



Yes, There is no Crisis

Working Towards the Posthumanities

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Abstract

There is widespread consensus in the Humanities scholarly community that it is inappropriate to speak of a “crisis” of our field, yet we do spend a disproportionate amount of time actually justifying or defending our existence to the public. I want to argue that this is a constitutive contradiction of the Humanities today and that it reflects not only public concern about our relevance, but also significant internal fractures within the Humanities. In this paper, I want to look more closely at some of these inner fractures. I will argue that the Humanities can and will survive their present predicament and contradictions to the extent that they will show the ability and willingness to undergo a major process of transformation in response to both technological advances and geo-political developments.

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There is widespread consensus in the Humanities scholarly community that it is inappropriate to speak of a “crisis” of our field. But nobody is denying that we do spend a disproportionate amount of time actually justifying or defending our existence to the public. I want to argue that this is a constitutive contradiction of the Humanities today and that it reflects not only public concern about our relevance, but also significant internal fractures within the Humanities, that cannot be mended just by good will, healthy self-confidence or downright denial. In this paper, I want to look more closely at some of these inner fractures.

It is almost inevitable that the debate about the status and function of the Humanities today will raise broader issues, notably the constructions of the human within contemporary Humanities scholarship and an array of anti-humanist and posthumanist positions.¹ The starting point for me is the anti-humanist death of Wo/Man which marks the decline of some of the fundamental premises of the Enlightenment and modernity, namely: the dualistic schemes of thought that position Man/reason/culture on the one side and Woman/matter/nature on the other; the progress of mankind through a self-regulatory and teleological ordained use of reason; secular scientific rationality allegedly aimed at the perfectibility of "Man"; and a unitary subject position. My general hypothesis is simple: the Humanities can and will survive their present predicament and contradictions to the extent that they will show the ability and willingness to undergo a major process of transformation in response to both technological advances and geo-political developments. We need schemes of thought and figurations that enable us to account in empowering terms for the changes and transformations currently on the way. We already live in permanent states of transition, hybridisation and nomadic mobility, in emancipated (postfeminist), multiethnic societies with high degrees of technological mediation. These are neither simple, nor linear events, but rather multilayered and internally contradictory phenomena. They combine elements of ultra-modernity with splinters of neo-archaism: high tech advances and neo-primitivism, which defy the logic of excluded middle. The Humanities therefore need great creativity to cope with these challenges.

The debate is framed at the outset by the legacy of one of the great controversies of the 1980's, namely the issue of humanism and posthumanism. For scholars in Continental French philosophy, gender, cultural and postcolonial studies, as well as the interdisciplinary field of environmental, science and technology studies, the question of what notion of the "Human" is implied in the practice of the Humanities emerged as a central concern.

The idea of the "Human" implied in the Humanities, that is to say the implicit assumptions about what constitutes the basic unit of reference for the knowing subject, is the image of Man as a rational animal endowed with language. This is the humanist core of the classical vision of "Man", which includes both an ideal of bodily perfection and a set of mental, discursive and spiritual values. This vision combines belief in human uniqueness with faith in a teleologically ordained view of rational progress through scientific development.

On the critical front, anti-humanists over the last thirty years questioned both the self-representation and the image of thought implied in the

Humanist definition of the Human, especially the ideas of transcendental reason and the notion that the subject coincides with rational consciousness.² This flattering self-image of “Man” is as problematic as it is partial in that it promotes a self-centered attitude.

This model does not only set standards for individuals, but also for their cultures. Humanism historically developed into a civilisational model, which shaped a certain idea of Europe as coinciding with the universalising powers of self-reflexive reason. This self-aggrandising vision assumes that Europe is not just a geo-political location, but rather a universal attribute of the human mind that can lend its quality to any suitable object. Equal only to itself, Europe as universal consciousness transcends its specificity, or rather, posits the power of transcendence as its distinctive characteristic and humanistic universalism as its particularity. This makes Eurocentrism into more than just a contingent matter of attitude: it is a structural element of our cultural practice, which is also embedded in both theory and institutional and pedagogical practices.

This paradigm implies the dialectics of self and other, and the binary logic of identity and otherness as the motor for universal Humanism. Central to this universalistic posture and its binary logic is the notion of “difference” as pejoration. By organising differences on a hierarchical scale of decreasing worth, this humanist subject defined himself as much by what he excluded from as by what he included in his self-representation. Subjectivity is equated with consciousness, universal rationality, and self-regulating ethical behavior, whereas Otherness is defined as its negative and specular counterpart. In so far as difference spells inferiority, it acquires both essentialist and lethal connotations for people who get branded as “others”. These are the sexualised, racialised, and naturalised others, who are reduced to the less than human status of disposable bodies. We are all humans, but some of us are just more mortal than others. Because their history in Europe and elsewhere has been one of lethal exclusions and fatal disqualifications, these “others” raise issues of power and exclusion.

On the creative side, over the last thirty years, new critical epistemologies have offered alternative definitions of the “human” by inventing interdisciplinary areas which call themselves: “studies”, like: gender, feminism, ethnicity, cultural studies, postcolonial, media and new media and Human rights studies.³ Claims to universalism were critiqued as being exclusive, androcentric and Euro-centric. They support masculinist, racist or racial supremacist ideologies that turn cultural specificity into a fake universal and normality into a normative injunction. This image of thought perverts the practice of the Humanities and in particular theory into an exercise

of hierarchical exclusion and cultural hegemony. The alternative views about the human and the new formations of subjectivity that have emerged from the radical epistemologies of Continental philosophy in the last thirty years do not merely oppose Humanism but create other visions of the self. Sexualised, racialised and naturalised differences, far from being the categorical boundary-keepers of the subject of Humanism, have evolved into fully-fledged alternative models of the human subject. They bring about the displacement of the human to an enormous extent.

What has emerged as a potentially fatal flaw at the core of the Humanities is their structural anthropomorphism and perennial methodological nationalism.⁴ Let me discuss this briefly before focusing on the postanthropocentric turn.

Structural anthropomorphism translates into sustained hostility towards, or genuine incompatibility with, the culture, practice and institutional existence of science and technology. Methodological nationalism challenges the Humanities' ability to cope with two of the distinctive features of our times: firstly the scientific rise of "Life" sciences and technologically mediated communication and knowledge transfer. Secondly, the need to take into account cultural diversity, notably between different geo-political areas but also within each one of them.

The issue of methodological nationalism is crucial in that it is in-built into the European Humanities' self-representation. Edward Said reminded us that Humanism must shed its smug Euro-centrism and become an adventure in difference and alternative cultural traditions. This shift of perspectives requires a prior consciousness-raising on the part of Humanities scholars: "Humanists must recognise with some alarm that the politics of identity and the nationalistically grounded system of education remain at the core of what most of us actually do, despite changed boundaries and objects of research".⁵ We shall see later how the changed institutional structure of the contemporary university both rests upon the decline of the nation state as the horizon for research and also has the potential to contribute to a postnational perspective.

Contemporary European subjects of knowledge must meet the ethical obligation to be accountable for their past history and the long shadow it casts on their present-day politics.⁶ The new mission that Europe has to embrace entails the criticism of narrow-minded self-interests, intolerance, and xenophobic rejection of otherness. Symbolic of the closure of the European mind is the fate of migrants, refugees, and asylum-seekers, which bear the brunt of racism in contemporary Europe.

Postanthropocentrism

The posthuman dimension of postanthropocentrism can consequently be seen as a deconstructive move. What it deconstructs is species supremacy, but it also inflicts a blow to any lingering notion of human nature, *anthropos* and *bios*, as categorically distinct from the life of animals and non-humans, or *zoe*. What comes to the fore instead is a nature-culture continuum in the very embodied structure of the extended self. This shift can be seen as a sort of “anthropological exodus” from the dominant configurations of the human as the king of creation⁷ – a colossal hybridisation of the species.

Once the centrality of *anthropos* is challenged, a number of boundaries between “Man” and his others go tumbling down, in a cascade effect that opens up unexpected perspectives. Thus, if the crisis of Humanism inaugurates the posthuman by empowering the sexualised and racialised human “others” to emancipate themselves from the dialectics of master-slave relations, the crisis of *anthropos* relinquishes the demonic forces of the naturalised others. Animals, insects, plants and the environment, in fact the planet and the cosmos as a whole are called into play. This places a different burden of responsibility on our species, which is the primary cause for the mess. The fact that our geological era is known as the “anthropocene”⁸ stresses both the technologically mediated power acquired by *anthropos* and its potentially lethal consequences for everyone else.

Many of the assumptions and premises of the postanthropocentric universe are somewhat counter intuitive, although the term has acquired widespread currency nowadays. In mainstream public debates, for instance, the posthuman is usually coated in anxiety about the excesses of technological intervention and the threat of climate change, or by elation about the potential for human enhancement. In academic culture, on the other hand, the critique of anthropocentrism has even more shattering implications than the transformative agenda of posthumanism. The postanthropocentric turn, linked to the compounded impacts of globalisation and of technology-driven forms of mediation, strikes the human at his/her heart and shift the parameters that used to define *anthropos*.

Dipesh Chakrabarty addresses some of these concerns by investigating the consequences of the climate change debate for the practice of history.⁹ He argues that the scholarship on climate change causes both spatial and temporal difficulties. It brings about a change of scale in our thinking, which now needs to encompass a planetary or geo-centered dimension, acknowledging that humans are larger than a biological entity and now wield a geological force. It also shifts the temporal parameters away from

the expectation of continuity which sustains the discipline of history, to contemplate the idea of extinction, that is to say, a future without “us”. Furthermore, these shifts in the basic parameters also affect the content of historical research, by “destroying the artificial but time honoured distinction between natural and human histories”.¹⁰ Although Chakrabarty does not take the postanthropocentric path, he comes to the same conclusion as I do: the issue of geo-centred perspectives and the change of location of humans from mere biological to geological agents, calls for recompositions of both subjectivity and community.

The geo-centred turn has also other serious political implications. The first concerns the limitations of classical Humanism in the Enlightenment model. Relying on postcolonial theory, Chakrabarty points out that the “philosophers of freedom were mainly, and understandably, concerned with how humans would escape the injustice, oppression, inequality or even uniformity foisted on them by other humans or human-made systems”.¹¹ Their anthropocentrism, coupled with a culture specific notion of Humanism, limits their relevance today. The climate change issue and the spectre of human extinction also affect “the analytic strategies that postcolonial and postimperial historians have deployed in the last two decades in response to the postwar scenario of decolonization and globalization”.¹² I would add that the social constructivist approach of Marxist, feminist and postcolonial analyses does not completely equip them to deal with the change of spatial and temporal scale engendered by the postanthropocentric or geo-centered shift. This insight is the core of the radical postanthropocentric position I want to defend, which I see as a way of updating critical theory for the third millennium.

Many scholars are coming to the same conclusion, through different routes. For instance, postanthropocentric neo-humanist traditions of socialist or of standpoint feminist theories¹³ and of postcolonial theory¹⁴ have approached the issues of environmentalism in a postanthropocentric, or at least non-androcentric, or non-male dominated, manner.

How are the Humanities to Cope with This?

The question of the future of the Humanities, the issue of their renewal and the recurrent threat of death of the disciplines is aggravated by one central factor: the new “human-non-human linkages, among them complex interfaces involving machinic assemblages of biological ‘wetware’ and non-biological ‘hardware’”.¹⁵

What is the place of the Humanities as a scientific enterprise in this globalised network culture¹⁶ that no longer upholds the unity of space and time as its governing principle? In the era of citizens' science¹⁷ and citizens' journalism, what can be the role of academic research institutions?

The dualistic distinction nature-culture has collapsed and is replaced by complex systems of data-feedback, interaction and communication transfer. This places the issue of the relationship between the two cultures at the centre of the agenda again. The anthropocentric core of the Humanities is displaced by this complex configuration of knowledge dominated by science studies and technological information. Far from being a terminal crisis, however, this challenge opens up new global, ecosophical dimensions.

Against the prophets of doom, I want to argue that technologically mediated postanthropocentrism can enlist the resources of bio-genetic codes, as well as telecommunication, new media and Information Technologies to the task of renewing the Humanities. Posthuman subjectivity reshapes the identity of humanistic practices, by stressing heteronomy and multifaceted relationality, instead of autonomy and self-referential disciplinary purity.

Today, environmental, evolutionary, cognitive, biogenetic and digital trans-disciplinary discursive fronts are emerging around the edges of the classical Humanities and across the disciplines. They rest on postanthropocentric premises and technologically mediated emphasis on Life and foster species egalitarianism,¹⁸ which are very promising for new research in the field. Probably the most significant example of the excellent health enjoyed by the postanthropocentric Humanities is the recent explosion of scholarship in the fields of "Animal Studies" and of "Eco-criticism". Both areas are so rich and fast-growing that it is impossible to even attempt to summarise them.¹⁹ Where do these developments leave the scholarship in the Humanities? Or rather: what's the human got to do with this shifting horizon? And what are the implications for the future of the Humanities today?

The vitality is high, as shown by the ongoing proliferation of new discursive fields; after the end of the Cold War, when we get the emergence of Centers for Conflict Studies and Peace research; Humanitarian management; Human Rights-oriented medicine; trauma and reconciliation studies; Death Studies and the list is still growing. These are institutional structures that combine pastoral care with a therapeutic function to deal with the inhumane and painful aspects of historical horrors. They perpetuate and update the transformative impact of the Humanities in an inhumane context, but they do so by exploding the boundaries of classical Humanities disciplines.

Therefore, instead of turning backwards to a nostalgic vision of the Humanities as the repository and the executors of universal transcendental reason and inherent moral goodness, such as Martha Nussbaum proposes,³⁰ I suggest that we move forward into multiple posthuman futures. We need an active effort to reinvent the academic field of the Humanities in a new global context and to develop an ethical framework worthy of our posthuman times. Affirmation, not nostalgia, is the road to pursue: not the idealisation of philosophical meta-discourse, but the more pragmatic task of self-transformation through humble experimentation.

This is not as abstract as it may sound at first. Let me give you some concrete examples. The first is the fast-growing field of environmental Humanities, inspired by the awareness that human activity has a geological influence. Also known as sustainable Humanities³¹ and as “anthropocene Humanities”,³² this interdisciplinary field of study introduces major methodological as well as theoretical innovations. For one thing, it spells the end of the idea of a denaturalised social order disconnected from its environmental and organic foundations and calls for more complex schemes of understanding the multilayered form of interdependence we all live in. Secondly, it stresses the specific contribution of the Humanities to the public debate on climate change, through the analysis of the social and cultural factors that underscore the public representation of these issues. Both the scale and the consequences of climate change are so momentous as to defy representation. Humanities and more specifically cultural research are best suited to fill in this deficit of the social imaginary and help us think the unthinkable.

The impact of the environmental Humanities is even further reaching. In his analysis of the implications of climate change research for the discipline of history, Dipesh Chakrabarty argues for a more conceptual shift towards “Deep History”. This is an interdisciplinary combination of geological and socio-economic history, which focusses both on the planetary or earth factors and on the cultural changes that have jointly created humanity over hundreds of thousands of years. It combines theories of historical subjectivity with “species thinking”. This is, in my eyes, a postanthropocentric configuration of knowledge, which grants the earth the same role and agency as the human subjects that inhabit it.

The scale of these mental shifts is such as to almost defy representation, as I suggested above. Chakrabarty suggests further critical reflection on “the difference between the present historiography of globalization and the historiography demanded by anthropogenic theories of climate change”.³³ This forces us to bring together categories of thought which were till now

kept apart not only by disciplinary boundaries – between the earth sciences and literature and history, for instance – but also by the anthropocentric bias that has sustained the Humanities. Far from being a crisis, this new development has enormous inspirational force for the field. It also calls into question some of the current ideas about the negative formation of a new sense of “the human” as bound together by shared vulnerability in relation to the possibility of extinction. Chakrabarty’s insights about a critical climate change-driven Deep History also challenges some of the given assumptions about postcolonial critiques of the Western universal. Quite a programme.

Another illuminating example of the advantages of a posthuman scientific position is the “One Health Initiative”.²⁴ The movement is inspired by Rudolf Virchow (1821-1902), who coined the term *zoonosis*, arguing that there should be no dividing lines between animal and human medicine. This position has been gathering momentum in the last fifteen years. The One Health initiative is a rather daring interdisciplinary alliance that unites physicians, osteopaths, veterinarians, dentists, nurses and other scientific-health and environmentally related disciplines, on the basis of a simple hypothesis, which is the isomorphism of structures between humans and animals in immunology, bacteriology and vaccine developments. This means that humans are both exposed and vulnerable to new diseases, like bird flu and other epidemics, which they share with animal species.

Obviously a response to the new pandemics that have emerged in the global era, like Bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), better known as “mad cow disease”, the One Health Initiative stresses the variety of shared diseases that tie humans and animals. For instance, animals suffer from many of the same chronic diseases such as heart disease, cancer, diabetes, asthma, and arthritis as humans. It follows therefore that we should develop comparative medicine as the study of disease processes across species and that therefore we should also connect doctors and veterinarians in their daily practices, both therapeutic and research-based. Environmentally embedded, The One Health Movement pursues both ecological and social sustainability and has large social repercussions.

One Health is the perfect postanthropocentric concept that brings together human health care practitioners, veterinarians, and public-health professionals for the sake of environmental social and individual sustainability.

Another significant example is the fast growing-field of the Digital Humanities – pioneered by Katherine Hayles, which deals with a rich agenda of thematic and methodological issues. One of them is the continuing

relevance of the science of texts and the role of the press – from Gutenberg to 3D printing – in shaping human knowledge. Just as the Humanities led these discussions in the sixteenth century, when the printing press was introduced in the Western world, so are they at the forefront of contemporary frontiers of thought. And they are not alone.

This is a new and innovative agenda, which builds on but is not confined to either humanism or anthropocentrism – a genuinely new programme for the Humanities in the twenty-first century.

Conclusion

I have argued throughout this paper that posthuman theory rests on a process ontology that challenges the traditional equation of subjectivity with rational consciousness, resisting the reduction of both to objectivity and linearity.²⁵ A collectively distributed consciousness emerges from this, a transversal form of non-synthetic understanding of the relational bond that connects us. This places the relation and the notion of complexity at the centre of both the ethics and the epistemic structures and strategies of the posthuman subject.²⁶

This view has important implications for the production of scientific knowledge. The dominant vision of the scientific enterprise is based on the institutional implementation of a number of Laws that discipline the practice of scientific research and police the thematic and methodological borders of what counts as respectable, acceptable, and fundable science. In so doing, the laws of scientific practice regulate what a mind is allowed to do, and thus they control the structures of our thinking. Posthuman thought proposes an alternative vision of both the thinking subject, of his or her evolution on the planetary stage and the actual structure of thinking.

As a consequence, one can venture the preliminary conclusion that the main implication of posthuman critical theory for the practice of science is that the scientific Laws need to be retuned according to a view of the subject of knowledge as a complex singularity, an affective assemblage, and a relational vitalist entity.

It follows from all this that the Humanities in the posthuman era of anthropocene should not stick to the Human – let alone “Man” – as its proper object of study. On the contrary, the field would benefit by being free from the empire of humanist Man, so as to be able to access in a postanthropocentric manner issues of external and even planetary importance, such as scientific and technological advances, ecological and social sustainability

and the multiple challenges of globalisation. Such a change of focus requires assistance from other social and scientific actors as well. This does not mean that “human” should become an obsolete category – rather, what we need is to update our understanding of what counts as “human” and what new forms the Humanities research is able to acquire.

The question is whether the Humanities are allowed to set their own agenda in relation to contemporary science and technology, or whether they are confined to places they did not choose to be in the first place. There is in fact a distinct tendency, for instance in the public debates about climate change, or biotechnologies, to assign to the institutionally under-funded field of the Humanities all subjects related to the human component of these complex debates. This tendency has made the institutional fortunes of ethics, which is expected – and often claims itself the prerogative – to issue new meta-discourses and normative injunctions suited to the dilemmas of our age. This meta-discursive claim, however, is unsubstantiated. It moreover perpetuates the institutionalised habit of thought – reactive and sedentary – of erecting philosophy to the role of a master theory. The image of the philosopher as the legislator of knowledge and the judge of truth – a model rooted in the Kantian school – is the exact opposite of what posthuman critical theory is arguing for: postidentitarian, non-unitary and transversal subjectivity based on relations with human and non-human others.

My point is that the Humanities need to embrace the multiple opportunities offered by the posthuman condition. The Humanities can set their own objects of enquiry, free from the traditional or institutional assignment to the human and its humanistic derivatives. We know by now that the field of the Humanities is richly endowed with an archive of multiple possibilities which equip it with the methodological and theoretical resources to set up original and necessary debates with the sciences and technologies and other grand challenges of today. The question is what the Humanities can become, in the posthuman era and after the decline of the primacy of “Man” and of *anthropos*.

In conclusion, I think the Humanities can and will survive and prosper to the extent that they will show the ability and willingness to undergo a major process of transformation in the direction of the posthuman. To be worthy of our times, we need to be pragmatic: we need schemes of thought and figurations that enable us to account in empowering terms for the changes and transformations currently on the way. We already live in permanent states of transition, hybridisation and nomadic mobility, in emancipated (postfeminist), multiethnic societies with high degrees of technological

intervention. These are neither simple, nor linear events, but rather multi-layered and internally contradictory phenomena. They combine elements of ultra-modernity with splinters of neo-archaism: high tech advances and neo-primitivism, which defy the logic of excluded middle.

We do need to embrace non-profit as a key value in contemporary knowledge production, but this gratuitousness is linked to the construction of social horizons of hope and therefore it is a vote of confidence in the sheer sustainability of the future.²⁷ The future is nothing more or less than intergenerational solidarity, responsibility for posterity, but it is also our shared dream, or a consensual hallucination.²⁸ Collini puts it beautifully: "we are merely custodians for the present generation of a complex intellectual inheritance which we did not create, and which is not ours to destroy".²⁹

Notes

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5. Edward Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 55.
6. As Edgar Morin, *Penser l'Europe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), Luisa Passerini, ed., *Identità Culturale Europea. Idee, Sentimenti, Relazioni* (Florence: La Nuova Italia Editrice, 1998); Etienne Balibar, *We, the People of Europe? Reflections on Transnational Citizenship* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004) and Zygmunt. Bauman, *Europe: An Unfinished Adventure* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004).
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8. The term was coined by Nobel Prize winning chemist, Paul Crutzen in 2002 and has become widely accepted.
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10. Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History," 206.
11. *Ibid.*, 208.
12. *Ibid.*, 198.
13. Sandra Harding, *The Science Question in Feminism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986).
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15. James J. Bono, Tim Dean and Ewa Plonowska Ziarek. *A Time for the Humanities. Futurity and the Limits of Autonomy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 3.

16. Tiziana Terranova, *Network Culture* (London: Pluto Press, 2004).
17. <http://www.citizensciencealliance.org/>, accessed 28 November 2013.
18. Rosi Braidotti, *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics* (Polity Press: Cambridge, 2006).
19. A companion to animal studies has just been published: Aaron Gross and Anne Vallely, *Animals and the Human Imagination: A Companion to Animal Studies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), whereas a complete eco-criticism reader has been available for a while: Cheryll Glotfelty and Harald Fromm ed. *The Ecocriticism Reader* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1996). *The Journal of Ecocriticism* is quite established, while a recent issue of the prestigious *PMLA* papers (2012) was dedicated to the question of the animal. For a younger generation of scholars the animal is the posthuman question *par excellence*: Manuela Rossini and Tom Tyler, ed., *Animal Encounters* (Leiden: Brill, 2009).
20. Martha C. Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: a Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999); Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit. Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).
21. Braidotti, *Transpositions*.
22. I am indebted to Debjani Ganguly and Poul Holm for this felicitous formulation.
23. Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History," 216.
24. <http://www.onehealthinitiative.com/>, accessed 28 November 2013.
25. For an excellent critical account of the notion of objectivity, see Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (New York: Zone Books, 2007).
26. Braidotti, *Transpositions*.
27. *Ibid.*
28. This is William Gibson's definition of cyberspace.
29. Stefan Collini, *What Are Universities For?* (London: Penguin Books, 2012), 199.

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