanted pets flushed down toilets, confronted by sewer maintenance workers, growing up to five and a half feet long, living in smaller pipes to avoid major trunk lines, and eventually exterminated by poison, flooding waters, or shotguns.[55] Whether congregations of alligators have inhabited sewers or not, they have thrived as erratic forms of subterranean life, and indeed have been circulated via social flows. Amidst these strange flows, belief becomes slippery, unwieldy, and out of grasp.

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[53] Camille, Image on the Edge, 50.

[54] See for example Ben Jonson's "The Famous Voyage," a mock epic through the Fleet Ditch which was brimming with seventeenth century London's sludgy sewage. See also Camilla Asplund Ingemark, "The Octopus in the Sewers: An Ancient Legend Analogue," *Journal of Folklore Research* 45, no. 2 (2008): 145–170. With thanks to Mathieu D.S. Bouchard for pointing me to Jonson's sewer epic.

[55] Loren Coleman, "Alligators-in-the-Sewers: A Journalistic Origin," *Journal of American Folklore* 92, no. 365 (1979): 335–338; Robert Daley, *The World Beneath the City* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1959), 187–189.

Submerged Strangeness

In "What We Do When We Believe," Michel de Certeau writes about how belief is dependent on the recognition of alterity and a gap in time, an obligation that will be restituted in the future. Belief offers a temporal space of suspension: "In a society, belief thus prevents the totalizing unification of the present."[56] Belief is an exercise in the disunification of the present and in the production of social relations that gestures towards the unknown, the unfamiliar, the strange.

Strangerhood, as discussed by Michael Warner, is "the necessary medium of commonality."[57] The experience of being amongst strangers creates a shared sense of the social and "requires our constant imagining."[58] Being amongst others and attempting to grasp and address a public "abandons the security of its positive, given audience" because "it commits itself in principle to the possible participation of any stranger."[59] Warner describes this risk as "fruitful perversity" precisely because it "postulates a circulatory field of estrangement that it must then struggle to capture as an addressable entity."[60] It is such a "circulatory field of estrangement" that we attempt to address in divining the sewer. The encounter with estrangement is a vital part of public life because it requires "constant imagining" as a shared social task. Estrangement is as much a part of social life as it is a part of eating, which "was long conceived as an inevitable encounter with otherness" in which

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[56] Michel de Certeau, "What We Do When We Believe," in *On Signs: A Semiotics Reader,* ed. Marshall Blonsky (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), 194.
[57] Michael Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics," *Public Culture* 14, no. 1 (2002): 81.
[58] Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics," 57.
[59] Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics," 81.
[60] Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics," 81.

"digestion required forcible assimilation, the transformation of what is not the body into the body" and whose residues "became a corrupting, alien presence" that had to be excreted.[61, 62] The sewer is one space of public life that hosts the unknown, the strange, the rejected, or the feared. In approaching the contents of the sewer with an alternate social sense, we must look beyond what we can see.

De Certeau diagnoses a contemporary sociality in which there is "a principle of scientificity (or 'truth') which, by eliminating the delay of a deferred time, by practicing the immediate coincidence between the given and the received, has *seeing* as its index."[63] How can we resist this prioritization of immediacy, of constantly rehearsing seeing-as-believing, and return instead to a state of time deferred? Divining, as a mode of sensing beyond the instantly visible and the apparently knowable, offers a possible approach to time deferred and to a sociality that is not oriented toward immediacy. Divining opens space between transmitting and receiving, between seeing and knowing. Divination reveals the social flow of the sewer to be an unstable process, one that cannot be fixed in time or space. It is a process that is changing, in motion, and variously composed over time. Divining the sewer is a practice of belief as constant imagining, of not knowing as social sensing.

Sensing the social while deferring immediate visibility necessitates the "right to opacity" Édouard Glissant discusses in *Poetics of Relation*: "Agree not merely to the right to difference but [. . .] agree also to the right to opacity that is not enclosure within an impenetrable autarchy but subsistence within an irreducible singularity."[64] Opacities can "coexist and converge, weaving fabrics"[65] that make coexistence and co-relation possible.

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[61] Shigehisa Kuriyama, "The Forgotten Fear of Excrement," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 38, no. 3 (Fall 2008): 432.

[62] I have previously written about consuming each other as a mode of making kin in "Live Tenders: An Incomplete Theory of Social Digestion," *Thresholds* 48 (2020): 176–185.

[63] de Certeau, "Believe," 195.

[64] Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 190.

[65] Glissant, Poetics, 190.

The reduction to transparency as a requirement of "understanding" is comparable to the immediate indexing of seeing as an operating mode of knowing. Glissant's demand for opacity, for the recognition of difference, echoes the inherently social and necessarily temporal political space created by belief. To defer the unification of the present is thus to refuse any premise of truth that is predicated on an imagistic flattening of time, on immediacy as an index of knowing. Instead, it recuperates social relation as a suspension of the present, of belief as a deferral *toward* another time. The potential incontinence of any particular system of belief becomes irrelevant. Beyond the production of an individual subjectivity or the formation of an addressable public, the recognition of difference, estrangement, and alterity is a practice of moving in, between, and against streaming social overflows. The revelation of these currents, whose excesses, leaks, and shifting opacities deter immediate legibility and evade constant capture, might best be attempted as an approximation, or an alternate social sensing.

The sewer, or the throughways that host the base material expressions of our corporeality, is the site of our common material strangeness, now met with digital alterity. At the threshold between incorporation and expulsion, the sewer operates as a space for transformation, for approaching the unrecognizable anew. Within the sewer, we find collective belief to be unstable: a moving, submerged form that awaits our divination.