Returning (to) the Question of the Human: An Introduction

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philoSOPHIA, Volume 8, Number 1, Winter 2018, pp. 1-17 (Article)

Published by State University of New York Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/phi.2018.0000*

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An Introduction

Birgit M. Kaiser and Kathrin Thiele

So for us to deal with global warming, this will call for a far-reaching transformation of knowledge—this pari passu with a new mutation of the answer (its "descriptive statement") that we give to the question as to *who* as humans *we are*.

—Sylvia Wynter, "Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species?"

With each intra-action, the manifold of entangled relations is reconfigured. And so consequentiality, responsibility, and accountability take on entirely new valences. [. . .] Responsibility is not ours alone. And yet, our responsibility is greater than it would be if it were ours alone.

—Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*

The trivialization of human suffering in our time and the consequent indifference [. . .] has many causes. Relevant factors are, no doubt, the impact of the society of information and communication–the repetition of visibility without the visibility of repetition [. . .]. However, at a deeper level, the trivialization of suffering resides in the categories we use to classify and organize it [. . .].

—Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *If God were a Human Rights Activist*

> When I speak of the human, it is perhaps also my way of being always traversed by the mystery of sexual difference. By the sort of double listening that I have, I am always trying to perceive, to receive, excitations, vibrations, signs coming from sexed, marked, different places; and then, in a certain place—barely a point, a full stop or a semicolon—the difference gives way to (but it is rather that the two great currents mix, flow into each other, so as only to be) what awaits us all: the human.
>
> —Hélène Cixous, in Cixous and Mireille Calle-Gruber, *Rootprints*

> To bridge means loosening our borders, not closing off to others. Bridging is the work of opening the gate to the stranger, within and without. To step across the threshold is to be stripped of the illusion of safety because it moves us into unfamiliar territory and does not grant safe passage. To bridge is to attempt community, and for that we must risk being open to personal, political, and spiritual intimacy, to risk being wounded.
>
> —Gloria Anzaldúa, "(Un)natural Bridges, (Un)safe Spaces"

Guiding quotes provide the means by which we, as guest editors of this special issue entitled "The Ends of Being Human? Returning (to) the Question," would like to open this discussion. The thematic horizons toward which this title gestures are both overwhelming and discomforting. There is the rather ambiguous gesture of a "return (to)," which could easily be misinterpreted as implying nostalgia. There is the thematic anchor of "the human," for whose hegemonic humanist and exceptionalist incarnations we feel anything but nostalgia and whose reduction to white, Western Man and obfuscation of other traditions of humanism must be so urgently disrupted that one might wonder—in light of the decolonial, feminist, and posthuman(ist) critiques of Man—how a return to the human can avoid resuscitating these hegemonic humanist ghosts. There is also the modality of the question addressed by the title, which could easily be read as being in pursuit of something seemingly (to be) known, as if the answer was "out there"—or even the goal to reach. The title harbors all of these pitfalls, and more. And asking about (the ends of) being human is perhaps especially challenging in the context of an academic journal devoted to continental feminism, as it might unduly pull any return to the figure of the human into the tradition of continental philosophy and thus only *its* responses to the question of the human.[1] Therefore, to pretend that this

collection of essays simply addresses any other question would be, to say the least, misleading. So, we opt to start this introduction very humbly under the guidance of the above citations and their different voices, taking inspiration here from Sylvia Wynter, whose texts also often begin with an assemblage of guiding quotes, and whose work has inspired so much more of this project. Yet, having selected these guiding texts for our introduction, we also acknowledge that they in no way exhaust what—or who—could have been cited here. From the outset, we will have overemphasized certain voices, while there are too many important authors whom we will have not named here, and therefore too many significant perspectives that will remain unvoiced. Returning (to) the question of the human does in no way come easy.

But why even assume that one should feel adequate to introduce this topic and not be overwhelmed by the task? If we pay only the slightest attention to the broader context unfolding as this special issue has developed—these times that "we" are living through—one cannot help but be exposed to many senses of discomfort, viscerally felt in so many different (atmo)spheres (Alaimo 2016; Sharpe 2016).[2] This discomfort is so deeply connected to the very question of what it means to be human right at this moment that—agential-subjectively, socio-politically, global-economically, and cosmo-ecologically, on all these levels (material and immaterial alike) and in all the differences and differentialities that "we" live—Wynter's substantial questioning of "*who* as humans *we are*" (see guiding quote) is extremely pressing, yet also so impossible to introduce or speak of *simply*.

Notwithstanding all of these significant difficulties, this introduction is important—not only in order to adequately meet our task as guest editors, but also to expose ourselves properly to the im/possibility of the question posed in the title. Thus, our introduction strives to achieve two things: First, we want to contextualize the critical urgency to return (to) the question of (the ends of) being human that drove us to compose this special issue. However, posing this question "after" humanism and from within the context of posthuman(ist), decolonial, and feminist critiques of Man also immediately opens a path toward issues related to methodology and pedagogy. Returning (to) the question of the human means to strongly consider *how* "return," "question," and most of all "human" are to be read. In other words, if we hope for a returning *to* and *of* the question of the human—and for this question to reopen—how should its very grammar be scrutinized? These are the methodological and pedagogical challenges we face, in effect: *how* do we ask what we ask? If our aim is to reopen the question of the human, rigorously exposing ourselves to it and allowing for it to be a real question again (and not one that is always already decided upon or whose parameters remain unquestioned), *what* is it that is asked from "us"—as readers, writers, thinkers, and citizens of this world? What is it that "we" need to *(un)learn* (see Tlostanova and Mignolo 2012)? How might the human be "what awaits us all" (Cixous, see guiding quote), rather than

an already determined entity? What we want to suggest is that, when it comes to the question that we ask with/in this issue, it is crucial to proceed otherwise than by merely delimitating different perspectives on "the human" that aim at a supposedly higher goal of clarity—a definitive response. Instead, what seems more promising for a possible disruption of the trivialization and indifference of which Boaventura de Sousa Santos speaks (see guiding quote)—and in which we also put political hope with regard to being *after* the human—is to allow for the multiplication of crossovers: more questions raised as well as more substantial questionings pursued; more points of view shared and hence many more conversations on the table. Putting our wager on such a *more* will be at times disorienting. Yet, it might also create the urgently needed new bridging points and crossings Gloria Anzaldúa speaks of (see guiding quote). We hope that one of this issue's critical interventions will be this emphasis on creating (new) relations and coalitions, rather than demarcating a clear-cut categorial territory through which the question can be fixed and settled. As Karen Barad writes (see guiding quote), "our" responsibilities and accountabilities will be greater with/in an entangled field of agential forces. Using the word "forces" here acknowledges inequality and asymmetry as foundational conditions of this relationality, namely that relationality *is* frictional (Tsing 2006). However, if relationality *is* frictional, having different voices and perspectives resonate with/in each other might also allow, to speak once more with Wynter, for more liminal and ecumenical returns to, and of, the human to emerge (see Wynter 2003; Wynter and McKittrick 2015). So, it is from here—from this mix of a sense of urgency with discomfort and foundational drifting, but also a renewed sense of curiosity—that this issue wants to return (to) the question of the human.

What Is Happening?: Violence, Indifference, and the Critical Potential of Theory

Drawing on insights and onto-epistemological shifts effected by many contemporary critical discussions in different academic fields and popular debates, this issue asks specifically: how *can* the question of what it means to be human be posed anew today? After five hundred years of hegemonic Western, Eurocentric, humanist thought-practice—based on an exclusivist notion of what it means to be human and denying subjective/agential potential to nearly all other life forms—this is an ambivalent question to ask. Why then go there *again*, as the gesture of a return implies? Why return to a figure that has been so intimately tied to human exceptionalism?

We started this endeavor fully aware of this specific problem. However, in times of heightened necropolitical, neocolonial, dehumanizing exploitation and systemic neoliberal exclusions occurring on a planetary scale, a scholarly critical practice that is interventionist and feminist cannot afford to abandon

the question of (the ends of) being human, even if, in its proposition, it needs to be radically revised—and continually so—in view of the violent history and present that hegemonic (Western) humanism continues to represent. For good reasons, many contemporary critical discourses demand that we abandon the figure of the human delineated by European humanism as Man. Yet, in order to resist political quietism, questions regarding the human as a very specific form of agency (and with very specific forms of responsibility) need to be continually posed. This necessitates an engagement with the figure of the human, also in its (in)capacities as agent or subject, however tempting—in extinction times like ours—the wish might be to avoid concerning ourselves with it.

It is important here to stress once more the role played by "hegemony" because the idea of merely jumping outside of humanism to move beyond it runs the risk of blindfolding onto-epistemological complicity and entanglement. So, while we affirm the different contemporary moves away from the limited humanism that continues to dominate the material-discursive global climate, we simultaneously acknowledge that any hasty move beyond—a *post*-humanism in any simple sense—will most likely merely enact an even worse repetition of exactly that system of human (as Man) exceptionalism. As Claire Colebrook (2014) has also argued, such hasty moves run the serious risk of renouncing "human privilege or species-ism" only to "then fetishize [. . .] the posthuman world as man-less" (160), and thereby re-inscribing onto-theology under different guises, without ever posing or changing the question itself (see also Braidotti 2013; Haraway 2016; Kirby 2014). There is no easy way out: "we" will need to cross thresholds, revisit the question as openly as possible, and (un)learn returning to it in ways that are not merely a traveling backward to conceptual or political beginnings, but rather represent an overturning, a turning over, and a revolving that both involves us and (hopefully) transports us to somewhere other than where we began.[3] Returning as overturning in this sense then cautions against the abandonment of any entry point or perspective too quickly. To reorient both the question and the human in registers other than Man might depend on nothing more than allowing "us" to abandon ourselves to it.[4]

This issue aims to revisit the question of (the ends of) being human in precisely such an open and abandoning sense, convinced that in order not to lose the specificity and force of the question, it is important not to press too quickly for answers to the massive issues at stake. Rather, what is needed is to turn over—and thereby hopefully contribute to the overturning of—the underlying patterns and securing mechanisms that have kept the question of the human tied to human exceptionalism, racism, and sexism for so long, and to (un)work the grounds upon which "we" can ask the question anew. Thus, our very specific—and partial—critical wager in this special

issue is to abandon ourselves to the question itself and to force ourselves not to abandon anything—neither humanism(s), nor antihumanism(s), nor posthumanism(s)—so as "to open the question of the human, and writing, as if for the first time" (Kirby 2011, 21). In the individual contributions to this issue, this means thinking toward being human as *carriance*, transgenerationally and transsubjectively (Ettinger); hacking the Subject in its patriarch-form (Ferreira da Silva); asking after "originary humanicity" (Kirby); and decolonizing the human while inventing gendered, (non)human, differentiated living anew (Hantel; Paris).

The essays collected in this issue provide us with a variety of singular entry points to the question. In "Hacking the Subject: Black Feminism and Refusal beyond the Limits of Critique," Denise Ferreira da Silva reads Nahum Chandler's "figure of the X" (2014) through Hortense Spillers's notion of "female flesh ungendered" (1987) in order to hack the hegemonic form of the subject that is interlaced with the white patriarchal figuration of the human. Using a set of formulas that evidence the reduction of the black female position within white patriarchy, her argument demonstrates that the *formal* conditions of the subject require hacking in order to account for a positioning of the black female subject. Returning (to) *anthropos*, Vicki Kirby's "Originary Humanicity: Locating *Anthropos*" revisits Lacan to demonstrate how the notion of the Subject as represented in the secular, antihumanist, critical (Western) tradition is very much based on human exceptionalism and a nature/culture split. Arguing for the *non-concept* of "originary humanicity," Kirby then shows how this common understanding of the Subject strangely resonates with Christian fundamentalist discourses on Intelligent Design. Therefore, her argument challenges us to think through the initial onto-theological conditions of any phrasings of subjectivity in contemporary critical discourse and to rethink the critical position of anthropocentrism. Max Hantel's essay, "What Is It Like to Be a Human? Sylvia Wynter on Autopoiesis," moves us into Wynter's work. In his discussion of the importance of Fanon's concept of sociogeny for Wynter's work on the figure of the human, Hantel argues that Wynter's deployment of autopoiesis, while crucially resolving debates over the "mind-body" problem in human consciousness, necessitates an emergent political ecology in tension with her own insistence on a uniquely human domain. Wynter's revolutionary humanism, he argues, must ethically engage the nonhuman. In "Humanism's Secret Shadow: The Construction of Black Gender/Sexuality in Frantz Fanon and Hortense Spillers," William Paris reads closely Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (2006, especially chapter 6) alongside Spillers's "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" (1987), interwoven with Balibar's and Derrida's critiques of Western humanism. The essay pushes the reader to rethink gender, sexuality, and race beyond (classical Western) humanism's violent disavowal of blackness as untruth and demonstrates how Fanon and Spillers reclaim the invention of a

new genre of the human. And finally, in our interview with Bracha L. Ettinger entitled "If You Do Well, Carry! The Difference of the Humane," we discuss her long and ongoing engagement with the question of the human(e). Ettinger has been working on this subject through her artistic as well as her theoretical work. Providing us with a feminist counter-reading of both Lacanian psychoanalysis and passages from Genesis, in this interview Ettinger foundationally pushes the Cartesian framework of subject formation toward a thinking of *carriance* and/as "I carry, therefore I am."[5]

Returning (to) as Transformative Practice: Diffractive Methodologies

When proposing this special issue, we kept the question after (the ends of) being human quite unspecified. We did not, for example, focus on specific instances of the current resurgence of patriarchal sexism or the contemporary deepening of systemic racism, or indeed the framework of the Anthropocene—although all of these are crucial perspectives and intimately linked to the urgency of the question, and certainly also constitute the backgrounds from which the contributions have been written. Yet, the decision to keep this issue relatively unspecified arose out of the hope for theoretical engagements with the *question* itself and for a reemergence of more and new pressure points regarding it. We endorse a creative use of thinking (trans- and interdisciplinary), and we consider theorizing a critical practice both within and of this world; a *mattering* dimension of practicing life and/as human(e)-ness. Stating this explicitly might seem superfluous, because who—especially amongst feminist critical thinkers—would not agree that this is what is (to be) practiced? However, we want to stress the value of theorizing and reposing questions here, not least to counter the claim frequently made in contemporary academic circles that less theoretical complexity would facilitate being more easily understood. It seems to us that what is so often missing in today's (over-)heated contemporary political climate is patient, rigorous thinking and careful questioning. Thus, we cherish the reminder by political activist and writer Winona LaDuke (2017) that "[w]e need to be coherent" as an essential dimension of, and for, our political struggles.[6]

So, what is it then, that "we" actually *cannot* afford to abandon regarding the question of the human? How are we to inhabit this question (including its post- or inhuman[e] dimensions) in ways inspired by diverse perspectives, such as (new) materialist feminisms, radical black studies, feminist posthumanisms, or decolonial and feminist critique—perspectives that do not harmonize easily with each other in today's critical discourses and might at moments even be read as *differend* (Lyotard 1988)? And how might "we" pursue challenges to the figure of Man without at the same time losing sight of Aimé Césaire's

(1972) continuously relevant call for "a humanism made to the measure of the world" (56)? Will we be able to attend to more than one perspective so that "our present descriptive statement of the human, Man, and its overrepresentation" might move toward "a redescription of the human outside the[se] terms" (Wynter 2003, 268)?

When beginning to approach these concerns, our *methodological maneuvering* becomes important. Without *doing* things otherwise, one risks always running into the same answers and never changing the grid upon which the questions are posed. Struggling *not* to return to the delimiting, departmentalizing drives of disciplines, but to open the question of the human in ways that allow for crossovers therefore also demands listening simultaneously to more than one perspective—i.e., learning from multiple and different conceptual angles, reading them with and through each other, diffractively. The "poverty-hunger-habitat-energy-trade-population-atmosphere-waste-resource problem" (Barney in Wynter and McKittrick 2015, 44) on a planetary scale—produced by the figure called Man (see also Cornell and Seely 2016)—is too complex for only one school of thought or one discipline to adequately tackle. Thus, in revisiting the figure of the human in light of these multilayered ecological and economic injustices that intersect with, and sustain, racial and sexual injustice the task is not to move "beyond," but rather to re-turn (to) and reopen underlying questions that unearth new ways of thinking and bring more voices to the table. Barad (2014) argues that "the temporality of re-turning is integral to the phenomenon of diffraction," adding that diffraction

> is not a set pattern, but rather an iterative (re)configuring of patterns of differentiating-entangling. As such, there is no moving beyond, no leaving the "old" behind. There is no absolute boundary between here-now and there-then. There is nothing that is new; there is nothing that is not new. (Barad 2014, 168)

The complexity of the planetary problem—bound up with the regime of knowledge in which Man determines what it means to be human (and consequently nonhuman)—calls for *systemic* transformation, necessitating the invention into existence (see Fanon 2008) of new modes of relating and being human.

In order not to abandon *and* reinvent, "we" might need to endure the often painful slowness required to address questions as adequately as possible—something that has become precarious in today's political and academic accelerationist climates. The question as a mode of inquiry is precious, but it is also under increasing pressure. Yet, if the motivation to return (to) the human is read in the context of the broader question "What is happening?" perhaps the necessity not to hurry too much and to even suspend answers for a while is of great significance, even if it seems as if "we" are running out of time. Nancy

(2014) might be inspirational here, and his analysis of "What is happening?" after the Fukushima nuclear catastrophe in 2011 can be productively read with and through voices that at first sight seem far from his. In relation to this question, he states the following:

> We are being exposed to a catastrophe of meaning. Let's not hurry to hide this exposure under pink, blue, red, or black silks. Let us remain exposed, and let us think about what is happening [*ce qui nous arrive*] to us: Let us think that it is we who are arriving, or who are leaving. (Nancy 2014, 8)

The catastrophe of meaning that Nancy refers to here is intimately tied to a "we" for (and from) whom this meaning is receding and to which a common response might be to rush to ribbons, silks, and flags. Yet, it would be wiser, Nancy implies, to *expose* ourselves to this receding framework and to ask the crucial underlying questions (including *whose* framework is receding). Thinking about *what* is happening (to "us") is therefore intimately tied to thinking about *who* is leaving or arriving on the scene, set by the twenty-first century's "poverty-hunger-habitat-energy-trade-population-atmosphere-waste-resource problem" quoted above. Thus, read critically through and with Wynter's foundational call for the necessity of rewriting knowledges in view of the onto-epistemological regime of Man, Nancy's insistence on exposure can be given direction, allowing the (onto-)epistemic limits of the "we" to be problematized anew. For, as Wynter (1994) already writes in "No Humans Involved: An Open Letter to My Colleagues," reflecting so critically on "us" as educators, "the central issue that confronts us here, is whether we too will be able to move beyond the epistemic limits of our present 'inner eyes'" (62). To move the diagrams and grids within which to phrase "who we are" and to rewrite knowledges in order to challenge the (onto-)epistemic limits of our "present inner eyes" is very much about "sitting with" and enduring questions—even those that some might have thought to have already surpassed. So, both in terms of a method of proceeding and in terms of the topic at stake, this issue follows Wynter's persistent question:

> How can we be enabled to come to *mind about* the well-being or ill-being of those inhabiting worlds *outside* that of our normatively politically liberal democratic *referent-we* of *homo-oeconomicus* rather than to continue, as we reflexly do, to mind about *only* the well-being of the above *referent-we*, as the one to which we, as hegemonically secular middle-class/bourgeois academics belong? (Wynter and McKittrick 2015, 44)

Moving toward this as a *real* question—that is, not one that can be passed over or explained away—becomes a task of redrawing questions so that they matter

again, and so that "we" become mindful of them *as* questions for whose answers and solutions we have to seriously work.

The impetus for many strands of feminist critique has always been to pay precise attention to the ways in which problems are phrased, to challenge the frameworks within which problems are constituted and questions are raised, and to expose exactly which ones are raised—who gets to ask them and in what manner? All of this work is intended to "shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the law" (Cixous 1976, 888) so that other matters can come to the fore and new problems can be constituted. Feminists have always urged "us" to think about matters on this profound level: "to stay with the trouble" (Haraway 2016) because it "matters what matters we use to think other matters with" (Haraway 2013). For us, such an approach to matters (see also Strathern 1992) also resonates with—and can be creatively juxtaposed to—a different theoretical terrain, namely that of Deleuze's (2006) reflections on the value of constituting the *problem* in philosophical arguments. For, in a similar vein to Haraway (and Strathern), in his discussion of *Bergsonism* Deleuze also emphasizes the matters with questions "we" raise and problems "we" constitute:

> We are wrong to believe that the true and the false can only be brought to bear on solutions, that they only begin with solutions. [. . .] [I]t is the solution that counts, but the problem always has the solution it deserves, in terms of the way in which it is stated [. . .]. In this sense, the history of man, from the theoretical as much as from the practical point of view is that of the construction of problems. (Deleuze 2006, 15–16)

Despite the perhaps unusual registers of history and man—a terminology that is otherwise not very prominent in Deleuze—the emphasis on the construction of problems is helpful and can be a tool with which to think in our context here, when put in alliance with—and diffracted through—the feminist and decolonial work that has foregrounded the matter(ing) of the question. It pushes forward an understanding of questioning that also includes the continuous restating of questions of *resistance*, and to have the resilience and breath to do so, especially in contemporary, heightened oppressive political climates. As such, we want to argue, focusing on how to approach the question is precisely to not be stuck with only questions. Rather, exposing ourselves to the reconstituting of problems—returning to a question with the hope of also re-turning something of it—becomes the milieu in which rigorous and generous thinking can flourish. For, as hooks (2010) articulates so clearly in her teaching of critical thinking as feminist pedagogy: "Thinking is an action. [. . .] [T]houghts are the laboratory where one goes to pose questions and find answers, and the place where visions of theory and praxis come together" (7).

Having the privilege to contribute to a journal on continental feminist philosophy, we feel the breathing space to remind ourselves that feminist theorizing can be, or may be at its best, a transformative thought-practice in which "to think differently, innovatively, in terms that have never been developed before" (Grosz 2011, 77) is of political significance. Returning (to) the question of (the ends of) being human—from the feminist, decolonial, philosophical, Afropessimist, sociological, psychoanalytic angles that contribute to this issue (always in mixed aggregates)—is, thus, methodologically and conceptually, a way to dream of new knowledges. It represents a return to the question in order to (re)invent into existence a different ecology of being human, and more human(e) ways of living with each other; to create exits or lines of flight out of the transgenerational traumas of chattel slavery and the Shoah, the regimes of "failing fathers" (Ettinger in this issue) and "loser sons" (Ronell 2012), out of the grids in which "the racial and the national still govern the global present precisely because of the way each refers to the ontological descriptors—universality and historicity—resolved in the figure of the Subject" (Ferreira da Silva 2007, xxiv).

The Question of the Human: An Im/possible Cartography

The task is immense, if we acknowledge the figure of the human to be entangled with all of these sites of struggle. Hence, our wager here is to ask ourselves and our readers to read together different genealogies and approaches regarding the question of the human, from diverse angles and along sometimes intersecting, sometimes diverging lines of inquiry. To that end, the issue's trajectory moves through anthropology/deconstruction (Kirby), psychoanalysis (Ettinger), feminist black studies (Ferreira da Silva; Paris), (new) feminist materialisms (Hantel; Kirby), Caribbean and decolonial philosophies (Ferreira da Silva; Hantel; Paris), art practice (Ettinger), and more. This trajectory is by no means random or merely additive. It is not random, for it touches on major academic fields that have traditionally delineated and questioned the figure of the human (philosophy, anthropology, black studies, psychoanalysis) and on historical constellations that have foundationally (in)formed that figure (the [un]gendering of female flesh, chattel slavery, the Shoah, colonialism, anthropocentrism). It is not merely additive, in the sense of striving to cover all grounds. This is not what we are interested in, as we have hopefully made abundantly clear with our insistence on the question of the question. Rather, we see crucial intersecting lines of concern and resonance across contributions that make this issue more of an open(ing) as im/possible cartography. There are contributions addressing the need to intervene critically into dominant (Lacanian) conceptions of the Subject and to move elsewhere (Ettinger; Ferreira da Silva; Kirby) and the offers

that Fanon and Spillers make to that end (Ferreira da Silva; Paris). There is the urgent task to deconstruct human exceptionalism in order to move the question of the human into relevant directions in times of extinction, and to unhinge the nature/culture split that upholds the idea of exceptionalism (Hantel; Kirby). There is the need to examine sociogeny and autopoiesis as more systemic constitutions of the subject (Ferreira da Silva; Hantel; Paris), and to explore different humanisms in this light (Ettinger; Kirby; Paris). There is the key role that art-working plays for thought, as well as the key role that abstraction—used as the right tool—can play toward the same goals (Ettinger; Ferreira da Silva). There is the need to think through race as the onto-epistemological grid upon which the human has been pinned (Ferreira da Silva; Hantel; Paris). There is the pressing task to revisit ecologies of coexistence (Hantel; Kirby). Finally, there is also the way in which (sexual) difference is a ground to think human(e)-ness anew (Ettinger) and hack the Subject (Ferreira da Silva). Yet, in as much as this is not a mere list of potential approaches but rather a web of interconnected (as intra-connecting) vectors, it is also not merely a plurality of perspectives. The arrangement of contributions to this issue hopes to create a "severality" in Ettinger's sense (2006), so that—when read together, that is, diffractively with, alongside, and through each other—their resonances, dis/harmonies, or contrapuntal polyphonies can begin to crystallize pressure points that move "us" elsewhere when it comes to the question of (the ends of) being human today.

As guest editors, we hope that our readers are willing to embark on such an affirmative critical engagement with the contributions, a practice that does not proceed by mere delineating and judging, but transforms the question by diffracting different points of view.[7] Such attitude takes seriously how reading implies always reading simultaneously the texts at hand and their multiple interferences, listening for resonances between them and the diffractive patterns that emerge and affect us as readers, each in our own thinking, yet together. Practicing theory in this way, it becomes less urgent—or even less helpful—to arrive at a conclusive answer or definition. Rather, it encourages "us" to move together with each other—a *creative evolution*, in Henri Bergson's (1998) sense, because "a philosophy of this kind will not be made in a day. [. . .] [I]t will only be built up by the collective and progressive effort of many thinkers, of many observers also, completing, correcting and improving one another" (xiv). Such a philosophical attitude is helpful for posing the question after (the ends of) being human that this issue raises. Only by proceeding with each other—generously, and in alliance to find mindful questions—can "we" move. Where this leads "us" is open and up to us.

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Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the journal editors of *philoSOPHIA*, Lynne Huffer and Shannon Winnubst, for their trust, support, and helpful feedback in the process of completing this special issue. We would also like to thank Lily Levy for her editorial help with the issue, and Nina Bresser and Sophie Chapple for the copy editing of this introduction. This publication is also supported by the Netherlands Organisation of Scientific Research (*NWO-Aspasiapremie*).

Notes

1. The suggestion to start "in the middle"—a Deleuze-Spinozian inspiration—is a great motto for dealing with the impossibility regarding the question of where and how to begin. Yet all too often, this "in the middle" remains confined to the European continental canon. The problem of other beginnings is, however, not only a geopolitical and/or historical question. Rather, it is also an ontological matter of becoming who "we" are. From the outset, it is important to us to emphasize both the utter impossibility of true beginnings *and* the constant possibility for other beginnings. For important discussions around this question that influenced us in this publication specifically, see the issue raised in and for AfricanAmerican studies and Africana philosophy (Gordon 2008; Gordon and Gordon 2006), and specifically Wynter's painstaking work on the demand to rewrite knowledges (see Wynter 1994) and the (always/already and yet to come) figure of *homo narrans* (see e.g., Wynter 2003, 2015).
2. The "we" is in quotation marks for several reasons. For one, it signals the fact that the notion of "we" is a crucial part of the entire question of the human, as Wynter's work teaches us. Throughout her work, Wynter elaborates how the collective "we" used to describe mankind and/as the human has been employed and conceptualized during (at least) the past five centuries in such a way as to include only white, Christian, bourgeois population groups (see Wynter 2015; Wynter and McKittrick 2015). Thus, one has to be cautious of who is in/excluded whenever referring to "we." Secondly, the quotation marks are meant to flag that any use of "we"—even if constantly with the question "But who, *we*?" (Derrida 1972, 136) on the horizon, the final sentence in Derrida's essay on "The Ends of Man"—implies a generalization, one that can hardly be avoided, yet one that must be continuously interrogated. Finally, in this very sentence above, the quotation marks highlight that here "we" also gestures to the context within which the people gathered in this issue are writing: in different geopolitical contexts, with different conceptual investments, yet largely within a Western academic context and as such situated.
3. Our use of returning and overturning here draws inspiration again from both Wynter's notion of "autopoietic turn/overturn" as a possible counter-cosmogeny,

and Barad's take on returning as a diffractive meaning-making process. Wynter writes:

> I have adapted the concept of *Turn* from, and as a further progression on, the earlier paradigm of the *Linguistic Turn* as put forward in the mid-twentieth century by Western academics/intellectuals. And I have likewise adapted the concept of the *Overturn* from the lexicon creatively generated by the "redemptive-prophetic intellectuals" (Bogues, 2003) of the now widely extended, transnational popular "planet of the slums" of the originally Jamaican, millenarian politico-religious *Rastafari* movement. Specifically, I have borrowed from this movement's underlying *counter-cosmogony* in whose logic words are semantically turned upside down—e.g., such as the use by Rastafari of the inverted term *downpression* to define the existential perspective of their *systemic oppression*, this given their largely poor and/or jobless existence. (Wynter 2015, 207)

And Barad notes:

> We might imagine re-turning as a multiplicity of processes, such as the kinds earthworms revel in while helping to make compost or otherwise being busy at work and at play: turning the soil over and over—ingesting and excreting it, tunnelling through it, burrowing, all means of aerating the soil, allowing oxygen in, opening it up and breathing new life into it. (168)

Here, returning is not "reflecting on or going back to a past that was, but [. . .] iteratively intra-acting" (Barad 2014, 168).

4. This play on the double meaning of abandonment draws inspiration from Peta Hinton and Xin Liu's (2015) article "The Im/Possibility of Abandonment in New Materialist Ontologies."
5. While short summaries of each essay facilitate orientation, to us it is just as important in this introduction that readers see the intersecting and diverging lines of argumentation in the essays—their cross-fertilizations, and plurality of perspectives—as well as the points of commonality that they offer. Since these diffractive patterns are integral to the issue as a whole, we highlight the ones we perceive in the introduction's last section and have deliberately kept the individual summaries short here.
6. LaDuke spoke of the need "to be coherent" at different recent events, among which the public lecture "Indigenous Politics Today: A Discussion" (Ohio State University, September 18, 2017) and the opening of the *Broken Boxes* exhibition at the form & concept gallery a month earlier (LaDuke 2017). There, she stated:

> There is a collapse at many, many levels of society. Those of us who were at Standing Rock saw what that was like, and felt that. We knew what that looked like, both looking down the face of the evil, and then also knowing what it tastes like to be free and to remember who you are. [. . .] We need to be coherent. We need to be those people. To me, that is part of what this moment is about. Art like this, and moments where you get to be conscious and you get to think, and you get to be present, and you get to really figure out exactly where we are in this time.

For an urge in a similar direction, we also refer to Gordon's (2006) countering of the claim that theory is a white affair: "To lock oneself at the level of experience is a theoretical move *beyond* experience. In effect, then, the abrogation of theory to whites is a form of *bad* theory" (32, emphasis in original).

7. Starting from an affirmative critical engagement has not only assisted us in putting together this issue, but also gives direction to our collaborative work with theory and the practice of critical thinking in the context of the *Terra Critica* network, where we have experimented especially with the critical pedagogy of reading together (diffractively and collectively) in our practice ReadingRoom (see http://terracritica.net).

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