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On the Risk of Gaia for an Ecology of Practices

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The work of Isabelle Stengers engages a baffling number of topics and includes collaborators from across many disciplines and practices. For this reason, there is perhaps no set of terms or concepts that easily encapsulates her work. Nevertheless, in recent years concepts such as "cosmopolitics" and the "ecology of practices" have gained a special currency in the context of humanities and social science research (e.g., Blok and Farias; Yaneva and Zaera-Polo; Gabrys). While cosmopolitics is not a new term, and Stengers is certainly not the only one to employ it today (e.g., Latour and Beck), her use of it, and in conjunction with the ecology of practices, seems to have sparked the critical and speculative imaginations of many. This should be good news given that these concepts are not exclusive to "professional philosophy." Stengers very specifically refers to them as "tools" to be put to use in practices (Stengers, "Introductory Notes" 185).

One of the attendant risks of calling these concepts "tools" is that they may be treated as all-terrain theories capable of being applied to any and every situation. While I will not criticize current applications of the concepts here, I will demonstrate how the ecology of practices in particular is an instance of thinking *par le milieu* in Gilles Deleuze's sense of the term, and how achieving it is a hard-fought struggle that is unique to each situation. In what follows, I suggest that "staging a scene" for thinking *par le milieu* involves tremendous risk, not only financial, social, and physical risk as activists clearly testify to, but also a risk for thinking: that is, we must resist the temptation to apply our well-worn habits of modern thought to a situation (as Alfred North Whitehead was fond of saying).

It is the latter form of risk that will form the crux of my argument, which is that Stengers's frequent appeal to non-modern practices (such as animism, magic, and witchcraft) attempts to challenge our modern dispositions of thought and activate modes of thinking *par le milieu*. To demonstrate this, I draw explicitly on her use of Gaia worship in the English translation of her work, *In Catastrophic Times: Resisting the Coming*

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Barbarism, and argue that it functions as a reclaiming practice (inherited from Reclaiming Witchcraft) that stages a scene for thinking according to what our epoch makes matter: namely, the threat the Earth poses to human and non-human life. Along the way, I draw on Deleuze's notion of the problematic in order to contend that Gaia is a proposition that makes all modes of response an opportunity for learning and paying attention to problems. Ultimately, thinking *par le milieu* today involves resisting the protection that our modern references and citational practices afford us, and being lured into feeling the efficacy of what we cannot accommodate within these modern fortresses.

I. Risking The Middle

In her 2005 essay, "Introductory Notes on An Ecology of Practices," Stengers insists that the ecology of practices is not a general metric that can be applied widely; instead it is a "tool for thinking" in the middle of divergent and incommensurable worlds. The metaphor of "tool" is helpful only if we recognize that although a tool can be "passed from hand to hand" each instance of taking the tool in hand is a "particular one" (185). Thus, to treat the ecology of practices as a tool means that it acquires its meaning in and through its use (185). We do not know what this tool means until it is put to work and gives the "situation the power to make us think" (185). Stengers maintains that the situation's power is a "virtual one," in the full sense that Deleuze intends this concept, and so the tool is what actualizes this power: "The relevant tools, tools for thinking, are then the ones that address and actualise this power of the situation, that make it a matter of particular concern, in other words, make us think and not recognize" (185). What this means is that the ecology of practices is a particular achievement of bringing divergent series together (actualization) without knowing in advance how those series will come to matter to each other.

In Deleuze's own work, the "dark precursor" is the figure that ensures communication between heterogeneous series without there being a pre-existent resemblance or identity between them (Deleuze, *Difference* 119). The dark precursor *is there*, indeed "*there is* an identity belonging to the precursor," it's just that "[t]his *there is* …remains perfectly indeterminate" (119). This is why Deleuze insists that the precursor is not seen in advance—it is not pre-given or visible in a situation—which is why it is *dark*; rather, it is only visible retrospectively. Deleuze uses meteorological phenomena to lend some clarity to the temporality of the precursor: "Thunderbolts explode between different intensities, but they are preceded by an invisible, imperceptible *dark precursor*, which determines their path in advance but in reverse, as though intagliated" (119).

How a tool comes to function as a catalyst for thought within a practice depends entirely upon the situation in which it finds itself embedded—it cannot be seen in advance. Following Deleuze, we might say that we are in the dark about how an ecology of practices will take hold, that is to say, how the powers of thought will be actualized in a situation. And while each situation or practice will surely have its own constraints, holds, and attachments, what they will come to mean to an ecology of practices cannot be predetermined; we can only ever identify these meanings retrospectively. It is in this way that the ecology of practices might be thought of as a *dark* tool for activating thought. "A tool can be passed from hand to hand," Stengers insists, "but each time the gesture of taking it in hand will be a particular one—the tool is not a general means, defined as adequate for a set of particular aims, potentially including the one of the person who is taking it, and it does not entail a judgment on the situation as justifying its use" ("Introductory Notes" 185).

In an attempt to clarify her position on the ecology of practices, Stengers insists that it "may be an instance of what Gilles Deleuze called 'thinking *par le milieu*" ("Introductory Notes" 187). She points out that "milieu" is intended in the full sense of the French term, which means "both in the middle and the surroundings or habitat" (187). Where "in the middle" references the fact that thinking has no ultimate ground, transcendental starting point, or "ideal horizon," according to the "surroundings or habitat," by contrast, means that there is no fixed perspective that would be capable of disengaging thought from what a milieu has come to mean to its surroundings. There is no going "beyond the particular towards something we would be able to recognize and grasp in spite of particular appearances" (187). But this also does not mean that all the power lies in the environment, that is, the meaning of the milieu cannot be "derived from the environment" (187). This would simply be to locate the transcendental principle elsewhere, in a set of environmental coordinates that could be known, instead of affirming how thinking *par le milieu* means that we are "obliged" or "forced" to think according to the specific way a situation comes to matter within its surroundings. It is for this reason that the ecology of practices is a specific kind of achievement: it is an event of thinking *par le milieu*, in the very specific sense that Stengers intends this notion.

It is from this perspective that we can appreciate the importance Stengers attributes to the "GMO event" in Europe. In *In Catastrophic Times* she speaks at length about the failure of our "guardians"—or those who are responsible for us—to find a way to use patents to appropriate agriculture for late-stage capitalism. The commotion over GMOs was supposed to dissipate and the rhetoric of "progress" and "innovation" was supposed

to take hold in the general public (57). That the coordinated dreams of Entrepreneurs, the State, and Science did not settle in, at least in the way they were supposed to, is a consequence of a genuine event of learning and thinking "through the middle." "The arguments that our guardians were counting on," Stengers writes, "provoked not only responses but above all new connections, producing a genuine dynamic of learning between groups that had hitherto been distinct" (37). For her, and for those who so bravely and publicly resisted the intrusion of the GMO, a genuine apprenticeship took place: the situation's ways of mattering and obliging us to think and act found a temporary hold instead of being disqualified as "irrational" or "un-scientific" (40). Communities became educated, questions were asked, and complaints were voiced about GMOs, and in such a manner that they were able to temporarily resist the presumed truth of our epoch: to make everything an opportunity for profit.

Crucial to this event, and what makes it an important instance of thinking *par le milieu*, was the ability to guard against the temptation to disqualify concerned voices from outside of the realm of expertise. To stage a scene in which divergent voices come to matter, and without subsuming them under a common measure, such as the "uneducated public," cuts to the heart of what it means to think "through middle." Stengers throws the importance of non-expert thought into sharp relief in her essay, "Speculative Philosophy and the Art of Dramatization." Among other things, she writes about what speculation means in the context of Whitehead's early and mature philosophy, and more specifically about the significance of "common sense" to it. Stengers is not speaking of course about Deleuze's notion of "common sense," the sense that is presumed to be true because it is held in common (Deleuze, *Difference* 132-135); rather, she is talking about the necessity of "taking an interest in the way others make their world matter, including animal others, or tales about different ways of life, for experimenting with what may be possible" (Stengers, "Speculative" 200). The idea here is that paying due attention to what matters in a situation, as Whitehead commits himself to, means accepting that there are radically different ways of having a situation matter, and these differences cannot be explained away, or accounted for in advance. In other words, the common sense of a situation indexes the divergent ways a situation comes to make sense to others.

In the case of GMOs in Europe, this meant refusing to give professionals the authority to make decisions on behalf of others, and being moved to think according to the multiple ways that genetically modified foods are and might one day be significant. This is not to disqualify professional knowledge in advance, to say that it is an illegitimate mode coming to know something, but it is to suspend its authority in order to

allow for divergent series to communicate. As Whitehead put it in *The Concept of Nature*, expert and non-expert awareness "must be put in the same boat, to sink or swim together" (148).

In saying all of this, however, it would be all too easy to forget that GMO event in Europe also entailed tremendous suffering and hardship. Thinking does not come easy today. Elsewhere, I have discussed the significance of the Barbara van Dyck affair for Stengers (Stengers, "'Another Science'"; Nocek). Very briefly, van Dyck was a scientist at The Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, who was sacked for publicly endorsing actions taken against genetically modified potatoes in Belgium. More appalling than this was the fact that the Leuven authorities deemed her to be an "enemy of science"; indeed, they even called her actions "violent." While I won't recount any more specifics about her case here, suffice it to say that what the Van Dyck affair and numerous other cases illustrate is that the kind of apprenticeship and learning experience that Stengers calls for is not only difficult to stage, but may also involve deep emotional and physical suffering; and all of this occurs without the benefit of a guarantee. In thinking according to an ecology of practices, we are stripped of so many of those securities we tend to shore up for ourselves before we get involved in something. This is why thinking *par le milieu* is always a *risk***.** But it is a risk whose conditions for occurrence are, unfortunately, becoming more and more difficult to imagine.

In this regard, it is significant that Stengers draws our attention to how the guardians surely have learned from their failures and that the "progress" argument, which was supposed to "charm" the public, will be soon replaced, if it hasn't already, by the kinds of "infernal alternatives" that she and Philippe Pignarre detail in their book *Capitalist Sorcery.* These alternatives are the commonly heard, though carefully constructed, fabrications that bear the logical form of "if… then": "if you refuse this bad-sounding thing, then the consequences will be far, far worse." These fabrications are "aimed at sapping or capturing the capacities for thinking and resisting of those who were apt to do so" (Stengers, *In Catastrophic Times* 55). What's so worrisome, then, is that staging the conditions for thought and action is becoming more and more difficult.

In another context, Stengers asks: "How [do we] design the political scene in a way that actively protects it from the fiction that 'humans of good will decide in the name of the general interest'?" ("The Cosmopolitical" 1002). She suggests that designing such a scene really concerns the "art of staging." It is a matter of staging or designing a scene for learning and thinking together that shields it from those habits of thought that would presume to already know what a situation demands and from whom. But it is precisely this staging that has become all the more difficult, and so

what obliges us in the era of proliferating infernal alternatives is to fabricate such a scene for ourselves—to build the conditions for struggle and risk in the face of those fabrications that undermine our ability to do so.

To stage such a scene involves drawing on techniques that force us to confront our modern disposition to judge a situation, to disqualify certain practices or claims, call them superstitious or naïve, and privilege others. In other words, we must suspend those habits of thought that presume to know how a situation will come to be efficacious. It may come as no surprise that language can be a particularly powerful ally in this struggle against modern judgment. This is why Stengers's use of compromised words such as "animism," "magic," and "witchcraft" is so important for us to pay attention to.

I'm confident that Stengers caused some of her readers to stutter and stammer for a moment when they first encountered her praise of Starhawk and her use of witchcraft and sorcery in the context of contemporary struggles over technoscientific innovation and global capitalism. Stengers's invocation of non-modern practices is nothing new (her work with Leon Chertok and Tobie Nathan testifies to this), but there is nevertheless something poignant about her appeal to these practices when many humanities scholars today feel compelled to make strong statements about returning to scientific rigor and materiality in the wake of cultural and linguistic constructivism (see especially, van der Tuin and Dolphijn).

Given this, we may even be tempted think, as Andrew Goffey remarks in the Introduction to his translation of *Capitalist Sorcery*, that there are "two Isabelle Stengers" for contemporary readers: "the good one, who writes about science and the politics of knowledge—and the bad, slightly crazy one, who seemed to have got a bit new age-y and dreamed up some nonsense about witches" (xviii). Goffey is quick to criticize this view (if it even exists), and for good very good reason.

In her article, "Reclaiming Animism," Stengers insists that we live in a modern milieu in which terms like animism and magic tend to be relegated to the dustbin of culturally situated beliefs. We tend to think about them as part of a particular historical milieu that can be accounted for, but no longer exists. We "know better" now: witchcraft and magic are not "real." We have protected ourselves from these kinds of illusions. If Stengers asks us to "reclaim" terms like animism or magic, this is not because she is asking us to return to a time when we believed in rock souls and witchery; this is the wrong kind of question to ask.

Rather, she is asking us to confront how it "is that we are the heirs of an operation of cultural and social eradication—the forerunner of what was committed elsewhere in the name of civilization and reason" (Stengers, "Reclaiming Animism" 6). Following the neo-pagan witch and

feminist activist, Starhawk, reclaiming terms like magic and animism forces us to situate ourselves within a modern milieu that is defined by its capacity to distinguish what is real and not real, what is fact and fiction (see also Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*). If these terms make us feel slightly hesitant, then they are doing their job: they are obliging us to "smell the smoke in our nostrils"—we are modern witch hunters—and to "reclaim" the capacity to "honor an experience" without speaking on its behalf, without knowing how it may be relevant to others (see Stengers, "Reclaiming Animism" 7).[1] It is in this context that we might begin to appreciate how naming practices are capable of threatening our modern fortresses of thought and luring us into feeling the efficacy of divergent ways of being moved to think, feel, and act in a situation without being able to answer on behalf of them.

The point for Stengers is not to get us to believe in the reality of magic and casting spells so that we might put it on the side of really real things. Thinking *par le milieu* concerns resisting the temptation to know in advance how a technique or practice will come to matter, how it will take hold, and how it will move us to think, act, and feel. We cannot speak on behalf of what is "not ours" (Stengers, "Reclaiming Animism" 7). This includes of course not appropriating or using what is "not ours" for the sake of "us," only to reinstate our modern fortresses.

In her essay on animism, Stengers insists that she received the notion of "reclaiming" as a gift from the neo-pagan witches. The witches she is referring to are the Reclaiming Witches of San Francisco, a group formed in 1979 by two Jewish women, Diane Baker and Starhawk (see Salomonsen). In thinking through how Stengers might have learned from these women, it is crucial to emphasize that Reclaiming is a radical political movement with deep ties to eco-feminism, civil disobedience, and direct action. According Jone Salomonsen, and with specific reference to Reclaiming's eco-feminist leanings, the movement is invested in reclaiming the proper name, "Witch," as someone who is "skilled in the craft of shaping, bending and changing reality" and not somebody involved in supernatural evil doing (Salomonsen 7). Reclaiming is also and fundamentally invested in the "spirituality these feminists feel they have reclaimed from ancient paganism and goddess worship in order to heal the experiences of estrangement occasioned by patriarchal biblical religions" (2). In this view, Reclaiming Witchcraft is, at least in part, a feminist healing practice borne out of a need to "bend and shape" our sense of reality through goddess worship. In response to our sharp modern criticism that "…your Goddess is only a fiction," Stengers insists that "they would doubtless smile and ask us whether we are among those who believe that fiction is powerless" ("Reclaiming Animism" 7).[2]

In what follows, I want to pay special attention to how naming practices, inherited from Reclaiming Witchcraft, take hold in the context of Stengers's work on environmental activism. Not only do they confront us with our own tendency to disqualify or culturally situate a non-modern practice, but they also experiment with the possibility that it could become a powerful lure for us to learn and pay attention to what our contemporary epoch makes matter. How might Stengers's naming of the ancient goddess, Gaia, help heal our "barbaric" relation to the Earth by "bending and shaping" our sense of reality? But of course naming a goddess does not in itself put our modern habits of thought to rest. Nor should we think that Stengers is appropriating the concept of Gaia from Reclaiming Witches. While the act of reclaiming is a gift from the witches, I want to insist that the Gaia who is named in the context of *In Catastrophic Times* is generated out of the obligations of our epoch. Gaia is a creative response and not an appropriative act. What we need to ask is how does naming *this* goddess, namely, Gaia, in our epoch make us stutter and stammer? What does naming Gaia call into being that would challenge our modern temptation to denounce goddess worship and even Stengers as superstitious? How does *Gaia* make it possible to think *par le milieu* in the 21st century?

II. Gaia, What She Makes Matter

In *In Catastrophic Times* Stengers tells us that what, among other things, marks our era as distinct from others is that we are no longer only confronting a "nature" "that needs to be 'protected' from the damage caused by humans, but also with a nature capable of threatening our modes of thinking and living for good" (20). If our epoch has changed, then it is because this "inconvenient truth […] imposes itself" (20) and "no future can be foreseen in which [we] will be given back the liberty of ignoring" it (49). But what also marks our epoch is that "we are," as Stengers affirms, "as badly prepared as possible to produce the type of response that, we feel, the situation requires of us" (30). "Barbarism" is how she characterizes our capacity to respond to the situation; or more precisely, barbarism is the future promised to us by the "three thieves," namely the State, the Entrepreneurs, and Science, who generate the possibilities for our response to what imposes itself on us today. And those possibilities index so many infernal alternatives that eclipse our capacity for formulating our own questions and answers (56).

In an effort to stage the possibility of a response to what is distinctive about our epoch, Stengers proposes that Gaia is the one who intrudes today and in the future, and that she is the deity to whom we must pay attention. The notion of proposal must be taken very seriously here.

Stengers is careful to point out that naming Gaia is "pragmatic," and then much later in the text she insists that Gaia is a proposition whose "truth derives from [its] efficacy" (146). "*To name,*" Stengers writes, "*is not to say what is true but to confer on what is named the power to make us feel and think in the mode that the name calls for*" (43; italics in original). Whitehead also speaks about the proposition in similar terms. For Whitehead, a proposition is neither true nor false in itself, but is a "lure for feeling" a world that "might be." The proposition is a "matter of fact in potential" (*Process* 22, 188) whose truth is evaluated according to its effects, according to what it makes matter. In just this way, Stengers is testing the efficacy of the naming practices of the Reclaiming Witches: How might we use naming to "bend our sense of reality"?

Stengers is quick to point out that naming Gaia should not be confused with the need to generate a sense of connection and belonging to the Earth in the wake of the global fragmentation and destruction produced by capitalism (43). But neither does Stengers want to fall into the trap of those scientists who first popularized Gaia in scientific discourse in the 1970s. For James Lovelock in particular, Gaia names an Earthly Mother who has to be protected, and indeed whose danger seems to require of us rather horrific and final solutions, namely, reducing the population by 500 million or so in order to live in peace with her (47). These are final judgments we make on Gaia's behalf. More than anything, Gaia is named in order to produce a feeling of *intrusion* that is "blind to the damage she causes" (43). What Stengers wishes to bring to our attention through naming Mother Earth is how there is "no afterwards," there is no going about our business in a post-Gaia world (57). The Earth's presence makes itself felt today although it is not threatened by us. Nor is Gaia judging us, and seeking to be the "righter of wrongs" done to her (46). We have provoked her through the "brutality" of capitalism (53), which puts life in danger, but she is indifferent to our responses to her.

It's worth noting that classics scholars, such as Robert Lamberton, have paid special attention to the fact that in Homer and Hesiod, Gaia's epithet is *pelore*, from the ancient Greek *pelor*. In Homer, *pelorios* is most often used to designate what is "awe-inspiring" or "large." In Hesiod, on the other hand, the "*pelor* group is never used for things that are simply large" (72). Along with Gaia, the epithet is used in relation to the "snake portion of Ekhidna" as well as Typhoeus and the Giants, and refers to what is monstrous—that is to say, the "monstrous Earth." "[I]t has long been noticed," Lamberton continues, "that the *pelor* group of epithets bind together Mother Earth and her huge, unruly offspring, the Giants. In her aspect as *Gaia pelore*, 'monstrous Earth,' she is specifically linked to the destructive forces represented by the Giants and Typhoeus" (73).

In light of this, I would argue that Stengers's very specific invocation of *Gaia* makes the epithet, *pelore*, seem entirely reasonable. However, it would be a mistake to think that Gaia is vengeful, that is, angry with us and seeking revenge; rather, Gaia's true monstrosity stems from the fact that she is indifferent to us—she is an indifferent mother. She has produced offspring, such as Typhoeus, the monstrous storm-giant, whose storms are liable to make it impossible for human life to thrive. But Gaia, for her part, is "blind to the damage she causes" (Stengers, *In Catastrophic Times* 43).

What is so difficult about the proposition of Gaia as the one who intrudes is that she is here to stay and demands nothing of us, or more precisely, she is "indifferent to our reasons and our projects" because they have no effect on her intrusion—she is not the one who is threatened, ever (47). "Gaia herself is not threatened," writes Stengers, "unlike the considerable number of living species who will be swept away with unprecedented speed by the change in their milieu that is on the horizon" (46). For this reason, there is no getting rid of Gaia, and so there is no solving the right problem to be done with her intrusion. This is why Stengers insists that Gaia's intrusion is not a "simple problem," by which she means that she is not a problem whose solution is just waiting to be discovered or invented (43). Gaia's intrusion is "unilateral" (46). We must therefore learn how to "compose with her" instead of trying to protect her, solve her, or struggle against her (50).

We must surely struggle against what provoked Gaia's intrusion, namely, global capitalism, but not Gaia herself (53). We must also struggle against the temptation to know what tools to compose with and how to go about using them; we must resist the urge to provide an answer to these questions lest we fall prey to our well-worn habits of thought that assume Gaia prescribes an answer to her own intrusion. Rather, Gaia names *the fact of* her intrusion now and in the future, and that there is no mode of response that could eclipse this fact (47).

What we must do, instead, is learn how to compose answers and responses to her that do not presume to know which ones will be efficacious. This is because Gaia's intrusion provides no explanation or reason that would be capable of disqualifying questions and answers in advance of them being put to the test. For Stengers, failure to engage in this struggle is barbaric, even suicidal; it is suicidal not to take on the demanding task of fabricating responses to an intrusion that has no adequate response (50).

What I want to foreground here is how Gaia is a proposition that makes responding to her necessary; and yet, no response, or sum total of responses, will ever be sufficient. Responding to Gaia, worshiping her, is therefore a problem that never finds its solution. If Stengers insists that Gaia is not a "simple problem," then I nonetheless think that her proposi-

tion frames our obligation to respond to her in terms of a true problem. Deleuze and Deleuze and Guattari are well known, of course, for their work on the problem, and I think what Stengers has managed to stage through naming this divinity is how the concepts, apparatuses, and solutions assembled in Gaia's name can and should become expressions of a problem in Deleuze and Guattari's sense.

As Martin Savransky's article in this special issue demonstrates, the problem for Deleuze and Deleuze and Guattari is a tension in a transcendental field that is never resolved, although each solution transforms the conditions for future response (*Difference* 161, 163, 169). Put in these terms, the problematic tension that the proposition of Gaia fabricates for us is one in which we are obliged to respond to the fact that life on Earth is threatened without there ever being an adequate response to this threat. But what we must also come to appreciate is that with every response, with every struggle, with every apparatus for learning and sharing assembled, the conditions for future struggle change; they undergo transformation. In other words, the problematic field doesn't go away, but it generates new conditions for learning and responding. But what, then, does it mean to engage in this kind of learning practice?

In *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze is speaks about the importance of learning from problems. He insists that "learning evolves entirely in the comprehension of problems" (192). Where education is so often regarded, and especially today, as addressing itself to the production of knowledge from out of effective solutions, Deleuze reverses this priority: "an apprentice," he insists,

> is someone who constitutes and occupies practical or speculative problems as such. Learning is the appropriate name for the subjective act carried out when one is confronted with the objectivity of a problem (Idea), whereas knowledge designates only the generality of concepts or the calm possession of a rule enabling solutions. (164)

Learning from problems, instead of knowing solutions, requires a transformation on our behalf (Deleuze, *Difference* 192). What this transformation entails, more specifically, is adjusting our expectations about the outcomes of learning. If true problems do not correspond to the "possibility of their solution," then we cannot expect to know what will be generated from an apprenticeship with them—"[w]e never know in advance how someone will learn…" (165). Thus, we cannot approach a situation composed of various tensions and strains already knowing how to resolve them, already expecting a result and how to go about achieving it. Rather, learning concerns the art of crafting responses that are always local, always situated, and always risky. Each adjustment, each pull, changes the nature of the composition of the problem, which is why

attention and care are so essential to learning from problems (165).[3] With one wrong adjustment, the field of potential action changes and the milieu can become "poisoned" (100). One must always be attentive to dosages.[4] Each response to a problem intervenes in the modes of thought and action that are possible in the future.

This mode of learning and paying attention to problems also means guarding against those who are apt to fabricate questions and answers on our behalf and pose them to whomever (Deleuze, *Difference* 100). The problem of a non-barbaric response to Gaia is an occasion for learning what such a problem demands from us, namely, crafting questions and answers based upon what a situation makes matter, how it moves us to think, act, imagine, and ask new questions. Learning is not about solving the problem, but about changing our conditions for engaging it.

So what does the proposition of Gaia make matter? What do the naming practices of Reclaiming Witches lure us into feeling? I want to suggest that naming Gaia makes responding to the threat the Earth poses to human and nonhuman life problematic. The proposition of Gaia lures us into feeling that there is no transcendental capacity to judge how best to solve the problem of the Earth's intrusion; there is no secure perspective from which we can evaluate this threat and eliminate it. Gaia makes it impossible for judgment to work confidently—that faculty which is so quick to apply the ready-made tools neoliberalism has made available to it. There are no prepared answers, only local questions and provisional answers that change the possibilities for future response. Responses to Gaia, Stengers writes, "will always be local responses, not in the sense that local means 'small' but in the sense that it is opposed to 'general' or 'consensual'" (*In Catastrophic Times* 131).

What I want to propose, then, is that Gaia stages the conditions under which we can begin to think *par le milieu* in our era. If we take Gaia to be the proposition that refuses to authorize a solution to her, then she is the one who facilitates the suspension of all those forms of judgment that would disqualify solutions to her in advance of being put to the test. Gaia is the one who lures us into confronting the fact that there are radically different ways of having a situation come to matter, and none of them can be subsumed under a common measure or a set of "shared values." Put in other terms, Gaia is a fabrication that obliges us to approach each situation by asking: how can an ecology of practices be actualized in it? How can divergent series come together in our epoch so that we may formulate questions and answers without a transcendental measure that would be capable of validating or disqualifying them in advance? The possibility of a non-barbaric response to the Earth depends upon our capacity to put the presumed authority of our guardian's questions and answers in

suspension and feel the efficacy of those responses that diverge from our own. "There will be no response," Stengers insists, "other than the barbaric if we do not learn to couple together multiple, divergent struggles and engagements in this process of creation, as hesitant and stammering as it may be" (*In Catastrophic Times* 50).

III. Civilizing the Milieu?

Very generally, this article has tried to bring to the fore just how difficult it is to stage the conditions for thinking *par le milieu* today. And I mean "difficulty" in the sense that van Dyck and others may have experienced it—in terms of physical and emotional loss and suffering—but also in the sense that we experience everyday, that is, in terms of those deeply engrained modern habits of thought that make it so easy to speak on behalf of others. Stengers addresses this difficulty in so many contexts, and I have just barely begun to scratch the surface here.

Nevertheless, this challenge is also an opportunity to situate Stengers's use of non-modern practices in terms of her ecology of practices. In particular, her use of *Gaia* worship, and her appeals to Reclaiming Witchcraft and other non-modern practices more generally, stages a scene for thinking "through the middle" in an era (and all future human eras) when human life is threatened on Earth. Gaia is a proposition that reorients our thinking about the Earth: it is a problem we must learn from and not solve; anything short of this destines us for barbarism. One of my central provocations here is that this "reorientation" may itself be a kind of witchcraft in the sense that goddess worship has managed to "bend and shape" our sense of reality. The efficacy of Reclaiming practices is thrown into sharp relief as we feel it transform what matters to us in our contemporary era.

Although Stengers often refers to our current capacities to respond to our epoch as "barbaric," she never names what a non-barbaric response would be. Would this be a civilized response? In other contexts, Stengers talks about civilization in Whitehead's sense, but not here (e.g., "'Another Science'"; "Speculative Philosophy"). At minimum, we could say that it involves learning and paying attention to how all responses get folded back into the problematic scene that Gaia helps stage. This, I think, could be another opportunity to think with Whitehead. And in particular, "The Rhythm of Education" becomes especially fertile ground. George Allen, for example, insists that Whitehead's philosophy of education needs to be understood both as a processual adventure of learning that never finds its solution (it is cyclical) and as a fundamental part of Whitehead's metaphysics more generally. In this regard, each of Whitehead's stages of education—Romance, Precision, and Generalization—have clear ana-

logues in the final part of *Adventure of Ideas*, which just happens to be titled, "Civilization" (Allen 35-58). In this way, I'd like to suggest that by creating the conditions for a non-barbaric response to Gaia, Stengers has also lured us into entertaining how Whitehead may help us learn what civilization could mean today.

Indeed, I think her work asks us to make this question a priority. We get a glimpse of this in the lecture she delivered in 2012 titled, "'Another Science Is Possible!' A Plea for Slow Science." There, Stengers references Whitehead's civilized modes of appreciation from his *Modes of Thought*. She draws attention to how modern professionalism is what eclipses civilized knowledge from taking hold (Whitehead, *Science* 197). In particular, she disparages the professionalism of scientific education today and its inability to place abstractions in wider contexts and encourage its practitioners to ask questions that have not already been prepared for them. She worries that modern professionalism eclipses the ability of scientists to subject their claims to severe objections and difficult criticism, and then celebrates Barbara van Dyck's resistance to GMOs in Belgium. Stengers contends that van Dyck's resistance was made possible by her non-professional education, her education as a citizen, and then suggests that she captures the spirit of what Whitehead meant by civilized learning. Stengers's work thus raises the question of civilized learning in Whitehead's sense, but I think it remains for us to learn what composing with Gaia in a civilized mode means in the 21st century.

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Notes

1. Stengers writes that "[r]eclaiming means recovering, and, in this case, recovering the capacity to honor experience, any experience we care for, as "not ours" but rather as "animating" us, making us witness to what is not us. While such a recovery cannot be reduced to the entertaining of an idea, certain ideas can further the process – and can protect it from being "demystified" as some fetishistic illusion" (Stengers, "Reclaiming Animism 7).
2. Furthermore, Stengers addresses the neo-pagan use of magic in this way: "As the witch Starhawk wrote, calling forth the efficacy of ritual magic is in itself an act of magic. Indeed it goes against all the plausible, comfortable reasons that propose magic as a simple matter of belief, part of a past which should remain in the past. 'We no longer ...'— as soon as we begin like that, the master word of progress is speaking in our place, precisely the one the contemporary witches contest as the name they gave to themselves is there also to recall to memory witch-hunting and the 'burning times' " ("Introductory Notes" 194).
3. Learning to swim in the ocean is a good example of the formation of a problematic field of relations. "To learn to swim," writes Deleuze, "is to conjugate the distinctive points of our bodies with the singular points of the objective Idea in order to form a problematic field. This conjugation determines for us a threshold of consciousness at which our real acts are adjusted to our perceptions of the real relations, thereby providing a solution to the problem" (*Difference* 165).

4. Stengers speaks of the "pharmacological" uncertainty that pervades the tools employed in "user movements." In particular, she argues that our "guardians" cannot handle the danger of the "pharmakon." As such there is no appreciation for the art of dosages. She contends that "what has been privileged again and again is what presents, or seems to present, the guarantees of a stable identity, which allows the question of the appropriate attention, the learning of doses and the manner of preparation, to be done away with. A history in which the question of efficacy has been incessantly enslaved, reduced to that of the causes supposed to explain their effects" (*In Catastrophic Times* 100).

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