

ROSI BRAIDOTTI

The Transversal (Post)Humanities in the 21st Century

For Susan Manning

Introduction

Writing about the humanities in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic means addressing an embattled field in a grieving world. There is no easy way to keep a balanced approach, given the alternation of exhilaration and suffering that marks our times. I have described this internally contradictory state as the posthuman convergence, that is to say the intersection of an intense sense of emergency with one of hope and resilience. We are swinging between the excitement at the advanced technologies that drive the Fourth Industrial Revolution (Schwab, 2015) and the anxiety about the damages inflicted by the Sixth Great Extinction (Kolbert, 2014). The effect of this convergence – technological development on the one hand, environmental degradation, climate change and new epidemics on the other – is felt on both the human and non-human inhabitants of this planet.

The COVID-19 emergency exemplifies the conflicting aspects of the posthuman condition (Braidotti, 2013). The planetary contagion, itself the result of environmental degradation and abuse of animal and other species by global capital, paradoxically resulted in increasing our collective reliance on the very technological apparatus that drives advanced capitalism. This is expressed in the collective hope – and scientific competition – for vaccines and other bio-medical solutions. But it also informs our global dependence

on internet-backed communication and exchange of basic services and provisions, not least in education. All the contemporary humanities are digital humanities and, sadly enough, the ecological roots of this coronavirus are obscured in the mist of the public health emergency. All the contemporary humanities should also be environmental humanities, but regrettably they are not. And the death-toll is rising, across all species. At the time of writing, the coronavirus casualty list has reached the 1.5 million mark, while an estimated 1-3 billion animals died in the 2019 Australian bushfires alone. The world is in mourning.

How does one even begin to speak of the future of our field, amidst such intense grief? There is so much that we need to both embrace and heal, acknowledge and resist: the collective and personal loss of lives, the evidence of harsh socio-economic inequalities, the uncertainties about the future. Finding an appropriate language – both critical and humble – for such an endeavour entails taking in and on the pain of this damaged planet, without giving in to the pretensions of knowing better.

A deep sense of fatigue, at times even of hopelessness, is the prevalent mood; faced with such a sense of exhaustion, words in many ways fail us. The strength of those who think and research in the humanities is that we are experts at using ordinary language to achieve extraordinary levels of accuracy, precision and accountability. To express the extraordinary in ordinary language requires knowledge, inspiration and stamina. In such effort, at times our language practice slips into over-precise technical language, which the critics brutally dismiss as jargon. But mostly, we all remain accessible and strive to be comprehensible, while making ordinary language work overtime. Over the last decades, a consensus was reached within the humanities 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, methods and terminology to the public.

To situate the humanities in the contemporary world requires therefore multiple balancing acts, respect for complexity, and an extra effort to develop cross-species solidarity. This is a time for collective mourning of our dead, both humans and non-humans; a time for solace and regeneration.

The traditional humanities mission of pastoral care needs to be extended transversally to encompass the planet as a whole, with its multiple non-human dwellers. The affective and social climate we are in calls for a collaborative ethics of inter-dependence and cross-species egalitarianism. ‘We’ are truly in this together, but ‘we’ are not one and the same. In what follows, I will single out some fragments of a meditation upon our grieving present, and end up striking an affirmative note.

After Humanism

The coronavirus emergency shows the impossibility of delinking both human welfare and our scientific thinking from their ecological roots. We are all part of an environmental ecosystem that we have disrupted at our own risk and peril. This is not an essentialist statement, because not only does it not entail the superiority of nature over culture, but it questions this entire divide as obsolete. An anthropogenic virus like COVID-19 is best understood within a nature-culture continuum. It emerges from environmental sources, but moves as a social actor and an indicator of structural social and economic inequalities. Public health has always been an intensely political issue, and the ‘capitalocene’ – that is to say, the greed of consumers’ society – is primarily responsible for the abuses that triggered the epidemics. To address these intertwined issues, the humanities need to develop a new relationship to the so-called ‘natural’ sciences and vice-versa. A culture of mutual respect is urgently needed.

Post/decolonial and Indigenous philosophies working within different parameters have a great deal to teach us as well. While they stress that for most people on earth, the nature-culture distinction does not hold (Descola, 2009; 2013), they also show that the experience of death and extinction is an integral part of colonised cultures. For many Indigenous people on earth, epidemics, dispossession and environmental devastations were the mark of the colonial conquests and of the Europeans’ appropriation and destruction of First Nations cultures (De Castro, 2015). Catastrophes on this scale are for many people on earth an everyday reality: not only do Europeans have a lot to answer for, but also a great deal to learn from the South on how to endure and prosper.

Consequently, the humanities at this point in time cannot smugly cling to an implied notion of a universal 'human' as an allegedly neutral category. The human is rather a normative category that indexes access to rights, privileges and entitlements. Appeals to the 'human' are always discriminatory: they create categorical distinctions among different categories of sub/in/infra-humans. Humanity is a quality that is distributed according to a hierarchical scale centred on a humanistic idea of Man as the measure of all things. This dominant idea of Man is based on a simple assumption of superiority by a subject that is masculine, white, Eurocentric, practising compulsory heterosexuality and reproduction, able-bodied, urbanised, speaking a standard language (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987; Irigaray, 1994; Braidotti, 1994; Wynter, 2015).

But humanism cuts both ways and you can be critical of western humanism in the name of humanism (Said, 2004); be an anti-humanist and remain perfectly anthropocentric (Foucault, 1977); you can also critique anthropocentrism but re-instate humanistic values (Singer, 1975; Nussbaum, 2006). I propose instead a critical posthumanist stance that takes the criticism all the way, across both categories. The convergence of posthumanism and post-anthropocentrism is never a harmonious synthesis; it rather entails negotiations and a chain of theoretical, social and political effects. My argument is that this process amounts to a qualitative leap in new conceptual directions: the transversal humanities, also known as the critical posthumanities. This is the most effective and ethical response to the contemporary conjuncture (Braidotti, 2019).

The convergence-factor needs to be stressed in order to avoid the risk of separation in contemporary knowledge production. For instance, scholarship – on AI; on the Anthropocene; on the new political economy of post-work; on climate change and extinction, etc. – is producing its respective takes on the human/non-human, independently of one another. Not only are there few crossovers between these domains, but they also tend to remain isolated from the critical work of speaking truth to power. These new separations do not help to construct the kind of transdisciplinary taskforce we would need to address the complexity of issues confronting us in the posthuman predicament.

Exposing the power-ridden assumptions of the dominant category of the human also results in relocating the subjects who have come to represent the dialectical opposite of this normative vision of 'Man'. These are the less-than-human others, dehumanised or excluded from full humanity – these qualitatively minoritarian subjects actually very often are quantitatively the majority. Historically, they have been the sexualised others (women, LGBTQ+); the racialised others (non-Europeans, Indigenous); and the naturalised others (animals, plants, the Earth). The others of the dominant subject – the Man of reason (Lloyd, 1984) – are the feminists, queer, anti-racists, Black (Hill Collins, 1991), Indigenous (Rose, 2004), postcolonial (Mies and Shiva, 1993) and ecological activists (Plumwood, 2002) and thinkers who have been criticising that regime for decades.

They have introduced theoretical innovation in the humanities through interdisciplinary practices that called themselves 'studies'. Women's, gay and lesbian, gender, feminist and queer studies; race, postcolonial and subaltern studies, alongside cultural studies; film, television and media studies; science and technology studies; these are the prototypes of the radical epistemologies. These 'studies' voice the situated knowledges (Haraway, 1988) of the dialectical and structural 'others' of the humanistic 'Man'. They have criticised the undifferentiated, universalist idea of the human upheld by the academic humanities on two grounds: structural anthropocentrism on the one hand, and inbuilt Eurocentrism or 'methodological nationalism' (Beck, 2007) on the other.

Methodological nationalism is inbuilt into the European humanities' self-representation as bastions of national languages, cultures and identities across the multi-lingual landscape of Europe and the world. As a method, it hinders the humanities' ability to cope with the distinctive features of our times: cultural diversity, notably between different geo-political areas but also within each one of them: global mobility, migration and the legacy of colonialism. Edward Said reminded us that humanism must shed its smug Euro-centrism and become an adventure in difference, exile and democratic criticism. This shift of perspectives requires consciousness-raising on the part of humanities scholars, a becoming-nomadic of sedentary mental habits (Braidotti, 1994). It is important to replace discriminatory unitary categories,

based on Eurocentric, masculinist, anthropocentric and heteronormative assumptions, with robust alternatives, counter-knowledges, methods and affirmative values.

The critical 'studies' focus on the limitations of Eurocentric humanism and expose the compatibility of rationality and violence, of scientific progress on the one hand and practices of structural exclusion on the other. No privilege of extra-territoriality is granted to scientific reason and practice (Braidotti, 2011a; 2011b). Academic disciplines are held accountable not only to the disciplinary past, but also to the dynamic and transdisciplinary conditions of the present. Critical – in speaking truth to the power of dominant visions of subjects and knowledge – and creative at once, feminist and race theories propose alternatives forged by the experience, the unrealised insights and multiple competences of marginalised subjects (Braidotti, 2002; 2006). Their point of reference is thinking of, in, for and with the lived experience of others, in a becoming-world of knowledge production practices. The critical studies voice robust criticism, offering qualitative shifts of perspectives; as such they constitute an asset and a laboratory in the quest for a new role for the humanities in the 21st century.

Clearly, not all these 'studies' simply oppose humanism to embrace the posthuman: they also offer alternative visions of the humanist self, knowledge and society. Notions such as a female/feminist humanity (Irigaray, 1993), queer in-humanism (Halberstam and Livingstone, 1995), and Black humanity (Fanon, 1967; Wynter, 2005) are part of this tradition of more inclusive humanism (Braidotti and Gilroy, 2016). And just as obviously, not all these studies were inspired by the philosophical, linguistic, cultural and textual innovations introduced by the French post-structuralist generation since the 1970s. The sources of the critical humanities are multiple and they depend on the different locations of the knowing subjects. This methodology is not relativistic, but rather immanent and materialist. I have also defined it as a form of critical perspectivism – the politics of locations (Rich, 1994). The key idea is that disciplinary purity must give way to trans-disciplinary connections.

In a concomitance of events that marks the extraordinary period we are living through, the voices, experiences and perspectives of multiple

de-humanised and excluded others are being expressed all around us. The power of viral formations has become manifest in the pandemic, stressing the agency of non-human forces and the overall importance of Gaia as a living, symbiotic planet (Margulis and Sagan, 1995). But at the same time a global revolt against endemic – and indeed viral – racism has also exploded in the fateful year 2020, crystallised around the Black Lives Matter movement. As these multiple crises unfold, the politics of the sexualised, racialised, naturalised others are moving centre stage, pushing the old Eurocentric *Anthropos* off-centre. It's time to move on.

After anthropocentrism

The humanities are also structurally anthropocentric, and this translates into sustained negotiations and discussions with the culture, methods and institutional practice of science and technology. The unique or exceptional nature of 'Man' – *Anthropos* – and his culture of humanism is challenged today not only because of his discriminatory practices – as argued by gender, race and postcolonial studies – but also in relation to contemporary science and technology. What is the place of the humanities as a scientific enterprise in this globalised, networked, technologically-mediated culture that no longer upholds the humanist unity of space and time as its governing principle?

Decentring anthropocentric patterns of thought, however, is particularly difficult for the humanities, in that it positions terrestrial, planetary, cosmic concerns, as well as the conventional naturalised others, animals, plants and the technological apparatus, as serious agents and co-constructors of collective thinking and knowing. Humanities scholars were not accustomed to asking such questions – 'what do you mean by human?' or 'are we human enough?' or 'what is human about the academic humanities?' Tradition and the force of habit encourage us to delegate to anthropologists and biologists all scientific discussions about *Anthropos*, while we in the humanities focus on Mankind, as culture, polity or civilisation.

The proliferation of critical 'studies' morphed with the posthuman convergence, when 'Man' came under further criticism as *Anthropos*, that is to say as a supremacist species that monopolised the right to access the bodies of all living entities. What has emerged in the last 15 years is a second

generation of 'studies' areas, genealogically indebted to the first generation in terms of critical aims and political affects and commitment to social justice, while addressing more directly the issue of anthropocentrism. They range from animal studies to eco-criticism, green studies and critical plants studies. The anthropocentric core of the humanities was also challenged by the ubiquity of technological mediation and the capitalisation of Life through data mining (Asberg and Braidotti, 2018).

Media studies is almost emblematic of the post-anthropocentric shift, as it evolved from standard media, film and television studies into a galaxy of its own, encompassing game studies, internet studies, software studies, critical code studies, algorithmic studies, etc. A related and equally prolific field of posthuman research concerns the inhuman(e) aspects of our historical condition: conflict and peace research studies; post-Soviet/communist studies; human rights studies; humanitarian management; migration and mobility studies; trauma, memory and reconciliation studies; security, death and suicide studies; extinction studies; and the list is still growing.

Today, environmental, evolutionary, cognitive, biogenetic and digital critical studies are emerging around the edges of the classical humanities and across the disciplines. They rest on post-anthropocentric premises and technologically mediated approaches, which are very promising for new research in the field. They spell the end of the idea of a denaturalised social order disconnected from its environmental and organic foundations and call for more complex schemes of understanding the multi-layered form of interdependence we all live in (Tsing et al., 2017). Secondly, they stress the specific contribution of the humanities to the public debate on climate change, through the analysis of the social and cultural factors, the power mechanisms, the ethical values and aspirations that underscore the representation of these issues. Humanities and more specifically cultural research are best suited to provide a rigorous analysis of the social imaginary and help us think the unthinkable, both in the negative and the affirmative sense. The successive generations of 'studies' areas therefore are both institutionally and theoretically a motor of critique and creativity that can prove inspirational for the transversal humanities.

In a further development, several interdisciplinary areas of study

in the humanities today no longer start from the centrality and the exceptionalism of the human; rather, they problematise it. These new fields call themselves: ecological, sustainable, Anthropocene or environmental humanities, sub-divided into blue (water) and green (earth) humanities; digital, computational, algorithmic or interactive humanities; medical, neural or bio-genetic humanities; public, civic, community or translational humanities, and the list is open and growing.

Their emergence was sudden, but did not go unnoticed. Meta-discursive analyses have been articulated in terms of: the posthumanities (Wolfe, 2010); the inhuman humanities (Grosz, 2011); the digital humanities (Hayles, 1999); the transformative humanities (Epstein, 2012); the critical posthumanities (Braidotti, 2013) and the nomadic humanities (Stimpson, 2016). Innovative and threatening in equal measure, the phenomenon of what I call the critical posthumanities represents both an alternative to the neo-liberal governance of academic knowledge, dominated by quantitative data and control, and a re-negotiation of its terms.

What are we to make of them?

My first comment is that, far from being the symptom of crisis and fragmentation, these new discourses are a sign of great vitality and innovation in the field. There is no crisis of the humanities in terms of content and research energy, though the field suffers from a negative public image and lack of government support.

Secondly, the transversal (post)humanities open up new eco-sophical, posthumanist and post-anthropocentric dimensions for research in the humanities. And these developments are empirically verifiable; they are already here. They are not the result of mere influx of capital. The transversal and critical humanities today are rather the result of the hard work of communities of thinkers, scholars and activists that reconstitute not only the missing links in academic knowledge practices but also a missing people.

The critical posthumanities assume that the knower – the knowing subject – is neither *homo universalis* nor *Anthropos* alone, but a collective assemblage, collaboratively linked to human and non-human agents as a complex zoe/geo/techno-mediated ensemble. The subject of knowledge

is no longer only Man/*Anthropos*, but rather a complex zoe/geo/techno-mediated ensemble. What this means is that the objects of study in the humanities today, in addition to human diversity, also extend to animals, eco- and geo-elements, forests, fungi, bacteria, dust and bio-hydro-solar-techno powers. We have meta-objects and the hyper-sea, while ‘human/imal’ and algorithmic studies ignite the imagination of our graduate students.

However, what is significant is not just the new objects of enquiry they introduce, but rather the qualitative shifts at the conceptual and methodological levels. These discourses take on the vital materialism, the life-making capacities of organic entities, but also of inorganic devices. They teach us how to think the vitalist immanence of non-anthropomorphic life-systems, ‘smart’ things and ‘live’ connections. Posthuman scholarship celebrates the diversity of zoe/geo/techno-mediated, that is to say, non-human lives, in a non-hierarchical matter; it recognises the respective degrees of intelligence, ability and creativity of all organisms not as a ‘flat ontology’, but as a materially embedded, differential system within a common matter.

This implies that thinking and knowing are *not* the prerogative of humans alone, but take place in the world, which is the terrestrial, grounded location for multiple thinking species and computational networks – we are all ecologically connected. Of course there is a qualitative difference between accepting the structural interdependence among species and actually treating non-humans as knowledge collaborators. My point is however, that, in the age of computational networks and synthetic biology on the one hand and climate change and erosion of liberties on the other, this is precisely what we need to learn to do, in addition to all that we know already. We need to de-familiarise our mental habits.

The creative proliferation of critical ‘studies’ as an institutional phenomenon was met with mixed reactions and even open hostility during the 1990s ‘theory wars’ in the USA (Redfield, 2016). This coincided not only with the emergence of the new political Right, the consequences of which we are all experiencing today, but also with the rise of digital culture, and support for bio-genetic and cognitive capitalism (Moulier-Boutang, 2012). This also resulted in a profound transformation of the university

structure through the adaptation to neoliberal governance and emphasis on the monetarisation of knowledge. The result was the creation of classes of both academic stars, contiguous with the circuit of the media (Shumway, 1997), and the academic ‘precariat’. This neologism merges precarious with proletariat, to designate the bottom social classes in advanced capitalism. This includes adjunct lecturers and other temporary, under-paid and over-worked non-staff members of the contemporary academy (Gill, 2010; Warner, 2015). What the position of these underpaid – and mostly younger – academics will be in the contemporary university is a matter of great concern.

The missing peoples’ humanities

A pandemic on the scale of COVID-19 brings home to the western world an ancient truth: that ‘we’ are all in this planetary condition together, whether we are humans or others. But it is also high time for this heterogeneous and collective ‘we’ to move beyond the Euro-centric humanist and anthropocentric representational habits that have formatted it. Nowadays we can no longer start uncritically from the centrality of the human – as Man and as *Anthropos* – to uphold the old dualities. This acknowledgment, however, does not necessarily throw us into the chaos of non-differentiation, nor does it awaken the spectre of extinction. It rather points in a different direction, towards some other middle-ground, which expresses the awareness that ‘we’ – all living entities – share the same planetary home.

Yes, we are connected, that is to say ecologically interlinked through the multiple interconnections we share within the nature-culture continuum of our terrestrial milieu. But we differ tremendously in terms of our respective locations and access to social and legal entitlements, technologies, safety, prosperity and good health services. The posthuman subjects of today’s world may be internally fractured, but they are also technologically mediated and globally interlinked. It is important to stress the materially embedded differences in location that separate us, but also stress the shared intimacy with the world that creates a sense of belonging together, within webs of ever-shifting relations.

A diversity of perspectives is crucial and today the critical posthumanities are in motion towards more inclusive horizons, led by

multiple ‘missing people’. Historically, all sorts of communities were already empirically missing. Whether we look at women and LBGTQ+, Indigenous knowledge systems, queers, otherwise enabled, trailer-parks, non-humans or technologically mediated existences, these are real-life subjects whose knowledge never made it into any of the official cartographies. Their struggle for visibility and emergence also affects the knowledge they are capable of generating. But the other missing people are the virtual ones, those that can emerge only as the result of a neo-materialist praxis of affirmation, aimed at constructing the plane of composition for such an assembly. By this, I mean a people in the process of becoming *not-One*: ‘we-are-in-*this*-together-but-we-are-not-one-and-the-same’ kind of posthuman subjects.

The emerging ‘missing people’ are the commons to come. They point to new clusters of research and knowledge production organised around a heterogeneous assemblage of devalorised human and non-human others, for instance: non-nationally indexed humanities; feminist/queer humanities; Black humanities; migrant/diasporic humanities; poor/trailer park humanities; decolonial humanities; a child’s humanities; otherwise-abled/disabled humanities.

Since Rob Nixon’s seminal work on slow violence (2011), the missing links between postcolonial theories, the environmental humanities and Indigenous epistemologies have been exposed and analysed, resulting in growing convergence between them. At the level of the political economy of the posthumanities, this results in the production of new areas of studies that crossover the convergence that constitutes the post-human turn.

This produces planetary differential posthumanities, such as: Indigenous environmental and digital humanities; postcolonial green; decolonial futures of digital media; transnational environmental literary studies; queer neo- and in-humanisms; Indigenous knowledges and cosmologies. Similar developments are on the way to fill in missing links in the digital humanities. For instance, relying on the work of pioneers like Lisa Nakamura (2002), Ponzanesi and Leurs (2014) claim that postcolonial digital humanities is now a fully constituted field, digital media providing the most comprehensive platform to re-think transnational spaces and contexts.

Mignolo's (2011) decolonial movement has struck new alliances between environmentalists and legal specialists, Indigenous and non-western epistemologies, First Nations peoples, new media activists, IT engineers and anti-globalisation forces. They have produced the decolonial digital humanities. Different assemblages are being formed, along the convergence of posthumanism & post-anthropocentrism, but adding in the social, ethical and political dimensions. They follow an encounter between feminist, LGBTQ+ and gender studies; postcolonial, de-colonial and Indigenous studies; critical legal studies; media activists; hackers and makers; First National land rights activists.

These encounters are transforming both the environmental and digital posthumanities. The assemblages they compose are as multiple as their lived experience, producing new areas of transversal research.

A posthuman university?

All these developments indicate the good state of health of posthuman knowledge in the humanities, but what do they mean for the contemporary university?

I remember long conversations with the late and much missed Susan Manning about the intellectual and civic missions of the university today, about the forgotten status of non-profit organisation, or charity, that is so much part of our history. I shared with Susan the idea that social relevance is an inbuilt attribute of academic excellence in higher education, and not an optional extra. I still believe that we, researchers in this field, need to work harder to restore an aura of cultural authority to scholarship in the humanities and to highlight the impact of university research upon citizens in extra-academic environments and in society as a whole.

Historically, relations between the universities as the location of academic research and their social, cultural and political contexts have been a matter of perennial concern. Every university has its own situated history of 'town and gown' relationships: always close, often troubled, the academic and the civic have always been mutually complicit. Their interaction reveals a society's self-representation, values, anxieties and their joint aspiration to train literate and discerning citizens. No amount of

commitment to economic globalisation should alter this ideal. The fast rate of technological mediation, especially in these times of pandemic isolation, revive the humanities' mission to provide guidance, solace and care. This is a fundamental form of intergenerational solidarity that has no price, and which cannot be reduced to vocational training and support for a business economy. These values shape the very idea of what counts as fundamental 'research' and its value to society.

The contemporary humanities are at the core of these crucial concerns and are perfectly suited to provide insightful and workable solutions to the dilemmas of the posthuman convergence. In fact, they are already doing so through the surprising and inspirational transversal developments I have outlined here. The posthuman predicament 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 humanities research is able to acquire.

The humanities are negotiating their present predicament and contradictions by finding the self-confidence and the willingness to review some of their traditional assumptions and premises on behalf of scholarly excellence and commitment to society at large. Whether one believes in the intrinsic rationality of the humanities and their dialogical method as perfectly suited to the challenges of social accountability, or in the extrinsic need to elaborate an accountable epistemology for the humanities, extra work is needed. This entails a serious discussion of what, of the humanist past, can and should be salvaged. Of course the past and its canonical texts should be respected, but they should not be frozen into sacred nationalistic icons. The past of humanism is too rich and important to be monumentalised: it should be brought to bear upon the present, transversally and in a broad, planetary perspective. This supposes delinking the classical canon from ethnocentric, patriarchal and exceptionalist premises to be re-framed in a different social imaginary.

We need an active effort to sustain the academic field of the humanities in a new global context and to develop an ethical framework worthy of our times. Affirmation, not nostalgia, is the road to pursue. The humanities need to embrace the multiple opportunities offered by the posthuman condition and

set new objects of enquiry, free from the traditional or institutional assignment to humanistic reflexes. We know by now that the field 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 global civic arena in a posthuman era. It seems urgent to organise academic communities that reflect and enhance an ethically empowering vision of the emergent posthuman subjects of knowledge, especially the ‘missing peoples’. Transversal interconnections across the disciplines and society – shareable workbenches – are the way to implement an affirmative ethical praxis that aims to cultivate and compose a new collective subject. This subject is an assemblage – ‘we’ – that is a mix of humans and non-humans, *zoe/geo/* techno-bound, computational networks and earthlings, linked in a vital interconnection that is smart and self-organising, but not chaotic. Let us call it, for lack of a better word, ‘life’.

Death is an essential part of it. So many lives today are the object of biopower’s thanato-politics, or new ways of dying: think of the refugees dying on the edges of Fortress Europe. We are all vulnerable to viruses and other illnesses, to the effects of climate change and other devastations – and many of the exposed lives are not human. Fortunately, humans are not the centre of creation. This is the insight of affirmative thought as a secular, materialist eco-philosophy of becoming. Life is a generative force beneath, below, and beyond what we humans have made of it. It is an inexhaustible generative force that potentially can transmute lives into sites of resistance – all lives, including the non-human.

An adequate response to a crisis on the scale of COVID-19 calls for community-based experiments to see how and how fast we can transform the way we live and die. That means facing up to the negative conditions, the social and environmental inequalities and the collective responsibility towards exposed or vulnerable populations. It is a praxis that promotes action and critical self-knowledge, by working through negativity and pain. This proactive activism manifests living beings’ shared ability to actualise and potentiate different possibilities and generate multiple and

yet unexplored interconnections. This is the immanence of life as jointly articulated in a common world. Not some transcendental and abstract notion of Life with capital letters, but rather the more patient task of co-constructing one's life, alongside so many others: just a life.

This praxis of forging communal solutions through the confrontation of uncomfortable truths is central to the ethics of affirmation. Accepting our shared exposure to ways of living and dying together, amidst environmental and public health human-led disasters, is also the starting point for a process of assessing what binds us together as an academic community. This is a task for the transversal humanities. This approach expresses a sort of epistemological humility that reiterates the never-ending nature of the processes of becoming-humans, even and especially in posthuman times.

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