

## METEORITE ECHOES HEARD IN PEEKSKILL

When in the fall of 219 CE, Elagabalus entered Rome triumphantly; the Severan dynasty seemed to have revenged the death of Caracalla repositioning themselves as the first family of the Empire. Elagabalus' mother and grandmother, Julia Soemia and Julia Maesa, were the origin of this victory, and secured a seat for themselves as the first women senators. The dynasty founded 26 years earlier by Septimius Severus, (the first North-African to reach the position of Emperor), had brought a series of military conquests, contained the corruption within the system, and introduced the cult of the Sun god Elagabal. Elagabalus, also the highest priest of the deity, took his name from the god, and brought to Rome from his hometown of Emesa, the embodied presence of the Sun god: a conical meteorite. The cult of the Sun can be traced centuries back to the Semitic cultures of the oriental coast of the Mediterranean and Mesopotamia (the actual Middle-East), and it is easy to understand why the Sun, source of light and warmth, played such a key role in agricultural societies. In times of Elagabalus, the summer solstice became a huge festivity in Rome, the stone was placed on top of a chariot carried by six horses while Elagabalus ran "backwards facing the god and holding the horses' reins."<sup>1</sup> We can imagine the abundance of free food and wine being distributed in the streets, the crowds avid for the feast, secretly knowing that the good won't last.

Elagabalus' sexual practices soon became a source for controversy and annoyance for the Praetorian Guard. Besides his four successive wives, Elagabalus had a male lover, the slave Hierocles, his chariot driver. Elagabalus circumcised himself, and practiced prostitution in and out of the palace, dressed in women's clothes, it is known that he wanted a sex-change operation, and would have done it, if this procedure had been available in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century. Again Julia Maesa anticipated Elagabalus' lack of support and knitted a new plan to replace him and his mother with another grandson of hers. Elagabalus and Julia Soemia were killed, their heads cut off, and their bodies exhibited throughout Rome, before throwing Elagabalus to the Tiber River. As usual the Roman river swallowed the unwanted. Hierocles and other members of the court were also murdered during the same month, March 222. Elagabalus was 18 years old, and the god-meteorite was sent back to Emesa.

In Peekskill on Friday October 9<sup>th</sup> 1992, at 7.50pm an 18 year old woman heard a thunder-like sound on the front porch of her house. The trunk of her recently purchased 1980 Red Chevy Malibu had been crushed by a stone-like material body. A meteorite had crossed the East Coast of the United States, recorded by sixteen different videos, and witnessed by thousands before arriving to the Hudson River location. This time the meteorite wasn't interpreted as a message from a sun-god, but simply as a meteorite from a collision of asteroids that chance had driven down to Peekskill on this fall evening. The meteorite was split and sold, with one section exhibited at the National Museum of Natural History in Washington, DC. The car experienced a similar fate, it was sold for a larger sum of money than its actual worth and exhibited around the world as an emblem of a marvelous encounter between human engineering and outer-space materiality.

If we gather all the acting bodies from the stories above, we end up with a curious assembly of elements and events. We have two meteorites separated by their human reception and a time period of probably more than two thousand years (it is unclear when the Emesa meteorite made

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<sup>1</sup> Herodian Roman History. Herodian unlike Cassius Dio, was not a senator, and his historical books have not been considered as rigorous as those of historians like Cassius. However his views are more open towards Elagabalus that those who hold power positions, and had to move with the political changes in Rome.

impact with the Earth). These meteorites trace a time-space wave defined by three geographical points, Emesa, the actual Homs in Syria, Rome, now capital of Italy, and Peekskill, Westchester County, New York State. We also have two young people: one Emperor of Rome, the other an anonymous citizen of the largest economic, military, and political power on Earth in 1992. We even have the presence of a slave, freed and loved by Elagabalus and who fatally died for being chosen as object of desire: Hierocles, born in Caria, now Turkey. In all these encounters, the meteorite seems to be the key element that triggers a repositioning of the material and existential conditions of the participating actors. The stone of Emesa was considered sacred and thus endowed with vital capacities evidenced by the parading of the stone in Rome atop a chariot pulled by horses and the Emperor himself. Although no one would have assumed that the stone of Peekskill was sent from heaven, it was invested with a hallowed quality, as is often the case with scientific curiosities. It certainly too acted as an economic asset that reshaped the life of a local family.<sup>2</sup>

These encounters with meteorites show how non-human materials interact with the human in ways that exceed the capacities of culture to fully organize events and meaning. The various instances where meteorites have intersected with the human experience show how (other-worldly) non-human matter has the ability to act as influential agent. For example, *Al-Hajar al-Aswad*, the sacred stone of the Kaaba in the Grand Mosque of Mecca, Saudi Arabia, was already venerated before the foundation of Islam. Consider the meteorite that led to the extinction of dinosaurs or Panspermia, the group of theories that defend an extraterrestrial origin of life on Earth, precisely through meteorites as life carriers. We might consider things as not only endowed with stories, but also as protagonists that initiate action. We could trace the Peekskill car, shown in Europe, the US, and Japan. Or we could analyze the combustion motor of the 1980 Chevy Malibu, the fourth generation of the car model that started in 1964, as a derivative series of the Chevrolet Chevelle. In fact, if we trace this line we will end up in the Middle-East again. In 1981, the Canadian branch of General Motors produced 25,500 Chevy Malibus for the Iraq Government at that time led by Saddam Hussein. Some of those were sent and used as taxis in Baghdad, the rest, after the Iraq Government broke the agreement, ended up being sold to Canadians at a very reasonable price. The bloody Iran-Iraqi war of those same years, 1980-88, needed all resources available for a cruel and lasting war, as Iraq and Iran played a complicated chess game. Iraq, then an ally of the West, carried out a systematic genocide of the Kurdish and other Iraqi opposition groups, and introduced chemical weapons against these groups and against the Iranians. All the chemical weaponry was facilitated by the US and several European governments, including Germany, France, Spain, Italy, and Austria. Iran, instead, sadistically used regular troops to launch “human wave attacks”, basically using the lives of their volunteer soldiers as cannon fodder.

The Peekskill Meteorite traces another history, one centered on transformation, from fossils to oil, from metal to car, from car to exhibition object, from subject to object, from life to death. All participating bodies oscillate between these states, intertwined within larger-scale apparatuses, whether war, state power, or the time-span of the universe. Their participation can be dismissed, erased from the traces of history, but these are the bodies that keep producing the vibration of the world. Hierocles and the other servants of Elagabalus, the remains of ancient times, the Kurdish people still today under fire from Turkey (NATO), Syria, and ISIS, the thousands of refugees from

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<sup>2</sup> This publication has unsuccessfully attempted to reach this family for an interview.

Homs and other parts of Syria, forced to leave their country due to the yet unresolved Civil War, risking their lives in the Mediterranean, arriving to Greece or Italy only to keep walking towards the European North, across fields, rivers, and mountains—lives that do not matter.

All these elements enter in relation in a composition that has shaped our present and deeply influenced our forms of living. We are part of these *intra-actions*<sup>3</sup>, we are not external to the effects and relations. The actual expansion of information online was once developed from a collection of traces, and fragments. These written and non-written remains have inscribed and witnessed the distributions of wealth, religious systems, and concrete everydayness of previous generations. Elagabalus remains present in the form of a Roman coin of the period, surviving the efforts to erase him from the official history. His transgressive attitudes on gender and sexuality are known thanks to Cassius Dio's *Roman History*, among other sources. A collection of 80 books, covering a period of 1400 years, although only 20 of these books are conserved in a summary version done by John Xiphilinus, a byzantine monk of the 11<sup>th</sup> Century—fragility that lasts.

Fortuitous encounters and transmissions through time, among forms of life and material combinations, junctions that we extract, interpret and organize. The resulting meaning (always in process of revision) positions us in a larger perspective, the open edge of our present, where interpretation can be reshaped by new findings or new research techniques. And we move with these stories, we belong to them, as every day users of matter and imagination. Our cars are consumable goods, transportation engines, and contaminant devices fed by products refined from a yellow-black liquid that, due to conditions of pressure and heat outside our control, has accumulated over the course of millions of years. Our cars are drinking the remains of the plankton that were alive when the dinosaurs populated the planet. Our life conditions are inseparable from these situations, as much as the oil economy is connected to the destruction of lives and world heritage evidenced by the latest conflict in the Middle-East.<sup>4</sup> The global warming threat is not an abstraction detached from concrete data and effects, and we are part of it. We consume, work, and enjoy, and in all instances of life we are attached to a system that is based on a necessary exploitation of human and material energy. We are equal to machines and fossils, in terms of this exploitation, with the exceptionalism we attribute to being human, as actors and directors of this structure of production and consumption. In 1992, the Peekskill Meteorite joined “her” predecessors to intervene in systems of life and belief. However, this time the pagans had been erased (long burnt in the pyre of Christian fanatics, as earlier Christians burnt in the pyre of the Roman Circus), and modernity and capitalism had been working to dislodge the sacred meanings of material life. The Peekskill meteorite, and its message of awareness against oil industry and all its

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<sup>3</sup> Karen Barad uses *intra-activity*, as a substitute for interactivity, to underline that there are not previous independent entities. “Post-Performativity: Toward an Understanding on how Matter comes to Matter,” in *Belief, Bodies, and Being: Feminist Reflections on Embodiment*, ed. Deborah Orr, (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006). In this text Barad elaborates a concept of performativity, as a field of relations that questions the borders between nature and culture, object and subject.

<sup>4</sup> Since the destruction by the Taliban of the giant Buddha statues of Bamiyan (from the 6<sup>th</sup> century CE) in March, 2001 in Afghanistan, many monuments from different time periods have been attacked. Among them, The National Museum of Iraq (looted during and after the US invasion of 2003), and most recently, last summer, the historic district of Sana'a in Yemen, bombed by Saudi Arabia, and the attack by ISIS on the roman ruins of Palmyra in Syria the temple of Baal (dedicated to the son of the Sun-god Elagabal from 32CE) in Palmyra, Syria.

successive effects, passed unheard as the echo of the bombs were still audible from the First Gulf War. Fiction as the basis of belief.

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