

## More-than-human, Less-than-human. Entering the In-between

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**ABSTRACT.** The article reads some assumptions of contemporary New Materialism against the grain, according to which the question of human/humanity should be completely translated back into material-semiotic entanglements – “beyond the self,” “beyond the species,” “beyond theory,” and “beyond death.” On the one hand, the article contrasts them with Bruno Latour’s thesis of the current European crisis as a “cascade of engendering troubles” that all revolve around procreation/reproduction. On the other hand, it confronts them with Luc Boltanski’s assertion that the historical situation of today’s Europe can be compared to the onto-theological concept of “limbo,” in which fetuses or unbaptized newborns traditionally remain—as a “border zone” between inside and outside. The focus here is on the question of the human being in the sense of an “in-between” or more-or-less-than-human.

**Keywords:** New Materialism, entanglement, conception, fetus, human being, In-between, Luc Boltanski

### 1

It is probably not entirely misguided to detect what Ernst Cassirer described in 1910 as the disappearance of substance into pure function<sup>1</sup> as a current reverberation of Hegel’s dictum that we must understand the true not only as substance, but also as a subject – and this reverberation has become a global reality. The thing, the body inherently at peace within itself, even the subjective body, its corporeity with

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<sup>1</sup> Ernst Cassirer, *Substance and Function and Einstein’s Theory of Relativity* (1910), translated by William Curtis Swabey and Marie Collins Swabey, The Open Court Publishing Company, 1923.



its inherent limits, its reach and possibilities has turned from a *subiectum* padded in the darkness of its own flesh, as the start and endpoint of all movement, into a transitory hub, into an incessantly newly and differently defined complex without a true core. Hence, the term teleology, essential to biology, which was a descriptive discipline into the 19th century, has been replaced by the perception that all forms of life are to be understood as micro-organism feedback systems that sustain themselves through feedback or energetic regeneration. This simultaneously implies that we should think of individuality as well as the sociality of such organisms as fundamentally pliable. And this return to the wide plasticity of life allows us not only to understand life as projectable into the deepest capillaries (i.e., formable by means of a project or an idea), but also to move machines and organisms onto the same playing field. Today, we think of nature, technology, biospheres, and subjectivity as interconnected spheres in which interfering “actants” that are no longer necessarily human interact dynamically in their fluctuating pockets of meaning. This we can see already in the Actor-Network-Theory of Bruno Latour<sup>2</sup> in which temporary material-semiotic inter-weavings take on the role of a springboard for methodic observations, which in turn constitute entanglements and therefore only marginally form a theoretical distance between the “subject” and its “object.” Whatever serves as subject or object is rather a position that continuously needs to be reevaluated. That is why Latour refers to them as “action nets” versus “networks” or refers to the hubs as quasi-objects, actants, plots or mediators. And wherever they have already descended into a nebulous common practice (meaning that we employ them ‘blindly’), he speaks of black boxes, of subcutaneous action dens that have not yet been defined or are no longer being defined and that will in due time have ‘motivational’ consequences that are no longer transparent. One of these consequences manifests itself today in that, as Latour says, “*all forms of belonging* are undergoing metamorphosis – belonging to the globe, to the world, to the provinces, to particular plots of ground, to the world market, to lands and to traditions,”<sup>3</sup> and last but not least, lest we forget, to us *as human beings*.

New Materialism today prominently features knots, networks or transitioning holobionts again, for example, in an interdisciplinary manner in Karen Barad’s “*agential realism*,”<sup>4</sup> in Jane Bennet’s “*ecology of things*” emerging out of “*vibrant matter*”<sup>5</sup> or

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<sup>2</sup> Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social. An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Oxford University Press, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*, Polity Press, 2018, p. 23.

<sup>4</sup> Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, Duke University Press, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Jane Bennet, *Vibrant Matter. A Political Ecology of Things*, MNG University Press, 2009.

in the draft version of Donna Haraway's "Chthulucene" replacing the Anthropocene.<sup>6</sup> Referencing the chthonic deities, Haraway takes the image of a spider, the *Pimothula*, residing beneath tree stumps as a case in point. Its web of "string figures" throughout the root system lets the porous edges and contact points of life merge in a multi-active way with multiple eyes, multiple brains and free of any prior, so-called initiating units or ontologies. Through their cross-reaching and merging, these beings present themselves primarily as reciprocal, i.e., they do not exist prior or independent of these relationships.

Haraway's soil-dwelling, web-weaving being that the *anthropos* is intended to become reminds us of the image of the cicada in Plato's *Phaidros* (258e–259d), but in the reverse. According to the myth narrated within, the cicada had been *human* once, a type of human who had become so enchanted with his own song that he refused all food and died. It provided the basis for the philosopher's image of an autotrophic being that should neither feed itself nor reproduce nor sleep, as Socrates reminds Phaidros, who is on the verge of nodding off in the heat of the day beneath a sycamore tree. Instead, he is urged to continue his song on his own in order to set himself apart from the body entangled in sustenance, dependencies, aging, and reproduction. Haraway's Chthulu's intent seems to be a type of secretion or regression of this insect that refuses all food and connection. Its katabasis is into the earth where all entities, as she writes, "become more a microbiome of fermenting critters of many genders and kinds, i.e., companion species, at table together, eating and being eaten"<sup>7</sup>: "The order is reknitted: human beings are with and of the earth, and the biotic and abiotic powers of this earth are the main story."<sup>8</sup> Haraway consistently uses the term "com-post," a common (com) life *after* (post) *the human life* with the intent of relating to the biotic-abiotic fabric, to think more horizontally and less vertically, and explicitly to disregard the question of being human. All of this is being reflected ubiquitously, in an almost entranced quest for a fundamental decommissioning of dualism models in favor of metaphysical, onto-theological dichotomies, for example, in the differentiation between nature and culture, subject and object, life and matter, will and determinism, growth and technology etc. Emergence, entanglement and process-orientation take their place while the *digital realm* serves as the preferred performative space. Going hand in hand with this opening between human and nature, nature and technology, the essentialist ontologies and subject-focused idealisms are undermined in favor of a life "beyond the Self," "beyond the Species," "beyond the Theory" and "beyond Death."<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble. Making kin in the Chthulucene*, Duke University Press, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, p. 170, note 3.

<sup>8</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, p. 55.

<sup>9</sup> Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, Polity Press, 2013 (chapter headings).

I would like to pick up on the pursued undermining but in the sense of a pivotal crossing point that *evades* this multiple composting of growing organisms and projection, of flesh and word, microbiology and info sphere or digital realm which makes it all the more important to capture as it is such an important crossing point or withdrawal moment. Pinpointing the dividing lines that we associate with the beginning and end of human “subjectivity” or human life in its broadest meaning is methodically being neglected by the New Materialisms, precisely because the term *subject* is apparently contaminated. Aside from that, it would be, according to Bennet, an “aporetic or quixotic endeavor”<sup>10</sup> despite the caveat that there are “of course differences between the knife that impales and the man impaled.”<sup>11</sup> I’d like to emphasize this difference, however, and point to it as a verticality, that is, as a rupture in the horizontally woven “biofilm” that is centered within this aporia and which I will term, for the time being, as the “materiality of raw openness” (as *materiality* of nakedness, i.e., flesh, and as *materiality of raw openness*, as something that pierces the flesh at the same time). This piercing or perforation introduces an incision into the ongoing material exchange and is an inextricable contradiction. Contradictions know no proxies, they can neither be replaced nor fed back, but can only be borne out and *occupied* (as a projection or symbolically). Coinciding with that, I’d like to assert that the wound, the crisis, the impediment of Europe today can be located in particular in its confrontation with just such “raw openness” (not in the least *as* functioning as being-for-oneself or being-in-itself, but as pure beyond oneself) as well as in the impossibility to close up an incision, *which is after all us*, within the projected horizon of “More-than-human,” a back-translated construct of the seductive, recursive interweaving of nature and technology. Maybe this image is skewed but allow me to stay with it for a moment. The seduction of Europa, in the sense of a flight forward into a type of “nature” that manifests itself primarily as the peaceful face of an ecological Gaia-nature, cleaned up by predominantly European ‘human beings,’ could prove to be a secondhand narrative of the ancient story of Zeus and the Oriental king’s daughter Europa in which she succumbs to the true intentions of the highest Olympic God – i.e., his utter indifference given his thirst for power – while she allows herself to be charmed by the enticing physicality of a benevolent snowy white steer and be carried off on his back ‘innocently day-dreaming.’

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<sup>10</sup> Bennet, *Vibrant Matter*, p. ix.

<sup>11</sup> Bennet, *Vibrant Matter*, p. 9.

## 2

Without explicitly referencing the neo-materialistic versions listed under the title “More-than-Human,” the French sociologist Luc Boltanski highlighted just such an aporia of humankind in his 2004 book *La condition foetale*, in English *The Foetal Condition. A Sociology of Engendering and Abortion*.<sup>12</sup> The core of his thesis is the unsolvable anthropological contradiction found in all societies, one that today is ever more prevalent as a festering wound in the globally expanding material-semiotic process of entanglement. Where do we find the *human* dividing line or ‘border’ between inside and outside, between nature and culture, or rather where does it forge its path given the old differentiation has perforated, is being undermined or projectively being shredded? Following the implosion of the grand ‘transcending’ narratives, each and everyone of us, according to Boltanski, has internalized it. Each individual human being could be viewed at any moment from an aporetic perspective: once to be human *through his/her flesh* and another *through the word*. The output of this insoluble dual, repeated in each individual between the (manifesting) coming-into-flesh and his or her active acknowledgment or lack thereof by a symbolic order that can change at will, forms the demarcation of all other worlds, identities, outlines, and derivations in the sense of *belonging to humankind* in the broader sense.

While human-ontologies in classical philosophy, largely disregarding natality, oriented themselves for over 2500 years primarily on mortality that was meant to be *overcome* in an approximation to a god (*homoiosis theou*, i.e., a “More-than-human,” aligned to a deity, remember the cicada), we appear to be increasingly focused today on *Natality*,<sup>13</sup> i.e., procreation and birth (in the sense of a distinctly ‘female’ connotation of that dimension) as the venue of such an opening gate into human existence. Especially, and this is Boltanski’s specific point of view, in the form of life on the cusp of its singularity, that is, the unborn, the *foetus*. The foetus in and of itself has not been awarded an ontological status in Western-European history so far (it is “less-than-human”); its precarious location between being and non-being was found in the semi-official fringes of symbolic society (just as the continuously precarious status of what we term its “uterine environment,” which is that of the mothers and women in general). While these precarious beings on the fringe historically played *no* role in symbolic society, it is their undefined pre-being or

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<sup>12</sup> Luc Boltanski, *The Foetal Condition. A Sociology of Engendering and Abortion*, Polity Press, 2013.

<sup>13</sup> “Because they are initium, newcomers and beginners by virtue of birth, men take initiative, are prompted into action” (Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, The University of Chicago Press, 1958, p. 177).

Being in-between on the cusp to a self, to a species, to theory, and to death that moves into the center of society today as a *political* scandalon of negotiability (for there is almost nothing that polarizes and roils the hearts and minds more than that). As a *philosophical* scandalon,<sup>14</sup> however, it is strangely pushed to the sidelines in the neo-materialistic ontologies of pure beyond-the-self or is even disregarded as an aporia or "Donquixotery."

It is worthy to take a closer look at the broad strokes of Boltanski's theoretical analysis. To clarify, neither Boltanski<sup>15</sup> nor I are raising this point to discuss the question of abortion as such, to discuss gender or gender politics, human rights, ecological topics etc. nor are we making any *political* demands in that regard (even though those are desperately needed). Instead, it is explicitly a *philosophical* question, I believe, subcutaneously hidden in all of the "debates" of the human being in the sense of a nervously flickering "more-or-less-than-human," seen in light of his or her *procreation*. And in parentheses I would like to add, Bruno Latour also retraces the core of the current European crisis, even though in more trenchant terms, to a "generational or generative crisis," which is the question of "lineage" and also of "gender," that is to say, origins/belongings and sexuality/procreation/viability that "is now posed at all levels and for all existing beings, involving growing uncertainty about the notion of a limit;"<sup>16</sup> I will come back to that later on).

We are able to draw from Boltanski four theses that build on each other:

1) The unborn, the foetus – has risen, for the first time in time, thanks to medical imaging technology into the realm of visual representation<sup>17</sup> and therefore

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<sup>14</sup> Scandalon is the "stumbling block," i.e., that which ricochets back to us in an anathematic sense, thus introducing a border and a turning point to the publicly negotiable (politics).

<sup>15</sup> Boltanski's aim is to develop "a moral sociology, in Durkheim's sense: that is, not a sociology impregnated with moralism but a sociology which takes 'moral phenomena' [faits moraux] seriously" (Boltanski, *The Foetal Condition*, p. 234). His interest is *theoretical* and the central perspective from which he views abortion as a sociological subject is the question of the general conditions for engendering human beings. According to his own statement, this question and investigation ultimately leads him to the limits of sociology; it becomes a philosophical question in the sense of the *question of ourselves*. He thus brings the "self" or "subjectivity," which is excluded or declared superfluous in many approaches to New Materialisms, back into the entanglement process as a gap, crack or "wound." On the edges of this wound the political tools for debates or negotiability grow fuzzy. Hence, a new perspective is adapted in the endeavors toward New Materialisms, which is to add the human conditionality to the political agency of a human being.

<sup>16</sup> Bruno Latour, *After Lockdown: A Metamorphosis*, Polity Press, 2021, chapter 5: A whole cascade of engendering troubles, p. 68.

<sup>17</sup> See also Donna Haraway, "Fetus: The Virtual Speculum in the New World Order," in: *Feminist Review*, 55, Spring 1997, p. 22–72. Haraway argues "for a broader conception of 'new reproductive technologies' in order to foreground justice and freedom projects for differently situated women in

a state of negotiability – but has, in a sociological sense, stood since the beginning of time on the threshold between flesh and word which, as I want to call it, a materiality of raw openness. It emerges out of the encounter of two gender-specific beings into flesh while this emerging-into-flesh could never be initiated by a symbolic instance. It steps onto the stage later in that it legitimizes this first manifestation of flesh by making it visible and giving it a name as a being allowed to pass through into a social life – or not. Historically speaking, the admission of a new human being into the collective of symbolic relationships was primarily handled along the axis of lineage. In modern times, the state and the thus firmly placed Biopolitics have taken over that role (Foucault). Transferring into singularity has today moved out of state control and become woven into what Boltanski calls the “parental project.” Whether this first reality into flesh can or should even be addressed as “human” is now at the discretion of its creators, its parents. Within the reproductive environment, its substance is being turned into a project-based transitory node that is either confirmed as an “authentic foetus” (as “my baby,” whose growth including its ‘uterine environment’ is forthwith surrounded by an extensive market sector and monitored meticulously), or it is termed a “tumoral foetus,” a shapeless mass of tissue that can be discarded or be shared as totipotent raw material (“techno foetus”) for other bio-technological projects and interests. The “previously virtually unknown foetus has ‘entered society’ in Latour’s sense, as an object of collective dispute over its status.”<sup>18</sup>

2) Together with Eve Chiapello, Boltanski worked on the *projective* dimension as an assertion and a controlling instance of the first being-in-flesh in an early work on the “new spirit of capitalism.”<sup>19</sup> Its hegemonic might is based on the metaphor of the net/web and is fed by perpetually fluid instances originally based within the contexts of science, technology, and management that are increasingly seeping into

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the New World Order.” In addition to her legitimate political interest, Haraway’s essay is interesting to me above all because of her use of the fetus as projection screen analogous to its twin, the planet Earth: “The fetus and the planet earth are sibling seed worlds in technoscience. If NASA photographs of the blue, cloud-swathed whole earth are icons for the emergence of global, national and local struggles over a recent natural-technical object of knowledge called the environment, then the ubiquitous images of glowing, free-floating, human fetuses condense and intensify struggles over an equally new and disruptive technoscientific object of knowledge, namely ‘life itself’” (ibid., p. 23). I, on the other hand, would like to argue that the fetus represents precisely the opposite – the piercing or perforation – of all projective technologies resp. visual cultures, namely precisely when we understand it neither as “a soft, fleshy child” nor as an objectified heap of tissue (“tumoral foetus”), but as actual human potentiality, which is the *potency of absolute precariousness*. (See below)

<sup>18</sup> Jim Conley, Book Review „Luc Boltanski, The Foetal Condition. A Sociology of Engendering and Abortion,“ in: *Canadian Journal of Sociology/Cahier canadiens de sociologie*, 39/2, 2014, p. 279–282, p. 281.

<sup>19</sup> Luc Boltanski und Ève Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Verso, 2007.

the world of intimate, physical relationships and inscribing the permanent on-demand status into this world as well. The "project polity" (*cité par projet*) is characterized by instability, transfer and the urge for innovation, that is, radically connectionist. Wherever one project fails, in other words, where corresponding interests fail to connect (where no "deal" can be struck), we end up with an abortive process, a break or departure immediately replaced by a new project with the implicit understanding that what is not tied to the project or asserted by it, does in fact not exist.

3) The project of a unique singularity upheld in the parental project (i.e., the foetus, formed in the projective phase of parenthood, that does not distinguish itself in any detail from the tumorous bundle of tissue that will be "tossed out" if its assertion does not occur) now encounters a further liquifying process in what we could call the *project Gaia* (with or without Latour) that is intended to take the place of parenthood. According to the call for a life beyond the Self, beyond the Species, beyond the Theory, and beyond Death, it now becomes a matter of placing a biotic-abiotic "monism of beings" in lieu of the "species" represented so specifically by parenthood (meaning that human beings give birth to "human beings" in a naturally symbolic sense full of contradiction). These beings are those who are populating planet earth or more precisely, the 'systemic totality' that is formed out of the interactions/interferences between these nodes. By this, I mean not only the status of being human or other 'metaphysic instances' of fluidity but in fact the status of *each and every one of us* who is forced to continually construct criteria that allow us to legitimize ourselves inside the systemic totality or vice versa letting ourselves be legitimized as a dark growth of *chôra*, as a part of the cooperative collective, as a totipotent stem cell, as a tumor or probiotic mish-mash according to the guideline, "It matters what compostables make compost."<sup>20</sup> The criteria of the ranking of such a biocentric egalitarianism result directly from the consequences that the participating actors and actants invoke depending on their stake in it (essentially like Nietzsche's "Will to Power") which creates a permanent state of unease as to where exactly the boundaries are located or should be located *according to prevailing circumstances*. As Latour points out, the right to singularity exists only for beings that are *completely autotrophic*, which is that they can "feed themselves *by themselves*," and this "can only apply for Gaia, which, by definition, contains itself"<sup>21</sup> – a strange analogy to the absolute in the metaphysical tradition.

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<sup>20</sup> To thwart any neo-Malthusian interpretation, we should add another dictum to the equation, "It matters which stories tell stories" (Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, p. 101).

<sup>21</sup> Latour, *After Lockdown*, p. 65.



This leads us to the conclusion that belonging to humankind is no (longer) a given. Today, the actual position of a human being — the *condition foetale* — is becoming radically apparent and not in any abstract form but quite concrete, i.e., as the intensely precarious position of each and every one of us. This “half-born” being, having emerged out of the darkness of its mother’s womb into the light only by means of our reproductive and imaging technologies becomes a ghostly image for the currently openly debated nebulous stance while also being left to the projective devices. Or it becomes – for each individual – a cypher for being in-between, to be at once equal and replaceable, that is, an indifferentiable being-for-others, instead of singular and as a singular being, striving to access the perception and memory of others. The fetus shows us the actual human potentiality, which is the *potency of absolute precariousness*. “La condition foetale,” Boltanski concludes his considerations, “c’est la condition humaine”.<sup>22</sup> Or, as Latour puts it, “This is the new universal that is to be found wherever all existing beings live [...]: we’re all affected by the *limits of the notion of a limit*; we find it hard to locate the *nomos* of the earth.”<sup>23</sup>

### 3

What can we say about this “nomos of earth”? And what does it mean to localize it or *ourselves* in it? Or rather, what *might* that mean? Which role could Europa play, this aging mother and product of a seductive liaison, that supposedly gave birth to the people of Europe, and who, according to Latour, in postmodern terms is defined by a whole “cascade of engendering troubles,” all of which affect the question of continuity on *all* levels: those concerned primarily with the physical basics for survival, the future generations (pensions! mandatory military service!), but also and predominantly the historic, intellectual, spiritual continuity, the act of passing on and the ability to narrate the rich, voluptuous historical body that is Europe. What hovers above all that like a heavy cloud is “a kind of broad threat of

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<sup>22</sup> Luc Boltanski, *La condition foetale. Une sociologie de l’engendrement et de l’avortement*, Éditions Gallimard, 2004, p. 332. This final sentence of Boltanski’s book is missing in the English translation, for whatever reason. This foetal condition as human condition is replayed in the form of a “cantata for several voices” in Boltanski’s poem *Les Limbes*, Éditions MF, 2005; Boltanski here compares today’s Europe as ‘limbus’: “Is there a term better suited than the concept of *limbus* [as a ‘border zone’ between inside and outside] to characterize, at least in metaphorical terms, the historical situation that is ours today in this region, this Europe of ours [...]? It is certainly not hell, but it is far from being a paradise.”

<sup>23</sup> Latour, *After Lockdown*, p. 62; vgl. Latour, *Down to Earth*, p. 17, where it is said that the new universality is the feeling, “that the ground is giving way beneath everyone’s feet at once.”

extinction," as if, so says Latour, "the genealogical principle has suddenly been disrupted"?<sup>24</sup> But which genealogical principle is he talking about? Three trajectories in light of the debate of "more-than-human" and with a view of the "dividing line."

*First:* The genealogical principle apparently, according to Latour, having suddenly "been disrupted" and needing to be overcome explicitly in the "More-than-human" movement ("make kin, not babies"<sup>25</sup> meaning "beyond the species" of human beings), seems to be concerned primarily and exclusively with a degree of assertion by the word, as Boltanski refers to it, which occurs as a second birth, a gesture of disposition of projective power following the first physical one. The first initial real birth (earth, *chôra*, uterus, material, flesh, which is, according to Latour, the productive "female" in the broadest sense), this first birth has itself no home, no being in the historical narrative of this assertion as it is beyond the "male" in the broadest sense "less-than-human," i.e., "nothing." Why then, this "nothing" might wonder, would the genealogical principle (origins, lineage) be *fundamentally* disrupted simply because the assertive word, i.e., the projective, is reined in by boundaries it cannot generate in and of itself? Wouldn't that be quite literally throwing the baby out with the bath? Taking a look today at its other, its second side, would we not recognize the 'genealogical principle' *specifically* as the fact that "self-conscious reason" (to cite Hegel from the *Encyclopedia* § 393) – or even better the self-confident reason – as the principle of the European spirit in its boundless conviction that *nothing* can pose an insurmountable hurdle for it and that it thus touches *everything* in order to manifest *itself* within, that this type of reason has to recognize that rather a lot of things can pose an insurmountable hurdle, most of all the impossibility of self-generating as an autotrophic being? This barrier or flipside, then as now precarious, phantomic, and semi-official in European intellectual history, is not represented by women or the "female aspect" alone, but concerns all "human beings" in their dual relation to procreation and birth. The troubling fact is that procreation is, prior to its projective reabsorption, primarily an act of the flesh between the sexes, a male and a female, an act that is extraordinarily portentous and whose result confronts us, as Levinas describes it, with the explicit demand, "Thou shall not kill me." Where I am headed is that the insinuation of the debate around More-than-human, to find salvation in a new beyond-self project, which is the project Gaia, could not only be the answer to a "generative crisis" but also the answer to a "generational conflict." It is there that it can link up to the demand to leave procreation and birth behind for good just as we would forget a bad memory

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<sup>24</sup> Latour, *After Lockdown*, p. 59.

<sup>25</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, p. 102.

and with that leave “their poor human bodies *delineated* the old-fashioned way like figures made of wire”.<sup>26</sup> “With your antennae, your articulations, your emanations, your waste matter, your mandibles, your prostheses,” Latour’s Gregor Samsa calls out to us, “you may *at last* be becoming a human being! And it’s your parents, on the contrary, [...] – who have *become* in-human, by rejecting becoming an insect *themselves*?”<sup>27</sup>

*Second:* The attempt to rid ourselves of our origins by eradicating the tragic act of human procreation, so fraught with absolute non-assurances, to reabsorb a reassuring vision of this act, a vision of bioclastic “com-post” cleansed of the state of being human, seems to contain the risk of letting ourselves be seduced into a type of being human that is free of any wounds (no shadows, an unsuspecting, white, innocent steer on whose back an equally unsuspecting Phoenician princess willingly rides off into the sunset). It also contains the risk that we succumb again without any conditions to the projective, and this projective again bears the name “nature.” In a strange twist on the Centauric human image of the past 2500 years this “nature” is no longer supposed to be seen as something that forms an incorruptible substantial dividing line of the reality of agency in human existence, adding just that level of exposure that gives rise to the tension of human existence. To the contrary, this new nature is now supposed to embrace us out of the loins of the physical Gaia, depicted by the modern digital imaging processes, along with all of our ecstatic intellectualism, our waste, excretions and prostheses (including an increasing amount of “AI”) and in this embrace supposedly eliminate all conflicts in one fell swoop. In light of the current crisis, it might seem more prudent to read Hegel’s dictum from the *Phenomenology of Spirit* against the grain, meaning, to recognize the true not simply as subject but also equally as *substance*. Thus, it would be a non-generative beginning that presents also the dividing line to all of the production means and opportunities for action known to us. It seems to me, therefore, that New Materialisms tend to be the aftermath and continuing narrative of that European longing to be *free of all natural-historical conditions*, and that includes the ‘cut into the outline of a human body’ represented by our being conceived and born which stays with us until death. For who or what is it in the end that takes on the task of “chipping and shredding and layering [the trash of the Anthropocene] like a mad gardener,” as Haraway describes it, to “make a much hotter compost pile for still possible pasts, presents, and futures”<sup>28</sup>? Who or what

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<sup>26</sup> Latour, *After Lockdown*, p. 21.

<sup>27</sup> Latour, *After Lockdown*, p. 17.

<sup>28</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, p. 57.

is empowered or self-empowers to do so? Is it a “holobiont” devoid of all organic matter, in the sense of a cloud-like only vaguely outlined totality of agencies?<sup>29</sup> Is it “nature”? Or is it rather a completely liberated subject that, fleeing from itself, has forged ahead by reflecting his or her own eccentricity back upon the self as “nature” in order to remove themselves out of the grip of being different, a difference that is *not* reflected in nature, neither in the ice crystal nor in a termite colony or in the collective intelligence of a beehive, but only and exclusively in each and every one of us?

*Third* and lastly: the Centaur. What does it mean to no longer consider the dividing line of singularity? To dismiss it as “Don Quixotery,” as undecidability between doing and suffering, eating and being eaten, the agency aspects and the *raw openness* of our flesh as just such an absolute potency of uncertainty? Let’s say, as Boltanski stated, it is each and every one of us, especially *because* it concerns the question of singularity, the “Self” in the sense of being seen, finding access into the memory of another, the question of “Species” in the sense of our origins, a question we must answer but are ultimately unable to decide, the question into “Theory,” also in the sense of a turning point and depictability and, finally, the question of “Death,” that only arises where we recognize each other as *human* (and not as compost that needs turning). What does it mean to want to toss this reality overboard as a sidenote of natural history that somehow ran off-track? The figure of the Centaur, prominent in European consciousness for centuries and reentering the global stage in a new iteration in the chimeras and cyborgs of Haraway’s Chthuluzene as a restlessly cohabitating hybrid being, raises the question of the proportionality of the whole to its parts. Simultaneously, we have to wonder what causes something to become part of a whole in the first place, and the emphasis here is two-fold, as the *part* of a whole or as a part of the *whole*. The centaur (originally, by the way, the personification of a churning, all-consuming waterfall) generally refers to the head, torso and arms of a man merged with the backquarters of a horse, in the connotation of a wild and abundantly wasteful natural power that needs to be conquered and reined in. Haraway’s hybrid Chthulu, however, is depicted as a delicate, translucent creation made up of threads, a cluster of nests, flipper fingers and vibrating butterfly wings forming a spine that is meant to evoke a busy, whispering being suffused by cooperative intent. No doubt the Chthulu has

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<sup>29</sup> Cf. Latour, *After Lockdown*, p. 68: “Uncertainty over a body’s exact edges is so great that Lynn Margulis has suggested replacing the too narrow notion of an organism by what she calls ‘holobionts’. Holobionts are a collection of actors in the form of clouds with blurred contours that allow somewhat durable membranes to subsist, thanks to the help the exterior contributes to what is held inside.”

plenty to say to the Centauric hybrid of human and horse or rather steer. As an aged "Europa," as the old woman that we know of as Post-Modernism or Post-Post-Modernism or shall we say as "com-post," she has plenty of eyes, memories and tentacles, in fact her old, parchment-resembling body is literally bursting with rich – conceived and unconceived, told and untold – stories. Likewise, to me without doubt, it is now her role to re-tell the history of seduction and co-habitation to old Zeus who's been sent to the scaffold by all parties. By doing so, she lines up (if we want to call it that) the 'feminine' reproductive gap with the (again citing Haraway) "existentialist, non-committal and thereby masculine reproductive gap"<sup>30</sup> as the preceding witnesses and *attestations* we can never catch up with of just such a shadow of European philosophy with its representative, ontologizing gestures of disposition. This shadow is outing itself today as a "cascade of engendering troubles." *Both* point to the gap that scratches the act of being human into the earth's stage. The fact is we are not only co-witnesses of a reality of agency, implemented compressions and hubs, but also, and simultaneously, gaps, tears, perforations of the very fabric that is entirely indifferent to us. We are witnesses to her tragedy, her painful antinomy between the whole and its parts, the individual and the many, the self, the species, the depictability, our birth and our death. In other words, neither the cicada nor the Chthulu with their predominantly *monistic* air of being able to feed themselves out of their own resources and thus able to reject the difference as an altogether unpalatable chunk, suffice to be human and to become human. The "critical zone,"<sup>31</sup> the In-between, in which we ought to find ourselves according to Latour, is not only the three kilometers of fragile ecosystems *above* and *below* (it is them, too, but not exclusively). The actual critical zone runs right through ourselves.

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<sup>30</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, p. 126.

<sup>31</sup> Latour, *After Lockdown*, p. 44 (with reference to Jérôme Gaillardet).

