

5. Cyclonoplicity: Impurity Politics for the Anthropocene

In part I of this book, I have made the case for a stronger ‘posthumanization’ of the discipline of Cultural Studies by means of a theoretical ‘encounter’ with the diverse intellectual approaches associated with the ‘nonhuman turn’. Though neither Cultural Studies nor the nonhuman turn of course represents anything like a unified, static, and homogenous theoretical formation, and though there are a number of difficulties and tensions which complicate any attempt at such an encounter, I have nevertheless argued for the potential productivity of a cross-fertilization between the two. More than that, in view of its history as a syncretistic and transdisciplinary theoretical *bricoleur* and its commitment to the intellectual work of ‘translation’, I have suggested that Cultural Studies could, in fact, come to function as something like a contact zone or Derridean ‘hinge’ for various different approaches – including, I contend, those that are frequently seen as incompatible or even opposed, such as, for instance, Marxism and actor-network theory (ANT). Thus, I have accentuated the field’s character as a heterogeneous theoretical *assemblage*, and stressed that one of its fortes lies in the work of *mediation*. Referring to commentary on this issue by Jean-Paul Sartre and Bruno Latour, Gregor McLennan has highlighted this crucial dimension in the work of Stuart Hall, explaining that, “by way of synthesising inclusivity in the journey of ideas, respecting aspects of a position without endorsing whole positions[,] and in so doing transforming the problem under consideration”, the practice of mediation constitutes “ongoing zones of engagement” and attempts to make very different theoretical formations “part of the same universe of discourse and progressive horizon” (McLennan et al. 2022).¹ In this sense, mediation, as a theoretical style or mode, is emphatically *not* aimed at an easy, tension-free, and harmonious compromise, but rather designates hard intellectual work, driven by what I have called the ‘five defining Cs’ of Cultural Studies, that is, by an emphasis on *contextuality*, *contingency*, *complexity*, and *the concrete*, as well as by its political *commitment*.

1 Cf. also McLennan 2021: 12–14, as well as his three editor’s discussions of Hall’s writings gathered in that book (Hall 2021).

As Stuart Hall famously pointed out, “there is something *at stake* in cultural studies”; it is “a serious enterprise”, “a practice which aims to make a difference in the world” (1996: 263, 264). For Cultural Studies, in other words, this intellectual work is (to name a sixth, umbrella term-like ‘C’) *conjunctural* – it responds to and takes place in a particular historical moment, a particular configuration, or articulation, of social relations (economic, political, cultural, etc.), a particular set of problematics and struggles. To that end, its theoretical orientation is principally a *pragmatic* one, something that Hall himself repeatedly underlined when he spoke of theory as a ‘detour’, albeit a necessary one, on the way to something more important (1996: 270, 1997: 42). It is, to repeat Latour’s words, essentially a “question of having the right tools for the right job” (2010: 475) – I have suggested that this image for theory of the *toolbox*, this approach to concepts as so many pliers and screwdrivers with which to ‘work on’ a given issue is a very helpful one.²

In the present essay, I would like to hold on to this pragmatic outlook and focus on a set of issues that are of central importance in the ‘contact zone’ between Cultural Studies and the nonhuman turn, namely questions of subjectivity or the subject, of agency, accountability, and responsibility. I will address these issues through the field of complicity studies, in which they are key concerns. I want to ask: What contributions can the nonhuman turn make to the study of complicity? In how far may it prompt us to rethink some of the central categories and frameworks we commonly work with? But also: What effects could such an encounter have for the other side? That is to say, in Karen Barad’s terms, what I am interested in is once more a ‘diffraction’ and “cross-pollination” (2007: 57), in this case of complicity studies and the nonhuman turn, particularly certain variants of the new materialisms and speculative realisms.

Note the reserved, questioning character of my formulations. These, really, are *questions* – I would like to raise them, because I think they matter; I would like to look into them, to open up a space for thought and debate – I do not necessarily want to provide definite answers. My deliberations are tentative and exploratory, not conclusive. Most of all, what I certainly do not want to do is to proclaim a revolution of thought, a great overhaul of all and every category, and the necessity to reconceive the study of complicity or culture from the bottom up. This is not a conversion narrative. As I hope will become clear in what follows, I am quite skeptical of certain theoretical arguments as well as some of the rhetorical gestures of some of the newer intellectual movements. This includes, among other things, the claims of absolute novelty and radical difference from what came before occasionally voiced from within these (and, for that matter, also by some of their critics and opponents). I often find these to be overstated. As I have indicated, my own approach is a very

2 It is also one we find advocated by the likes of Deleuze and Foucault (Foucault 1996: 76), or, more recently, by Andreas Reckwitz (2023).

different one. On the whole, I am more interested in looking for points of contact, cross-fertilization, and for possible alliances between the new and older approaches. In fact, as will hopefully become apparent, for me, the productive potential of the dialogue I would like to foster and delineate lies less in a comprehensive remaking of the field of complicity studies than in something like a reorientation or an extension and intensification of certain aspects which are already part of it. Thus, when I speak of the ‘nonhuman turn’ here, I use that term as a heuristic one – helpful for pointing to certain broadly shared tendencies and dimensions, but at the same time not unproblematic, both, in its subsumption of a wide variety of actually very different fields and theories under one heading, and in its evocation of radical breaks and new beginnings. Generally, to repeat a point I have made before, if talk of a nonhuman ‘turn’ is warranted, it can, in my opinion, only be – in keeping with the word’s various meanings – as a process, a turning (into), a becoming, which is also a twisting, a repositioning and changing of orientation, a rearranging rotation, and one involving a number of re-turns.

Let’s begin by briefly recapitulating what is meant with the ‘nonhuman turn’. As Richard Grusin puts it, this turn “is engaged in decentering the human in favor of a turn toward and concern for the nonhuman, understood variously in terms of animals, affectivity, bodies, organic and geophysical systems, materiality, or technologies” (2015: vii). As such, it makes sense to see it as part, a development or a new stage, of posthumanism. As explained before, the latter, generally conceived, “inhabits humanism deconstructively” (Herbrechter 2013: 7; cf. also Badmington 2003) and, through a combination of cultural materialist and deconstructivist work (Herbrechter 2013: 9f), attempts to stall what Giorgio Agamben has called the “anthropological machine” of humanism, the “device for producing the recognition of the human” (2004: 26). Posthumanism, in other words, reveals the realm of the human as a “colonial realm” (Halberstam 2020: 7) insofar as the human “functions to domesticate and hierarchize difference within the human (whether according to race, class, gender [or any of the many other categories]) and to absolutize difference between the human and the nonhuman”, and consequently aims at “re-distributions of difference and identity” (Halberstam/Livingston 1995: 10), that is, at a dis- and reorganization of “that field of discourse and power that orchestrates, delimits, and sustains that which qualifies as ‘the human’” (Butler 1993: 8).

The current turn to the nonhuman can perhaps be considered the latest, properly *postanthropocentric* phase of this posthumanism. Grusin explains:

Intended as a macroscopic concept, the nonhuman turn is meant to account for the simultaneous or overlapping emergence of a number of different theoretical or critical “turns” – for example, the ontological, network, neurological, affective, digital, ecological, or evolutionary. As something of a theoretical or methodological assemblage, the nonhuman turn tries to make sense of what holds these

various other “turns” together, even while allowing for their divergent theoretical and methodological commitments and contradictions. Each of these different elements of the nonhuman turn derives from theoretical movements that argue (in one way or another) against human exceptionalism, expressed most often in the form of conceptual or rhetorical dualisms that separate the human from the nonhuman [...]. (2015: x)

A key element of these discourses are notions of interconnection and interdependence, which are thought in different ways, and which find expression in a number of metaphors and concepts such as networks, webs, meshes, assemblages, transversalities, continuums, convergences, becomings-with, entanglements, and more. One might, perhaps, speak of something like a new ecological paradigm (Hörl 2017). In various ways and on various levels, the human is here seen as always already inescapably bound up with the nonhuman in its diverse manifestations, whether it is organisms, animals, ecosystems, or technologies. The characteristic prefixes of these conceptions are hence ‘trans-’ and ‘inter-’, or, indeed, ‘intra-’ – depending on the degree to which the entities in relation are themselves theoretically unsettled (i.e., not assumed as preexistent and independent). For if the human and the nonhuman are always variously entangled and entwined, then these onto-epistemological categories/beings and the distinctions/boundaries between them are more than ever revealed as contingent material-discursive productions, the result of what Barad, who is arguably among the ones who have gone furthest in this unsettling, calls ‘agential cuts’. Accordingly, for Barad, “[p]osthumanism doesn’t presume the separateness of any-‘thing’, let alone the alleged spatial, ontological, and epistemological distinction that sets humans apart”; rather, “*posthumanism* marks the practice of accounting for the boundary-making practices by which the ‘human’ and its others are differentially delineated and defined” (2007: 136). Here, entanglement appears as a basic ontological condition. As Barad declares: “Relations do not follow *relata*, but the other way around.” (2007: 136f) Thus, the ontology that emerges in many of the contemporary approaches, particularly the new materialist ones like Barad’s, is a decidedly *relational* and *dynamic* one – and, importantly, one that is consequently significantly *flattened*. Instead of “monarchs of being”, as Levi Bryant puts it, humans are now “*among* beings, *entangled* in beings, and *implicated* in other beings” (2011: 40). To already link up with a key notion of complicity studies, derived from the word’s etymological roots (from Latin *complicare*, *com* “together” + *plicare* “to fold”), they are *folded together* with other entities. An object-oriented ontology (OOO) philosopher like Timothy Morton pushes this reasoning further and provocatively proclaims: “my being is not everything it’s cracked up to be – or rather [...] the being of a paper cup is as profound as mine.” (2013: 17)

I will have more to say about this levelling later. For the moment, I would just like to note the new, upgraded status accorded to the nonhuman in these theoretical

discourses. Against this background, I have suggested that it is safe to say that these recent approaches can generally (also) be seen as a symptom of and/or response to the socio-ecological crisis widely referred to as the Anthropocene or Capitalocene. What is at stake here, essentially, is a novel appreciation for and a novel relation with the more-than-human world. This revaluation and 'putting in its right' of the non-human also entails a reconsideration of our understanding of *agency* – in the sense of a greater acknowledgement of the nonhuman's capacity to act or to 'make a difference' (Latour 2005: 71), of wresting the notion of action away from its close ties to human intentionality, and of elaborating a dispersed, distributive account which sheds more light on the 'nonhuman' conditions, parts, and participations in what are usually seen as 'human' actions.

A case in point is the highly influential work of Jane Bennett, a key voice of the so-called new materialisms. Bennett's 'vital materialism' mounts a powerful challenge to human exceptionalism by defying the received dualisms between dull matter and vital life, inorganic and organic, between passive objects and active subjects. In place of this dominant 'partition of the sensible' (Bennett 2010: vii), she advances her conception of 'vibrant materiality', which understands matter *in all of its manifestations* as generative and creative. Going beyond both, traditional variants of vitalism and of materialism, matter, whether human or nonhuman – this distinction too loses its force – is here conceived as inherently lively – not in the sense of being suffused by a universal life force (such as Bergson's *élan vital*), but of 'having an effect', exerting influence or force. This is what Bennett calls 'thing-power'. In her eyes, all material bodies constitute potential actors, or, to use Bruno Latour's terminology, 'actants'. An actant is that which "makes the difference, makes things happen, becomes the decisive force catalyzing an event" (Bennett 2010: 9). Importantly, this force is not to be thought of as the abstract 'agency' or 'capacity to act' – in the sense of a property or attribute – of a pre-formed, pre-existent subject. In line with much new materialist, and especially feminist materialist, writing (e.g., Stacy Alaimo, Karen Barad, Elizabeth Grosz), Bennett rejects the traditional analytic focus on singular bodies and their boundaries and instead emphasizes the latter's porosity, contingency, and mutability. Materiality is figured here as endlessly swirling and swarming, temporarily settling into particular configurations, only to be then swept up again and to rearrange into new sets of contingent relations.

Heterogeneity, hybridity, processuality, and volatility are key elements of this thinking. In all kinds of regards, it rigorously positions itself '*against purity*' (Shotwell 2016). Any seemingly unified actor, in the words of Latour, "is itself an association made up of elements which can be redistributed" (1990: 109). As Bennett points out, just as "[i]t is futile to seek a pure nature unpolluted by humanity", it is equally "foolish to define the self as something purely human" (2010: 116). Instead, the subject needs to be reconceptualized "as itself an impure, human-nonhuman assemblage", "a self that is its own outside, is vibrant matter" (xvii, 116). Speaking about the "alien"

quality of our own flesh", Bennett writes: "My 'own' body is material, and yet this vital materiality is not fully or exclusively human. My flesh is populated and constituted by different swarms of foreigners. [...] The *its* outnumber the *mes*. [...] We are [...] *an array of bodies*, many different kinds of them in a nested set of microbiomes." (112f) Thus, as Rosi Braidotti has argued, emphasizing the "embedded and embodied and grounded, multi-directional and multi-scalar" ontological relationality of (human) beings, the subject has to be understood as a "dynamic convergence phenomenon", a 'transversal' "zoe/geo/techno assemblage" (2019: 45, 41, 44).

Although in certain regards, the new materialisms and other more recent theoretical movements expressly position themselves in distinction to older, poststructuralist approaches, I believe that in this respect, they can also be seen as continuing, extending, or radicalizing the latter's characteristic politics of difference: Here as there, we find a resolute opposition to discourses and forms of power relying on essentialized identities, binary divisions, and hierarchical orderings, an emphasis on hybridity and fluidity against the relegation of the multiplicity of difference to totalized and homogenized binaries and dualisms. Even though the meaning of that phrase is not exactly the same in both cases, nevertheless we could say that for both, to adopt Latour's (1993) famous slogan, 'we have never been modern'. In their different ways, both, to this time quote Lyotard, "wage a war on totality" (1984: 82). And not unlike poststructuralism did, so these new approaches too impel us to rethink our understanding of agency and responsibility. The former, in its decentering of the sovereign subject of the humanist tradition (understood as originary, unified, and autonomous) and its concomitant repudiation of atomistic conceptions of agency, is, of course, a central element in the field of complicity studies, urging us not to restrict our thinking to questions of personal moral agency, but to broaden it so as to take into account structural forms of complicity, that is, to extend or shift the focus from the individual to the social and from the exceptional to the ordinary.

Here, the nonhuman turn arguably encourages us to go further still. For if the basic condition of interrelationality and entanglement and the ubiquity of assemblages are accepted, then what emerges is a new, 'congregational' understanding of agency. As Bennett points out: "an actant never really acts alone. Its efficacy or agency always depends on the collaboration, cooperation, or interactive interference of many bodies and forces." (2010: 21) For her, agency is emergent and distributive: "the efficacy or effectivity to which that term has traditionally referred becomes distributed across an ontologically heterogeneous field, rather than being a capacity localized in a human body or in a collective produced (only) by human efforts" (23). The root cause of an effect is thus never simply a single (human) subject, but always an assemblage of various vital materialities, what Bennett also terms an "agentic swarm" (32). She writes: "insofar as anything 'acts' at all, it has already entered an agentic assemblage" (121) – and this assemblage owes its agentic force to the particular con-

figuration of the elements that constitute it.³ Of course, this applies equally to what is usually figured as *human* agency. To quote Bennett again: “There was never a time when human agency was anything other than an interfolding network of humanity and nonhumanity; today this mingling has become harder to ignore.” (31) Agency, in these posthumanist accounts, is always a complex chain or swirl, a knotty folding, a dance (Pickering 1995), a choreography (Cussins 1996).

Importantly, this does not mean a denial of human intentionality. Yet, this intentionality is radically decentered (Bennett 2010: 31–34), reconceptualized as less determinative of outcomes than assumed by liberal-humanist thought, merely one force among a swarm of others – or, as Bennett puts it, like a pebble thrown into a pond, vibrating and overlapping with other currents (32) – and, moreover, *itself* subject to or an effect of an interplay of human and nonhuman forces. It can be agentic only *because of, through, and alongside* an entourage of nonhumans. Now this, of course, has consequences for how we may think about things such as accountability and responsibility. If any outcome is essentially the result of a complex and multifaceted, non-linear and fractal interaction between a host of elements and tendencies, if agency is distributed across a network of agentic forces, then the locus of political responsibility is always a human-nonhuman assemblage (36). Consequently, it becomes impossible or disingenuous to assign singular blame. As Bennett writes: “a theory of vibrant matter presents individuals as simply incapable of bearing *full* responsibility for their effects” (37). Accordingly, while moral outrage should by no means disappear, for her, “[a] moralized politics of good and evil, of singular agents who must be made to pay for their sins” (38), is essentially unethical. In its place, Bennett advocates a politics more dedicated to a close discernment of the agentic elements and the relations constitutive of a given assemblage. An illustration of this is her analysis of the 24-hour power blackout in North America in the year 2003, which affected approximately 50 million people. In Bennett’s reading, the electricity grid is less a machine or tool consisting of fixed parts organized from without, but rather a vibrant association of a variety of actants, which includes the humans who build and maintain power plants, consume energy, and pass regulation laws, but also “coal, sweat, electromagnetic fields, computer programs, electron streams, profit motives, heat, lifestyles, nuclear fuel, plastic, fantasies of mastery, static, legislation, water, economic theory, wire, and wood” (25). For Bennett, in one way or

3 Bennett thinks this part-whole relationship along the lines of the Deleuzian notion of ‘ad-sorption’, which she describes as denoting “a gathering of elements in a way that both forms a coalition and yet preserves something of the agential impetus of each element” (35). This view is characteristic of assemblage thought more generally, which commonly emphasizes the novelty of the constellation as a whole as well as of its constitutive relations and the character of the relata themselves, but simultaneously stresses that none of these are reducible to one another. On the notion of the assemblage, cf. ch. 2.

another, all these actants contributed to the energy failure of 2003, which she interprets as the “end point of a cascade” (25), involving voltage collapses, human motivations, decisions, and omissions of various kinds, generator withdrawals from the web, and brush fires, which together made cooperation between the actants impossible.

In this complex and hybrid web of forces and relations, where do we assign blame? Instead of a single determining source of wrong we find a host of contributors and participants, instead of a single guilty party a series of entanglements and complicities. I believe that Bennett is right to point out that there are no easy answers here. Responsibility is distributed. I think that this type of thinking links up, or can be linked up, in very helpful ways with earlier work – within feminism, critical race theory, postcolonialism, the study of intersectionality, and elsewhere – which not only decentered the subject, but also emphasized its situatedness, embedded- and embodiedness, and ‘worldliness’. Like the field of complicity studies, all these approaches contribute to a significant complexification over against liberal-humanist perspectives.⁴ It would seem as if today, in the messy present of the Anthropo- or Capitalocene, this is more important than ever. In her *Companion Species Manifesto*, Haraway declares that “[i]n layers of history, layers of biology, layers of naturecultures, complexity is the name of our game.” (2003: 2) As she herself, along with Latour, Bennett, and many others, has pointed out, if this is always the case, it is especially so nowadays. Interconnection and interdependence, hybridity, assemblages, and the congregational character of agency are today increasingly harder to ignore and deny. This is most obvious, of course, in the nature of the Anthropocene as, in the words of Timothy Clark, an “emergent ‘scale effect’”, which means that “at a certain, indeterminate threshold, numerous human actions, insignificant in themselves (heating a house, clearing trees, flying between the continents, forest management) come together to form a new, imponderable physical event, altering the basic ecological cycles of the planet” (2015: 72). Both, with regards to space and time, we are now aware of and confronted with unheard-of entanglements. As Timothy Morton writes:

Every time I start my car or steam engine I don't mean to harm Earth, let alone cause the Sixth Mass Extinction Event in the four-and-a-half billion-year history of life on this planet. [...] Furthermore, I'm not harming Earth! My key turning is statistically meaningless. [...] But go up a level and something very strange happens. When I scale up these actions to include billions of key turnings and billions of coal shovelings, harm to Earth is precisely what is happening. I am responsible as a member of this species for the Anthropocene. (2016: 8)

4 In this context, cf. the shared etymology, already referred to above, of ‘complicity’ and ‘complexity’.

Although there are arguably a few things that are not unproblematic about this passage – not least its mobilization of the universal figure of the *Anthropos* or its somewhat sensationalist seamless short circuiting of individual responsibility and planetary climate change – it can nevertheless be seen as a paradigmatic example of the countless complexities and complicities that mark the present. As Eben Kirksey succinctly puts it: “Life and death are at stake every time we eat, buy clothes at the store, or flip an electric light switch.” (2015: 219) Whether ethico-politically, ontologically, or otherwise – in the Anthro- or Capitalocene, more than ever, we are confronted with what Alexis Shotwell calls ‘constitutive impurity’: “complexity and complicity as the constitutive situation of our lives” (2016: 8). *Impurity is our condition*. “Everyone carries a history of contamination”, writes Anna Tsing; “purity is not an option” (2015: 27). Of course, this assertion should not be taken as a false universalization: Its meaning varies from context to context; the ‘we’ shifts from case to case. Harm and responsibility are distributed extremely unevenly. But, as Shotwell explains, “however the bounds of the ‘we’ are drawn, we are not, ever, pure. We’re complicit, implicated, tied in to things we abjure.” (2016: 7)

Despite this – and perhaps also because of this – discourses and politics of purity abound. In particular, ‘purism’ is now a key element of contemporary capitalism, in which, for instance, the illusory promise of purity is mobilized to great effect for marketing purposes, with purity itself being turned into a lucrative commodity (“Detoxify your body!”, “Eat clean!”, etc.), or in the context of the fabrication of the imaginary of a ‘green’, ecologically conscious, and sustainable economic system. In this context, we can observe that contemporary governmentality only continues and intensifies the trend towards responsibilization that has long been a central feature of the entrepreneurial subject form hegemonic under neoliberalism. Contemporary regimes, in other words, consistently dictate individualist responses to ‘pollution’, be it moral or corporeal, and make each and every one of us personally responsible for our own purity. Here, I believe that one task of complicity studies is to continue to challenge such de-complexifying narratives and the concomitant technologies of subjectivation through its forte of structural critique. Not least because purity practices – as essentially attempts (ultimately futile) to impose order and system on what is, in fact, untidy and disorderly (cf. Douglas 2002) – are politically highly problematic: For one thing, their orientation is always, at heart, immuno-political, and thus 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).⁵ For another, as Shotwell points out, “[p]urism is a de-collectivizing, de-mobilizing, paradoxical politics of despair.” (2016: 9) If every choice we make, whether it’s while we’re grocery shopping or while we’re pondering where to place our political commitment, is inevitably a tainted one, then we may well end up wishing not to choose

5 On this topic, cf. ch. 4.

at all (which is, of course, also a choice). I am sure this is a feeling many of us will know all too well. Always, the flipside of the responsible subject is the overwhelmed, exhausted, and resigned one.

We need different responses to the impossible complexity of the present than purity politics. Here, however, some of the new materialist thinking perhaps reaches its limits. As I have explained, I believe this thinking has the potential to significantly enrich the study of complicity. If we can say that this field is in large parts driven by the well-known Marxian dictum that “Men” – let’s rather say: “People” – “make their own history, but do so under conditions not of their own making” (cf. Afxentiou et al. 2017: 9f), or, to refer to an equally important theoretical tradition, by the Deleuzo-Foucauldian notion of the ‘dividual’ as a node in a complex network, produced through and bound up with a multiplicity of powers and relations, then I think the nonhuman turn alerts us to the fact that these forces and entanglements are even more numerous and complex than we already knew. Judith Butler revisits the well-known Nietzschean topos of there being ‘no doer behind the deed’ and emphasizes the constrained, performative nature of all social practices (1999: 33) – a shift from humanism to (post-)structuralism. Then Jane Bennett takes up this same topos once again and argues that the doing that, for Nietzsche and Butler, ‘is everything’ is, in fact, an effecting by a human-nonhuman assemblage (2010: 28) – an extension of poststructuralism into (nonhuman-turn) posthumanism. As I have pointed out, I consider this as more of a broadening of the horizon of complicity studies than a radical reorientation. As I see it, the field is already more or less firmly committed to relationality, with the concept of complicity, as Afxentis Afxentiou et al. put it, ultimately invoking “a demand for recognizing the ways in which people are connected both to one another and to the nonhuman world” (2017: 10f), or what Mark Sanders calls “a generalized foldedness in human-being” and, he adds in parentheses, “perhaps beyond *human-being*” (2002: 17). Here, the nonhuman turn encourages us to omit the hesitant ‘perhaps’ and draws our critical attention to previously marginalized or overlooked dimensions of complexity and complicity, to new points of intervention, and to perhaps necessary reconceptualizations of political space and community.

Yet, as I indicated, an encounter is never a one-way street. And this is where I return to the question of politics. Ultimately, I think that some of Bennett’s conclusions in this regard remain unsatisfactory. She observes that the notion of distributive agency, while attenuating “the blame game”, “does not thereby abandon the project of identifying [...] the sources of harmful effects”, but, to the contrary, “broadens the range of places to look for sources” (2010: 37). As I have said, in that respect, I consider her thought to be a very helpful one. The problem, for me, lies elsewhere. Referring back to her discussion of the blackout, Bennett explains:

Though it would give me pleasure to assert that deregulation and corporate greed are the real culprits in the blackout, the most I can honestly affirm is that corporations are one of the sites at which human efforts at reform can be applied, that corporate regulation is one place where intentions might initiate a cascade of effects. Perhaps the ethical responsibility of an individual human now resides in one's response to the assemblages in which one finds oneself participating: Do I attempt to extricate myself from assemblages whose trajectory is likely to do harm? Do I enter into the proximity of assemblages whose conglomerate effectivity tends toward the enactment of nobler ends? (37f)

I feel that, even as autonomy and what Bennett calls “strong responsibility” (37) may be empirically false, and even as the analysis of root causes may be a very complicated affair, the conclusions she comes to here simply are not enough. It seems to me that the attempt to avoid an overly moralized politics ultimately results in an *avoidance of politics tout court* (Marso 2011: 426). Here, ethics effectively replaces politics – and, we might add, quite paradoxically, an individualist and voluntarist ethics at that (Washick et al. 2015: 75). Here as elsewhere in Bennett's work and new materialist theorizing more generally, does this thinking, as several, especially Marxist, critics have claimed, end up reaffirming the status quo and playing into the hands of the powers that be (thus echoing similar claims made at an earlier point in time vis-à-vis poststructuralism)?

Choosing another path, I believe that we should remain committed, both analytically and politically, to what Cultural Studies has always described as the ‘dirty and messy’ domain of politics (cf. Cord 2018) – and that means, essentially, remaining committed to the analysis and critique of relations of *power*. That means that we will have to continue the work of rethinking the notions of agency and responsibility, beyond the established liberal conceptions⁶, for instance building on distinctions within the field of complicity studies, by distinguishing between different *degrees* and *kinds* of agency (cf., e.g., Afxentiou et al. 2017: 10).⁷ Even if ontology is flattened, this should not keep us from making important distinctions. After all, as OOO philosopher Ian Bogost has pointed out, “*all things equally exist, yet they do not exist equally*” (2012: 11). What we need is an account that conceives agency as truly relational, emergent, and contingent. Bennett, for her part, somewhat oscillates between the frequent assertion of the relational and non-stable character of things on the one hand and, on the other, a problematic tendency to reinscribe essentialism through the ascription of fixed characteristics and properties to them, which seem

6 I am here thinking, for instance, of the equation of agency with activity, participation, and voice/speech, or distinctions such as the one between full and partial responsibility or imputability, etc.

7 Bennett (e.g., 2010: 31, 98, 104, 108f), too, repeatedly makes comments that point in such a direction, but never really pursues this further.

to be inherent to the things ‘in themselves’ (Hinchliffe 2011). Here, the more consistently and radically relational account of, for instance, Karen Barad’s ‘agential realism’ may prove useful, which completely gives up the notion of preexistent, individual, and independent entities, instead seeing relata only as the result of relations and ‘intra-actions’, and consequently conceives of agency not as an attribute but as “the enactment of iterative changes to particular practices [...] through the dynamics of intra-activity” (Barad 2007: 235), that is, as intimately bound up with the contingency and mutability of particular material-discursive configurations. In a similar vein, Thomas Lemke, whose work I consider to be extremely valuable for the kind of encounter I am concerned with, combines new materialist theories and work in science and technology studies and actor-network theory with the thought of Michel Foucault, and also rethinks agency along performative lines, in terms of so-called ‘modes of doing’, thus likewise shifting the focus “from individual actors and their capabilities to the dispositives that allow for certain emergences rather than others” (2021: 152). Finally, we may find helpful tools to think with in Levi Bryant’s ‘ontocartography’, which develops a very differentiated account of agency (2014: 218–26). In our context, what is perhaps of particular interest is his reconceptualization of power as ‘gravity’ and his posthumanist rethinking of the subject as not a specific *type* of being, but a *transitory functional role*. It is akin to Michel Serres’ ‘quasi-objects’, essentially a dynamic catalyst or, to use a Lacanian term, a ‘quilting point’ which creates or draws together – similar to gravitational pull – divergent entities into an assemblage or ecology and assigns them roles or positions.

There is no room to go into detail at this point, within the context of these more programmatic reflections. For sure, there is much theoretical work still to be done here. But I believe that if we were to bring together these and other recent approaches with classical Cultural Studies concepts such as ‘articulation’, ‘arbitrary closure’, ‘suture’, or ‘hegemony’, we may arrive at a type of analysis ultimately more productive than that which transpires in new materialist work such as Bennett’s, allowing us, for instance, to identify certain points of condensation or suture in a given assemblage, nodes in the web which have an ‘overcoding’ function or influence (e.g., the neoliberal organization of the energy market) and where, hence, agency and responsibility congeal or accrue. It would permit us to keep questions of power firmly in view and to not have to abandon the political for the ethical. Ultimately it would push us to raise anew what I consider to be the (still) central question of the *social totality*.⁸

What, I believe, appears on the horizon here is a mode of analysis not unlike the one which many have seen as definitive for Cultural Studies: something like a *diffraction of conjunctural analysis and assemblage analysis*, which begins with one particular,

8 I address these issues in more detail in ch. 6.

more or less clearly defined event or phenomenon and then sets out from there, asking, as Stuart Hall was wont to do, what this ‘has to do with everything else’. Start with a blackout; start with the death of two-year old Julen Roselló, who fell down a 109 meter deep shaft in the south of Spain in early 2019, and move outwards, to the approximately one million such holes illegally excavated in the country by peasants looking for more water than is available in order to be able to grow fruits and vegetables, on to the soil conditions, to agricultural practice and policy, to supply chains, to supermarkets in Germany and elsewhere, where these goods will eventually be sold, on to agribusiness, global divisions of labor, the capitalist food industry, ... Such a mode of analysis would thus proceed along widening circles or spirals, branch out in various directions, move across different spatial scales and levels of abstraction, sketch the contours of the relevant assemblage(s), and trace the complex networks of relations, including the intricate foldings of – to allude to Reza Negarestani’s (2008) wordplay – cyclonoplicity. Let’s invoke a thoroughly paradoxical image and say: *It would be like an ANT desiring to see like an eagle.*⁹

This cyclonic or, to use Haraway’s (2016: 30–57) image, tentacular methodology would also allow us to see further. Another one of Bennett’s key examples of nonhuman agency is that of edible matter, for instance omega-3 fatty acids, which, when consumed by human beings, can modify the latter’s affective states, behavior, and cognitive skills (2010: 40–43). Yet, a critical analysis such as the one I have in mind might here not only point out that the relation in this human-nonhuman assemblage is not a symmetrical one – after all, one participant eats while the other is being eaten (Abrahamsson et al. 2015: 11) – but also that, importantly, the assemblage actually extends farther than Bennett acknowledges.¹⁰ After all, like everything else, omega-3 is not matter *itself*, but matter *in context*, matter *related* (Abrahamsson et al. 2015: 12). It is an element in more than one set of relations. Following other tentacles, which also lead us into the domain of political economy, we find, for instance, that many of the omega-3 fatty acids consumed by health-conscious people in the so-called ‘Global North’ actually come from fish in the ‘Global South’, whose catch

9 For some intimations of what such an analysis could look like, cf., e.g., Nancy Tuana’s (2008) illuminating discussion of Hurricane Katrina or the work of Anna Tsing (2015).

10 In a sense, this is, of course, always the case. The description/construction of every assemblage/conjuncture will inevitably involve an element of ‘arbitrary closure’ or an ‘arbitrary (agential) cut’. As assemblage theorists have pointed out, assemblages are somewhat like Russian dolls, and the relations and connections always reach further still – not, as Haraway explains, because everything is connected to everything, but because everything is connected to something (2016: 31). What, I think, is significant is thus not the fact that certain relations and elements are missing from Bennett’s account per se, but rather what *kinds* of relations are omitted. What matters, in other words, is *how* or *where* she makes her cut. And here, I believe it is significant that what is excluded from the analysis are above all more overtly *political* issues, e.g., questions pertaining to political economy.

contributes to the overexploitation of the oceans and to food shortage on these regions (Abrahamsson et al. 2015). I would argue that the omission of these contexts is somewhat symptomatic of the evasion of questions of power relations in Bennett's vital materialism.

By contrast, such issues would be central to the kind of 'cyclone analysis' I have outlined. No doubt the work undertaken by it is extremely demanding and complex (given that it attempts to do greater justice to the complexity of the world), can only be carried out collectively and interdisciplinarily, and can never really come to any definitive end. Still, I believe it should be attempted. Though infused by the new materialisms, speculative realisms, and other posthumanist theories, such an approach would still insist on the accountability of particular entities and assemblages (not least particular *human* collectives!) and on the necessity to identify those political, economic, and social conditions that impede more sustainable, equal, and democratic ways of life. It would proceed from a 'metaphysics of compost', not purity (Shotwell 2016: 16), from the fact that living today (and always) inevitably means 'compromised living' (Shotwell 2016: 7), that ethico-politically as well as ontologically, impurity unavoidably defines our condition. Thinking about these entanglements and enfoldings has to be our starting point for action. We need to 'stay with the trouble' (Haraway 2016). As complicity studies so compellingly argues, while *non*-complicity is not an option, *anti*-complicity, which is not about exculpation and the preservation of individual purity but about solidarity and the transformation of structures that cause harm, is (Afxentiou et al. 2017: 11). If the heuristic tool of complicity "broadens our horizons as to what constitutes *harm being done*" (Afxentiou et al. 2017: 12), then I believe the nonhuman turn encourages another, postanthropocentric broadening, and consequently urges us to develop a widened, posthumanist understanding of solidarity, where this would extend to animals, plants, ecosystems, geologic formations, fungi, technologies, microbes, or atoms (cf. Morton 2017). Alexis Shotwell, for one, speaks of an 'aspirational solidarity', one "based on collective conceptions of worlds that do not yet exist" (2013: 105).

A political practice driven by such solidarity would certainly encompass what Dimitris Papadopoulos (2018) calls a 'politics of matter', that is, the material, mundane, and collective work of building alternative attachments and assemblages, the working towards 'alterontologies'. I would argue that such an orientation, which might, following Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003: 123–51), perhaps be called 'reparative', infuses much contemporary theorizing.¹¹ It decidedly departs from the imaginary of revolutionary 'eventfulness' and instead emphasizes the cultivation of ordinary 'arts of living on a damaged planet' (Tsing et al. 2017) or ordinary practices

11 On the reparative, cf. ch. 3 and the excursus.

that enable ‘life in capitalist ruins’ (Tsing 2015).¹² Here, resistance is understood not so much in terms of open opposition or revolt, but rather as “a movement of exit and escape” (Papadopoulos 2018: 253n122) from prevalent power relations. As Papadopoulos has it: “Resistance is not primarily about direct confrontation but about changing the conditions in which power operates. This is possible only by changing the ontological conditions of life in a certain field.” (2018: 253n122) While I find such rethinking of the space of the political to include the everyday practices that remake the materiality of life very helpful, I believe that such ‘terraformation from below’ still needs to be complemented by struggles taking place on other fronts as well. Let’s be better Gramscians! When, for instance, Eben Kirksey explains that “[c]apitalist enterprises [...] may well be unstoppable” and encourages us to not let this lead us into resignation but to join those who are “transforming feelings of futility into concrete action, cynicism into happiness and hope” (2015: 219), then, even though I do appreciate the affirmative outlook, I believe that such approaches might be running the risk of giving up on or losing sight of certain domains of struggle which, in my view, continue to be essential. After all, even though it may sometimes seem (and present itself) that way, capitalism is, of course, *not* unstoppable. Here, I think we should not buy into the TINA doctrines of capitalist realism (Fisher 2009), endlessly and performatively repeating “the truth of the impossibility of the impossible” (Rancière 1999: 132), but instead remain committed to political economy, bring ‘old’ and new materialisms into stronger dialogue¹³, and reaffirm the possibility of systemic change and of ‘reinventing the future’ (Srnicke/Williams 2016).

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12 Within complicity studies, a broadly similar orientation is, for instance, expressed by Paul Reynolds, who argues that “complicit individuals should still explore ways in which they can become less or indeed anti-complicit, even while acknowledging that this alone will not lead to radical systemic change” (2017: 43).

13 Of course, work in this direction is already being undertaken in various contexts. For the present purposes, cf. particularly the invaluable work of Noel Castree (2002).

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