

# Philosophical post-anthropology for the Chthulucene

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Evelien Geerts & Amarantha Groen

# Philosophical post-anthropology for the Chthulucene

Levinasian and feminist new materialist perspectives in more-than-human crisis times

## 1 Introductory musings: Disorienting pandemic times

The COVID-19 crisis—provoked by the SARS-CoV-2 virus that most likely jumped from a non-human host to humans in the fall of 2019, resulting in a full-blown pandemic thanks to the infrastructural interconnectedness of today’s globalized world—has had many devastating effects so far: from causing millions of human deaths and bodies plagued by long COVID symptoms, the compulsory culling of complete colonies of minks in an effort to curtail the spread of the virus, and the massive widening of pre-existing inequality gaps (see Braidotti 2020; Butler 2020), to a rather irony-filled situation in which extractive capitalism’s powers are now used against itself in the global race for vaccines instead of opting for more sustainable solutions. The crisis apparently left almost nothing of our lifeworld untouched. Even the end of the Anthropocene—Paul J. Crutzen’s (2006) notion for the geological era in which the environment has been affected by human technological, capitalist, and industrial interventions—is no longer a farfetched apocalyptic fantasy: the chances are high that potent SARS-CoV-2 mutations, a deadlier type of virus, or antibiotic-resisting bacteria will wreak havoc in the years to come, further laying bare the fragility of planetary life and the instrumentalizing ways in which humans have attempted to control—and hollow out—their natural milieus. Maybe Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer had a point when warning us in their *Dialectic of the Enlightenment* about the modern unstoppable quest for power/knowledge: we appear to be stuck in a capitalist regime of “calculating reason” (1997, p. 32) by blindly worshipping scientific positivism and capitalism’s—unfortunately only momentarily emancipatory—powers.

In addition to creating this patchwork of connected catastrophes and a future-to-come-or-not-to-come, the pandemic’s viral speed is also impacting our feelings of what it means to be (but a) human in a more-than-human world. Meaning-making praxes from the past that positioned the human subject—problematically limited to ‘Mankind’—as the world’s ‘lord and master’, have now partly lost their value. In a crisis-ridden world in which a shared “trans-corporeality” (Alaimo 2016, p. 2) between all lively things of matter is manifesting itself, and the human subject is more and more to be regarded as “solidly located” within “worldly entanglements” (p. 7), as

feminist new materialist Stacy Alaimo so aptly puts it, ‘Man’ is not only dethroned but also forced to return *his*—emphasized on purpose here—crown and scepter.

The dethronement of the Cartesian-conceptualized autonomous, über-rational subject had of course already been announced by the post-Enlightenment “masters of suspicion” (Ricoeur (1970, p. 33), Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. But these particular crisis times have made the call to de-anthropocentrize our ways of doing and philosophical thinking more urgent: now that we, humans, have been hit with complete disorientation, we finally are starting to fully reflect upon our place in the world at large. How these feelings of disorientation in pandemic crisis times destabilize and ‘unearth’ the discipline of philosophical anthropology—and some of its core questions, such as the relationship between the human subject and its milieu, intersubjectivity, and practices of meaning-making—make up the conceptual skeleton of this essay. We will investigate these issues by examining the philosophical (post-) anthropological perspectives of Emmanuel Levinas, Donna J. Haraway, and their interlocuters. Making use of two explicitly feminist new materialist philosophical figurations—Haraway’s (1988; 2016) situated Chthulucene thinking *with* instead of a rejection-based thinking *against* and Rosi Braidotti’s (2011) critical cartographic method—we map out some of the effects that the doses of “epistemological electroshock therapy” (Haraway 1988, p. 578) administered by these pandemic times have had on the praxis of philosophical anthropology. Pushing the latter to its limits by means of feminist new materialist thought that does not depart from an outdated optimism-laden anthropocentrism but spotlights the more grounded task of “living in ruins” (Tsing 2015, p. 131), we conclude with a post-anthropological model that could potentially rise up to today’s more-than-human challenges. Such a post-anthropological model is meant to be affirmative, in the Harawayan sense of the word, and, similar to the postmodern rewriting of modernity’s grand narratives by Jean-François Lyotard (1987), works through the legacy of the philosophical anthropological theories and concepts to update them for these more-than-human times.

## 2 Part one. Philosophical anthropology and disorientation: Cartographical contours

Questions of (dis)orientation, directionality, and how to exist within the world have of course long been part of the disciplines of Western philosophy and philosophical anthropology. Although philosophical anthropology is as diverse as for instance epistemology, it still brings together thinkers from various Continental (see Schacht 1990 for the ‘Continentalness’ of the field) philosophical strands, locations, and eras on the basis of a shared wish to further reflect upon the ontological condition of ‘Man’ and the freedom he has to navigate his milieu by transcending his animal nature. Starting with Immanuel Kant, but mostly popular from the 1920s onwards, thinkers such as

Max Scheler, Helmuth Plessner, Ernst Cassirer, and Martin Buber set the parameters of the field, while several (post-)wartime phenomenologists and existentialists critically engaged with some of philosophical anthropology's premises, such as the conceptualizations of (in)authenticity, freedom, and societal critique.

The existential pandemic dread that is currently felt around the world, as pointed out earlier, provides us with a good starting point for drawing the first critical cartographical contours of a philosophical post-anthropology that critically yet also affirmatively works through the discipline of philosophical anthropology as such. The mapmaking methodology that we are putting to use in this essay is more than a quick 'Etch A Sketch' strategy, by the way: by choosing to work within the complex context of a pandemic crisis and by employing feminist new materialist philosopher Rosi Braidotti's (2011, p. 4) Deleuzoguattarian critical cartography, we hope to provide "a theoretically based and politically informed reading of the present" that also pays attention to the links between the past, present, and future, and moreover emphasizes the importance of rhizomatic thought and geopolitical situatedness.

## **2.1 The importance of well-grounded mapmaking in times of disorientation**

Braidotti's critical cartography is not a transcendental regulative theory: it is a form of colorful mapmaking with deeply entrenched roots in the material world, therefore packed with the potential to present a geopolitical power-focused thinking with the phenomena of which it is sketching the contours. It is here where critical cartography reveals itself as anchored in Deleuzoguattarian (2005) rhizomatic—non-essentializing—thought, Foucault's (1990) power/knowledge notion, Haraway's (1988) multi-perspectival situated knowledges, and Rich's (1986) corporeal politics of location. For Braidotti, maps are inherently knowledge-laden and power-heavy, as they depend on the mapmaker's viewpoint. This matters, as cartography, together with anthropological exploration and traveling narratives (see Pratt 1992), has formed the building blocks of Western imperialism and colonialism (see Smith 1999). Marking and mapping out spaces has always implied territorial ownership, not only on an ontological, but also on epistemological and political levels.

Thus, there are no innocent, 'pure' maps out there, meaning that the cartographic contours drawn here are grounded in two situated positionalities—those of the authors. The advantage of working with such a situated critical cartographical methodology is that it is characterized by an openness to the future and other perspectives-infused cartographies on the same topic. In this particular case, we have decided to 'stay with the pandemic trouble', to rephrase Haraway's (2016) notion, by using these pandemic times and the phenomenon of disorientation—and the potential reorientation that could go along with it—as our main cartographical leitmotif.

And it is the above leitmotif that immediately brings us to a topic central to the tradition of philosophical anthropology and some of its theoretical contemporaries, namely, how ‘Man’ navigates the world. Martin Heidegger’s *Existenz*-philosophy, as presented in *Being and Time* (1996) and heavily criticized by Emmanuel Levinas, as we will later show, already focuses on the worldly embeddedness of *Dasein*—or the ‘there-being’ that for Heidegger boils down to the standard existentialist mode for beings, and human beings in particular (also see Haugeland 2005 for this interpretation).<sup>1</sup> Upon having been thrown into the world, *Dasein* is able to orientate itself and connect with others through its state of “being-in-the-world” (Heidegger 1996, p. 49). Maurice Merleau-Ponty, influenced by Heidegger and also partly overlapping with the philosophical anthropological tradition, touches upon the experience of orientation in his *Phenomenology of Perception* (2012) as well: the embodied subject—a feature Heidegger does not explicitly accentuate—exists in the world and is characterized as being pre-objectively, temporally oriented toward that world. Queer phenomenologist Sara Ahmed (2006) follows in both thinkers’ footsteps, while also pushing their human-focused frameworks to their limits. In line with various contemporary feminist new materialists (see Braidotti 2013, Alaimo 2016, Shotwell 2016, Radomska 2020), Ahmed brings in a more affect theoretical perspective that could, potentially, transcend human experience and thus inscribe new posthumanist layers into *Existenz*-philosophy and phenomenology, and, more particularly, philosophical anthropology. Zooming in on the interconnectedness between time, space, and affect, Ahmed disturbs the anthropocentric idea of (dis)orientation. For Ahmed (2006):

Moments of disorientation are vital. They are bodily experiences that throw the world up, or throw the body from its ground. Disorientation as a body feeling can be unsettling [...]. Such a feeling of shattering, or of being shattered, might persist and become a crisis. (p. 157)

Crises such as the one ‘we’—and that category includes the earlier-named colonies of minks, parts of the world already burned down by the extractive capitalist machine, and the oceans whose surfaces will soon have to make space for massive volumes of polluting face masks—are currently living in, are not just disorientating because they *dis*-orientate and take away some of the imaginary and actual places we could go to. These crises also make us plunge into the unknown, forcing us to refamiliarize our-

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<sup>1</sup> Levinas’ philosophy is of course not completely discontinuous with Heidegger’s *Existenz*-philosophy: Levinas in fact developed his philosophical anthropology or radical alterity philosophy on the foundations of Heideggerian thought. This for instance becomes clear in how Levinas tackles Heidegger’s (1996, p. 49) notion of “being-in-the-world”—a notion that Heidegger himself had borrowed from Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology that focuses largely on *Umwelt* (‘environment’) and *Lebenswelt* (‘lifeworld’). Being human for Heidegger equates being immersed in the world, and this becomes noticeable in Levinas’ own conceptualization of the subject, the world, and the subject’s mode of dwelling (see e.g., 1969, p. 37 and following).

selves with the known, the normal, and the taken-for-granted, as they make us aware of our tendencies to navigate time and space without too much self-reflection.

These three non-orthodox philosophical anthropological perspectives on (dis)orientation do not only provide us with a proper affective feel of the current pandemic crisis and the almost tragic thrown-into-the-world-ness, to use another Heideggerian (1996) concept, that especially the less privileged amongst us are experiencing now, but it also supports this essay's main argument: these peculiar crisis times, seen through our situated points of view, reveal that the discipline of philosophical anthropology urgently needs to think about where it has come from and where it is heading to. Philosophical anthropology, as we would like to claim, should use the countless moments of disciplinary disorientation that have been engendered by the dethronement of its lead actors—'Man' and 'Human'—by the virus as a way to reorient itself.

## 2.2 Mapping the field of philosophical anthropology: (The limits of) 'Man'

When philosophical anthropology began to take shape in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, it reflected on both the philosophical challenges as well as the usefulness of the refraction of the human figure emerging within the various modern human sciences. In doing so, it set out to synthesize the one crucial element directing most modern philosophical—ontological, epistemological, and ethical—investigations: 'Man'. Kant's addition of a fourth question to his famous 'What can I know?', 'What ought I do?' and 'What may I hope for?' queries in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1998) can be seen as emblematic for the philosophical anthropological intuition that human existence—and the lived experience thereof—is of foundational importance to the praxis of philosophy. As discussed in his *Lectures on Logic*, the three foregoing questions culminate in the most fundamental question 'What is Man?' (2018, p. 25), which for Kant "was simply equivalent to philosophy as such" (Frierson 2013, p. 138). Under the auspices of Kant, an obvious 'pre-historic' figure to philosophical anthropology and the first Continental philosopher to have put anthropological questions on the Western philosophical map, albeit very Eurocentrically and with racist undertones, philosophical anthropology became a discipline of its own. Moreover, it was a discipline that from its inception claimed to be self-critical because of its continuous contemplations on the limits of 'Man'—of course minus reflections on the topic of who got excluded from that particular category. There were only but a few bodies that actually *mattered* enough to be automatically included, to put it in Butlerian (1993) terms.

These partly self-critical contours of this upcoming discipline were neatly captured by Heidegger, who agreed with Scheler that modernity presented us with a paradox: thanks to empirical anthropology, we were never surer of all our knowledge about the essence of 'Man', while this 'Man' had never been more "questionable" (Heidegger 1997, p. 147). Scheler (1976, as cited in translation by Davis & Steinbock

2019) himself, theorizing against the backdrop of the socio-political tensions in Germany's Weimar culture, proclaimed an ontological crisis of the human being as that which undergirded the dangers of an even more dreadful World War:

In our ten-thousand-year history, we are the first time period in which the human being has become fully and totally 'problematic'; the first time period in which the human being no longer knows who he or she is, but also does not know that he or she does not know. (p. 120)

Pointing at the idea that what was considered to be unproblematic should actually be problematized, philosophical anthropology's founding father underlined the addressal of the human question, as humans' natural essence could not be that easily universalized. The limits of 'Man's' lived experience were thus taken into account from the get-go, although the definition of the human-subject-as-Man was, as just noted, quite narrow. Positioning his own project in opposition to philosophical anthropology, Heidegger's critique of Kant (see e.g., 1996, p. 45–50) did not focus on this element of exclusivism but rather tackled the 're-throning' of the human subject: in his *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* (1997), Heidegger labels Kant as a proto-philosophical anthropologist reducing all metaphysics to the study of 'Man'. Kant here is said to turn 'Man' into "a possible catchment area" (Kant 1997, p. 149; Melville 2002), making him a theoretical dumping ground of sorts for all basic philosophical problems.

Heidegger's *Dasein*-fueled critique taken aside, it is clear that philosophical anthropology and its various configurations of 'Man' until this day play a major role. Whether it be the recent so-called 'Plessner Renaissance' and the latter's concept of man as eccentric positionality (Plessner 1975; de Mul 2014); Arendt's (2018) rearticulation of Scheler's *homo faber* through her take on work as distinguishing humans from animals; or Huizinga's (1949) confrontation of the *homo faber* with its playful *homo ludens* counterpart—all these configurations pinpoint at praxes of demarcation. The shifting locations of the dividing lines and the referents of the demarcated territories notwithstanding, this praxis of trying to theorize the limits of 'Man' at the same time clearly reveal what *he* is *not*.

And while Heidegger's critique of philosophical anthropology was certainly not the last when it came to the primacy of the question of 'Man' or the anthropocentrism—"Anthropologismus" (Heidegger 1991, p. 212)—that went along with it, many critical perspectives addressing the exclusive content of the answers given to this very question later emerged. Even though there is a huge variety of philosophical anthropological configurations of 'Man', feminist, anticolonial, and critical race theorists have pointed out that in demarcating 'Man' from other living, branded lifeless, or *forcibly* made lifeless bodies, anthropological groundings of the human subject have often been co-extensive with normative Eurocentric whiteness and androcentrism. The false universalist definitions of 'Mankind,' as these critical theorists argue, depend on the exclusion of those on the other side of gender, color/ethnicity, sexual orientation, class, and other lines. In that light, the exclusivist notions of what it means



to be fully human must be unpacked by looking at the material-semiotic co-constitution of ‘Mankind’ and its normative masculinity (see Rich 1986; Bordo 1987; and Haraway 1988), as well as the centrality of race and colonial encounters in figures of the ‘Human’, disciplining humanity into full humans, not-quite-humans, and non-humans. As these notions become more and more problematized, vital work is being done to destabilize governing figurations of the ‘Human’ as synonymous with white, Western, bourgeois ‘Man’ (see Wynter 2003; Weheliye 2014; and Jackson 2020). That is, the ways in which hegemonic figures of the ‘Human’ are firmly located in systems producing lived and “racialized categories of the rational and irrational, the selected and the dysselected, the haves and the have-nots” (Wynter & McKittrick 2015, p. 10) have become significant intervention points when it comes to the limits of ‘Human-ness’. By focusing on the crucial points, these critiques anticipate a radical reorientation of philosophical anthropology—prefigured by much-needed disorientation.

And it is—ironically—the rather humanist thinker Levinas that will help us with sketching out the first cartographical contours of these much-needed reorientations: his critical reflections *vis-à-vis* Heidegger’s *Existenz*-philosophy and the Other as ‘Man’s’ limit form a crucial part of our proposed post-anthropological project.

### 3 Part two. Levinas’ philosophical anthropology: The Other as the limit of ‘Man’

We now turn to one of Levinas’ widely discussed critiques of traditional Western philosophy, and Heidegger’s *Existenz*-philosophy in particular: the privileging of ontology as first philosophy at the cost of everything connected to the ethical. This Levinasian turn towards the ethical is, surprisingly, something that already anticipates many contemporary feminist new materialist, affect theoretical, and posthumanist philosophies. There is a manifest overlap noticeable between the oeuvre of Levinas and that of Haraway (1988; 2016) and fellow feminist science studies scholar Karen Barad (2007), for instance.<sup>2</sup> Similar to how Levinas criticizes the totalizing—violent—tendencies attached to Heidegger’s conceptualization of ontology, as we will shortly explore, Haraway has since the publication of “Situated Knowledges” (1988) warned against the totalizing, difference-erasing systems of seeing and thinking from a supposed nowhere. Writing about her quest for more socially just scientific knowledge praxes, Haraway (1988) states the following:

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<sup>2</sup> It is nonetheless important to note here that Haraway’s engagement with Levinas’ work mostly takes place within footnotes, whereas Barad is fully emerged in contemporary Jewish thought. Both thinkers do, surprisingly enough, relate to Levinasian philosophy via Derrida. See e.g., Haraway 2008 and Barad 2010 for examples of the latter.



Feminists don't need a doctrine of objectivity that promises transcendence. [...] We need the power of modern critical theories of how meanings and bodies get made, not in order to deny meanings and bodies, but in order to build meanings and bodies that have a chance for life. (p. 579–580)

Such a material(ist) “*situated knowledges*” (Haraway 1988, p. 581) project emphasizes the fact that the material body and the environment of the researcher influence the knowledge that is being produced and vice versa. This means that each and every perspective is forever contextual, partial, and incomplete, and that seeing and thinking from nowhere—a totalizing “god trick” (p. 582)—is but a dangerous illusion. We need a multitude of situated perspectives and accountable knowledge claims if we are to arrive at a deeper understanding of our complex reality and a critical cartography of the latter. This focus on situatedness implies an ethical reckoning with how philosophizing should be done and something similar is echoed in Barad’s agential realist work: Barad’s focus on “knowing in being” (2007, p. 185) emphasizes that reflecting upon the world is by necessity a material activity happening *within* that world. All of this points at what Barad sees as “ethico-onto-epistemology” (2007, p. 90) or the idea that ontology, epistemology, and ethics are inseparable when it comes to knowledge production (also see Geerts 2016 for more information about this notion’s agential realist framing).

In addition to his critique of totalizing theoretical enterprises and the recentering of the ethical moment of the encounter in philosophy, Levinas and the foregoing thinkers also push the subject in all of its hybris-laden humanness to its limits, as we will discuss now.

### 3.1 A radical critique of Heideggerian *Existenz*-philosophy

To create our philosophical (post-)anthropological map, we would like to claim that Levinas’ critique of Heidegger is one of its crucial—ethics-focused—constellations. This becomes clear in Levinas’ *Totality and Infinity* (1969). Echoing a coming to terms with the atrocities of the Holocaust and with Heidegger’s turn to National Socialism, Levinas (1969) connects Heidegger’s political fascism to his ontology when stating that:

Heideggerian ontology, which subordinates the relationship with the Other to the relation with Being in general, remains under the obedience to the anonymous, and lends inevitably to another power, to imperialist domination, to tyranny. (p. 46–47)

Seen through Levinas’ *Dasein*-critical perspective, existents lose the *inter-* of the intersubjective relationship by having Being and their relation to Being made more important than their interrelating. This obscures the ethical—and subjectivity-disrupting, life-altering—potential of the encounter with the Other-as-radical-Other. Whether or

not Levinas' critique of Heidegger stems from a thorough engagement with the latter's oeuvre is certainly subject to philosophical debate (see Drabinski & Nelson 2014), yet we have decided to focus on the promising ethical openings created by Levinas here as they could be utilized for our post-anthropological project. Levinas' insight concerning ontology's totalizing effects, combined with the idea that thinking in terms of totalities can lead to totalitarian acts and regimes, has far-reaching consequences. For Heidegger (1996), who critically addresses the technological drive through his concept of enframing [*Gestell*], it is the inherent forgetting of Being [*Seinsvergessenheit*] that has kept Western philosophy in the dark of the existential lived experience of Being. Levinas, contrastingly, suggests that Heidegger's thoughts on intersubjectivity present another, far more dangerous type of 'forgetting', as it is through Heidegger's re-foregrounding of Being that the ethical moment is eradicated. Through theoretically 'grasping' the Other instead of ethically relating to the Other, the Other is reduced to the same. By prioritizing ontology over ethics, the "anonymous *there is [il y a]*" (Levinas 1969 p. 143) is cast over and above the potential encounter with the Other. This is the consequence of the ontological move through which we 'possess' the Other by means of a third, neutral term—Being itself—which makes existents intelligible and forecloses the possibility of facing radical alterity. Instead of being undone by the Other's invocation, the relation with the other is sacrificed to the relation to Being, effectively renouncing ethics and providing the basis for domination and injustice.

In other words, the way we think about 'what is' effectively leaves this 'what is' open and vulnerable to being subjected to other forms of domination. Levinas leaves us with the insight that containment—or boxing up all existents in Being—forecloses our relation to the Other; the Other that "cannot be contained" (p. 230) by us.

### 3.2 The Other as the limit (and master) of 'Man'

How exactly are we to understand Levinas' assertion in *Totality and Infinity* (1969) that morality should have primacy as first philosophy (p. 304), and that in contrast to traditional ontology, which he labels as "philosophy of power" or a "philosophy of injustice" (p. 46)? In line with Anne Murphy (2014, p. 54), we do not read this statement as dogmatic hierarchizing, but as "a claim that forces recognition of the impossibility of entirely parsing these two domains of enquiry," namely ontology and ethics. Or as Levinas (1969) puts it: "I cannot disentangle myself from society with the Other, even when I consider the Being of the existent he is" (p. 47).

In *Totality and Infinity* (1969), but also in his later works, such as *Entre Nous* (1998), Levinas takes his critique of Heidegger against the backdrop of the post-Holocaust urgency of coming to terms with genocidal logic as a point of departure to work towards his own interpretation of intersubjectivity and justice. To do so, he in *Totality and Infinity* sets out to move away from "philosophy as egology" (1969, p. 54), that is, from an understanding of subjectivity as individualistic and egoistic. Rejecting previ-

ous models of intersubjectivity that have not allowed for authentic encounters with others, Levinas develops the notion of the face, or the way in which “the other presents himself, exceeding the idea of the other in me” (p. 50). It is through this unmediated ethical encounter with the face of the uncontainable Other, who only *expresses* himself to me—and in doing so breaks through “all the envelopings and generalities of Being” (p. 51)—that the subject fundamentally becomes undone. This is a confrontation with the absolute, as the face of the Other is the source of a transformative ethical response (if, of course, answered): the egological subject is pulled out of his own world and forced to question himself and his actions.

And while this face-to-face encounter of the subject with the Other is immediate, Levinas also recognizes that it is asymmetrical—which is exactly where we can lay the first foundation of our post-anthropology for these (post-)Anthropocenic times: in this encounter, we are confronted with the Other’s radical vulnerability-through-alterity. He calls upon us to sustain him. While Levinas reverses the Hegelian master/slave dialectic, the face of the Other presents us with the first command and prohibition to kill. Levinas’s articulation of the Other’s transcendence is of significance here, for it signals an understanding of the primacy of the ethical relationship the subject has with the Other—an Other that demands to be recognized as the subject’s master; neither a reflection of the subject, nor an existential(ist) threat.

The ethical encounter with “the Stranger who disturbs the being at home with oneself” (Levinas 1969 p. 39) thus shatters our onto-epistemological frameworks—a bit like the ongoing pandemic crisis—and forces us to reorient ourselves toward taking up responsibility for the transcendent Other. It is this notion of unconditional responsibility—a responding-to what the Other needs—that surfaces as the ethical cornerstone of Levinas’s philosophy and of many feminist new materialist thinkers’ radical relational onto-epistemologies that stipulate that accountability and responsibility towards everything else of matter is to be prioritized (see Barad 2007; Alaimo 2016; and Haraway 2016).

It should be clear by now that Kant’s fourth question finds itself on very shaky grounds: through our unconditional responsibility in the face of radically different Other(s), we have now arrived at a place where the human cannot be defined through solipsistic rationality. In the end, the intersubjective encounters are what matters—but when ethical relating becomes primary, we also need to reflect upon the relata, which is where Levinas’ philosophy reaches its own limit: it is extremely difficult to see how Levinasian responsibility could extend beyond the ‘Human’ and ‘His’ face. Even though Levinas (1969, p. 39) mentions the “[s]tranger, the widow and the orphan” and at one point in his oeuvre (see 1990) narrates the story of Bobby the stray dog that kept Jewish war prisoners company in a labor camp and provided them with a reaffirmation of the humanity that was so brutally taken away from them, his philosophy is enveloped by a humanism that is explicitly antifascist but not neces-

sarily that inclusive to the articulation of encounters with nonhuman and more-than-human agencies.<sup>3</sup>

Although this omission of course also makes sense, given the radical dehumanization of the Jewish people and others deemed unworthy of life by the Nazi state at the time, this is exactly where Levinas' notion of radical Otherness could be opened up. Contemporary new materialist and specifically feminist new materialist thinkers have followed in Levinas' footsteps by prioritizing the ethical moment and accentuating the worldly but often also messy entanglements between Levinas' formerly dehumanized and humans that have elevated themselves to subjects, and the still underexposed nonhumans and the more-than-human. Particularly Haraway's (2016) ecofeminist new materialist 'staying with the trouble' is worth exploring here as a way to help us draw the contours of a post-anthropology-to-come.

## 4 Feminist new materialisms: The key coordinates of a Chthulucenic post-anthropology

Following Levinas' accentuation of the ethical realm, while firmly rooted in feminist standpoint theory, historical and other types of materialist philosophies, and the Foucauldian (1990) idea of power/knowledge—all philosophies that see thought as embedded within the world, and thus carrying ethico-political implications—contemporary feminist new materialist thought radically thinks through certain key philosophical anthropological principles and assumptions. Similar to critical post-humanist thought (see Braidotti 2013 for a definition), feminist new materialists take Levinas' alterity philosophy even further, by questioning its 'all too Human' foundations as well as proposing multiple situated perspectives in which the realms of ontology, epistemology, and ethico-politics are seen as always already entangled (also see Barad 2007; Geerts and Carstens 2019 for more on these entanglements).

In addition to this decentering of the 'Human', it is important to note that new materialist thought as a *post*-poststructuralist enterprise is marked by a plurality of voices, locations, and foci: there are various strands and subsets of new materialist thought (of which speculative realism, object-oriented ontologies, and feminist new materialisms are but a few) and as many, if not more, subsets of feminist new

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<sup>3</sup> Although Levinas discusses the nonhuman world as a potential source of joy, in which 'Man' eventually creates a "[d]welling" of his own (1969 p. 37), this nonhuman world remains void of the disruptive powers assigned to the human face, since it is "only man [that] could be absolutely foreign to me" (p. 73). More recent interpretations have challenged the anthropocentrism of Levinas's ethics. However, these have for instance opened up a more-than-human ethical horizon by looking at nature as the Other (see Sallis 2010) and have related Levinas' alterity notion to ecofeminist and animal liberationist theories (see Llewelyn 2010).

materialisms (think of the Deleuzoguattarian strand by thinkers such as Braidotti but also Elizabeth Grosz (2017); the more feminist science studies-rooted eco-feminisms of Alaimo, Alexis Shotwell (2016), and Haraway; Barad's agential realism which has Harawayan but also Levinasian-Derridean touches; Mel Y. Chen's (2012) animacy theory and Jasbir K. Puar's (2007) assemblage thinking; and many more). All these thinkers share a love for pushing various dichotomized constructions to the brink and highlighting bio-/necropolitical modes of governing and subjectifying, while focusing on a holistic materialist approach to all types of lively assemblages of beings that is sensitive to power imbalances.

Braidotti's (2013, p. 60) "[z]oe-centred egalitarianism" is a good example of such a feminist new materialist undertaking: focusing on how life in all of its differing material forms is relationally connected because of a shared vitalism, an ecological ethico-onto-epistemological critique of neoliberal extractive capitalism that commodifies, exploits, and could potentially turn everything of matter into something disposable, is revealed. Feminist new materialisms, to summarize via this Braidottian example, thus not only offer us the vocabulary to analyze these more-than-human pandemic crisis times with, but also grant us specific methodologies (such as diffraction and critical cartography) and politics-infused instructions of how to engage with the world—and this becomes very clear in Haraway's ecofeminist philosophy.

#### 4.1 Haraway's post-anthropological ecofeminism: More-than-human encounters

Of all the contemporary new materialists, it is Haraway that explicitly moves through and beyond Levinas' 'Human' Other by extending his alterity philosophy to integrate various kinds of responding-to human, nonhuman, and more-than-human Otherness. Contrary to the doctrines of "human exceptionalism and bounded individualism," which are no longer "available to think with" (Haraway 2016, p. 30) as "[w]e are all lichens" (p. 54) now, or composite organisms and relationships situated across multiple kingdoms, Haraway highlights a multitude of agential beings that are in *sympoietic*—or making-with, and thinking-, living-, and dying-with—relationships with one another. To better see these agential capacities and *sympoiesis*, Haraway (1988, p. 596) calls for the acquisition of new literacies that could assist us with seeing and reading the agency-packed world as a kind of "coding trickster" "with whom we must learn to converse". This conversing with related kin plays a role throughout her work. Haraway's *Companion Species Manifesto* (2003), for instance, reveals a peculiar interspecies love story. Referring to her (now passed away) dog, she writes:

Ms. Cayenne Pepper continues to colonize all my cells [...]. I bet if you checked our DNA, you'd find some potent transfections between us. Her saliva must have the viral vectors. Surely, her darter-tongue kisses have been irresistible. Even though we share placement in the phylum of

vertebrates, we inhabit not just different genera and divergent families, but altogether different orders. (p. 1)

Acknowledging the differences between her and her dog, she also points at their intertwinement:

I'm sure our genomes are more alike than they should be [...]. Her red merle Australian Shepherd's quick and lithe tongue has swabbed the tissues of my tonsils, with all their eager immune system receptors [...] we have had oral intercourse [...]. We are training each other in acts of communication we barely understand. We are, constitutively, companion species. We make each other up, in the flesh. (Haraway 2003, pp. 2–3)

What is being explored here are messy interspecies relations, as well as a rethinking of subjectivity in terms of a *sympoietic* becoming-with the Other through the perspectives of a dog and its owner (a notion and relationality that, admittedly, still sounds possessive). Haraway asks us to develop a thinking-with in becoming-with other critters; a micro-leveled thinking attuned to relationships of irreducible difference with all of our significant Others—whether they are coyotes (1988), cyborgs (1991), OncoMice (1997), dogs (2003), lichens and spiders (2016), or other kin-like figures. The 'Others' of Levinas are conceptualized and 'facialized' in more-than-human ways in Haraway's oeuvre, and this becomes clear in her *When Species Meet* (2008) book, which explicitly builds on Levinas' concept of responding-to. Critiquing modern Western science's installment of a system of "animal and human killing and killability" (2008, p. 336) in which certain bodies have been labeled as easily disposable, Haraway tweaks Levinas' notion of responding-to by explicitly engaging with Derrida's Levinasian conceptualizations of alterity, sacrifice, and moral duty: by letting animals enter the picture, Haraway broadens the original Levinasian call to respond-to to multispecies "relationships of response" (p. 83). Already anticipating Barad's (2007) posthumanist agential realism that regards everything of matter as agency-laden, vibrant, and worldly, Haraway here focuses on what she calls "companion-species worldliness" (2008, p. 88) or the idea that all beings in this world are in the continuous process of becoming-with when encountering one another.

Haraway's posthumanist ecofeminism does not stay within the realm of these companion species-focused micro-encounters, however: *Staying with the Trouble* (2016) is all about exploring affirmative ways to respond to our current climate crisis and other entangled crises. Haraway does so by developing a more macro-oriented—but still materially grounded—vision for what she labels the Chthulucene or her less pessimistic alternative to the (end of the) Anthropocene and Capitalocene, which she interprets as anthropocentric narratives that are simultaneously "too big and too small" (p. 101). The Chthulucene—symbolically aligned with H. P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu, but spelled with an extra 'h' to mark its departure from the latter's racist, genocide-packed stories (Haraway 2016, p. 173)—refers, amongst others, to the Pimoya Cthulhu spider, whose web metaphorically stands for the absence of separa-

tion between human organisms and their environment. It is this ‘webby-ness’ of the Chthulucene that turns it into a Harawayan motto for a more relational world that could arise if humans were to respectfully listen and respond-to the calls of Mother Nature. Such an ecofeminist, and in our opinion, *post*-anthropological, model worthy of the arrival of the Chthulucene promises multispecies flourishing if we manage to reorient our ‘all-too-Human’ former orientations and find a way to *sympoietically* imagine future possibilities within the context of the ongoing and “all-too-ordinary urgencies of onrushing multispecies extinctions, genocides, immiserations, and exterminations” (Haraway 2016, p. 37).

## 5 Concluding musings: The affirmative *post*- in post-anthropology

With this article, we have built the foundations of a feminist new materialisms-embedded philosophical post-anthropology on top of Levinas’ alterity philosophy. Such a post-anthropological project, we hope, is not only relevant for the more-than-human present because of its Harawayan attentivity to ongoing Anthropocene-rooted troubles and crises. Post-anthropology is also meant to be an affirmative enterprise, as noted earlier, working through the legacy of its philosophical anthropological fore-runners to create something for the present (and the future).

The map presented here has latched onto certain ethics-focused constellations that were sketched out by Levinas decades ago, rewriting his still ‘all-too-Human’ philosophical framework. As demonstrated, feminist new materialist thinkers, such as Haraway and Barad, work through and push the tradition of philosophical anthropology to its limits. Radically reconceptualizing concepts, such as the subject, the Other, and the world, they use these notions, and Levinas’ ideas of a radical alterity that demands respect, to create with what we have called a ‘post-anthropology’ worthy of the Chthulucene. Such a post-anthropology moves beyond focusing on the ontological level (Heidegger) and the ethico-ontological level (Levinas), to create a worldly philosophy that forefronts multispecies relationality, and also connects the ontological to the epistemological and the ethico-political similar to Barad’s (2007, p. 90) “ethico-onto-epistem-ology”, as explained earlier. Thinking-with the world namely demands an acknowledgment of how these levels are, in the end, interwoven: one cannot philosophize about one’s situated lifeworld without acknowledging how creating knowledge about the latter also has ethico-political consequences. Thinking-with a world in extreme crisis moreover also asks for philosophical humility: ‘we’, as ‘Humans’, need to take a step back and understand that today’s crises need to be tackled more holistically and relationally because of the globalized capitalist chains of destructive production we have created. Or as Shotwell (2020, n. p.) argues, we do not need to put humans at the center of the current pandemic crisis, but regard this



crisis “in terms of relationships” between beings of matter, material-semiotic praxes, and digital-material infrastructures infused with power, as to construct a posthuman world characterized by “freedom and care” instead of bio-/necropolitical “containment and control”.

## 6 Postscript: The ‘dangers of a single cartography’

This attentivity to the ethico-political present in feminist new materialisms and critical cartographical undertakings, however, does not undo the potential pitfalls attached to post-anthropology and mapmaking: in fact, there are plenty things to watch out for when it comes to the map drawn here. Its cartographers are, after all, geopolitically situated embodied beings, and the same can be said about the disciplines that were mapped out through the perspectives of said cartographers. Although the situatedness of this specific methodology implies a certain open-endedness, it still is a power-infused one: maps do not simply reflect the world.

Designing critical cartographies thus comes with a lot of responsibility, and if the mapmaker’s situatedness is not constantly emphasized, the (multi)perspectivist nature of such an undertaking could get lost. In line with Haraway and Braidotti, we hope to have accentuated the material, lifeworld-related side of such maps as well and shown that critical cartographical projects are more than just deconstructive: cartographies are lively and timely material-discursive screens onto which geopolitical power relations, discourses, and praxes, together with ways of seeing, philosophizing, and world-making, are projected—and with which they are at the same time co-constituted. Uprooting and ‘universalizing’ the critical cartography of the philosophical post-anthropological pandemic project presented here would thus damage the project as a whole. Or, to play with novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s (2009) words, the ‘dangers of a single cartography’ are plentiful.

And the same goes for thinking-with a Chthulucenic world: the crisis landscapes and times that we are currently inhabiting and experiencing are so disorienting, that we could easily be tempted by the ever-lurking philosophical desire to create all-encompassing—and often totalizing and reductive—theories. With some of the affirmative post-anthropological principles presented here, we hope to have avoided at least that, while also accentuating what *not* to do. Continuing to deny the fact that human subjects are as rooted in worldly soil as other beings and are equally vulnerable to the annihilation-bringing mechanisms of extractive capitalism as everything material that surrounds them, is not the way to go. The apocalyptic, destructive side of the Anthropocene needs to be reckoned with, before the vicious capitalist cycle brutally comes to an end, when all the material embodied beings, fertile soil, and earthly riches have been depleted and destroyed.

A post-anthropology for the Chthulucene, in conclusion, could assist with that critical, yet equally affirmative, intervention by dethroning the human subject once and for all, and making her response-able to the caring for the worldly environment she is, in the end, but a part of...

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