

## 4. 'Humanity Recedes like a Loathsome Dream': Nick Land, Ahuman Becoming, and Cultural Studies

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### Accelerationism and the Cultural Studies Beachcomber

What are the tools for a posthumanist Cultural Studies? Surely they are manifold. I have made the case for a stronger 'posthumanization' of Cultural Studies by means of a theoretical 'encounter' with the diverse intellectual approaches associated with the 'nonhuman turn' in the humanities and social sciences. I have argued that such an expanded, modified, and reorganized discipline would need to avail itself of a number of theoretical and methodological resources and draw on all three of what I consider to be the main 'modes' of contemporary posthumanist theorizing: critique, repair, and escalation.<sup>1</sup> As I have shown, while critique, with its commitment to deconstruction and denaturalization, undoubtedly lies at the heart of the Cultural Studies project, there is within it also a less central but nevertheless distinct and rather rich history of reparative theorizing, with its characteristic break with the 'paranoia', pessimism, and negativity that so often mark thinking in the critical mode, and its adoption of a more affirmative, positive, even optimistic, outlook. In contrast, it seems to me that the theoretical mode of escalation, though certainly not entirely absent, has nevertheless overall played only a minor role in the field. However, I want to argue here that for a posthumanist Cultural Studies, escalative thinking, too, can become an important theoretical resource, valuable, among other things, for its potential to urge Cultural Studies towards a position that no longer makes any (untenable) claims to 'stand outside', that accepts the immanence of the social and the technical as an irreversible given, and that hence does not resort to de-celerative or restorative solutions but is future-oriented and aiming at technological literacy (Mackay/Avanessian 2014: 4–8).

At first, though, there seem to be some good reasons for the existing distance to such approaches. After all, the chief, though by no means the only, manifestation of escalative theorizing is accelerationism. As is typical of escalation, accelerationist theory works through intensification and excess, through pushing things to

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1 On this topic, cf. ch. 3 and the excursus.

the extreme, and is committed to a radical anti-naturalism and a politics of complete immanence. Its essence consists in “the argument that the only way out is the way through” (Shaviro 2015: 2). What accelerationism wants to get out of is, of course, capitalism. It is no coincidence that this theoretico-political approach, which first materialized in the work of thinkers such as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Jean-François Lyotard, and Jean Baudrillard, emerged in 1970s France. Not only is it heavily indebted to the new libertarian spirit of the times; more than that, it decidedly represents a response to the failure of May ’68 and the ensuing disenchantment with Marxist certainties and teleologies and the general waning of revolutionary hopes. In fact, these theoretical interventions can be considered as so many attempts to preserve and actualize these libertarian impulses and hopes in the face of a capitalism that increasingly came to be experienced as exceedingly resilient, totalizing, and able to recuperate virtually all forms of opposition. As such, these works are very helpful in understanding the accelerating expansion of capital, both ‘extensively’ across the world and ‘intensively’ into every aspect of life (Massumi 1992: 132), an expansion that would only further intensify with the neoliberal counter-revolution in the following decades. As Benjamin Noys, one of the foremost analysts and critics of accelerationism, has pointed out, the movement must essentially be understood as a reaction to the “felt experience of closed, if not terminal, horizons” (2014: 6). Confronting a system that was now seen as largely immune to both traditional (workers’ struggle) as well as novel (counter-culture) forms of contestation, some left-libertarian thinkers chose a new strategy. As Sylvère Lotringer has put it, these “‘children of May,’ revolutionaries bereft of a revolution”, resolved “to sleep with the enemy” and “turned to capitalism, eager to extract its subversive energy they no longer found in traditional class struggle” (2007: 11). For these theorists, the only remaining path beyond capitalism was not to resist it, but, quite the opposite, to embrace it and take it further, pushing it to its most extreme point, beyond even its very own limits, where, thus the hope, it would collapse. This strategy was perhaps most explicitly formulated by Gilles Lipovetsky, who asserts: “‘revolutionary’ actions are not those which aim to overthrow the system of Capital, which [...] has never ceased to be revolutionary, but those which *complete* its rhythm in all its radicality [...]. This speed proper to capital in its expansive logic must be exacerbated in the struggle against all the dispositifs of power [...]” (2014: 233) Similarly, in an oft-quoted passage from their *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari write:

But which is the revolutionary path? Is there one? – To withdraw from the world market, as Samir Amin advises Third World countries to do, in a curious revival of the fascist “economic solution”? Or might it be to go in the opposite direction? To go still further, that is, in the movement of the market, of decoding and deterritorialization? For perhaps the flows are not yet deterritorialized enough, not decoded enough, from the viewpoint of a theory and a practice of a highly schizophrenic

character. Not to withdraw from the process, but to go further, to "accelerate the process," as Nietzsche put it: in this matter, the truth is that we haven't seen anything yet. (1983: 239f)

In the 50 years since these lines were written, accelerationism has significantly branched out, and various manifestations, developments, and transformations of its impulse have occurred. After this first explicit articulation in the 1970s, it most notably resurfaced in the 1990s, in the work of a number of thinkers more or less closely associated with Warwick University, UK, and its Cybernetic Culture Research Unit (CCRU), and, most recently, in the 2010s, this time as a more inter- or trans- (or perhaps outer-)national phenomenon. Yet, in practically all of its incarnations, accelerationism essentially appears to be a crisis phenomenon. What it registers – though frequently in oblique or hyperbolic form – is both, significant transformations in the capitalist regimes of accumulation, as capitalism successively renews itself through forms of 'creative destruction', and the often concomitant crisis of forms of political agency. As such, if nothing else, I believe it remains a valuable diagnostic tool. Without a doubt, our present moment is still, or once again, marked by such double crisis, as evidenced by today's dual dynamic of stagnation and acceleration (Noys 2014: 10f) and the ongoing shift towards a 'post-post-Fordist' accumulation regime (Gilbert 2019: 30–34; Murray/Gilbert/Goffey 2014) on the one hand, and by our pervasive sense that the future has been 'cancelled' (Berardi 2011; Fisher 2009, 2014) and that "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism" (Jameson 2003: 76) on the other.

However, it is not hard to see that as a political strategy, accelerationism is highly problematic. For at least in its 'purest', most radical instantiations, it becomes virtually indistinguishable from the dynamic of capitalism itself, which is driven precisely by the desire to perpetually break through ever new barriers – a fact that is perhaps most evident in its contemporary, neoliberal form. As already Baudrillard – who would nevertheless go on to develop his own, 'negative' kind of accelerationism (Noys 2010: 6) – pointed out: "This compulsion toward liquidity, flow, and an accelerated circulation [...] is the exact replica of the force which rules market value: capital must circulate; gravity and any fixed point must disappear; the chain of investments and reinvestments must never stop; value must radiate endlessly and in every direction." (2007: 39f) Here, in other words, the demands of the accelerationists paradoxically come to coincide with those made by the managers of capital. Hence, the belief that increased acceleration will necessarily lead to capital's demise and thus clear the path towards a more just and egalitarian society on closer inspection effectively turns out to be a reinstatement of old-fashioned Marxist teleology. In this way, the issue of political subjectivity and agency – the central question of political subjectivation – is simply bypassed, and "[a]gency disappears into a fundamental passivity" (Noys 2010: 8). By contrast, Cultural Studies will raise this question anew each time

and insist on struggle – including the struggle over the imagination of the future itself – as the means through which a better world can emerge.

In spite of this, I want to argue that there is something to be gained from an engagement with accelerationism. I would like to advocate a position beyond the binarism of ‘being for’ or ‘being against’ accelerationism. Instead, I want to reactivate the syncretism that has long been a characteristic of Cultural Studies, to emphasize its long-standing role as a theoretical *bricoleur*, and propose what is essentially a pragmatic approach. Thinking the world, mapping it, intervening in it – I believe that these, not the purity of frictionless systematicity, define the purpose of Cultural Studies theorizing. Consequently, rather than to simply adopt or outright reject accelerationist work, I suggest it proceed like a beachcomber – more Walcott’s Crusoe than Defoe’s. The goal is always the finding of tools that can be used. As I have said before: What is Cultural Studies if not a large toolbox? It is a heterogeneous theoretical assemblage, gathering and pulling together concepts, methods, and theories from a wide variety of sources for the purpose of intellectual (not just academic) work as a political practice. As numerous examples, such as, say, the ‘left’ readings of Martin Heidegger or Carl Schmitt, illustrate, helpful tools are sometimes found in unexpected places. Accordingly, their appropriation frequently involves a process of ‘translation’, in the anti-essentialist and anti-teleological sense in which Stuart Hall and others have used this term.

In the following, I want to adopt just such a beachcomber’s approach with regard to accelerationism. While the recent emergence of more moderate, ‘conditional’, and distinctly left accelerationist positions (cf. esp. Srnicek/Williams 2016; Williams/Srnicek 2014) in my view testifies to a basic compatibility with Cultural Studies – partly via a shared debt to the work of Antonio Gramsci – here I will focus on a rather ‘extreme’ manifestation, which is in many ways very much at odds with the general outlook of Cultural Studies: the thought of the English (anti-)philosopher Nick Land. Disregarding academic conventions and deliberately provocative, not least for many on the political left, his writings have been subjected to oftentimes fierce criticism. While I agree with much of this critique, particularly regarding his nihilistic embrace of the runaway circuits of cyber-capitalism and his more recent appalling turn to neoreaction, I will argue that Land’s work nevertheless offers a set of very helpful theoretical resources for a posthumanist Cultural Studies facing the challenges of the Anthro- or Capitalocene.<sup>2</sup> To do so, I will first briefly introduce and provide an overview of it, and particularly elaborate on Land’s “program for the posthuman” (2011: 379) and his championing of a machinic, ‘cyberrevolutionary’ becoming-ahuman, and then proceed to open up a way of reading his work that

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2 Land himself would no doubt disapprove of a reading such as the one I am undertaking here, which he would certainly – and quite rightly – consider as hopelessly ‘docile’, corresponding as it largely does to the established norms of discursive propriety.

stresses its critical, emancipatory dimensions. I will argue that while we should discard the hyperbole and his (a-/anti-)political conclusions, both argumentatively and methodologically, there are various aspects of his analyses that are worth salvaging and articulating to the project of Cultural Studies. In this essay, I will principally focus on Land's powerful critique of defensive, 'securocratic' humanism or what he terms the 'human security system' and its frequently quasi-fascistic 'immuno-political' manifestations. As I will argue, this critique can at once inspire a useful 'anti-naturalist' orientation, draw our attention to alternative becomings ('becoming-inferior'), and sharpen our awareness for the hybrid, composite, palimpsest-like character of power structures and socio-cultural formations. The Coronavirus pandemic will serve as a case study to illustrate these arguments.

## Introducing Nick Land

Land's work comprises his only academic – or, better, quasi- or anti-academic – monograph, *The Thirst for Annihilation: Georges Bataille and Virulent Nihilism*, published in 1992, a large number of essays and shorter pieces, many of which were first collected in the volume *Fanged Noumena* in 2011, and, especially since his move to Shanghai, several self-published works of both fictional and non-fictional nature, as well as numerous online commentaries, including the infamous 2012 text "The Dark Enlightenment", which has become an important intellectual reference point of recent neoreactionary thinking. While Land's writings have been largely ignored by the academic mainstream, they have exerted a rather strong subterranean influence in other spheres, such as music, art, and fiction – for instance in the work of the musician Kode9, the artists Jake and Dinos Chapman, or the writers Reza Negarestani and Hari Kunzru – though more recently, particularly with the emergence of speculative realism and new materialism, their mark can be felt in the domain of theory and philosophy as well, as in the writings of Mark Fisher, Kodwo Eshun, Luciana Parisi, Ray Brassier, Robin Mackay, or Iain Hamilton Grant, many of whom actually studied or worked with Land. Like the work of these thinkers, Land's thought (at least up until its turn to the far right) can be characterized as rigorously opposed to the ideology of liberal humanism and to anthropocentrism in general, as well as to all theoretical positions that can be described as correlationalist (Meillasoux 2009) and/or representationalist (Barad 2007). I believe that his work can be roughly divided into three main phases:

A) the early writings, which are still heavily indebted to theory's 'critical' mode (though they are already distinctly moving towards escalation) and which mainly consist of highly idiosyncratic engagements with the history of 'Western' philosophy. For one thing, Land here develops subversive readings of what he considers to be the West's philosophical mainstream (esp. Kant, Hegel, Schelling, Husserl, Hei-

degger, Derrida) – the “theo-humanists”, “croaking together in the cramped and malodorous pond of Anthropos” – while for another, he identifies/constructs and aligns himself with a small and marginalized insurrectionary counter-tradition (essentially Nietzsche and Bataille, but also, with some limitations, Schopenhauer and Freud) – “the wild beasts of the impersonal” (2005: 97). Methodologically speaking, Land engages with the philosophical canon through highly original genealogical-materialist rereadings, in which, for instance, Kant’s Enlightenment project of critique turns out to be the type of thinking corresponding to, and ultimately justifying, patriarchal, xenophobic, colonialist, capitalist modernity<sup>3</sup>. I believe that this approach, driven by an insistence on “the ineliminable materiality of all spiritualization [and thought] processes” (2011: 187), has certain affinities with some of the work that is done under the banner of Cultural Studies and may well serve as a source of inspiration for further work on the ‘archive’ (a term that should here also be understood in the Foucauldian sense [Foucault 1972]).

B) Then, in the early to mid-1990s, a noticeable shift occurs, a change in content as well as style and form. The increasing technologization of life, its accelerating penetration by technocapital, now becomes Land’s central concern, one he addresses theoretically through an eccentric synthesis of the thought of Deleuze and Guattari as well as Bataille on the one hand and the field of cybernetics on the other. This is the properly accelerationist phase of Land’s work. Conceiving capitalism along ‘machinic’ lines, that is, as an essentially self-organizing cybernetic system, Land emphasizes the revolutionary power of positive feedback loops and long-range runaway circuits against the conservative control-function of negative loops and stabilization or short-range circuits. Following the Deleuzo-Guattarian update of Marx’s and Engels’ famous description of capitalism as a force melting ‘all that is solid into thin air’, Land calls for an ‘escalative’, ‘delirial’ cybernetics that would break with the humanist, managerial-technocratic form of ‘security cybernetics’ in the vein of Norbert Wiener and, abandoning the homeostatic ideal, unshackle the deterritorializing feedback processes and thus unleash “exploratory mutation” (2011: 297f). According to Land, once all flows are freed from the inhibitions of reterritorialization, the ensuing emergent escalation processes come to constitute a nomadic, “unmanageable exploration that escapes all authority and obsolesces law” (2011: 301). As Land puts it: “cybernetics is the reality of critique” (2011: 300). ‘Acephalic’ capitalism itself – a relentless force of unbinding, of death (2011: 266) – thus represents the

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3 As Land argues, “the first *Critique* corresponds to appropriative economy or commodification”, “the second critique corresponds to imperial jurisdiction”, and “the third critique corresponds to the exercise of war at those margins of the global system that continue to resist both the market and the administration” (2011: 74f).

path to 'exit'<sup>4</sup>, to connecting with the vast tracts of the unknown.<sup>5</sup> Hence, since "the forces of production are going for the revolution on their own" (2011: 341), the goal becomes to participate in this anarchic process of radical destratification and deterritorialization, in the escalating unmaking of cultures, customs, traditions, institutions, and subjectivities, in such a way as to persistently accelerate and intensify it – up until the point, thus Land's wager, at which this "automatizing nihilist vortex", "becoming ever more tightly identified with its own self-surpassing" (2011: 444, 625), implodes. Political action is thus radically redefined as the acceleration of capitalist deterritorialization in the direction of "escape velocity" and the "catastrophe threshold of change", that is, as the "coercion of capital into immanent coexistence with its undoing" (2011: 341, 278). For Land, whose stance has accordingly sometimes been labelled as 'right accelerationism', there is no alternative to this – all hopes for a return to some type of precapitalist, organic, communal lifeform, or socialist calls for a strong, regulating state and appeals to solidarity and collectivity, are considered by him as hopelessly nostalgic, anachronistic in both, their analyses and propositions. As Land argues: "'Post-capitalism' has no real meaning except an end to the engine of change." (2011: 626)

In this period, escalation for Land is simultaneously subject matter, philosophical stance, and political program, as well as formal principle. Consequently, Land's texts of this time turn into increasingly experimental theory-fictions, effectively forsaking all conventions of academic discourse. Now, form and content effectively fuse, as Land seeks out adequate ways of responding to the real of hypermodern<sup>6</sup> capitalism, which, as he sees it, has rendered theoretical critique obsolete by itself becoming, through its infinite powers of deterritorialization, "the definitive automation and realisation of critique, stripped of all philosophical subjectivity". Hence, "Land's writing is compelled to abandon the obsolesced model of critique perpetuated by philosophy, and to engage in positive feedback with this actually

4 Land's notion of 'exit' constitutes one important common theme connecting all phases of his work, including the most recent, neoreactionary one, in which this erstwhile complex and suggestive idea is now rewritten in a very concretizing and, in my view, rather trivializing and politically highly questionable manner.

5 Despite its emphasis on radical immanence, Land's accelerationism thus ultimately remains a 'philosophy of the outside', driven by what Badiou famously called the 'passion for the real', pairing immanence with a "(deferred) transcendence" (Noys 2014: 8), insofar as capital's escalating 'immanentization' is supposed to eventually flip over into transcendence.

6 I believe that Land's take on the present is perhaps best characterized not in terms of 'late' or 'postmodernity', but, in reference to theorists such as Paul Virilio, Jean Baudrillard, or Marc Augé, as 'super-' or 'hypermodernity'. Though the philosophical and political positions of these thinkers differ significantly, they nevertheless all consider the present as above all characterized by phenomena of acceleration and excess. In this context, cf. especially the centrality of the 'hype(r)' in Land's essay "Hypervirus" as well as Land's and the CCRU's notion of 'hyperstition'.

effective automated critique" (Mackay/Brassier 2011: 27). Or, as Land puts it: "There is no real option between a cybernetics of theory or a theory of cybernetics" (2011: 295). The goal, then, can no longer be to write *about* or *against* capital, but to write *with* it, in sync with its deterritorializations. Thus, Land's work turns into a kind of mash-up or "sample machine" (Mackay/Brassier 2011: 34), not only combining a wide variety of different disciplines and fields in a radical trans- or post-/non-disciplinarity, but also interweaving science with literature, occultism, myth, popular fiction, electronic music, and film, and fusing writing with performance, dance, music, and visual art (e.g., in his collaboration with the artist collective Orphan Drift). In this way, as Robin Mackay and Ray Brassier point out, "Land proceeds to deterritorialize and de-institutionalise 'philosophy', turning it into a mode of concept-production which dissolves academic theory's institutional segregation from cultural practice and subverts the distinction between cognitive representation and fictional speculation". In doing so, his "superpositions of figures and terminologies approach a point of maximum compaction and density, forming their own compelling microcultural climate" (Mackay/Brassier 2011: 26, 34). The goal, for Land, was the creation of "a textual machine for affecting reality by intensifying the anticipation of its future" (Mackay/Brassier 2011: 32), or, as the CCRU used to say, 'hyperstition': 'fictions that make themselves real' (CCRU 2015).

Not unlike some other late 20<sup>th</sup>-century philosophical writings – we may, for instance, think of the work of Derrida here – Land's texts forcefully remind us of the significance of a *politics of form*. In this regard, different subdivisions of this phase of his oeuvre would be possible as Land's battle against the traditional protocols of 'Western thought' and against all that is sedimented in and subliminally perpetuated by it assumes more and more radical shapes, his experimentation *with* writing gradually giving way to one moving *beyond* writing (Mackay 2012). Thus, in the later texts, his self-consistent, somewhat hermetic theory-fictional assemblages are replaced by highly eccentric experiments with esoteric numbering practices (escaping 'Occidental' mathematization) and alphabetic anti-systems (based on the QWERTY keyboard) and attempts at a performative evacuation of the (speaking/writing) voice itself.<sup>7</sup> These 'non-sensical' writings from the late 90s and early 2000s can effectively be understood in terms of a radicalization of the deconstructivist struggle with the 'prison-house of language' (Jameson 1972), to the extreme point of the elaboration of a veritable 'anti-Logos' (Mackay/Brassier 2011: 21), efforts aimed at a subtraction from signification and meaning itself.

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7 In this context, a clear point of reference is Land's interest in the dance music of the 90s, especially Jungle, whose aesthetic was often similarly characterized by a welcoming of mechanization or computerization and an abandonment of human(ist) residues such as the voice (Noys 2014: 53).

C) In his 'late' work, roughly texts published after 2000, Land then increasingly returns to more conventional and accessible forms of writing. Now, however, as Mackay and Brassier observe, the formerly "tactical embrace of unlimited deregulation, marketisation, commodification, and privatisation, as vectors of social deterritorialization, apparently flips over into a complacent acceptance of actually-existing capitalist social relations" (2011: 47f). Increasingly conceiving of liberal democracy and its (attempts at) management of the economy as an obstacle to the unfolding of the inhuman dynamic of capitalism, Land now calls for its abolition and replacement with a system of 'neo-cameralism', in which nation-states are dissolved into tiny 'gov-corps', effectively run like businesses and, according to Land's neo-eugenic 'hyperracism', often based on 'race' (Land 2012). With this vision of a "rigidly formalized capitalist technocracy" (MacDougald 2015), capitalism is pushed to an extreme, openly authoritarian, fascist point. Like the online writings of computer scientist Curtis Yarvin (blogging under the pseudonym Mencius Moldbug), on which he heavily draws, Land's "The Dark Enlightenment" and other more recent texts are at the heart of the intellectual movement known as neoreaction, which Lawrence Grossberg has described as "conservatism after postmodernism" (2018: 78), a highly idiosyncratic amalgamation of older conservative, libertarian, economic-liberal, racist, and postmodernist discourses<sup>8</sup>, which – as is so often the case with the contemporary new right – also distinctly incorporates or echoes left critique.

If Cultural Studies is a 'political project' (Hall 1996a), one that, generally speaking, aims at a more just, free, and egalitarian world, then the arguments and demands put forth in these late works by Land need to be unambiguously rejected. If they are of significance at all, then certainly not as tools, but as material for better 'knowing the enemy'. Though this is far beyond the scope of this essay, in order to better understand, and ultimately better fight, the extremely complex and heterogeneous phenomenon of the new right, these texts thus deserve to be submitted to a rigorous (discourse) analysis, deconstruction, and critique. With regard to the already mentioned integration of 'critical', leftist, postmodernist, and poststructuralist thought into this body of work, there is, I think, also something to be learned here about the considerable conceptual and political flexibility such approaches are evidently able to tolerate (Burrows 2019). In this context, against Mackay, who, with respect to the late work, maintains that "[i]n any normative, clinical, or social sense of the word, very simply, Land did 'go mad'"<sup>9</sup> (2012), it bears

8 Cf. also the discourses of 'post-truth' politics, 'fake news', etc.

9 Land himself identifies a similar gap between his old and new work/self: *"It's another life; I have nothing to say about it – I don't even remember writing half of those things ... I don't want to get into retrospectively condemning my ancient work – I think it's best to gently back off. It belongs in the clawed embrace of the undead amphetamine god."* (qtd. in Mackay 2012)

pointing out that while a radical shift did unmistakably take place, there are also distinct continuities throughout Land's writing – and I believe we would do well to keep these continuities in mind and allow them to trouble our reading of the earlier work (and our theorizing more generally<sup>10</sup>).

## Dismantling the Human Security System

You scrape away your face and step into  
the dark...

*(Nick Land)*

I have already indicated that, as a political proposition, I believe that Land's accelerationism needs to be rejected. As his own philosophico-political trajectory shows, a simple embrace of the existing dynamics of capitalism will not lead us anywhere good – only to more, perhaps even worse versions, of the same. After all, capitalist crises come and go. 2007/08 was only the latest in a series of crises, none of which has led to the demise of capitalism. On the contrary, crises frequently help the system to advance and regenerate itself. As Steven Shaviro points out: “we are all accelerationists now” (2015: 34). Excess, transgression, and crisis are what fuels neoliberalism. There is thus no reason to expect that the next crises and contradictions will be any different. Interestingly, what Land's position comes down to in the end is not entirely unlike certain other political philosophies that have emerged from the ‘radical left’ in the (not so) recent past – I am thinking here, for instance, of those positions held by the likes of Badiou, Rancière, or Žižek, which effectively tend to collapse politics into ‘the political’ (cf. Marchart 2010), understood as the “absolute singularity of an event” (Badiou 2005: 23), or those, like Lévinas’ or Derrida’s, that appeal to the ‘totally Other’, figured as some radical outside. Though these theories should no doubt not simply be conflated, they arguably all run the risk of turning politics into a quasi-theological affair and, paradoxically, of ultimately resulting in a-political attentism. Here, curiously, these often ultra-radical stances seem to fold into their very opposite: ‘Keep Calm and Carry On’.

Thus, if Landian accelerationism is of value, then not as political strategy but as a symptom, a marker of the crisis of political agency. Yet, as I have suggested, there are other aspects of his work which may prove more useful. In my view, one of these is Land's powerful critique of humanism. Before I embark upon an in-depth discussion of this critique, let me briefly introduce (my reading of) Land's idiosyncratic brand of materialism on which that critique is based. The reference points

10 In my opinion, the ‘unnatural political alliances’ (as a call for papers dedicated to this important topic put it) that mark our present moment still deserve more analytical attention.

for this materialism are mainly Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Freud, Deleuze and Guattari, and especially Bataille, whose 'base materialism' (e.g., 1985) Land develops and updates for the age of technoscience. Like Bataille's, Land's vision is a 'heterological' one, focused on waste, dirt, and the abject, on all that is excluded from capitalist 'homogeneity', yet which constantly haunts and disturbs this world centered on rationality, utility, production, and accumulation, with which it cannot be coordinated, threatening to rupture the 'restricted economy' of capitalism<sup>11</sup> and to void value. Anticipating certain varieties of the new materialisms, for Land, matter is essentially active, unstable, and unruly, something that can ultimately not be contained within models that posit sovereign human subjects manipulating external and passive objects, as propagated by modern (read: humanist, correlationist) science and elsewhere. Here, matter is creative and excessive, an entropic force always undoing any form, order, or organization, whose stability can never be but provisional – "base matter twitches and spits, selfassembling neoverminous swarms. It bites, and spreads disease." (Land 2011: 393) It is "acategorical", "turbulence 'beyond all regulation'" (211, quoting Bataille). There is clearly something vitalist about this – perhaps we may speak of a 'dark' or an 'excremental vitalism' (Noys 2014: 79) – and it would no doubt be interesting to put it into dialogue with some of the vitalisms that have emerged or been reenergized in recent years. For now, what matters most is that Land's ontology is essentially a processual one, conceiving all phenomena in terms of only ever temporary aggregations, precarious assemblages of flows of energy. After structuralism and poststructuralism emphatically 'depresentified' (Foucault 1972: 47) things, Land, not unlike several new materialist philosophers, now argues for their "de-thinging" – "there are no things" (273, 210). Citing Nietzsche, Land writes: "With the libidinal reformulation of being as composition 'one acquires degrees of being, one loses that which has being' [...]. The effect of 'being' is derivative from process" (2005: 30). Thus, "any possible self – or relative isolation – is only ever precipitated as a precarious digression within a general economy, perpetually renegotiated across the scale of energy flows. The relative autonomy of the organism is not an ontological given but a material achievement" (2005: 45). With this insistence on what Barad (2007) would call the 'intra-activity' of matter, binary oppositions such those of nature and culture, human and nonhuman, organic and inorganic, etc. are destabilized. Like the work of Haraway, Barad, and others, Land's writings allow us to think and address the contingent and fabricated nature of such

11 Against this, Bataille proposes a 'general economy' able to do justice to all those elements excluded or denigrated by capitalism. Similar to what was said above, I think it is debatable in how far this theory, which was clearly modeled on an older form of capitalism still largely devoted to production and accumulation and driven by the asceticism of the Protestant work ethic, is still adequately able to capture the realities of our '(post-)postmodern' capitalism of consumption and excess.

boundaries. As he writes with regards to the body: “There is a boundary of sorts along the banks and shores of the body where fluidity and rigidity meet, but this is not sufficient to authorize the irrigational idol of rigid differentiation.” (2005: 91) What is denied here is not the existence of boundaries, but their essentialist, permanent character. As Land’s use of metaphors suggests, they are better thought of in terms of congealments, solidifications, sedimentations, and as such are always tenuous and marked by “porous heterogeneity” (2011: 192). Here, in other words, ontology emerges as “managed flow” (2005: 92). And this management can, of course, be thematized and problematized. That is to say, Land’s libidinal, dark materialism contributes to an explicit *politicization of ontology* – a politics of matter. While Land’s radical Dionysian pessimism leads him to denounce organization per se as invariably a form of despotism<sup>12</sup> and accordingly to champion total, uninhibited deterritorialization, we do not need to follow Land to this extreme stance – which I would consider as depoliticizing and disempowering and thus as highly problematic – but can still assert the validity and usefulness of his reflections.

One context in which their analytic value becomes apparent is Land’s critique of humanism. In my reading, this critique condenses what, throughout his writings (especially the early ones<sup>13</sup>), shows up as the anti-authoritarian, anti-patriarchal, anti-racist, anti-nationalist, and anti-fascist thrust of his politics. For Land, the defining trait of ‘Occidental’, modern humanism is its ‘securocratic’ (2011: 585, *passim*) nature. It is a prime instrument of “anthropomorphic power” (397) – which should be read as both, the power of *Anthropos*, but also the power that *produces Anthropos* in the first place<sup>14</sup>. The specific form of the human manufactured by humanism is referred to by Land as the ‘human security system’ (312, *passim*). From Land’s pessimistic, neo-Dionysian, libidinal-materialist perspective, infused by the thought of Nietzsche, Bataille, Deleuze and Guattari, human existents<sup>15</sup> are essen-

12 In this context, cf. also Land’s idiosyncratic theory of ‘geotraumatism’ (esp. 2011: 493–505), which construes the organization of matter as itself an expression of trauma and hence assumes that all things universally yearn for release. While this view is no doubt somewhat eccentric, I believe that Land’s interest for geology and the inorganic domain might nevertheless be a potential opening for instructive dialogues with more recent theoretical work on the inhuman (cf., e.g., Povinelli 2016; Yusoff 2018).

13 Cf. especially the essays “Kant, Capital, and the Prohibition of Incest”, “Art as Insurrection”, and “Making It with Death”.

14 The phrase “in the first place” should here not be misunderstood as signaling precedence or some founding act or moment. Instead, this production of the human must be conceived along the lines of Butler’s (1993, 1999) concept of ‘performativity’ or Althusser’s (1971) notion of ‘interpellation’ (esp. as reread by Butler [1997: 106–31]) as an ongoing process, a constitution in time.

15 The concept of the ‘existent’ is borrowed from Elizabeth Povinelli (2016). I use the slightly awkward phrase ‘human existent’ in order to avoid alternative terms such as ‘individual’, ‘subject’, ‘person’, or ‘human’, which all come rather fully loaded with sedimented meanings and

tially a "battlefield" (189), caught in an endless flux of energies, given over to multiple, heterogeneous 'becomings', traversed by impersonal forces beyond any control, and constituted, but also undone, by the "ferocious exteriority" (153) of radical alterity and 'base matter'. According to Land, the "anthropological machine" (Agamben 2004: 26) of humanism works precisely to repress this reality. Along with other mechanisms of stratification and territorialization, it represents an attempt to organize, structure, and control the processes of matter-energy flows. It is fully dedicated, he writes, to the "paranoid ideal of self-sufficiency" (443). Humanism, in tandem with capitalism, individualizes existents, provides them with a unique 'face' (cf. Deleuze/Guattari 1987: 167–91), and endows every single one with an *identity*, signaling the unity, continuity, and coherence of the person. No fragmentarity, multiplicity, heterogeneity, and mutability, but sameness (Lat. *idem*) – "a person or thing is itself and not something else" (OED 1991: 620). Land is unambiguous in his view that this is a form of power. For him, as Mackay and Brassier point out, "every repressive culture is founded upon the identification and repetition of sameness" (2011: 21). Land here effectively inscribes himself in the long line of thought of the critique of the subject (esp. in its poststructuralist variant), which, instead of the primordial and sovereign origin of all action, speech, affect, relation, etc., he considers to be the effect and product of a whole number of "macro- and micro-governmental entities" (450). As for Nietzsche, Foucault, Deleuze, and numerous others, the result is docility: humanism "shores up the cop in everyone's head" and "smother[s] the earth in priests, cops, and bureaucrats" (280, 394) – a process, as Land maintains in line with many of these thinkers<sup>16</sup>, strongly contributed to by the so-called human sciences, especially the "medico-security apparatus" and the "psychopolice" (308, 307), that is, psychology and psychoanalysis.

For Land, the human subject fabricated by modern humanism is one among many 'PODS': "Politically Organized Defensive Systems" (320). These pods can be understood as assemblages, existing at various scales, though one of their defining characteristics is precisely the repression of their 'assembled' character – which, in keeping with the double meaning of the original French word *agencement*, should be taken to refer to both, their nature as a heterogeneous ensemble of parts as well as the fact that they are the result of a process, the action of fitting these parts together (Fr. *agencer*). In a radicalization of the Foucauldian notion of power as 'micro-physical' and all-pervasive, Land identifies the operation of control 'all the way down' and 'all the way up', from the micropods of the organization of matter, the

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connotations I wish to avoid (and each of which, of course, has been subjected to rigorous deconstruction).

16 Here, out of a plethora of works, we might single out the groundbreaking writings of Canquillhem and Foucault as well as those associated with the anti-psychiatry movement of the 1960s and 70s.

cells of the body, or the organism, via the self, family, or institutions, up to macropods such as nations, Fortress Europe, or the capitalist world order. In each case, “fluctuations are case-packed into reproducible units – geochemical, bio-organic, cultural – encrusted within security pods” (415). They are “pseudo-organic unities” (448), instances of “pseudoabsoluteness” (188), relying on the “defensive strategies of repression, projection, denial, censorship, exclusion, and restriction” (448). Like the human, which is effectively nothing but “crystallized paranoia” (Plant/Land 2014: 311), all pods constitute “fortifications”, marked by an “anal-sadistic structure” (Land 2011: 320, 200). Their make-up is essentially *‘immuno-political’*. With this focus on immuno-politics, Land effectively joins the (radicalized) determination to ‘wage a war on totality’ (Lyotard 1984: 82) propelling so much poststructuralist writing to the theoretical discourses on biopower and biopolitics. What immuno-politics is aimed at is the effective repression of relationality, entanglement, and processuality through the manufacture of (ostensibly) discrete and self-contained entities. For this project, alterity is a problem. Yet, because it is the very condition of possibility for any such entity, the (un-)ground from which they can be constructed in the first place, and because modernity is by its very nature propelled by a drive pushing it outward and forward, towards novelty, acceleration, and expansion (not least, of course, in the form of capitalist exploitation), alterity can never be eradicated. Instead, the encounter with it always has to be reduced to what Land terms an ‘inhibited’, that is, a pre-structured and -framed, safely regulated, and hazard-free one. As he points out, a modern society’s “dream is to grow whilst remaining identical to what it was, to touch the other without vulnerability” (63f). Hence the central law of all pods: “the outside must pass by way of the inside” (320). The goal is invariably “to capture alterity within a system of rules, to provide it with an identity, and to exclude the possibility of the radically different” (69). This, in other words, is an alterity that is in advance rigidly positioned, fixed in a stable relation, inscribed with meaning, and therefore always already delimited, domesticated, and tamed. Otherness is thus stripped of anything that might trouble or undo the ‘self’ and reveal the ‘agential cuts’ (Barad 2007) through which it was produced in the first place. As Land puts it: “we have always already torn out the tongue of alterity before entering into relation with it”<sup>17</sup> (64).

To a certain extent, Land’s thinking on immuno-politics here resonates with the work of Roberto Esposito (2008, 2010, 2011), a major contribution to the theorization of biopower. It was above all Esposito who forcefully argued that “*in bio-politics, the hyphen is immunological*” (Neyrat 2010: 32). Opposing *communitas* to *immunitas*, Esposito explains that the former, harking back to the *munus* (Lat. ‘task’, ‘duty’,

17 This may well be a reference to the mutilated Friday of J.M. Coetzee’s original rewriting of the Robinson Crusoe-myth in his 1986 novel *Foe*, a text in which – as in Coetzee’s work on the whole – the question of alterity is of central concern.

'gift'), means a living interdependence with the other, a reciprocal relation in which human existents 'ex-pose' themselves, whereas the latter signifies a defense of the 'proper', of one's own identity, and thus a negative, privative form of community, in fact, the very interruption of the "social circuit of reciprocal gift-giving" (Esposito 2011: 6) that is the foundation of every community. That is to say, for Esposito, community is really the very opposite of the individual, the private, and the particular; it is the 'common', "the giving up of all identity closed onto itself", an "originary exile" (Neyrat 2010: 33). As Frédéric Neyrat explains: "Existing only outside of itself, community is first and foremost a lack of Self, of unity, of a One." (2010: 33) By contrast, the 'immunitary paradigm' denies precisely this alterity that permeates the (putative) self and conceives community in an identitarian way by equating the common with the proper. Immunity signifies "the 'nonbeing' or the 'not-having' anything in common" (Esposito 2011: 51). Individual as well as collective life is defined in terms of a self-sameness, a unity, a self-enclosed absolute, and, importantly, as something to be defended against risks and dangers. The process of 'immunization' as Esposito understands it means the protection of life from 'external' threats, a securitization against the loss of identity and individuality. It thus institutes the demarcations of inside and outside, self and other, human and nonhuman. As for Land, this process – in keeping with its biomedical meaning – involves the controlled admittance or introjection of small dosages of that which threatens it – an "exclusionary inclusion or exclusion by inclusion" (Esposito 2011: 8). At the heart of immunization we thus find an irreducible dialectic: the proper (self or community) is to be defended against precisely that which is constitutive of it and to which it constantly needs to have recourse: the other. According to Esposito, it is because of this dialectic that there is always the danger of an 'auto-immunitarian' hypertrophication of self-preservation: the frenetic attempt to defend the self and cleanse it of all traces of alterity results in the shift – what the German Left Hegelians would call *Umschlagen* – from the protection to the negation of life (hence the subtitle of Esposito's *Immunitas*). When this happens, biopolitics turns into what Foucault termed 'thanatopolitics'; the power over life is exercised against life, a politics for life becomes a politics of death. Hence the countless murders and genocides committed in the name of life. This, for Esposito, is the 'enigma of biopolitics' (2011: 13–44). Esposito and Land consequently consider Nazism the most extreme, but also the 'logical', not wildly aberrant, endpoint of the logic of immunity. Where, in Esposito's (2010) view – which echoes somewhat similar sentiments in the work of Bataille, Blanchot, Nancy, Lacoue-Labarthe, Derrida, and Agamben – the community is something that can never *be*, since it is founded on a lack, a lacuna, an indelible limit, and thus "is not identifiable with itself, with all of itself and with itself as all", totalitarianism pursues precisely this "furious illusion" and must therefore be understood as "the phantasmatic temptation of abolishing the limit, of filling in the fault, of closing the wound" (2013: 29). However, this temptation haunts *all* pods, since, logically, every pod is a

'monopod' (Land 2011: 347, *passim*). For an author like Land, fascism must thus be seen as something like the dark flipside of securocratic humanism, whose immunopolitical orientation entails a tendentially obsessive and violent need to define, delimit, and defend the 'proper', understood at once as 'one's own' and 'the clean' (cf. Kristeva 1982). In fact, it is driven by a veritable 'will to purity' (Kroker/Kroker 1993). That is to say, the immunological production of the human inevitably also constructs the nonhuman, subhuman, infrahuman, parahuman, etc. and is accompanied and underpinned by an incessant work of 'purification' (Latour 1993) or 'ontological hygiene' (Graham 2002). As Land succinctly puts it: "The only possible politics of purity is fascism" (2011: 76). Here, I believe that Land's thinking intersects in potentially productive ways with critical posthumanism and its focus on the human as a "differential norm" and its critique of "the limits of human intelligibility" (Butler 2016: 76, 2006: 35).

Yet, as I have already noted, while the 'politics of purity' may aim at total integrity and homogeneity, without any remainders, it will always inevitably fail, as absolute closure is an impossibility. Because of this, there will always be existents that resist or escape immunological capture. Adapting Deleuze and Guattari (1987, esp. 232–309), Land describes these oppositional or alternative modes of being as so many ways of 'becoming-inferior'<sup>18</sup>. Regarding these, I here only want to observe two things: Land notes that for such becomings, the rule is: "No revolution without insurrectionary desire, no effective route for insurrectionary desire without integral anti-fascism." (170) For Land, the anti-immunological, anti-fascist thrust of these becomings already registers in their very 'form', that is, in the fact that desire is here not congealed in the territorialization of a subject – routes instead of roots, nomads rather than monads. This, precisely, is a *becoming*, not a subjectivation (hegemonic, oppositional, or otherwise). The 'subject' (again, language itself constrains us here) of a becoming is always 'one' (Fr. *il*, Ger. *man*): it is not *I* but *one* that is becoming-minor, -wild, -lateral, -imperceptible, ... I believe we may well feel compelled to oppose this typically Landian radicalization of the impulse towards deterritorialization along multiple 'lines of flight' and, against his injunction to "extinguish all nostalgia for belonging" (264), insist on the latter's legitimacy, if not necessity (as well as the fact that it is not necessarily nostalgic). In that context, we may want to think of 'routes vs. roots' and so forth not so much in terms of a binarism than of a question of 'articulation', and bring into play the key problematic of 'identification' (cf. Hall 1996b). Nevertheless, I would like to hold on to the significance of Land's notion of becoming as, on the one hand, a welcome reminder that any sense of identity should always be put 'under erasure', kept open to be troubled, unsettled, and refashioned by its constitutive outsides, that is, to use Deleuzo-Guattarian terminol-

18 The most concise elaboration of this important concept can be found in the essay "Spirit and Teeth".

ogy, remain 'molecular' and never be permitted to petrify into a fixed 'molarity'; and, on the other hand, as a potentially potent figuration of a new political, not subject, but *assemblage*.

The other point I want to make is related to this: It concerns the second aspect of Land's concept, not the 'becoming', but the 'inferior'. Rather than a reaffirmation of hierarchical logics of superiority and inferiority, I think that this notion should be read as an *appropriation*: a tactical siding with the other(s) of the human, a strategic seizure of this problematic term which effectively decenters it through a deconstructive move problematizing and displacing classifications and aiming in the direction of a utopian anti-/non-logic that eschews all orderings. For Land, to be becoming-inferior (only the progressive form is appropriate here; one can never *be* inferior) means to *escape*: to break away from hegemonic constructions of humanity towards its outside – "becoming an enemy of mankind" (200). Hence his insistence that 'the inferior ones' are indecent, lazy, disobedient, unrestrained, unclean, and impure, "no more employable than they are psychoanalyzable", "excluded from every possibility of salvation" (183). Becoming 'dehumanized', they undo the territorializing codings of class, race, gender, sexuality, nationality, ability, and so forth. In this context, it is significant to note the numerous figurations of the nonhuman and not-quite-human among the plethora of Land's examples of becomings that exceed the 'human security system': becoming-animal (esp. 'abject' ones such as rats), -beast, -werewolf, -vampire, -plant, -virus, -cyborg, -inorganic, and more. For Land, becoming-inferior is essentially all about deterritorialization and the liberation of flows. As he explains, inferiority is a "wilderness terrain" with "channels of open flow"; becoming here means "becoming multiple, fluid, unpredictable, [...] becomings of all kinds". Inferiority is hence "not a state, essence, or genus, but a complex space cross-cut by voyages of all kinds" (200). Yet, I believe that it is also possible to understand all these passages and images simultaneously in terms of a potent political speculation, gesturing towards a wholly other mode of existence, in which, to quote Donna Haraway, whose work points in just such a direction, "people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines" (2010: 2196). In fact, I think Land's writing can be read as part of a new, *posthumanist imaginary*, emerging in theory, philosophy, and across the cultural landscape (with science fiction as a primary site), consisting of often daring representations and radical thought experiments which all signal the necessity for a novel type of collectivity, without yet really being able to articulate what it could concretely look like.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, what transpires in many cases, including, in my reading, in Land's, is that, for a more sustainable, just, and egalitarian future, this collective will have to be a sort of transversal<sup>20</sup> as-

19 In this context, cf. also my reading of Alex Garland's 2018 science fiction horror film *Annihilation* in the coda.

20 On transversality, cf. Braidotti 2019.

semblage of assemblages, based on wide-ranging “re-distributions of difference and identity” (Halberstam/Livingston 1995: 10) and a collectively negotiated posthuman performativity (Barad 2007). In this context, becoming-ahuman – “Man is something [to be] overcome: a problem, drag” (Land 2011: 446) – would not mean heading full throttle for human extinction, as championed by Land in many of his texts, but rather working towards the abolition of the human as a category. We can escape and undo the Human without having to wish for the end of the human.

Not unlike Haraway, Land sees the more recent accelerations of technoscientific development as an opportunity to similarly speed up this process of becoming. Now, from all corners, “deterritorializing replicants of nomad-cyberrevolution close in upon the reterritorializing reproducers of the sedentary human security system, hacking into the macropod” (330). Everywhere – through digitalization and VR, AI, biotechnology, (third-wave) cybernetics, etc. – the human is today being disassembled, so that “[h]umanity recedes like a loathsome dream” (300). Identity is being ‘shut down’ (457), the pods taken apart, and if this ‘meltdown’ “has a place for you”, then only “as a schizophrenic HIV+ transsexual chinese-latino stim-addicted LA hooker with implanted mirrorshades and a bad attitude” (456). Yet, whereas Haraway (2010) emphasizes what she calls ‘the social relations of science and technology’, that is, their articulation with other societal subsystems, and while she stresses the ambivalent, over- as well as underdetermined nature of the cyborg, and thus frames technoscience itself as a site of struggle, Land tends to fall back into a technological determinism. “It is ceasing”, he writes, “to be a matter of how we think about technics, if only because technics is increasingly thinking about itself.” (293) For Land, the “pilot of history” is “impersonal”, and consequently, “politics is obsolete” (295, 317). According to Land, the “planetary technocapital singularity” inescapably assembles itself: “Life is being phased-out into something new, and if we think this can be stopped we are even more stupid than we seem.” (338, 317f) While such depoliticization should resolutely be resisted, I believe that Land’s analyses still have their use for the project of a critical ontology and genealogy of the present. In fact, his work can be added to the long list of writings that attempt to think the present moment in terms of a shift, or a number of (interrelated) shifts – analyses associated with notions such as late capitalism, post-Fordism, the control society, the information age, the network society, the posthuman condition, and numerous others. Such diagnostic accounts engage in the work of periodization, which, despite the fact that it is never unproblematic<sup>21</sup>, is in my view indispensable for mapping and being able to intervene in the present. The significance of Land’s writings is not

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21 For instance, I am here thinking of the dangers of generalization, absolutization, and homogenization, with such theories always running the risk of turning into oversimplifying ‘grand narratives’.

only that they chart the shift towards our contemporary cybernetic technocapitalism, but that they allow us to see this shift as a deeply uneven, heterogeneous process. I think that if we read Land somewhat against the grain and ignore his flippant hyperboles, which always tend to reduce historical process to teleology, his deliberations on pods and immuno-politics, his focus on the tensions between territorialization and deterritorialization, and related aspects of his work may well sharpen our awareness of the fact that socio-cultural formations and power structures are always hybrid, composite, palimpsest-like in character, so that, for example, the post-modern, technoscientific society of control must be understood as uneasily coexisting with, but also sometimes integrating, numerous elements of humanist, disciplinary modernity.<sup>22</sup> While, for instance, human existents are today in all kinds of ways being subjectivated as 'dividuals' (Deleuze 1992), that is, as decentered subjectivities dispersed across a variety of networks, they are, in other contexts, simultaneously continuously being interpellated as integrated and autonomous individuals (i.e., pods) – with effects that are not infrequently pathological. As I see it, the nuanced and differentiating investigation of such 'simultaneity of the nonsimultaneous', of syncretisms, multidimensionality, and of the ensuing effects, is today one important task for Cultural Studies. Power and society, too, are effectively assemblages, not homogenous wholes.<sup>23</sup>

I think the relevance of all these reflections on immuno-politics, becoming, and social assemblages is also attested to by the Corona pandemic.<sup>24</sup> As several commentators have pointed out, the epidemic was an occasion for a reconfiguration of technologies of power. With regard to the various measures adopted by different nation-states in order to contain the spread of the virus (lockdown, curfews, compulsory mask-wearing, mobile phone tracking, etc.), a rather heated debate has broken out about the question of how to interpret these developments. While some, most

22 On discipline and control, cf. Foucault 1979 and Deleuze 1992.

23 In a similar vein, we might consider Land's political proposition of accelerationism as giving us cause for doubt regarding the received theoretical model of subversion and containment, which continues to infuse many contemporary leftist political analyses – we may, for instance, think of the influential work of Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) and their argument about the 'incorporation' of critique by the 'new spirit of capitalism' here. In contrast to the binarism of this model, I would read Land's work as urging us to take more seriously the central Foucauldian insight about the mutual implication and entanglement of 'power' and 'resistance' and to realize that nothing ever simply comes 'from outside' – there is no outside in that sense – and is then 'taken in'. Nothing is *essentially*, by and in itself, resistant. Instead, it is a question of relations, tendencies, and articulations – all of which are immanent. In the wake of Barad's important work, we may therefore want to abandon the whole geometric model which opposes interiorities to exteriorities and replace it with the notion of a "contested and ever-changing topology", one that is "iteratively (re)produced through the dynamics of intra-activity and enfolding" (Barad 2007: 243).

24 The Corona pandemic is taken up again in more detail in ch. 7.

(in-)famously Giorgio Agamben (2021), saw the (for 'Western', liberal societies) unprecedented restrictions on freedom, the universalization of (bio-)surveillance, and the imposition and, to some extent, normalization of what effectively amounted to a state of emergency as a sure sign of a reassertion of Foucauldian disciplinary power, or worse, even a new "technological-sanitizationist despotism" (Agamben 2021: 10) quickly sliding towards totalitarianism, others contradicted, arguing, for instance, that the measures were better understood with reference to what Foucault described as liberal governmentality and the *dispositif* of security (Sarasin 2020), or, within the Deleuzian paradigm of post-disciplinary power, as a manifestation of media-cybernetic, 'pharmacopornographic' control (Preciado 2020). Yet, looked at from the theoretical perspective outlined here, instead of absolutizing this type of power or that, the Corona measures are perhaps more productively seen in terms of an assemblage of power technologies, of a heterogeneous, dynamic, and contested network (in which, importantly, each technology must itself be conceived as an assemblage of practices, discourses, regulations, institutions, artifacts, etc.). In place of totalizing, large-scale pronouncements, such an outlook demands a much more nuanced, differentiating, and contextual (or conjunctural) approach, one dedicated to the concrete, delimiting its investigation both spatially and temporally, and trying to analyze as precisely as possible the actual configuration of the social force-field. While concepts such as discipline, bio- and necropower, control, or governmentality are extremely helpful for this task, I think they are best considered not as absolutes taking turns in the course of history, in a more or less linear succession of different 'types' of power and society, but rather as elements in a series of complex, uneven, and shifting constellations. These need to be described in terms of unstable sets of relations between what, following Williams (1977: 121–27), can be termed the hegemonic, the marginally residual, and the emergent – relations which can take various forms: a parallelism, an incorporation, a syncretism, a contradiction, etc. (cf. Cord/Schleusener 2020: 8). The precise nature of the nexus of these relations has to be determined anew in each specific case, as the Corona measures showed very well, which not only differed from place to place and were continually being adjusted in time, but which were in themselves a variable assemblage of disparate elements. And this, I contend, is what power *always* is.

The pandemic also demonstrates the enduring significance of the notion of immuno-politics. Here, Land's theoretical framework once again proves productive. For what did the shutdown of public life, the social distancing regulations, the closing of national borders, and related measures in Europe and elsewhere signify if not a general attempt at the fortification of 'pods' at various levels, from that of the individual body to the national and supranational ones? Everywhere, the immunitarian impulse was radicalized; what was to be maintained and defended at all cost was integrity (bodily, national, etc.). In that way, sovereignty was to be preserved: "the sovereign is he who protects from the diffuse conflict raging on the outside. He

bio-contains, he safeguards.” (Di Cesare 2021: 34f) As Donatella Di Cesare’s use of the masculine pronoun implies, the sovereignty that was thus meant to be guaranteed in Europe was, as in earlier epidemics (syphilis, HIV, etc.), once again principally that of the male, white, ‘Western’, bourgeois, able-bodied, younger and middle-aged (read: productive<sup>25</sup>) subject – the ‘human security system’. Here as elsewhere, the pandemic functioned like a catalyst or “magnifying glass” (Nancy 2020), revealing modes of biopolitical and necropolitical management – especially through a “politics of *differential vulnerability*” (Lorenzini 2021: 43) – that, both within and at national borders, were often already operating in some form before the implementation of the new measures. It thus exposed more clearly the dialectical, even paradoxical, relation between community and immunity discussed above and the fact that immunity is never just “a biological fact independent of cultural and political variables”, but something that is “constructed through social and political criteria that produce sovereignty or exclusion, protection or stigmatization, life or death” (Preciado 2020).

Yet, at the same time, and because of this, it seems to me that Covid-19 can also be said to have opened up a window onto something different. It arguably not only raised the awareness for the necessity of alternative forms of inhabiting the earth, but also provided us with some ideas of what this might mean or entail. As I have already indicated, on a general, theoretical level – which will have to be translated into countless concrete measures (for which many suggestions already exist) – it is, to adopt Land’s terminology, precisely (also) a question of becoming-inferior, of refusing the immunitary paradigm, that is, “the obstinate desire to remain intact, uncorrupted, beyond harm” by immunizing ourselves against “all that is outside, other and beyond” (Di Cesare 2021: 27). What is at stake is a radically different biopolitics. Esposito, whose work is extremely helpful in this context, attempts to think such an alternative type of biopolitics, one that would not entail “the self-destructive revolt of immunity against itself” but “an opening to its converse, community” (2011: 141). Drawing, among other things, on Spinoza’s ‘multitude’, Merleau-Ponty’s conception of the ‘flesh’, Simondon’s thinking of ‘individuation’, and Deleuze’s concept of ‘a life’, Esposito outlines an ‘affirmative biopolitics’ thought through the *munus* of community and the notion of an ‘impersonal’ life shared among all (living) beings, which can never be fully contained within a closed, unified (individual or collective) body. Citing Simondon, he conjures a different logic of community, that of an “impersonal singularity (or a singular impersonality), which, rather than being imprisoned in the confines of the individual, opens those confines to an eccentric movement that ‘traverses men as well as plants and animals independently of the matter of their individuation and the forms of their personality’” (2008: 194). To a certain extent, Esposito’s reflections here resonate not only with Land’s critique of the – in the

25 Cf. the concept of ‘productivity ageism’.

last instance always *imaginary* (in the polysemic Lacanian sense) – fortifications of the pods, but also with some of the more recent new materialisms and their reconceptualization particularly of the individual body. Not unlike Land, who repeatedly polemicalizes against the conception of the organism as “a little security system” and instead emphasizes “the reality of the free penetrability of the body” and the fact that “the subject is not the owner of its skin, but a migrant upon its surface” (2011: 332, 200, 343), new materialist philosophers rethink corporeality as ‘transcorporeality’ (Alaimo 2010) and stress the body’s basic volatility (Grosz 1994), porousness, heterogeneity, and its nature as “an impure, human-nonhuman assemblage” (Bennett 2010: xvii).<sup>26</sup> An alternative, affirmative biopolitics would thus have to proceed from a very different ontology: not from the identitarian, sovereigntist fantasy of pure, unified, self-enclosed, and self-sufficient entities, but from the basic relationality, interdependence, entanglement, and processuality of being.

Similar propositions have recently been put forward explicitly in the context of the Corona pandemic. Thus, thinkers as diverse as Latour (2021), Preciado (2020), or Bratton (2021) have all argued, in their very different ways, that the pandemic should finally drive home to all the illusory and dangerous nature of the old ontology – that is, the fact that ‘we have never been modern’ (Latour 1993) – and articulated their hope that it might hence function as a catalyst for a radically different form of planetary cohabitation, based on a whole new biopolitics (many of these authors employ metaphors of metamorphosis and mutation to signal the fundamental and far-reaching nature of the required transformations). Preciado, for instance, writes: “Contrary to what one might imagine, our health will not come from a border or separation, but only from a new understanding of community with all living creatures, a new sharing with other beings on the planet.” (2020) Here, much could be said about the nature of viruses in general, which, in both their ontology (defiance of clear classifications, esp. the ‘living’ vs. ‘non-living’ binary) and their mode of functioning (replication inside the cells of organisms, i.e., circulation from one body to another, contamination and altering), always represent something akin to an “ontological insult”<sup>27</sup> (Bratton 2021: 98). It is certainly no coincidence that the virus figures

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26 For Land, who here follows in the footsteps of Deleuze’s and Guattari’s schizoanalysis, the psychological apparatus of ‘Western’ man (sic!) is another such pod, essentially oriented towards shoring up the integrity of the ‘self’ through the clear demarcation of an inside from an outside. In this context, too, Land evokes the immuno-political nature of these structures and processes, as when he speaks of the ego as a “political or policed skin” or of its functioning as “a kind of quarantine” (333).

27 With regard to the present ‘posthuman condition’ (Braidotti 2013, 2019), marked as it is, among other things, by new technoscientific, mediatic, and biomedical realities, by the numerous problematics associated with the term ‘Anthropocene’ or ‘Capitalocene’, and now also by Covid-19, one is tempted to take up Freud’s train of thought and speak of further ‘narcissistic insults’ for Man here.

prominently across Land's writings (esp. in the essay "Hypervirus"), as a powerful figuration of "xenopulsions" (Land 2011: 333), subverting immunosecurity and signifying "not just infection, but connection" (Plant/Land 2014: 312). In the readings of Latour and others, Covid-19 today produces in all "a general uncertainty about our protective envelopes". Latour writes: "If lockdown is the bad news, the good news is the calling into question of notions of a border." (2021: 42) According to him, we can now finally "escape the traps of identity" and instead "start thinking in terms of *overlapping* and *encroachment*": "Thanks to confinement, we can finally breathe!" (2021: 43, 42) Taking this 'flattened', relational, and processual ontology, where life is understood not as the property of a clearly delineated organism but as distributed and emergent, as a 'mesh' (Morton 2010), and where the basic unit of analysis is accordingly not the individual but the assemblage, as its starting point and foundation, the main modality of a positive biopolitics would clearly not be immunological. The precise shape of such a new biopolitics has yet to be determined, of course. Certainly, immuno-politics would inevitably still be important, yet it would no longer be about the paranoiac defense against a threatening outside, but about *a conscious, care-ful, and collective negotiation of (permeable) boundaries*. Latour's reflections in this regard remain largely metaphorical and suggestive (his text can be described as essentially a theoretico-poetic rereading/-writing of Kafka's *Metamorphosis* through the prism of the pandemic). Preciado's comments likewise are unfortunately not very helpful, as he – quite uncharacteristically! – contents himself with resorting to what almost sounds like a quasi-Luddite fantasy of extracting ourselves from contemporary bio-surveillance: "Let us turn off our cell phones, let us disconnect from the internet." (2020) Esposito's deliberations, too, which revolve around the counter-metaphors of the flesh, birth, and the norm of life (2008: 146–94), often remain rather speculative. One of the central images Esposito offers for the envisaged immunitary opening to community is pregnancy, where, in his reading, the fact that the immune system of the mother "immunizes itself from an excess of immunization" (2011: 170), which would mean an attack against the child, makes it an apt symbol for the needed tolerance of alterity within a system and the desired permeability of the border between inside and outside. Yet, whether this image is really fitting as a motif for a new type of politics remains questionable. For not only can this situation of utmost intimacy merely be generalized to a very limited extent and is, moreover, simultaneously also one marked by a highly asymmetrical relation – from a posthumanist perspective, infused by Landian or, more generally speaking, escalative thinking, we may also feel compelled to challenge the naturalist, organicist connotations of this image – no least with a view to, on the one hand, the political critique from within queer theory of the usage that is often made of the figure of the child and representations of motherhood, which are frequently mobilized for the purpose of legitimizing and perpetuating hegemonic, heteronormative social imaginaries (cf. esp. Edelman 2004), and, on the other, the new materialist re-theorization of prenatal diagnostics,

which has brought to light the extremely complex relations of power practices such as ultrasonography are caught up in, and has shown that the fetus is no static entity but ontologically and epistemologically multiple and processual, something that is only 'intra-actively' produced in variable ways by different sets of discursive-material practices or 'apparatuses' enacting 'agential cuts' (Barad 2007, esp. 189–222). In that regard, we may want to insist that biopolitics is not only – as, for instance, critical animal and plant studies remind us – always 'more-than-human biopolitics' (Lemke 2021: 136–40), but also always 'technobiopolitics' (Barad 2007: 59), and that any new form of community will hence only come about through a deliberate, projective, and 'response-able' (Haraway 2016), process of *producing* that community. As Bratton (2021) suggests, post-pandemic biopolitics will have to revolve around an intentional, premeditated governance, operating through something like a 'biopolitical stack', that is, an infrastructure of different technologies, institutions, policies, and parameters. A posthumanist Cultural Studies as I understand it would thus reject any "[l]aissez-faire vitalism for which 'life will find a way'" (Bratton 2021: 5), but would likewise remain skeptical of the assumption that an affirmative biopolitics "in the name of life" (Esposito 2008: 15) could easily be distinguished or separated from a negative one that subjects life. Yet, it would also refuse the Landian ideal of uninhibited deterritorialization and the dissolution of all limits – especially if this process is imagined as one driven solely by the autopoietic dynamics of capital.<sup>28</sup> Instead, proceeding from what we may call the 'primacy of the political', it would emphasize the essentially *political nature* of all forms of community, which is based on the fact that the 'common' of the community is never simply given as some sort of essence or substance, but is always the result of a conflictual negotiation. The boundaries of a community, the identity of any 'us', are always contested, always constructed or articulated in and through antagonism (Laclau/Mouffe 2001); never are they determined by some pre-political, primordial 'fact' such as a shared descent, tradition, culture, etc. Because of this, the unity of community, in the strict sense of the word, is finally an impossibility because the 'will to totality' (Laclau 1990: 92) will always

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28 We may add here that, with regard to the political developments of the more recent past, Land's hopes also turned out to have been overly optimistic. As Mackay and Avanesian point out, it is not that radical decoding and deterritorialization did not take place – they certainly did – only that these processes, instead of having "broken through all the social control mechanisms" (Plant/Land 2014: 305), were largely "rerouted back into the very identitarian attractors of repetition-without-difference they were supposed to disperse and abolish, in sole favour of capital's investment in a stable future for its major beneficiaries" (2014: 24). Perhaps, an embodiment of these strange reversals and unexpected amalgamations can be found in the complex phenomenon of Trumpism, effectively a fusion of accelerated, deterritorializing hypercapital with a radical immuno-political re-fortification of a whole series of pods, among them the nation-state and the human security system, whose quasi-fascistic tendencies are now no longer merely latent but manifest.

flounder against an irreducible, non-integrable 'remainder', the 'constitutive outside', and hence the ineradicable political conflict. The 'us' is only ever based on 'contingent foundations' (Butler 1992), always caught up in the incessant play of the institution/destitution of the social. From the perspective of such a 'postfoundational' – not anti-foundational! – understanding of community (Marchart 2010, 2013), starting from the contingency and conflictuality at its heart, and against the background of the powerful critique of humanist immuno-politics, which has acquired additional urgency in the wake of the Corona pandemic, it becomes clear that what is needed today is nothing less than a radical redesign of planetary coexistence. While there is no room to develop this here, I believe that it is vital that any future form of togetherness be conceived as an explicitly *political* and a decidedly *postanthropocentric* project. It would need to proceed from the ontological as well as social reality of connectivity, interdependence, and entanglement, and hence conceive of boundaries, whether those of the individual organism or a collective, in terms of contingent and variable 'borderlands', not fixed and static 'borderlines' (Anzaldúa 1987; Hinchliffe et al. 2013). No more pods! Consequently, these boundaries would be openly politicized (where previously, they were largely depoliticized, though of course they have in fact at all times been political) and made the subject of processes of democratic decision-making.<sup>29</sup> Community would no longer be tantamount to a paranoid-immunitary defense of identity against the outside, but be redefined along the lines of a 'political ethos of cohabitation' (Hark 2021). It would be fashioned under the sign of a shared vulnerability (Butler 2006, 2016) and mutual obligation (Esposito's *munus*), responsibility and accountability, and be founded on practices of care. As Di Cesare puts it: "To be part of a community means to be linked, bound to each other, constantly exposed, ever-vulnerable" (2021: 47) – and this includes not just the human, but all kinds of existents.

## The Uses of Nick Land

We have come quite a long way: We began with the emancipatory potentialities of the 'alienating' dynamics of contemporary capitalism and ended with the vision of

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29 The wide-ranging transformation outlined here would also have to involve the democratic process itself which, in the wake of arguments put forth by thinkers such as Latour (2004) or Bennett (2010), would, among other things, need to be widened so as to include previously excluded 'actants' – "a parliament not defined in terms of the politics of identity or nationality", but "a parliament of (vulnerable) bodies living on planet Earth" (Preciado 2020) (though we may wish to broaden this constituency even further so as to include non-living existents as well [cf. Povinelli 2016]). Clearly, notions such as equality, liberty, and a host of others will inevitably have to be reimagined beyond the traditional liberal-humanist framework as well.

a posthumanist, radically egalitarian form of community based on a politics of interdependence and an ethics of 'promiscuous care' (Care Collective 2020) that transcends all kinds of differences – those of 'race', gender, class, sexuality, and age, but also those of species and of life vs. non-life. Along the way, I have utilized Land's thinking, drawn inspiration from it, but also criticized it, twisted it, reinterpreted it, and made it mine. I have thought from and with, but also against and beyond Land. My reflections on the Covid-19 pandemic were not a *Landian reading*, but they *made use* of Land's work, in a pragmatic spirit, as one tool among others. Focusing on his critique of the human, I have here elaborated some of 'the uses of Land' for Cultural Studies. In doing so, I have inserted his work into some unlikely contexts and opened up for it some unusual dialogues. Critique, escalation, repair – to think, imagine, and work towards sustainable futures, a variety of theoretical modes are needed. *Escalation*, for instance, can caution against the pitfalls and dangers of retreatist solutions and not just serve as an antidote to the often highly problematic implications and consequences of discourses and politics of the pure, the natural, and the 'proper', but also sharpen our awareness for the political usage made of the frequently nostalgic rhetoric of deceleration and slowing down (e.g., "Keep Calm and Carry On" – that is: shut up and swallow austerity). Without falling into technological optimism, its anti-naturalism can foster an increased sensitivity to the progressive potentials of technoscience and "the evident (if partial) changeability of nature as a space for emancipatory politics" and encourage us to think of "technology as an activist tool" (Hester 2018: 21, 7). While technologies are certainly not inherently value-free and neutral, their potential is never exhausted by their original premises and purposes. Accelerationist theorizing thus typically urges us "to strategically deploy existing technologies to re-engineer the world" (Laboria Cuboniks 2018: 2). At the same time, a *reparative* impulse may serve to somewhat dampen the occasionally overly Promethean drive of escalative theorizing – Williams and Srnicek, for instance, envisage a "politics of maximal mastery over society and its environment" (2014: 360) – and remind us that our technologies are not, after all, "flawless instruments or prosthetic extensions of our will" – a view that ignores both that their flexibility has limits and that they, for their part, also modify us – and that, following actor-network theory, we rather "need to engage in *alliances* with our tools" (Shavero 2015: 20). Thus, while I think (left) accelerationism's rehabilitation of rationalism represents a welcome corrective to a sometimes exaggerated and politically debilitating postmodern skepticism, and while its interest in the appropriation and repurposing (rather than rejecting) of capitalist technologies can open up paths for progressive political work, reparative theories certainly have a point when they caution that such positions run the risk of reinscribing a simplistic subject-object binarism and of reinstating the phantasm of the sovereign human monad, ignoring once again the ontological reality of interdependence and entanglement, the distributed nature of agency, the volatility, unpredictability, and uncertainty that inevitably ac-

company and hamper all planning, and, as a result of all this, the ineradicable limits constraining the field of human endeavor – limits we may well not only establish as fact empirically, but also wish to embrace ethically.

I believe that Cultural Studies should open up to these various theoretical influxes and allow itself to turn (even more than it in fact already is) into a kind of theoretical assemblage. If anything, the Anthro- or Capitalocene world is deeply messy, marked by an almost unprecedented complexity. Whether it is the vexed question of geoengineering, the contentious issue of biopolitics, or any of the other challenges that urgently need to be addressed if we are to build livable futures for all existents on this planet – as I see it, it is such a syncretic, hybrid outlook, one involving a system of theoretical 'checks and balances', cross-fertilizations, multiperspectivity and transdisciplinarity, that best enables us to do so, not least because it allows us to move beyond stifling and false dichotomies (geoengineering or systemic change, capitalist biopolitics or no biopolitics at all, etc.).<sup>30</sup> As I have tried to show here, helpful resources may be found in unlikely places. Let's comb those beaches of theory and look for tools.

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30 For helpful starting points regarding the two issues mentioned here, cf. Buck 2019 (on geo-engineering) and Bratton 2021 (on biopolitics).

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