



WHO COMES AFTER THE ANTHROPOCENE?

Vicki Kirby¹

The University of New South Wales, Sydney

ABSTRACT

I remember my immediate fascination with an edited collection, now twenty years old, *Who Comes After the Subject?* The title seemed to entirely displace the identity of the subject, the “of-courseness” of its uniquely human definition. Indeed, its provocation did more than destabilise the what and where of the subject, as if we might extend this complexity, albeit in attenuated form, to non-human entities. The more radical implication was a destabilisation of human identity itself—its circumscribed location—together with the progress narrative that made the arrival of language, technology and agential smarts synonymous with human achievement. As contemporary concern about planetary health is galvanized around the unique power of human agency to either ruin or redeem an impassive and defenceless Nature, a “before” that lacks what being a subject affords, this article will linger over the logic that continues to sustain this story. By reworking Derrida’s “originary writing” as “originary humanicity,” a different sense of ecological involvement might be possible.

Keywords: Postcritique; Originary Humanicity; New Materialism; Deconstruction; Nature.

¹ v.kirby@unsw.edu.au

I remember my immediate fascination with the title of an edited collection, now twenty years old, *Who Comes After the Subject?* (1991). The question seemed disarmingly straightforward, as if an answer was expected. And yet there was something in its matter-of-fact inquiry that quietly threatened, at least on my reading, to displace the “of-courseness” of the subject’s uniquely human definition. To better set the scene for the direction of this discussion and why the title’s apparent endorsement of my wildest speculations was such a surprise, it might be helpful to revisit the book’s “Introduction,” written by one of the editors, Jean-Luc Nancy.

The critique, or the deconstruction of subjectivity is to be considered one of the great motifs of contemporary philosophical work in France [...]. The question therefore bears upon the critique or deconstruction of interiority, of self presence, of consciousness, of mastery, of the individual or collective property of an essence. Critique or deconstruction of the firmness of a *seat* (*hypokeimenon*, *substantia*, *subjectum*) and the certitude of an *authority* and a *value* (the individual, a people, the state, history, work). (1991, 4, emphasis in original)

Several decades on there are no surprises here. Critical theorising in the Continental, and especially the French tradition, is well rehearsed in exploring the internal workings of the subject; the inherent fragility, the inevitable self-deception, the waywardness of intention, the creative reinventions of memory and the implications of all this for political and ethical debate. Even the concession that the subject is plural, articulated by myriad social forces, can’t repair the instability of the “I” with the collective identity of a “we,” for what might appear as an external context that can anchor and allay individual uncertainty will suffer the same internal ruptures and displacements.

In sum, Nancy appreciates the interrogative tonality of these philosophical approaches and their ongoing ability to provoke and reroute our thinking—to keep us on our toes. However, he expresses some irritation that what is critically nuanced and certainly difficult can be rendered anodyne in certain hands; a mere “capricious variation of fashionable thinking” (1991, 4). Wanting to illustrate the latter’s misrepresentation of what will be important for the volume’s analytical complexities, Nancy dilates on his choice of title by focussing our attention on the word “after.” An example of deixis,

such words seem to specify place and time, or even a particular subject position which nevertheless remains ambiguous and uncertain. It is as if these words, for example, “now,” “here,” “tomorrow,” “you,” function like holes in a text that are only fleetingly filled in the situated moment of reading them. The sense of “after” evokes this riddle because what anchors the word and gives it significance is its metonymic connection to what came before, something whose prior existence reached and surpassed its limit, now gone, dead, finished. Thus, “after” carries within it a sort of temporal flutter because in registering the absence of something it evokes and affirms a sort of retrospective, yet lingering presence.

For Nancy, however, the critical and deconstructive “event” of recent intellectual history has achieved a more extensive critique of the subject than is conceded in this example. Put simply, there never was a self-aware individual, a “someone” who could give a proper account of himself and realise his intentions.² But this is where things get interesting, because if the interpellation of the subject hails something into being that will never finally arrive then what is the status of an “after the Subject” that can take no meaningful leverage from a “before”? The weight of this paradox exercises Nancy and the other contributors who, in their different ways, explain and explore its inevitability and endurance. However, it is at this precise point, where intellectual subtlety is required, that Nancy rails against those who remain deaf to the challenge by pronouncing the subject dead. If subjectivity is a riddle that requires a robust engagement with what we are, or perhaps more accurately, how we are who we are—the shifting and complex force field we come to embody—then assuming that the fragility of the subject is proof of its inevitable demise effectively resuscitates its precritical status. Only the cogito can presume to make a definitive pronouncement on “the property of the *self*” (1991, 4, emphasis in original), or where he begins and ends, and as we know, even for Descartes such certainty was secured by doubt. As Nancy notes, “deconstruction has not simply obliterated its object (as those who groan or applaud before a supposed ‘liquidation’ of the subject would like to believe)” (1991, 4). The problem here is that whether on the side of the subject’s death or its uncanny aliveness, what remains uninterrogated is the mystery of existence, or becoming, that underpins both pronouncements. To argue against the metaphysics of self-presence, to illuminate why the concepts of self-knowledge, self-control and the coherence of identity are wrapped in delusion and fantasy, isn’t to assert that the subject is no longer

² The use of masculine pronouns is an acknowledgement of the political structures within representational systems that normalise the subject’s sovereign status as properly male.

existent. Rather, it is to explore, as Nancy describes it, “an entirely different thought: that of the *one* and that of the some *one*, of the singular existent that the subject announces, promises, and at the same time conceals” (1991, 4, emphasis in original). Nancy’s point is sobering: there can be no relief from the interminable interrogation of the subject and its consequences for ethical and political life, an interrogation that continually,

brings us back to the same figures: the individual, a people, the state, history, production, style, man, woman, as well as “myself” and “ourselves” [...]—but it is precisely something like this thought that henceforth comes toward us and calls us forth. (1991, 5)

I’ve dilated on Nancy’s understanding of how the book’s title might be read, an acknowledgement of the wider interpellative space within which the subject is subjected or hailed into becoming. However, attentive to the critical spirit which Nancy’s argument encourages and remembering that my initial sighting of the title seemed to promise so much, I’m made to pause. Recall Nancy’s irritation with the intellectual complacency, the “fashionable thinking” that ascribes identity and its limits by pronouncing the subject dead. And yet, when the question of the subject assumes a uniquely human guise, one that Nancy unsurprisingly extends to the cultural and social framework of human institutions, haven’t we contained the question, made it proper to an “us,” a “we,” indeed, a “who,” whose exceptional identity was never in question? Admittedly, what we might provisionally call poststructuralist philosophies of one form or another have effectively destabilised the subject, ruptured consciousness and revealed the delusional claims that attach to individual agency and self-awareness. However, questioning the givenness of identity by exploring “the how” of its coming into being is all too often an exercise in managed containment when the interiority of the subject (the entity purportedly in question) is equated with the mental and social complexities of being human. Granted that psychology, ideational commitments, and the impact of cultural and social forces “world a world.” However, at the heart of analyses that destabilise identity and question the coherence and autonomy of anything, why do the respective identities of psychology, ideation, the social and the cultural, remain intact? Why do we set a limit to what can be asked? Related to this, why is the identification of species-being, “the human,” exempt from the interrogation of identity when even the sciences struggle to pin it down: “the word ‘species’ is actually fiendishly difficult to define. Despite decades of research, biologists do not agree on what constitutes a species. Several dozen definitions have been proposed” (Marshall 2019). If identity is always on the move, not just in a linear, evolving way along predictable inheritance lines, but horizontally

(Marshall 2019) and transductively entangled in a way that might be described as “the environment speciating itself,” then other questions become possible. Are forests psychologically motivated?³ Is the gut an organ of social awareness? (Sonnenberg and Sonnenberg 2015; Wilson 2015).⁴ Must we continue to understand ideation, language and representation oppositionally, as the other of matter?

Staying in this interrogative space we might wonder how algorithms, codes, writings—patternments—“spoken” by what we conventionally understand as matter, can have any forensic purchase, seeming to read through each other in a sort of haunting, palimpsestic cascade of broken connectivities that are nevertheless indicative. This is the stuff of wonder that fascinates us in our nightly diet of crime dramas: the intricacies regarding sex, disease, hair type, even facial structure detected in a sample of DNA; the arrangement of blood spatter patterns that testify, in an almost cinematic rerun, to the movement of actors in a crime scene; vegetal markers telling time through their intra-active attunement to weather rhythms; the routines of insect behaviours and their social alliances with particular vegetal companions acting as witness; crumbs of soil whose chemical grammar suggests the particular geographic location of a crime scene; the individual signatures of diatomic communities, those microscopic algae found in bodies of water that can diagnose drowning and its specific site even when the body is found elsewhere and has decomposed; the compass in a shaft of hair that points to a particular region or city where someone has lived in past months; and on and on. What is remarkable is that “somehow” this enfolded “chatter” has indicative leverage.⁵

We could interpret this evidential “scene of writing” through Edmond Locard’s famous words, “Every contact leaves a trace.” Pioneer in forensic

³ Disciplinary orthodoxies can censor research that discovers what are considered strictly human capacities within vegetal life. Personal communication with Monica Gagliano, a plant behavioural ecologist whose research does just this, reports that respected journals have often rejected her work with automatic alacrity, refusing to send it for peer review where the science could be tested. The editor’s “explanation” for this summary judgement: “This isn’t what we do.” Interestingly, there is growing interest in these exploratory juxtapositions in the humanities and the arts and a healthy intrigue in popular culture about the mysteries of plant life. Nevertheless, it seems that what counts as science can be as defended as what is considered relevant to the problematic of the subject. For an introduction to this field, see Gagliano 2012; Toro 1945; Trewavas 2003; Wohlleben 2016.

⁴ Although just two references are mentioned there is now a significant body of scientific research on this topic.

⁵ For a more detailed discussion of forensic cross-chatter and its revelatory capacity, see Kirby 2011. It should be underlined, however, that these intra-textual “scenes” include interpreting “subjects” whose “own” constitution can include racist and misogynistic assumptions, such that “indication” is always fraught and open to question.

science, a common-sense reading of Locard's trace is that it signals something or someone that *was* present. However, even in early forensics, prior to computing and as we might expect from a sign system, a field theory, it is in differentiation that identity of any single trace, or lonely piece of evidence, accrues significance. In other words, it is only by drawing data through a field of possibles, a field that interpellates itself into a very specific articulation/representation, that something, or someone, appears. Importantly, this means that the interiority of any entity, sign, even person, as well as its outline or apparent limit, is "drawn" by the field that hails it forth. What is at stake here is how we differentiate the singular, or individual, from the general. Extrapolating from this, we do not return to a subject, autonomous and fully present to himself, his finitude outlined against an alien background. Rather, what seems outside and other is *interior* to the subject's very possibility, its becoming "itself." Nancy explained the destabilisation of the subject as an effect of deconstruction's critique of interiority, and as already mentioned, all too often this is interpreted as a critique of human psychology and its mental vagaries: the identity of the human as the orthopaedic en-framing of the question is assumed. However, if the scene of interpellation from which the subject is hailed into becoming is not restricted to human social and cultural forces, if it is generalised and allowed its natural expression,⁶ then Nancy's call for a very different approach could acknowledge that "some *one*"—the subject—is immersively entangled as "some thing"—the object—and that the latter isn't outside human identity.

In sum, what is most fascinating about the concatenation of myriad "writings" whose vectors were always intra-active, intra-textual, is that the subject is subjected through and as a particular instantiation of this animating scene. As this is a mouthful for anyone who isn't already captivated by such riddles it might be helpful to reiterate that the grammatological "textile," the "scene of writing," isn't a field of discrete entities whose aggregation performs this haunting, apparitional indication. This point needs emphasis in anticipation of the argument that follows, because aggregation, or the logic of the supplement, 1+1, the assumption that identity isn't a relational phenomenon but something that pre-exists its mode of production, can be firmly entrenched in surprising ways, even in critical theory. Derrida's "originary *différance*" complicates the appeal of this "already individuated subject," with its locatable beginning and end, and instead challenges us to think with/in the field, that is, with/in the entire scene of writing

⁶ In anticipation of the argument's direction I am using the word "natural" quite strategically, not to return to a prescriptive foundation figured as the opposite of cultural movement, but to think the comprehensiveness of originary systematicity as "no outside nature." According to this perspective being human is not an inherently un-natural state.

whose constant reproducibility promotes both discernment and ambiguity. With this in mind it seems fair to ask why Derrida's "scene of writing," from which nothing is excluded, is read so exclusively. Need we assume that the en-framing of this scene does *not* involve ecological intricacies which comprehend the biological, geological, geographical, mathematical, indeed, all the vagaries of Life?⁷ Why are these involvements denigrated by omission in favour of analyses about human subjectivity and its intrigues? More challenging still is the realisation that "human subjectivity" has no supplement, not because we return to a reworked form of humanism, now enlarged as a defense of human exceptionalism and species being, but because individuation of any sort is an instantiation of the field, its purported "outside," the non-human, already interior and necessary to its being itself. Is there a palpable fear, almost automatic in its visceral attention, that strives to maintain, unbroken, the containment line between the human (culture) and its non-human other(s) (nature)? Is this the bridge too far that Derrida's work encourages us to cross, or more provocatively, to acknowledge we have already crossed? Because if that protective "skin" that segregates one thing from another is not outside the rupture of systemic diffraction and displacement then isn't "being human" under erasure, open to inquiry? This is the uncomfortable question that has yet to gain traction in critical theory debates.

Returning to Nancy, he concludes his foreword with the summation, "the plural liberates (or shares) the singular, the singular liberates (or shares) the plural, in a community *without subject*. This is what we have to think about. *Who* thinks, if not the community?" (1991, 8, emphasis in original). Many insights in critical theory acknowledge the importance of rendering the framework of our analyses more inclusive and its contents more relationally implicated. However, as I've already suggested, this style of approach can remain stubbornly conservative, aligning the "so what?" of the exercise, "the who," or "we" of this thinking community, with the unique capacities of being human. I will return to the circumscription of these questions, especially as it plays out in arguments concerning human exceptionalism and anthropocentrism. But for now, as an interim strategy, I want to suggest that we refuse to pre-empt what this community, this "commons," might involve. Jacques Derrida's now infamous words, "there is no outside text (*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*)" (1997, 158) help us here. It is such a little sentence, just five words in English, yet their TARDIS-like dimensions challenge the received rules, the basic architectural arrangements that define

⁷ Following Derrida, it is important to keep the subject, Life, open to what might look like an identifiable limit, namely Death. See Derrida 2020.

logic. And yet it's not so much that Derrida works against the rules, making an effort to put them aside as if liberation would be measured in escaping them. It's more the case that Derrida follows their every detail and in so doing discovers networks of contradiction and paradox hidden in plain sight. If the comprehension of Derrida's terms remains restricted however, and "text" comes to signify human representations and symbolic systems—a reading which Derrida has corrected again and again⁸—then the radical charge in this seemingly modest claim is domesticated as an endorsement of human exceptionalism and cultural solipsism. Little wonder that the relevance of deconstruction has faded as academic concerns have turned to more immediate, "real world" problems, such as environmental degradation, species loss and the devastating consequences of this for global communities.

To engage the shape of such arguments and explain how they maintain human exceptionalism as sovereign and unassailable even as they struggle to find a different outcome, I want to make a detour through two, arguably related discourses. As contemporary concern about planetary health is galvanized around the unique power of human agency to either ruin or redeem an impassive and defenceless Nature, a "before" that lacks what being a subject affords, we need to better understand what sustains this story and how we might re-route the more conservative aspects of its reproduction. What complicates the discussion is that in the main, human exceptionalism and anthropocentrism are roundly condemned on the one hand, only to be surreptitiously affirmed and recuperated on the other. The agential authority of human will and intention, for example, a centrist stance that marginalises and inevitably diminishes non-human life and certainly objects, has come under critical scrutiny on several fronts. There is an emerging belief that no serious defence of anthropocentrism can be justified because its excesses have been so damaging and its pretensions to a God's-eye-view of the world, patently misguided. And yet confessing human peccability for past misdemeanours, a redemptive manoeuvre that acknowledges the problem, inadvertently recuperates the whole mess in the belief that a solution, or minimally, an amelioration of what ails us, is something that only human ingenuity can deliver. It seems that anthropocentrism is the problem, the poison

⁸ An example of just one especially provocative example of this can be seen when Derrida considers the difference between biological (natural) and cultural "texts." He argues, respectively, that the second is not a second order, necessarily failed re-presentation of the first for they are already intra-textual. To clarify the point, one could just as easily reverse the order from "culture re-presents biology" to "biology re-presents itself (as culture)": "both" are expressions of "the same" logic of life. See Derrida 2020, 78.

that destroys, just as anthropocentrism is the unique and only cure that just might, if we proceed in reparative good faith, realise a different future.

New materialism, a contemporary movement that tolerates various theoretical approaches, is nevertheless unified by the need to displace anthropocentric lines of inquiry that privilege linguistic and cultural frames of reference. It is the hermeneutic solipsism of the latter that is now in question, with its prohibition against crossing the cultural line. Judith Butler, for example, a philosopher who confines the involvements of systematicity to cultural production, argues that claims to engage the physical world of material things that are outside the enclosure of human interpretive regimes will always be a failed project. For Butler and those committed to cultural constructionist explanations of causality, language and representation are human abstractions *about* reality, signs that stand in for a real world that exceeds symbolic systems and our attempts to capture it. In a remark that I often cite because it succinctly explains what is at stake in this commitment, I refer to an interview I conducted with Judith Butler. My question is focussed on her understanding of language and if it extends to the code-cracking literacies of bacteria which constantly mutate as they encounter anti-biotic scripts. Her response is something of an admonition.

What of life exceeds the model? When does the discourse claim to become the very life it purports to explain? I am not sure it is possible to say “life itself” is creative encryption unless we make the mistake of thinking that the model is the ontology of life. Indeed, we might need to think first about the relation of any definition of life to life itself, and whether it must, by virtue of its very task, fail. (Butler in Breen et al. 2001, 13)

The admission that culture “fails” effectively skirts around the puzzle of materiality and explains why this latest interest in physical reality—meteorology, geology, biomedicine, weather events, animal and plant life, the list is endless—has achieved wide-spread traction. The material turn is perhaps the latest (if it isn’t already overtaken) in a dance of dizzying “turns” that seek to replace, or certainly ameliorate, the importance of what came before. The linguistic turn, the subjective turn, the pragmatic turn, the experiential turn, the affective turn, the material turn, the postcritical turn, all promise a different perspective that, by dint of being new, holds the promise of something better. The foundational arguments that inaugurate this need to break free of the epistemological, the discursive, or what “skews philosophical discussion in the direction of words rather than matter,” believe that for too long, “the real takes a backseat to the discursive” (Hekman 2008, 97-8). Unsurprisingly, there is a tendency in these arguments to commit to

an oppositional approach that separates nature from culture, matter from ideation and human from non-human. What feels especially strange however, given the insights of previous “turns,” is the reinvestment in binary thinking and its political implications: indeed, an attention to Cartesian dualism and its conservative investments regarding race and sexual politics have been put aside, or perhaps more accurately, inadvertently embraced.

My interest here is in the politics of identification that calmly discriminate one thing from another, as if systematicity, relationality, or intra-textual involvement are of no consequence when we presume to turn the page. If we return to Nancy’s comment that the singular arises from the plural, or that the community thinks, it seems fair to say that for new materialism this “commons” is no longer explained in terms of human exceptionalism or cultural solipsism, at least, not straightforwardly, for it is now made up of a diverse collective, an aggregation of human and non-human that together make a world. However, as identity is more assumed than questioned in these readings, human identity and its special capacity to think, to speak, to write and be guilty, is “the given” that makes this approach and its apparent generosity work. But perhaps this is unfair, for there are acknowledged difficulties in this turn to matter. Although Stacey Alaimo’s and Susan Hekman’s edited collection, *Material Feminisms* (2008), argues that language has hijacked our ability to engage reality, in Diana Coole’s and Samantha Frost’s collection, *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency and Politics* (2010), we are provided a more forgiving understanding of why the turn is necessary. Although the editors remark on the failures of constructionist arguments they are careful not to downplay their importance. They state that a “reprisal of materialism” (2010, 3) will need to avoid a simple reversal of the previous inattention, and consequently, they aim to engage both approaches. They note that, “our material lives are always culturally mediated, but they are not only cultural” (2010, 27). In the main, the goal is to repair the oversight and supplement the privileging of subjectivity with an almost celebratory focus on science and its objects. For this reason, new materialism can seem comparatively more generous, more inclusive and outward looking, and importantly, more critical of the narcissistic self-congratulation that human exceptionalism promotes.

Another text which operates as a foundational guide in this field is Rick Dolphijn’s and Iris van der Tuin’s, *New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies* (2012). Although the editors note their preference for a monist approach that refuses to privilege mind, most of the contributors remain committed to cartesian division. Manuel Delanda and Quentin Meillassoux,

for example, argue that the linguistic turn, with its focus on culture and subjectivity, has been displaced by a turn outward and away from what now appears as human solipsism. DeLanda comments, "Any materialist philosophy must take as its point of departure the existence of a material world that is independent of our minds" (in Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012, 38). And Meillassoux, in a similar vein, notes, "there is contingent being independent of us, and this contingent being has no reason to be of a subjective nature" (in Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012, 71). Although these positions read like an impatient assault on the conventional doxa of cultural construction, an attempt to acknowledge the independence of the material world, what seems ironic is that cultural construction is equally committed to this division. If we again take Judith Butler as our exemplary theorist in the cultural construction "camp," she concedes that the nature/culture division requires further nuancing.

it seemed to me that there was a cultural use of 'natural' arguments to provide legitimacy for natural genders or natural heterosexuality. But that criticism did not take account of a nature that might be, as it were, beyond the nature/culture divide, one that is not immediately harnessed for the aims of certain kinds of cultural legitimation practices [...]. (Butler in Kirby 2006, 144-45).

Importantly, we don't need the reassurances of Butler to assume the existence of something "before" culture, something other than culture and outside language, something that can't be "harnessed" by culture, something mediated by the unique complexities of culture's symbolic systems which re-present and inevitably fail to capture that "something." Such thinking is conventional within the linguistic turn, cultural construction and even new materialism and its companion, speculative philosophy, at least, in the main. Because surprisingly, and despite their significant differences, Meillassoux, DeLanda and Butler attribute a complex cognitive interiority to the human subject, and each thinker understands this "property" as uniquely human. It seems "The existence of a material world that is independent of our minds" was never in doubt. Little wonder that various forms of human exceptionalism are recuperated in its critique. Not unrelated, the mounting concern for planetary health locates culpability in a human author whose geological signature is mooted as the Anthropocene. And yet, hope for the future and the unique ability to realise change and avoid a continuation of what is currently emerging as a global fiasco is attributed to this same culprit. The point here is that whether culprit or saviour, there is an almost blind faith in the dominating agency of the human subject who knows his intentions in the first instance, and in the second, can control their direction and consequences.

Although the possibility of such a subject has been roundly debunked in Continental philosophy of various stripes and has even been despatched by the sciences, for example, *New Scientist* articles and even whole issues have been devoted to the science of “the self illusion,”⁹ this self/subject endures in cartesian form even in critiques of cartesianism. Similarly, the subject’s collective identity as human species being again recuperates cartesianism: anthropocentrism measures species smarts against the body of a non-thinking nature that it can choose to exploit or rescue. Given the persistence of such long-held prejudices have we moved very far? Admittedly, in academic spaces such as environmental humanities there is an attempt to gift nature some degree of cognition, and although this certainly opens us to potentially exciting possibilities it rests on an unexamined self-certainty that already knows what thinking entails. Needless to say, the generosity in these examples will usually grant a diminished form of cognitive capacity, and even that can be hard fought.¹⁰ In sum, the desire to get ahead and see our corrections gain ground over an error is the motivating impetus of critical endeavour, an impetus that is more or less shared by all of us. However, when difference is understood as *difference from*, as if a concept, or entity of whatever sort pre-exists our engagement with it, we remain tethered to the repeating tic of binary thinking, -A/A. The paradox of such a criticism is surely obvious: how can my own critical engagements avoid this same pitfall without presuming, in its turn, to secure the significance of my intervention and the legitimacy of its “turn” by turning away from an error? Can we stop this dance whose attempt to outstep and triumph over what came before brings us back to where we started? Or to put this another way, if there is no outside the metaphysics of self-presence, are there ways of inhabiting its interior involvements otherwise?

We can call this question a form of postcritique if we emphasize that “post” needn’t imply a moving on, a letting go of what was, but a reconsideration of how “post” is already alive in the temporal condensations of a future past and present. Returning to Nancy’s summation at the beginning of the argument, he noted the importance of deconstruction’s critique of interiority. Putting aside Nancy’s too swift conflation of deconstruction with critique, on my reading, he automatically (because it goes without saying?) confines the question to the interiority of human identity. What happens if we consider that no identity precedes systematicity’s “production” of becoming identifiable? My own strategy for shifting the terms of the debate is

⁹ See *New Scientist*. I mention just a few examples, however, there are myriad others in this and other science journals. See September 5, 2018; Dec 11, 2019; January 29, 2020.

¹⁰ See the previous reference to Monica Gagliano’s work in footnote 2.

to flip the oppositional stand-off between what is properly cultural and what is not by bringing all related debates into one system—what if culture was nature all along?¹¹ We are no longer forced to wonder how difference can be bridged, or if it can be overcome at all. Difference in a Derridean sense doesn't segregate and separate as if there is a gap, or distance, between already formed and pre-existent "individuals," for it comprehends genesis as involvement, an originary "always/already." But here again we seem to rely on a form of opposition—segregation versus non-segregation—so perhaps a more accurate way to evoke this radical sense of entanglement is to allow that separability, the appeal of distance, is expressed as and through in/separability.

Karen Barad, who held a tenured appointment in theoretical particle physics and quantum field theory in her earlier career, helps us to at least entertain the possibility that a different way of thinking is not only on offer, but that counter-intuitively, it already resides in the banality, the apparent difference, of the one that is most familiar. Interestingly, Barad is also interviewed in the Dolphijn and van der Tuin collection (2012), however the logical co-ordinates that explain new materialism's turning away from the linguistic and subjective to a substantive reality of physical "stuff" is made strange in her hands. One might wonder why someone with training in theoretical physics would title her contribution, "Matter feels, converses, suffers, desires, yearns and remembers" (Barad 2012), a description that finds the affective significance of subjectivity *within* matter. For Barad, language and representation are not confined to cultural production's epistemological frame of reference. The shock in this confusion over what belongs where, a chiasmatic blurring of matter and affect, not only undercuts the difference between epistemology and ontology, for it also complicates the unidirectional understanding of "who" observes; "who" authors an observation?

Conventionally, we locate the author of inquiry, and certainly of scientific observation, in the authority of a human subject who interprets through a particular cultural or epistemological lens, model or technology: nature provides the material support for this inevitable misrecognition; anthropocentrism's error no less.¹² And yet this isn't the only view. Many new materialist and empiricist arguments position the other of culture as transparently accessible, hoping that an aggregation of the human and non-human will provide a more inclusive and thorough perspective. Importantly for this argument, the difference between the human and its non-human others isn't

¹¹ See Kirby 2017.

¹² For an interesting discussion on this and similar themes in the sciences, see Kirby, Schrader and Timár 2018.

in question in most new materialist literature. However, if we open human identity to an outside that is already in-corporated then humanism and human exceptionalism suffer an assault: the object is entangled with/in the subject “who” interprets (it/him/her/self). The translation, metamorphosis or transubstantiation between these apparent differences, call it what you will, involves no transition through a passage of time or a gap in space. No addition is required if the difference between matter and ideation, body and mind or nature and culture begins in an originary intra-activity, as Barad describes it. To emphasize the point, she notes:

Rather blasphemously, agential realism denies the suggestion that our access to the world is mediated, whether by consciousness, experience, language, or any other alleged medium [...]. Rather like the special theory of relativity, agential realism calls into question the presumption that a medium—an “ether”—is even necessary. (2007, 409)

It is interesting that these words from Barad, the physicist, are echoed in those from Derrida, the philosopher:

what we human beings claim to take from culture as a model, namely, discursive texts or computers and everything we believe we know and are familiar with under the name *text*, what we then claim to take as a model, comparison, or analogy in order to understand the living at its most elementary level is itself a complex product of life, of the living, and the alleged model is external neither to the knowing subject nor to the known object. [...] The text is not a third term in the relation between the biologist and the living; it is the very structure of the living as the structure common to the biologist, as a living being, to science, as a production of life, and to the living itself. (2020, 81, emphasis in original)

When I read Barad’s “blasphemy” I think of Ferdinand de Saussure, the linguist who struggled to find the proper object of linguistics only to find that the material world of reference had somehow crept in. How had language materialised? How had matter become articulate? As we know, after laying down the many rules and structures that made language work, and perhaps in exasperated frustration with these rules that often collapsed, perversely folding in on themselves, Saussure concluded that “in language there are only differences *without positive terms*” (1974, 88, emphasis in original). When we ask, “differences between what?” and we can find no identity to anchor how we should proceed—because every sign remains in constant

and systemic formation—we enter the Baradian, Derridean problematic that has us think again about everything we thought we knew.

The background to Derrida's comment above takes us from Barad's discussion of physics to Derrida's dilation on biology in *Life Death* (2020), the seminars he originally delivered in 1975-1976. As time restrictions allow only a cursory mention of this work, what is most relevant to the argument so far is that Derrida's protagonist is François Jacob, recipient of the Nobel Prize for his research into RNA transcription regulation. Derrida reads Jacob's *The Logic of Life* (1993) and is exercised by the biologist's comparison of the operational involvements of heredity's instructions in the gene with the pedagogical instructions and rules in institutional, cerebral and cultural life. However, Jacob preserves a difference between the two that Derrida regards as mere prejudice: "Where does Jacob get the notion that, outside the genetic system and the genetic programs, changes in program are deliberate, essentially deliberate?" (2020, 20).¹³ Derrida's curiosity extends to the broader, regional divide between nature and culture that secures Jacob's adjudication; respectively, the passive routine and obedience of the genetic programme is measured against the agential creativity of social and cultural life. At this point, Derrida muses that his critics, reading of his engagement with Jacob's work, will feel some irritation, judging his argument foolish, the precious abstractions of a mere philosopher "who knows nothing about the matter" (2020, 10). Indeed, Derrida surmises that the relevance of his argument will be likened to that of an annoying insect, "pestering" the scientist with demands of philosophical rigour that simply distract from the importance of the scientist's research. But Derrida's purpose is more pressing, more counterintuitively targeted, because his intervention questions the *aboutness* of language, the assumption that Jacob's way of thinking, his representational schema, is peripheral to the object he studies. As we have seen, Derrida argues that "what we then claim to take as a model, comparison, or analogy in order to understand the living at its most elementary level is itself a complex product of life, of the living, and the alleged model is external neither to the knowing subject nor to the known object." It is the dis/location, as interiority, of what Jacob perceives as exterior and other than himself, both object and representation, that leads Derrida to question the actual rigour of Jacob's scientific practice (2020, 10). Interest-

¹³ I've written elsewhere of Jacob's discussions with the linguist, Roman Jakobson, about the difference between biological and cultural language systems. I argue that when no difference can be ascertained it is simply asserted (Kirby 2010).

ingly, a very similar argument is made by Karen Barad regarding the quantum physicist, Niels Bohr (2007), who asserted that representation was not immaterial but intrinsic to observed phenomena.

After all this, where do we land? I've tried to acknowledge a more implicated field of becoming by thinking systematicity as nature. This strategy isn't a reversal of cultural construction's identification of itself as exceptional, an identification that requires the comparative denigration and exclusion of nature and the non-human. In other words, a strict reversal might see nature take precedence over culture as we see in arguments that appeal to "the before"—nostalgia, simplicity and original wholesomeness. However, if culture is now diffracted *as* nature, no longer a stand-alone system, then the incapacity of the non-human is no longer assumed, and yet, nor is anthropocentrism automatically rejected. Can the latter be a natural implication of the former? Can such a possibility be considered?

As Derrida's reading of Jacob's work on genetics suggests, if there is one system that differentiates itself into infinite individuations then the entanglements of these becomings can no longer be parsed into an active, agential intelligence versus a passive and unthinking obedience to "the programme." This isn't to extend what we thought were specifically human attributes and capacities to the rest of life, nor to argue that agency is a fiction, now reduced to a rote programme of prescriptive determinations. Just as the critique of the subject as a cultural and social phenomenon complicated humanism's investments—intention, self-consciousness, memory, desire, responsibility, authorship and authority—reading the problematic of the subject by naturalising its enfoldments doesn't discount these insights. Instead, it furthers them by cracking open their defensive containment lines. Within such a reading, originary *différance* continues to evolve "out of itself": there is no absolute rupture, no supplement to add to this field of implicated rapturings.

To reiterate, this is not to put the insights of cultural analysis aside but instead to interrogate the investment in restricting them. If we think Derrida's "originary writing" as "originary humanicity"¹⁴ we are encouraged to interrogate the human, the subject, in a way that doesn't foreclose its identity as one creature among others whose comparative differences have al-

¹⁴ I have dilated on this term elsewhere. See Kirby 2018.

ready been established. The consequences of such an approach for postcritique are significant.¹⁵ Although extremely difficult to navigate, working intra-actively, intra-textually—and we all do this whether we claim it or not—means that we can't take triumphal satisfaction in discovering an "error" that, by dint of being "called out" will magically be despatched. Grammatology underlines that a method isn't a third term that can isolate one thing from another in an absolute, or definitive way. Therefore, "no outside metaphysics," a phrase often heard in Derridean circles, doesn't mean that recuperating the error in the guise of its corrective is an inevitable two-step that keeps us turning on the spot. We are not prevented from asking how this genesis of the one with/in the other is possible, and how we might read these conflations and iterations differently.

We have considered why "the ends of man" are as dis/located as the "origins of man," and this offers us two different perspectives. On the one hand, anthropocentrism registers the violence and self-interest of a sovereign subject/species whose arrival is regarded as relatively recent. This view understands human species being as an autonomous and identifiable "individual" whose privileged status and power over life is unquestionable. And yet this vision of the human subject recuperates all the self-proclaimed attributes and capacities of subjectivity—self-awareness, agential control, autonomy, inventor of language and technology—that cultural analysis and critical theory have persuasively contested. Should we put all our critical research aside when "the subject" (human interiority) appears as "the human species/subject," now read against nature's exteriority? Isn't the identity of "the subject," in whatever guise, provisional, fraught, apparitional? On the other hand, read deconstructively, anthropocentrism expresses an involved ecological individuation whose "subjectivity" has always been in-formation. "Originary humanicity" reframes our questions through a deep ecology whose gravitational centring *of itself* is anthropological through and through.

Although this last assertion looks like a mistake because surely anthropocentrism is the problem to be diagnosed and somehow overturned, as with logocentrism and phallogocentrism, the task is to better appreciate how the internal "machinery" of these systems can produce unexpected outcomes, including their own undoing. Because presuming to escape or negate them, as if we could take our distance, is itself a logocentric manoeuvre. Im-

¹⁵ There has been interest in the critique of critique for well over a decade, however, even in a recent collection of essays on the subject it is noteworthy that deconstruction's "contribution" is confined to that of a literary methodology. See Anker and Felski 2017.

portantly, the “notion” of “originary humanicity” doesn’t recuperate and install the integrity of human identity at the centre, one individual among a plurality of other possibles. This is the conventional reading of anthropocentrism. However, human identity configured through “originary humanicity” is instead fractured and dispersed through the same systemic dynamic that renders its appearance seemingly coherent. If this scene of writing is granted its ecological dimensions then anthropocentrism acknowledges how nature centres itself, allowing its ongoing explorations, experimentations and debates about how it continues to become itself.¹⁶ If we repeat Nancy’s words here, “Who thinks, if not the community”?, do we need to conclude, as Nancy does, that this is “a community *without subject*”? (1991, 8, emphasis in original)? Nancy’s challenge re-routes the question of the subject by dissolving its foundational assumptions and central importance altogether. But what happens if we say yes, if we acknowledge the “problematic of the subject,” the enduring importance of its constant resurrection and mutation, by embracing its natural capacities? Can we naturalise “originary humanicity” by counterintuitively insisting that the community *who* thinks is the ecological system, a subject whose planetary dimension speaks through us all?

¹⁶ See Kirby 2015 for a similar argument about how we might read “the centre” as a systemic dis/articulation.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alaimo, Stacey and Susan Hekman, eds. 2008. *Material Feminisms*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Anker, Elizabeth. S. and Rita Felski. 2017. *Critique and Postcritique*. Durham N.C.: Duke University Press.
- Barad, Karen. 2007. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham N.C.: Duke University Press.
- Barad, Karen. 2012. "Matter feels, converses, suffers, desires, yearns and remembers" in *New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies*, edited by Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin, 48–70. Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press.
- Breen, Margaret Soenser et al. 2001. "'There is a Person Here': An Interview with Judith Butler," *International Journal of Sexuality and Gender Studies* 6, no. 1–2: 7–23.
- Cadava, Eduardo, Peter Connor and Jean-Luc Nancy, eds. 1991. *Who Comes After the Subject?* New York and London: Routledge.
- Coole, Diana. and Samantha Frost, eds. 2010. *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*. Durham, NC.: Duke University Press.
- De Lange, Catherine. December 11, 2019. "Who do you think you are? Why your sense of self is an illusion." *New Scientist*.
- Deleniv, Sophia. September 5, 2018. "The 'me' illusion: How your brain conjures up your sense of self." *New Scientist*.
- Derrida, Jacques. 2020. *Life Death*. Edited by Pascale-Anne Brault and Peggy Kamuf. Translated by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas. Chicago: University of Chicago.
- Derrida, Jacques. 1997. *Of Grammatology*. Corrected Edition. Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Dolphijn, Rick and Iris van der Tuin, eds. 2012. *New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies*. Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press.
- Galiano, Monica. 2012. "In a green frame of mind: perspectives on the behavioural ecology and cognitive nature of plants." *The Annals of Botany—Plants* 7: 1–8.
- Hekman, Susan. 2008. "Constructing the Ballast: An Ontology for Feminism." In *Material Feminisms*, edited by Stacey Alaimo and Susan Hekman, 85–119. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Jacob, François. 1993. *The Logic of Life: A History of Heredity*. Translated by Betty. E. Spillman. Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press.
- Kirby, Vicki. 2006. *Judith Butler: Live Theory*. New York and London: Continuum.
- Kirby, Vicki. 2010. "Original Science: Nature Deconstructing Itself." *Derrida Today* 3, no. 2: 201–220.

- Kirby, Vicki. 2011. *Quantum Anthropologies: Life at Large*. Durham N.C.: Duke University Press.
- Kirby, Vicki. 2015. "Transgression: Normativity's Self-Inversion." *differences: a journal of feminist cultural studies* 26, no. 1: 96–116.
- Kirby, Vicki, ed. 2017. *What if Culture was Nature All Along?* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Kirby, Vicki. 2018. "Originary Humanicity: Locating *Anthropos*." *philosophIA: A Journal of Continental Feminism* 8, no. 1: 43–60.
- Kirby, Vicki, Astrid Shrader and Eszter Timár. 2018. "How Do We Do Biodeconstruction?" *Postmodern Culture* 28, no. 3.
- Marshall, Michael. June 17, 2019. "What is a Species?" *New Scientist*.
- Lu, Donna, Alison George, Daniel Cossins and Layal Liverpool. January 29, 2020. "What you experience may not exist. Inside the strange truth of reality," *New Scientist*.
- Saussure, Ferdinand de. 1974. *Course in General Linguistics*. Edited by Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye with Albert Riedlinger. Translated by Wade Baskin. Suffolk: Fontana Collins.
- Sonnenberg, Justin and Erica Sonnenberg. May 1, 2015. "Gut Feelings—the 'Second Brain' in Our Gastrointestinal Systems." *Scientific American*.
- Toro, Rafael A. 1945. "Psychology in Plants." *Bios* 16, no. 4: 257–261.
- Trewavas, Anthony. 2003. "Aspects of Plant Intelligence." *Annals of Botany* 92: 1–20.
- Wilson, Elizabeth A. 2015. *Gut Feminism*. Durham. NC.: Duke University Press.
- Wohlleben, Peter. 2016. *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate*. Carlton, Vic.: Black Inc.