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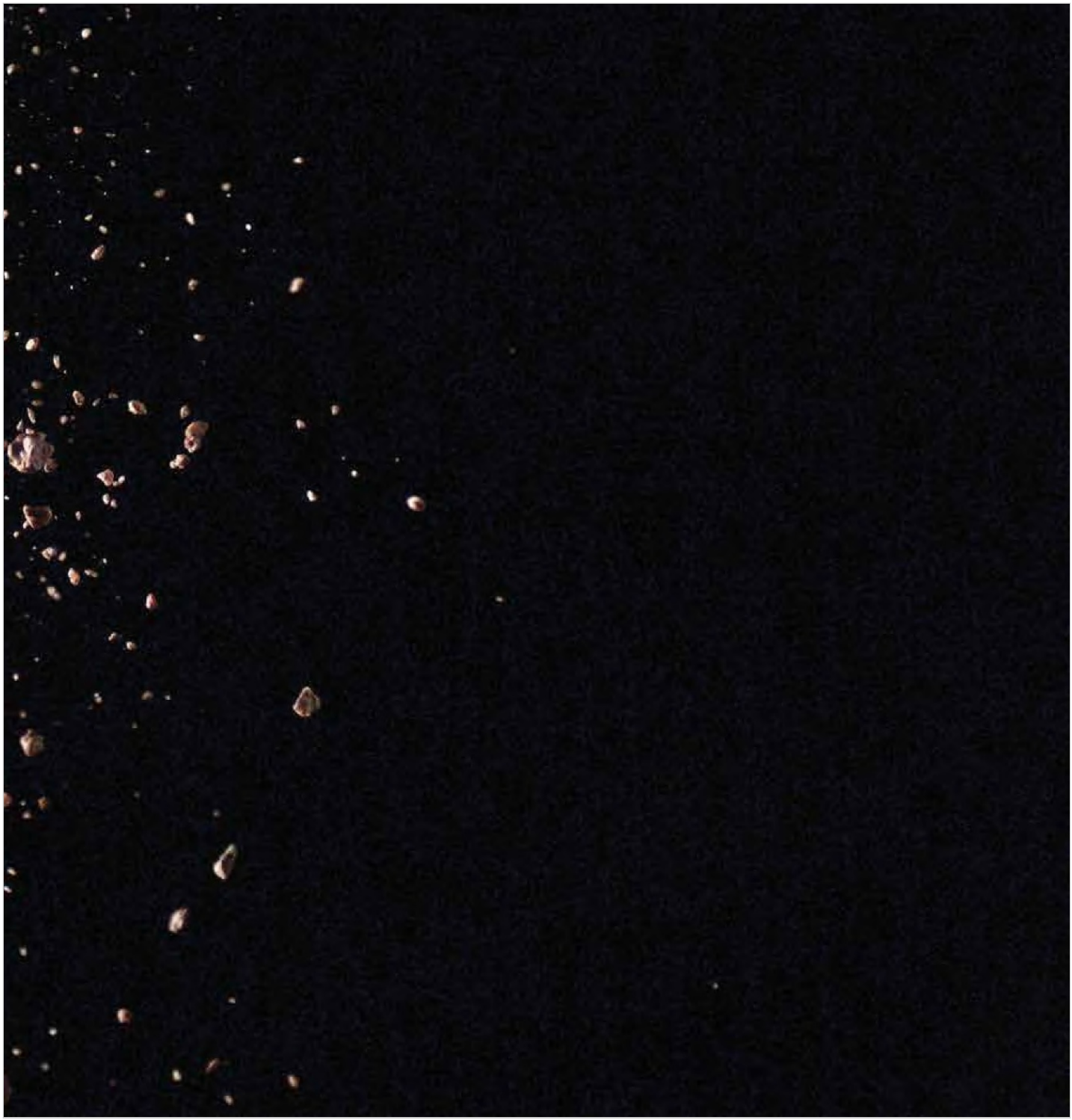
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Particularity: Swarms, Storms and Other Matters *Tessa Laird*

In Henry David Thoreau's proto-environmentalist classic *Walden*, the archetypal nature-lover tries to bring some of the great outdoors inside. He introduces three magnificent chunks of limestone into the ecology of his writing desk, only to find that the displaced rocks require daily dusting. He throws them out the window in disgust, declaring: 'I would rather sit in the open air, for no dust gathers on the grass, unless where man has broken ground'.[1] Thoreau implies that dust is an artefact of culture, concomitant with civilisation, unknown in the wilderness. This rings true: from cobwebbed catacombs to the grey velvet mat across the top of the DVD player. But what about deserts, those *wild* silos of dust? Growing awareness of desertification indicates that civilisation might be responsible for those shifty ex-territories too. Even Australia, if we are to believe Tim Flannery's *Future Eaters*, was once a rainforest paradise, not the red desert it became after human colonisation and 'firestick farming'.[2] Meanwhile, the deserts of the Middle East are both source *and* residue of culture as we have come to know it in the 'civilised' world, via the trifecta of meat, wheat and monotheism.[3]

Surely dust is a *natural* substance that reclaims human artefacts and swathes dwindling civilisations with its imperceptible embrace after the death of *culture*? Yet, according to Thoreau, dust *itself* is evidence of culture; indeed, perhaps dust and culture are caught up in a mutually constitutive storm? Artist Rangituhia Hollis runs a collaborative blog called *puehu: cultural dust*, inspired by the Maori proverb '*tutu ana te puehu*', which refers to an orator on the *marae* stirring up dust.[4] Hollis, who works predominantly with politically and culturally charged forms of computer animation, uses the analogy of *Tom and Jerry* cartoons, where cat and mouse are enveloped in a cloud of dust that absorbs everything around them. The cultural production of desert peoples can be particularly particulate; the dot paintings of Indigenous Australians suggest the grain of red desert dust is *the* indivisible unit, monad, pixel, with which to build an understanding of the world's doings and undoings.

In *A World Undone* (2012), Melbourne artist Nicholas Mangan pulverised zircon, one of the oldest minerals on the planet, into red dust. Filming its mineral fallout at 100 times the frame rate compatible with human vision and rendering the russet dust-fall in exquisite slow motion, each grain becomes a world, each moment a *yuga*. Helen Hughes refers to the ancient zircon crystal as forming an early 'terrestrial skin',[5] an appropriate metaphor for Mangan's disaggregation, seeing as the key ingredient of household dust is keratin, a protein derived from human skin.[6] Mangan's work makes manifest these extremities of the 'scalar spectrum'[7] (not to mention the scaly spectrum of skin flakes, from humanoids or planetoids). Hughes calls Mangan's fast-tracking of entropy an 'unbecoming', while the artist uses the phrase 'inverted cosmos'.

Carl Sagan was unaware that while he was filming the documentary series *Cosmos*, beatifically intoning 'we are made of star stuff', his son Dorion was smoking angel dust during high-school lunch hour. Later, as a responsible microbiologist, Dorion reads his son Dr Seuss's *Horton Hears a Who!*, which features a talking speck of dust that is actually a microscopic world. Dorion calls it a 'crash course in imaginary microbiology and crypto-anthropology',[8] comparing the Seussian parable to his father's mania for scalar comparisons: Sagan senior described planet Earth seen from space as a mere 'mote of dust'.[9] For the cosmic Carl, as for

Nicholas Mangan
World Undone
2012
HD video still, colour, silent, 12:00 mins, continuous loop
Courtesy of the artist, Sutton Gallery, Melbourne, Hopkinson Mossman, Auckland and LABOR, Mexico City

many others, grains of dust were seeds in an intergalactic granary, sowing civilisations in space via dehydrated bacteria, in a process given the speculative if somewhat phallocentric name 'panspermia'.

If dust is the residue of cosmic ejaculate, it's no wonder feminism's work is never done, though dusting, like Hollis's orator on the *marae*, only ever stirs things up. In 1997, an artists' intervention was staged in the about-to-be-refurbished Oriental Room of the Auckland Museum, but the show was pulled after a couple of weeks due to disgruntled responses from the public. The trigger was Constance McArdle's vitrine containing the contents of a vacuum bag—the kind of dust we normally dump in the bin, face averted, in disbelief that we have managed to coexist with such quantities of this insidious substance. Star stuff having come down to Earth is mundane indeed. Perhaps McArdle was commenting on the dusty state of the museum's collection, channelling collective memories of, for example, the moth-eaten stuffed elephant that used to greet Aucklanders, straw falling out of his tatty scrotum—like the entropic museum Robert Smithson captured so eloquently in his 1968 essay 'The Establishment'.[10] Or perhaps she was foregrounding the experience of women as the ultimate dust-busters, doomed to an eternal and useless struggle against entropy. Are women really civilising forces in the struggle against chaos? Or rather, despite Barbara Kruger's assertions, do women play nature to this dust = culture, unsettling the settled? Is dusting, then, a worlding, or rather, as with Mangan's swirling planetoids, a *whirlding*?

Ten years after McArdle, Palestinian artist Raeda Saadeh performed a Sisyphean task in *Vacuum* (2007), a two-channel video installation in which she attempted to hoover the dust off the desert hills of Palestine. While in part a commentary on women's labour, *Vacuum* is also about history and the paradoxical inevitability *and* impossibility of erasure, of the omnipresent cloak of data-rich matter that preserves as much as it conceals. Unfinished business.

If dust is thick with information, what can we learn from its grey matter? In Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*—a dense, sophisticated steampunk trilogy for young adults dedicated to expunging the Christian Islamophobe propaganda of C.S. Lewis's *Narnia* series once and for all—capitalised Dust is a sentient substance that clings to people and cultural artefacts. In the first book of the trilogy, *The Golden Compass*,[11] young heroine Lyra witnesses a magical slideshow in which glowing particles of Dust can be seen streaming around a man, while a child in the same photo attracts very little Dust. This is a recurring theme: at the passage of adolescence, children open themselves to the wonders or terrors of Dust, depending on your point of view.

Lyra's world is similar to our own but possesses subtly divergent technology and terminology, like a mirror with its own mind. The most striking difference is that all humans possess a daemon: a spirit incarnated in animal form, and neither can survive long without the other. Children's daemons change shape incessantly, but around the time of adolescence the daemons find a form they will hold for the rest of their humans' lives. Known as 'settling', this process occurs at the same time that Dust starts to be attracted to children; when you settle, Dust settles on you. Dust can't settle on the unsettled, hence the necessity for nomadism in the desert, or Thoreau tossing his rocks out the window.

A host of associations accumulate around Dust in *His Dark Materials*; the word itself attracts fragments and flakes of meaning. Arch-villainess Mrs Coulter calls Dust 'something bad, something wrong, something evil and wicked'.[12] The daemon, the animal nature of a human, is responsible for introducing 'troublesome thoughts



Raeda Saadeh
Vacuum, 2007
Two-channel video installation, 17:00 mins
Courtesy of the artist



and feelings' at puberty, which 'lets Dust in'.[13] The Magisterium, an all-powerful global church state, sees Dust as 'the physical evidence for original sin'.[14] But Dust isn't just sinful, it's smart; indeed, it's what powers the narrative engine of *His Dark Materials.* 'Its billions of particles were like the stars of every galaxy in the sky, and every one of them was a little fragment of conscious thought.'[15] Dust is also divine: Tartars drill holes in their skulls to let the Dust in, 'so the gods can talk to them'.[16] Gods and Dust are one, yet for the duration of *The Golden Compass*, Dust is shrouded in 'dark intentions, like the forms of thoughts not yet born'.[17]

The second book in the trilogy, *The Subtle Knife*, introduces multiple worlds, including our own, in which ex-nun Dr Mary Malone notes that Dust seems to be attracted to anything associated with human workmanship and thought,[18] and that there are many ways to get in touch with this cosmic intelligence. The *I Ching* is an acknowledged source, as is Lyra's alethiometer (the eponymous golden compass). Dr Malone's computer engages in a remarkable conversation with Dust, which declares itself to be, variously, 'angels', 'structures' and 'complexifications'. According to Dust, 'matter and spirit are one'.[19] This sounds something like Baruch Spinoza's monist philosophy, postulating a single, universal substance, with the spiritual and physical as merely two aspects of what he chose to call God.[20] Pullman's Dust, like Spinoza's Substance, 'is entirely immanent, and knows no separation of matter and spirit'.[21]

Book three, *The Amber Spyglass*, gets up close and personal with some angels: the queer cosmic couple Baruch and Balthamos.[22] Balthamos says, 'Dust is only a name for what happens when matter begins to understand itself. Matter loves matter. It seeks to know more about itself, and Dust is formed.'[23] Here, 'knowledge' is a biblical euphemism for sexual relations, although it's also much more than that. Indeed, the crux of the trilogy is the rehabilitation of sexuality without sin, as Lyra and her companion Will become young lovers towards the narrative's end and rejuvenate the ailing worlds with their sexual love. The Dust that was leaking out of holes in the fabric of the multiverse comes streaming back again. Matter loves matter (Lyra and Will), matter loves Dust (the wind and trees mourn its loss), and Dust loves matter, turning tide and settling all around Will and Lyra, whose daemons have 'settled' into their fixed forms after they have felt the touch of a lover's hand upon them. Will and Lyra are now radiant with Dust, and all is well with the worlds.

Dust, however, can be personified as agentic in scenarios far from such utopian territory. One such cartography is itself a dust-covered manuscript purportedly exhumed from under a bed in a Turkish hotel. If Deleuze once described 'taking an author from behind and giving him a child that would be his own offspring, yet monstrous', then Reza Negarestani's *Cyclonopedia* is that monstrous 'immaculate conception' produced by intellectual 'buggery';[24] the bastard child of Deleuze himself, along with William Burroughs, Georges Bataille and a host of others. The geo-political buggery of two Gulf Wars has the Middle East assert itself as a sentient being made of autonomous materials, including dust, which is a 'super-weapon, infected with bad karma'.[25] As with *His Dark Materials*, dust is data-rich, it is 'the middle-eastern unit of information'.[26] Dust's inherent dryness (*xero* in Greek) leads to the neologism 'Xero-data', which, contra Pullman, doesn't animate our universe with spirit, but infects it with nihilism. For Negarestani, 'dust qabalistically equals No God',[27] whereas in Pullman's universe, 'Dust functions as a replacement for the redundant God'.[28] Yet, according to Negarestani, 'nothing is more characteristically middle-eastern than the monotheistic, essentially Zoroastrian phrase "dust to dust"',[29] and dust has filtered across the planet as 'that middle-eastern relic from which nothing can escape'.[30] Because dust is always migrating elsewhere, it is an 'illusive ground, a bogus State', permanently extraterritorial.[31]

For Negarestani, the dust storms generated by the Gulf Wars have engineered a type of vision that can *only* see through the 'Fog of War', and then it can *only* see 'other warmachines moving, copulating and finally being devoured by War'.[32] Unlike Pullman's Dust-attracting sexuality without sin, Negarestani's Fog of War is the infinite money shot of 'Wargasm'.[33] Indeed, dust is 'so baked, so dehydrated' that it 'thirsts for cosmic wetness, for the flood'.[34] In this binary of wet and dry, *napht*, the Persian word for wetness, comes to name oil and the petro-politics driving the Gulf Wars: 'Only oil can settle the dust of the Middle East'.[35]

In Pullman's universe, the *mulefa* (strange, sentient wheeled animals Dr Malone finds in another world) venerate the oil of a particular tree. In a twist on the Garden of Eden myth, this oil takes the place of the fruit of knowledge and gives them consciousness. When Dr Malone constructs her amber spyglass in order to see the Dust (which the *mulefa* give the rather Arabic-sounding name of *sraf*), it only works after she coats the spyglass with the special oil. As with *Cyclonopedia*, there is mutual attraction between dust and oil, or any wetness. Dust and water combine to make clay, the cosmological *prima materia* from which humans emerge, along with that insidiously dust-attracting conglomeration of congealed dust known as 'civilisation', including art and artefact.

'Understand this', says Xaphania, one of the oldest angels in Pullman's universe: 'Dust is not a constant. There's not a fixed quantity that has always been the same. Conscious beings make Dust—they renew it all the time, by thinking and feeling and reflecting, by gaining wisdom and passing it on.'[36] If dust = culture, then the art world ought to be teeming with it; yet the white cube is particularly dust-averse. Artists' studios seem more promising breeding grounds for the particulate matter, witness Marcel Duchamp's *Large Glass*, which was left languishing in a state of partial completion while the artist spent a year in New York. The year's worth of dust on the work's veined and ribbed surface was photographed in 1920 by Man Ray; *Dust Breeding (Duchamp's Large Glass with Dust Motes)* looks like an aerial view of the ancient geoglyphs carved into the Nazca desert of Peru (now *there's* an art of dust!).

Duchampian practice encroaches like the desert; one is never sure if it is de- or re-territorialising. New Zealand artist Dane Mitchell, one of many extraterritorial Duchampians, has been compiling a 'Dust Archive' since 2003, which includes samples of dust gathered from galleries and museums around the world. Mitchell expounds upon the properties of dust, which may contain anything 'from space stones to Saharan dust, from fungi to the bones of animals, bits of modern tire rubber, poisonous lead, long banned pesticides, dangerous molds and bacteria and countless micrograms of human skin'.[37] In *Minor Optics (Dust Particulate Collection)* (2009), at DAAD Gallerie in Berlin, Mitchell exhibited freestanding squares of black-lacquered steel attached to voltage units. Wilfully stark, these electrostatically-charged plates became dust attractors, set up to achieve that which happens quite naturally on any homely shelf of *tchotchkes*. Indeed, putting the 'us' back in dust, Emily Cormack notes that Mitchell's monoliths 'emulate the dust-attracting qualities of a human'.[38]

At the Busan Biennale, in 2010, Mitchell turned his attention to the skies with *Cosmic Dust Collection {Extraterrestrial Smithereens}*, a series of magnetised satellite dishes 'working to collect Interplanetary Dust Particles (IDPs) as they continuously rain down through earth's outer atmosphere'. Eschewing the very thing they seekto attract, they are anachronisms: clean lines and polished surfaces in the service of attracting an agent ofdisruption and entropy. Mitchell suggests that one purpose of capturing and cataloguing cosmic dust is to locate ourselves in the vastness of space, yet this universal substance has been segregated from viewers by a vitrine, on a slide under a magnifying glass, recalling the experimental station at Bolvangar in

The Golden Compass—where children are 'severed' from their daemons. Mitchell's pseudo-science is more benign than Pullman's nightmare world, but both emphasise the folly of striving for pure objectivity.

Pullman has been critiqued for his inconsistent characterisation of Dust, blocking our efforts 'to establish an integrated symbolic interpretation of it'.[39] Yet even the scientific definition of dust doesn't make a qualitative distinction 'between mite droppings and pulverized diamonds'.[40] Like Hollis's *Tom and Jerry* cartoon on the *marae*, it seems entirely appropriate to the nature of dust that just such an undifferentiated fog is created, and that only glimpses—a tail here, a whisker there—might be visible in the cloud. For the cloud itself has no edges but billows out into imperceptibility, eternally omnipresent, persistently opaque, deterritorialising everything in its wake.



Dane Mitchell
Minor Optics (Dust Particulate Collection), 2009 (detail)
Steel, lacquer, perspex, electronic unit, vices, electrical clamps
Dimensions Variable (steel sheets 170 x 150 cm each)
Image courtesy of the artist, Hopkinson Mossman, Auckland and daadgalerie, Berlin

1 Henry David Thoreau, *Walden, or Life in the Woods*, Dover Publications, New York, 1995, p. 23.
2 Tim Flannery, *The Future Eaters: An Ecological History of the Australasian Lands and People*, Reed Books, Chatswood, 1994.
3 Obviously meat is eaten wherever humans find themselves, but the livestock varieties we breed so efficiently for slaughter—sheep, goats and cows—all have Middle Eastern origins. Reza Negarestani sees desertification as a deliberate jihadi strategy, since 'militant horizontality' is the 'promised land of the Divine'. Reza Negarestani, *Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials*, re.press, Melbourne, 2008, p. 18.
4 Rangituhia Hollis et al., *puehu: cultural dust*, http://puehu.tumblr.com/; accessed 30 November 2016.
5 Helen Hughes, 'Vertical Histories: Nicholas Mangan's *A World Undone*', gallery brochure, Hopkinson Mossman, Auckland, 2012 (archived at www.nicholasmangan.com).
6 Dorion Sagan, *The Cosmic Apprentice: Dispatches from the Edge of Science*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2013, p. 53.
7 Hughes.
8 Sagan, p. 54.
9 Sagan, p. 56.
10 Robert Smithson, 'The Establishment', in Jack Flam (ed.), *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1996, pp. 97–99.
11 The first book of the series in the UK release was titled *The Northern Lights*, but the US version, along with its 2007 film adaptation, was titled *The Golden Compass*, featuring a villainous Nicole Kidman. The film was boycotted by the Catholic League for purportedly promoting atheism to young people. It underperformed financially and the sequels were scrapped.
12 Philip Pullman, *The Golden Compass*, Knopf, New York, 1998, p. 282.
13 Pullman, *The Golden Compass*, p. 284.
14 Pullman, *The Golden Compass*, p. 371.
15 Philip Pullman, *The Amber Spyglass*, Knopf, New York, 2000, p. 401.
16 Pullman, *The Amber Spyglass*, p. 228.
17 Pullman, *The Golden Compass*, p. 390.
18 Pullman, *The Subtle Knife*, p. 89.
19 Pullman, *The Subtle Knife*, pp. 248–49.
20 Anne-Marie Bird, 'Circumventing the Grand Narrative: Dust as an Alternative Theological Vision in Pullman's *His Dark Materials*', in Millicent Lenz, with Carole Scott (eds), *His Dark Materials Illuminated: Critical Essays on Philip Pullman's Trilogy*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 2005, p. 191.
21 Santiago Colas, 'Telling True Stories, or the Immanent Ethics of Material Spirit (and Spiritual Matter) in Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*', *Discourse*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2005, p. 49.
22 The name Baruch is surely a tribute to Spinoza, who was a spectacle grinder, while the amber spyglass of the title is made laboriously by a humble scientist-theologian. The angels' sexual orientation also seems pertinent; speculation on Spinoza's homosexuality abounds.
23 Pullman, *The Amber Spyglass*, p. 31.
24 Gilles Deleuze, 'Letter to a Harsh Critic', *Negotiations, 1972–1990*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1995, p. 6.
25 Negarestani, p. 87.
26 Negarestani, p. 88.
27 Negarestani, p. 191.
28 Bird, p. 191.
29 Negarestani, p. 87.
30 Negarestani, p. 88.
31 Negarestani, p. 88.
29 Negarestani, p. 87.
30 Negarestani, p. 88.
31 Negarestani, p. 88.
32 Negarestani, p. 101.
33 Negarestani, p. 101.
34 Negarestani, p. 92.
35 Negarestani, p. 88.
36 Pullman, *Amber Spyglass*, p. 491.
37 Christian Rattemeyer, 'Dust Archive', *NDP #4*, North Drive Press, New York, 2007, www.danemitchell.co.nz/bacterial-dust; accessed 30 November 2016.
38 Emily Cormack, 'Minor Optics', *Dane Mitchell, Minor Optics*, exhibition catalogue, Berliner Künstlerprogramm/DAAD, Berlin, 2009.
39 Bird, p. 196.
40 Sagan, p. 57.