

# The (post)human and the (post)pandemic

## Rediscovering our selves

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The Covid-19 pandemic is being experienced individually and collectively as a crisis. Referred to as the ‘disease of stoppage’<sup>1</sup> that brings about a ‘rupture’ of the ‘everyday’<sup>2</sup> and heightened defamiliarization;<sup>3</sup> the pandemic is causing massive social and economic disruption, physical and mental suffering and deaths. And yet, it also has the potential of being generative: the first evidence of a potential silver lining to it being the radical diminution of pollution caused by significantly reduced human traffic leading non-human animals to thrive and venture into urban settings. Images and reports of wild goats and boars roaming urban settings and dolphins enjoying the Bosphorus and getting closer than ever to the city of Istanbul have elicited smiles and wonder at the power of nature to reclaim the world once humans cease to be so active, giving us glimpses of what would follow our species’ extinction. However, for the humans relegated to their private spaces and forced into different variations of quarantine and lockdowns, the pandemic has reduced, rather than expanded, horizons. Examining the meaning of ‘crisis’, ‘emergency’ and ‘catastrophe’ in the context of the pandemic, Rebecca Solnit argues that the pandemic is an instance of sudden large-scale disruption, a point after which we need to reorient ourselves. Solnit explains that disasters teach humans lessons, the first of which being ‘that everything is connected . . . [Disasters are] crash courses in those connections.’ She further argues that ‘Our sense of self generally comes from the world around us, and right now, we are finding another version of who we are.’<sup>4</sup> I contend that the being we are discovering – this other ‘version of who we are’ – is actually the being we have always been but forgotten we were: a radically materially entangled being. The pandemic is allowing us to grasp ourselves as the posthumans we always were, namely the materially entangled beings that we are rediscovering.

In this chapter, I explore the disruptive and generative potentials of the pandemic as experienced by a being that has lived under the humanist delusion of existing as an autonomous exceptional subject: the human being. This is a delusion we have lived under until Covid-19 hit us with its powerful agentic capacity. The biothreat we face, hidden yet deadly – the ‘invisible enemy’ as it has been called by some – has confronted us with the fissure at the heart of the concept ‘human’: we were never human and always were posthuman. I examine how the sudden and fearful confrontation generated by the pandemic with our own bodily entanglements is potentially a generative moment. However, this moment in which we recognize that our embodied and subjective existence is deeply entangled with that of all human and non-human others is first lived in anxiety as we discover our ontological vulnerability. Our relations with others have deeply shifted in the crisis: we fear the Other as invisible – the virus – or the once familiar and non-threatening Other – the potential carrier we cross paths with while out – or even our own body either as healthy but asymptomatic, therefore still a carrier and a threat to others, or as disrupted and incapacitated by a potentially deadly host – our body as sick patient. Yet, as much as we fear the Other, we still long for that Other as our quarantined selves are forced into physical distancing. I argue that the pandemic experience, which is rewriting our imaginations<sup>5</sup> and bringing us back to the body,<sup>6</sup> is an opportunity to be seized: it has the generative power to allow us, rather than ‘returning to normal’, to reinvent ‘normal’ as we embrace our vulnerability and become the posthumans we always were, existing as such in a post-pandemic world.

My view of the posthuman is formed along the lines of posthumanist material feminist theory, which explores the manifold entanglements that compose us and that we participate in. I propose that we are transjective beings, namely beings that are concomitantly transsubjective and transobjective. We exist and unfold through a web of material and subjective relations that both shape us and undo us. We are dynamic assemblages of unfolding relations, experiences, beings and agentic capacities. This assemblage, which materializes as an embodied being, is itself a porous and permeable being, constantly changing materially and subjectively. I use the term ‘transjective’, which blends the material (objective) and the subjective, as I do not see those as separate. We refer to them as if they were of a different nature but, in fact, the material inflects the subjective just as much as the subjective inflects the material. It is impossible to disentangle those relations and webs of affect. Nor is it possible to conceive of beings as autarkic. This is true of all beings, and not merely the human.<sup>7</sup> All beings, humans included, are porous and permeable beings. As Samantha Frost puts it, if there is no traffic

of molecules through our various membranes, there is no life.<sup>8</sup> This is also true of the traffic of ideas, affects, images, etc. While porosity sustains life, it also renders it vulnerable. This is the double-sided coin of porosity: the condition for a being's thriving is its vulnerability. The very openness of beings, which is at the foundation of their thriving, also renders them vulnerable and thereby potentially toxic – as discussed by Stacy Alaimo in the context of environmental exposure to pesticides and pollutants – and potentially infected when encountering a virus such as SARS-CoV-2, whether one develops symptoms and perhaps dies from it or not. One is toxic in two ways: as having various toxins in their assemblage but also toxic to others, in the case of the pandemic, as a carrier of the virus.

It is important to emphasize that our entanglements are manifold. Rosi Braidotti recently captured this by suggesting we are *zoe/geo/techno* framed subjects.<sup>9</sup> Material feminists have offered various terms to capture the entangled and dynamic being of both the human and non-human such as 'mangle', 'transcorporeal being', 'biocultural creature', 'cyborg' and, most recently, the '*zoe/geo/techno* framed subject' discussed by Braidotti.<sup>10</sup> I add to this list the transjective. Importantly, each view not only rejects the humanist notion of subject but, with it, the notion of autonomous agency. Karen Barad, Jane Bennett and Samantha Frost are important resources in reconceptualizing the notion of agency as distributive agency or agentic capacity.<sup>11</sup> Barad explains that agency is 'not an attribute but the ongoing reconfigurings of the world'.<sup>12</sup> These unfold through intra-active relations in which the human is entangled. One cannot single out human agency. Likewise, Bennett argues for what she coins 'distributive agency'. Grounding her proposals in Spinoza's views on affect and bodies and Deleuze and Guattari's notion of assemblage, Bennett claims that agency is distributed in a continuum: the assemblage has agency just as its different members each have agency. The result is an 'effervescence of agency'<sup>13</sup> and 'a swarm of the vitalities at play'.<sup>14</sup> Human intention is one among many forces with which it always congregates, which is why she also speaks of 'congregational assemblages'.<sup>15</sup> In addition to this, I find it useful to consider Frost's distinction between intentionality, as may be found within human agency/consciousness, and the intentless direction she identifies in relation to the biochemical processes that constantly unfold within bodies and necessarily also inflect agency. Thus, we are always dealing with assemblages of agency and intentless direction, and using the phrase 'agentic capacity' allows us to capture either form of impetus that drives dynamic unfolding.

Deflating the notion of human agency and emphasizing that of agentic capacity is key to the posthumanist material feminist enterprise, and is helpful in

understanding the disruptions brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic and the agentic capacity of the virus. Living through this as individual humans, we are suddenly faced with the power of the agentic capacity of a tiny being, the virus. We are also faced with the power of the agentic capacity of its cumulated effect via its myriad entanglements. The repeated admission, on the part of multiple scientists trying to understand the mechanics of the virus and its spread, that we do not understand exactly how transmission occurs or what kind of havoc the virus can cause in a human body has caused major anxiety and forced us to adopt the humility not characteristic of the subject of humanism. We must be humble about our capacity to understand a novel virus that does not behave like the ones we know. We must be humble about the power of our human agency to defeat the virus.<sup>16</sup> We must be humble about the power of our own human agency in the face of the fantastic power this tiny being's agentic capacity holds. Humility is the name of the game when one realizes fully how deeply entangled one's being is and thereby how vulnerable one is.

There is something reassuring in clinging to a humanist notion of self. The autonomous rational subject that can orient its action through a simple operation of its will and sometimes in utter disregard of one's body, circumstances, others and world is one that we can either trust or not. Moral education trains that autonomous humanist subject to make the right decisions, among which not harming others is primary. The notion of the posthuman as radically entangled does not do away with moral responsibility entirely. But this notion makes room for the agentic capacity of a myriad of beings and factors that make the posthumanist subject through its multiple entanglements, porosity and seepage. Political theorists have provided various origin stories for human societies. Social contract theories often rest on pessimistic views of human nature whereby a contract needs to be put in place to control natural human violence or the propensity of humans to do wrongful things. I do not want to debate whether these views are right or wrong. The fact of the matter is, however, that the socialized humans we now are operate on trust. When I board a bus, I trust the driver will not drive us off a cliff. When I use my new appliance, I trust the installer did their job right. When I consult a health-care professional, I trust they take my well-being seriously. When I meet someone new, I expect they are well intentioned. It is precisely because trust is at the foundation of our interactions with others that we are so surprised, shocked and hurt when others fail to meet our expectations, which they, unfortunately, sometimes do. This all rides on the humanist delusion of an autonomous wilful subject whose action is guided by their good intentions. In the case of Covid-19, trust has been shaken

and needs to be rebuilt. The pandemic has shown us that we cannot trust others and even ourselves even if we are all fully well intentioned. This is because we are abruptly discovering the myriad entanglements of beings all exercising their agentic capacity.

At all times we are confronted with various others. But this new Other, the virus, is particularly threatening. Not only does it affect human bodies in ways that other viruses have not – and in ways we are still far from fully understanding – but it is also having a long-term impact on survivors that we are only beginning to glimpse. This virus is novel not only in the way in which it affects bodies but also in the way it does not. The asymptotism noted in many carriers has made the management of the pandemic particularly difficult. It has also heightened our sense of threat and distrust of other individuals we meet who look healthy but might be a threat to us. The common cold or flu, or even recent more severe viruses like SARS, are much easier to handle since carriers display symptoms. This also allows us to identify who may be a threat and who may not be. But with Covid-19, there is a long list of very different symptoms and, if one is a carrier, one can suffer from one or many, or even none at all. Some are the same as for other illnesses including seasonal allergies, indigestion or the common cold. How does one trust one's own body's signals or even lack thereof? How does one trust another human body we encounter or interact with given they may pass as healthy and non-threatening but in fact may render us sick? Is it indeed safe to enter into a social circle, which was encouraged by some authorities to palliate the mental health effects quarantines were having on individuals?

The Canadian province of Ontario's guidelines put forward at the beginning of June 2020 encouraged individuals to form social circles, allowing them to eliminate physical distancing for a limited number of persons. Each individual was to belong to one circle only, the members of the circle had to always be the same and, within it, physical contact such as hugs were permitted. At the same time, any member of a social circle could engage in social gatherings provided those were limited to ten people and a physical distance of two metres was maintained between members of the group. One could navigate and participate in many different gatherings but not in more than one circle.<sup>17</sup> If this reads a little confusing it is because it was, and most of the population had a hard time interpreting the guidelines or simply did not trust that these measures would suffice in containing the spread. In addition to those, recommendations for mask wearing were put forward to be followed by mandatory indoor mask-wearing measures adopted by municipalities and regional governments.

I do not want to discuss in detail the frenzy that erupted around recommendations or implementations of mandatory mask wearing. Pretty disgraceful incidents of various individuals protesting against this measure or simply refusing to obey mandatory mask-wearing policies have flooded traditional and social media. The issue has become polarized and politicized to an unimaginable degree in the United States where any kind of social behaviour tends to be interpreted as an expression of political partisanship of one brand or another. Canada has seen its own instances of resistance and the formulation of various conspiracy theories equating mask wearing to sheepishness and willingness to be controlled by the dark forces trying to enslave individuals, whatever those might be.<sup>18</sup> That a protective device – be it a homemade simple fabric mask, a surgical mask, or even an N-95 mask – would trigger such passions is quite surprising especially because the main purpose of mask wearing is the protection of self and of others. It is a gesture of care.<sup>19</sup> Resisting it in the way we have witnessed in North America certainly appears unreasonable to the many Asian societies in which mask wearing is very common.

I am more interested in mask wearing insofar as it inflects our relations to others through the message this measure conveys. If I wear a mask when in public, I am not only well intentioned, but I am also communicating that I can be trusted. Wearing a mask flags that I have understood that I may be a threat to others without knowing it. I am doing my best to curb that threat and indicate that to others. Likewise, when I encounter others who wear masks, I perceive a sense of awareness of the risks they might pose to me and others. Those others can be trusted again just like I can be when I wear a mask. Now, the mask does not eliminate the threat, and, if one is a carrier, one may still transmit the virus if one does not also practice proper hygiene such as hand washing and sanitizing and wearing the mask in the appropriate manner without touching it or pulling it under one's nose or chin. Wearing a mask is also a protective gesture for oneself. One understands that being in the presence of others for such mundane activities like grocery shopping can expose oneself to that invisible threat. Wearing a mask is a measure one can take to curb the entanglement of which one is a part and limit the possibility of being infected.<sup>20</sup> Mask wearing is an acknowledgement of one's being as entangled in these relations and the recognition of our individual and collective vulnerabilities as materially entangled beings.<sup>21</sup>

From this, it would be easy or tempting to think that anti-maskers are just ill-intentioned people who refuse to protect others or themselves or that they just don't care. I want to venture that they are, most of them, well-intentioned individuals, but that they have failed to understand themselves as entangled

beings. In most cases, this is due to a misunderstanding or even mistrust in science and data that points to the contrary. They see themselves as the autonomous subject of humanism whose action is the outcome of their intentional decision-making. They do not recognize that they are parts of material entanglements that make them potential transmitters against their will. Likewise, and in a much less extreme form, those neighbours, friends or family members who make us shake our heads in disbelief because they are engaging in risky behaviour – having friends over, fetching the newspaper every morning at the corner store as usual or standing too close to you if you see them on the street and stop to chat – these are all well-intentioned folks who sincerely believe they are taking all due precautions and doing the right thing. Theirs is a failure to recognize the extent of our entanglement and not an expression of ill will.

The pandemic has taught us that the body we are is an unknown. The body we thought we knew shows itself to be quite other than what we conceived. We have suddenly and forcefully learned about the permeability of our bodies and how we always exist as an assemblage of beings. My body hosts millions of organisms. It is itself a bundle of atoms, molecules and membranes that function together and exist in an environment which does not merely surround it but also penetrates it. Very efficient marketers have convinced us for years that foreign bodies such as probiotics are good for our guts and that we should support our microbiome by ingesting products that contain those healthy bodies. This idea has been embraced even if individuals continued to have a somewhat fuzzy understanding of their body's innerworkings. Over the years, we have also understood that viruses and some bacteria can be bad for us as well as some allergens but typically our body alerts us when such damaging bodies enter our own. The alert can be rather benign, such as sniffles, headache, mild coughing or an itchy throat or mouth, but it can also be sudden and violent such as vomiting, intense fever and anaphylactic reaction. Our understanding of the fact that our body can host healthy or damaging bodies has come along with an understanding that our body will somehow let us know what is going on: we will feel healthy or sick, depending on the bodies hosted. Covid-19 threw this off completely. Add to that the fact that many people have experienced all kinds of psychosomatic symptoms from chest pains to extreme fatigue caused by the anxiety generated by the disruption brought about by the pandemic and the general sense of threat and uncertainty that came with it. Thus, the body signals could be very misleading.

I had the following experience over the summer. I had an itchy throat. My skin temperature was high, but I had no fever. I had a headache (a rare occurrence

for me). I had some chills and muscle aches. I thought: 'Must be Covid-19!' Or was it seasonal allergies and the intense yard cleaning session from the previous day? I felt great and ready to run 10 km. I thought: 'I must be virus free if this is the case.' But I could have been asymptomatic. I threw myself into the run. The thought was: 'If I make it, I must be OK.' I did make it and, no, I was not sick. Going out for a run to prove to myself that I was OK is a strategy I reverted to too many times to count, although that one time when I had these 'symptoms,' I did go and get tested the next day to ensure I was clear.

I run in a residential area to avoid the crowded path and multiple close encounters with other humans. The streets are not busy, and I can run on them by the sidewalk, keeping a distance from those others that may be out for a walk. If I am out for a walk, I use the sidewalk and can step on the street to avoid another walker coming my way. This has been my strategy to keep active with walks and runs while respecting physical distancing, but the experience is uncanny. Prior to the pandemic, I did not have to think about my moving in the world in this way. Encountering an Other did not involve strategizing to avoid being close to them. The inner narrative goes: 'The other human coming toward me looks well-intentioned enough but are they an unaware carrier? I went grocery shopping yesterday. Might I have been infected despite taking all precautions? I have to protect the Other just as much as I have to protect myself.' Trust is broken. The Other and I are two well-intentioned bodies moving about and no longer trusting that the Other is not a threat. This lack of trust is perceptible in the body language, furtive eye contact and hesitations as to who will step off the sidewalk so we can avoid each other. A behaviour unimaginable not too long ago. My first few outings, I would half-jokingly refer to potential other humans to be encountered as zombies. It was and still is not funny.

Existential and phenomenological philosophies have explored the problem of the Other and how the subject relates to the Other it encounters. I relate to the Other in my encounters with them in the world. I encounter self-contained conscious bodies and enter an intersubjective relation in which I am acknowledged as an Other consciousness while acknowledging the other as an embodied consciousness. That relation can be positive and enhance one's existential and phenomenological experiences or it can be fraught with ambiguity. Worst, it can also be hellish, as famously theorized by Jean-Paul Sartre in his early philosophy. In his view, rather than acknowledging me as a free consciousness, the Other objectifies me in their own appropriation of the world and this experience is lived as conflictual. 'Hell is other people!' is a claim Garcin makes in the play *No Exit*. They are such because they make him into a coward; they determine that

the essence of his being is to have been a coward. As a free subjectivity, Garcin experiences this objectification and essentialization of his being in a negative way. As interesting as they might be, the existentialist/phenomenological analyses of the relation to the Other tend to focus on the intersubjective realm and how one subjectively experiences being in the presence of others. While thinkers like Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty provided key insights on embodiment and how the body one is matters in shaping one's subjective experiences, the focus still remained on the latter.<sup>22</sup> As such, they fail to capture the extent to which our material entanglements matter just as much, if not more, than our subjective ones. Heirs of humanist thinking, they still think in dualist terms and privilege the mind over the body. For posthumanist material feminist thinking, hell is Other people – or rather Other beings are – and for rather different reasons. Our materially entangled beings are fundamentally vulnerable, and our relations may enhance our thriving or radically impede it.

In *The Ecological Thought*, Timothy Morton puts forward the notion of the 'strange stranger'. He explains: 'The strange stranger is not just the "other" – the "self" is this other. Since there is no (solid, lasting, independent, single) self, we are the strange stranger: "I is another".'<sup>23</sup> Morton speaks of all creatures as monsters, 'they are chimeras, made from pieces of other creatures. The strange stranger is strange to herself, or himself, or itself'.<sup>24</sup> To experience oneself as strange is what the pandemic has afforded us. It has shed light on our material entanglements, on ourselves as porous assemblages, on our limited and entangled agentic capacity. Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos's description, grounded in a Spinozist stance, focuses on the collective in an evocative manner. He says, 'We are all collective bodies, with histories and futures, bacteria and mites, mobile phones and prostheses, moving along like clouds of affects, emanating presence and attachments, fears and desires. . . . We are all collective bodies leading collective lives with other collective bodies.'<sup>25</sup> This means, for him, that in pandemic times, we must embrace an ethics of withdrawal. 'Covid demands an ethics of self-positioning (physically and at the same time ethically) in relation to other bodies, of removing ourselves from the collectivity that we might harm despite our best intentions, of thinking beyond the edge of our skin.' Or, I would add, through our skin as porous membrane. This amounts to the realization of the manifold entanglements I have been speaking about and the gestures we can make to communicate that we understand our entangled nature and seek to engage with others in a way that acknowledges the threat we or they may pose. As Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos further claims, 'The Virocene, a taste of which we have been having with the various viruses of the past few years,

throws into relief the ultimate continuum amongst the various bodies, whether this continuum is desired or undesired.<sup>26</sup>

As materially entangled beings, we are also entangled with various spatio-temporal affects. This leads me to question: Is there a season better than another to elicit a pandemic response in the mode of an ethics of withdrawal? Are there times – and locations – better suited for retreating to ourselves, in our private indoor spaces? Over the summer, we have complained that people were taking fewer and fewer precautions. The pandemic hit North America at the tail end of winter. Spring was cool and slow to onset. Three months into physical distancing and various orders of isolation, quarantine-fatigue set in. At the same time, spring bloomed, followed by a hot jump into summer. Nature was lush and life was bursting. How could the world be ending when flowers grow, bushes hustle and birds and critters multiply? This was our affective experience of the world; one we are familiar with and long for after cold winters. Spring is usually the time we drop multilayered clothing and expose our skins to the elements. Spring fever is an embrace of the possibility of exposing oneself. I – along with many others, I presume – experienced this spring/summer with a major cognitive dissonance. Nature was giving us every visible signal that things are good, and life continues. Moreover, with humans isolating and working from home, nature has been even more prolific thanks to reduced pollution levels and empty streets. Non-human animals have ventured into urban spaces, making themselves more visible. All of these signals were going against the message we were receiving via our news feeds that we were faced with a biothreat. The bios we were encountering – or more properly *zoe*, life itself<sup>27</sup> – gave every indication of thriving. It was difficult to reconcile this affect with the need to continue to withdraw. The affective charge was such that it was difficult to maintain the heightened level of caution practised until then and tempting to revert to our comforting humanist delusion.

There are great disparities in the ways in which the pandemic is experienced across the world. I acknowledge that I am writing and thinking about it from a position of privilege as a homeowner who had the space and resources to follow recommendations and guidelines. With that said, the affective experience as it relates to the pandemic is worth pondering. Moving from one country to another, as I had to while working on this paper, made me experience yet another dissonance in how to relate to the threat posed by the virus. Moving from Canada to Finland was the equivalent of time travelling, and not just because of time zones (Finland is ‘ahead’ of Southern Ontario by seven hours). But for a Canadian who was slowly moving through the phases of reopening after a few months of physical/social distancing and experiencing public debates

at home over mask wearing and its efficacy – debates triggered by a proliferation of mandatory mask-wearing measures put in place by local and regional governments and the resistance put forward by various anti-maskers and conspiracists<sup>28</sup> – arriving in Finland generated a dissonance. This was magnified by the clash of two experiences. Travelling from Toronto to Helsinki via Paris meant a total of twenty hours of travel with a mask on and in the company of others who were all wearing masks, with some airport and flight staff also wearing gloves. This was the longest I wore a mask ever; my previous experiences having been limited to contexts such as grocery shopping or medical appointments. The masked travel experience reinforced the sense of risk and the sense of the virulence of the pandemic and the threat posed by the virus which any of these others I was travelling with could be carrying (I knew I was not a carrier since I tested negative right before travelling). However, the minute I was riding the taxi from the Helsinki airport to my apartment, masks disappeared. The driver was not wearing one (nor were any of his colleagues at the taxi station at the airport). I only spotted one cyclist with a mask even though there were many pedestrians and other cyclists, as well as motorists. Very few people wear masks and even on public transportation not everyone does. Some measures are still in place. One can see traces such as the plexiglass panes at cash registers in stores and the now ubiquitous hand sanitizer dispensers. The University of Helsinki has pushed back resuming normal operations due to a resurgence of cases in the country (and mostly in the region of Helsinki), which might be the sign of the looming second wave, but otherwise everything looks very normal. For a Canadian, propelled within twenty-four hours from a context in which measures are still very strict because Canada is still dealing with a strong first wave, to a context in which the first wave is behind, was grounds for yet another sudden shift in the affective fabric of my being. One thing this virus has taught us is that things can change very quickly, and so it is quite possible that by the time this chapter is in print another set of experiences will have taken place.<sup>29</sup> But what I want to reflect on here is how the affective fabric of existence is altered for any single individual experiencing the pandemic as a posthuman subject done and undone by its affective relations. To exist in a world where masks are worn, restrictions are in place and visible and the news is saturated with numbers of cases and deaths is completely different from moving about in a world where those seem to have disappeared. Granted my lack of exposure to Finnish news contributes to that. My news feeds are mostly populated by news from Canada and North America, with the odd item about Europe and the world, with regards to Covid-19. Relocating, and its affective fabric, can quickly give the false sense that one

has either moved back in time to a pre-pandemic world or forward in time to a post-pandemic world. In either case, one need not worry. This, as mentioned, is a false sense of safety, of a return to 'normal' in which one ignores one's multiple entanglements and the vulnerability and risks that come with them. These are shifts that beings come to negotiate as they go about through the world as the materially entangled beings they are.

There is no doubt that the Covid-19 pandemic has caused massive manifold disruption likely to continue to unfold for a long while. We have come to fear the Other – the virus, our body as potential carrier, the Other human who might be a carrier – and yet we have also come to long for the Other as we have been forced to isolate. A recurring theme in discussions about the experience of the pandemic was the longing for a return to normal, all the while acknowledging that this may be impossible or even undesirable. Indeed, many have pointed out that the 'normal' was problematic in many ways and the pandemic provided us with a magnifying lens to recognize those problems as underprivileged individuals suffering much greater hardship than others. This being the case, a return to normal would mean a return to a world in which class, race, geographical location, etc. determine one's thriving. This is not acceptable. This is yet another way in which the pandemic experience has taught us to recognize our entanglements. What happens at the other end of the world is happening to me. Having to interiorize the idea that we too are vulnerable beings, that a story of deadly disease is not only about others<sup>30</sup> – which is how North Americans and Europeans typically think about epidemics such as Ebola, Zika or dengue – comes as a shock.

As Molly Andrews argues, we are now faced with the challenge of reconstructing the Other and the added challenge of seeing them and ourselves as vulnerable.<sup>31</sup> This involves reimagining who we are, as argued by Solnit.<sup>32</sup> The shock of the pandemic has brought about a high degree of defamiliarization, one to which we have responded in various ways. But, as Alberto Godioli argues, this provides us with an occasion to critically reflect on 'normality', on those things we took for granted and no longer can.<sup>33</sup> While this opens up a vast array of questions and potential answers, I would offer, as a means to conclude my reflections on the pandemic and how we have discovered ourselves, that 'normal' is what we make it. We have now understood that the autonomous exceptional subject of humanism was a delusion and that we in fact are and always were posthuman, namely radically materially entangled, open to all the Other beings and the world upon whom we depend for our thriving but through whom we are also vulnerable. This recognition shatters how we have conceived of ourselves

and of others, and we need to rebuild a trustful relation that rests upon the acceptance and active embrace of our vulnerability. This is no easy task, but one that can open up brighter future

## Notes

- 1 Andreas Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, 'Covid: The Ethical Disease', *Critical Legal Thinking*, 13 March 2020 (<https://criticallegalthinking.com/2020/03/13/covid-the-ethical-disease/> accessed 11 May 2020).
- 2 Molly Andrews, 'The COVID-19 Pandemic and the Failure of Narrative Imagination', *European NetIAS Lecture*, 24 June 2020 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GW7J9VjXAe0> accessed 22 August 2020).
- 3 Alberto Godioli, 'Stranger Things: Defamiliarization in the Time of COVID-19' Cultures of the Crisis series, 8 May 2020 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wTQmKJcKnpo> accessed 22 August 2020).
- 4 Rebecca Solnit, "'The impossible has already happened": what coronavirus can teach us about hope', *The Guardian*, 7 April 2020.
- 5 Kim Stanley Robinson, 'The Coronavirus is Rewriting our Imaginations', *The New Yorker*, 1 May 2020 (<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/annals-of-inquiry/the-coronavirus-and-our-future> accessed 5 May 2020).
- 6 Achille Mbembe, 'The Universal Right to Breathe', *In the Moment*, 13 April 2020 (<https://critinq.wordpress.com/2020/04/13/the-universal-right-to-breathe/> accessed 5 May 2020).
- 7 This also allows me to retain a space for the experience of consciousness and subjectivity while displacing it from the center of human existence and radically entangling it in its manifold relations. Thereby, a space, albeit minimal, is provided for human agency and responsibility. This has been a problem faced by material feminists: the common critique leveled against their position is that their emphasis on materiality evacuates a notion of the subject to whom we could ascribe ethical and political responsibility. My claim, instead, is that it is still possible – and necessary – to ascribe such responsibility to the human all the while recognizing that human agency is always and ever entangled materially and subjectively and thus much less potent than the history of philosophy has wanted it to be.
- 8 Samantha Frost, *Biocultural Creatures. Toward a New Theory of the Human* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016), 54–5.
- 9 See Rosi Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge* (Cambridge: Polity, 2019). I have started to delineate the contours of posthuman vulnerability in a previous piece (See Christine Daigle 'Vulner – abilité posthumaine', *Con Texte. Notes and Inquiries. An Interdisciplinary Journal About Text*, Special Issue on 'Posthumanism: Current State

- and Future Research', 2, no. 2 (2018): 9–13). In an article co-authored with Ilaria Santoemma, I explore the different aspects of posthuman vulnerability, working with the frame proposed by Braidotti. See in preparation.
- 10 For the concept of 'mangle', see Susan Hekman, *The Feminine Subject* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014); the concept of 'transcorporeal being', see Stacy Alaimo, *Exposed. Environmental Politics and Pleasures in Posthuman Times* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2016); the concept of 'biocultural creature', see Samantha Frost, *Biocultural Creatures. Toward a New Theory of the Human* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016); and the concept of the 'cyborg', see Donna Haraway, 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century', in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991): 149–81.
  - 11 See Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter. A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); and Samantha Frost, *Biocultural Creatures. Toward a New Theory of the Human* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016).
  - 12 Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 141.
  - 13 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 29.
  - 14 Ibid., 32.
  - 15 Ibid., 33.
  - 16 The war language adopted to speak of the virus in the pandemic is problematic and using phrases such as 'defeating the virus' or 'the invisible enemy' which I used earlier is common but posits the human as way more powerful than it actually is.
  - 17 One can consult the guidelines here: <https://www.ontario.ca/page/create-social-circle-during-covid-19>. These have been updated since then but the population continues to complain about the lack of clarity.
  - 18 The rise to prominence that conspiracy theories of all kinds have gained, and the speed at which they are spreading, is quite alarming. I do not claim to know the psychology behind it and what attracts certain individuals to them. But I would claim that faced with the sudden realization that one is not the powerful agent one thought oneself to be, this might be a way to try and reclaim that agency rather than recognize one's own vulnerability. But it would require a whole study to ground my claim.
  - 19 This gesture of care is part of an ethics of withdrawal as proposed by Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos (see his 'Covid: The Ethical Disease', *Critical Legal Thinking*, March 13, 2020 (<https://criticallegalthinking.com/2020/03/13/covid-the-ethical-disease/> accessed May 11, 2020). More on this later.
  - 20 It has been interesting to see that rates of infection to other viruses such as the flu have diminished significantly in those countries where mask wearing has been

widely adopted. See <https://www.wsj.com/articles/covid-19-measures-have-all-but-wiped-out-the-flu-in-the-southern-hemisphere-11595440682>.

- 21 It should be noted that frontline workers such as hospital personnel, grocery store clerks and public transit operators were very keenly made aware of their own vulnerability when their livelihood was tied to exposing themselves to threat. They did not have the luxury of quarantining and working from home. That many did not have access to the protective gear they needed to carry on their tasks pointed to a fundamental flaw in our social fabric: their work is deemed essential, but their lives are not.
- 22 In an article on Beauvoir as precursor of posthumanism, I have argued that her unprecedented attention to biology, the body, sex and gender, and situation opens the way for the development of posthumanist material feminist views and a rejection of the humanist subject. See Daigle 2020.
- 23 Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2010), 87. The latter is taken from Arthur Rimbaud's letter to Georges Izambard from 13 May 1871 in which he says: 'C'est faux de dire: Je pense: On devrait dire: On me pense. – Pardon du jeu de mots. – Je est un autre' (Arthur Rimbaud, *Complete Works, Selected Letters. A Bilingual Edition*, Trans. Wallace Fowlie (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 370). The last sentence is translated as 'I is someone else' (Ibid., 371), but it would be more precise to translate as 'I is an other', to which Morton comes close here.
- 24 Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 66.
- 25 Andreas Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, 'Covid: the ethical disease', *Critical Legal Thinking*, 13 March 2020 (<https://criticallegalthinking.com/2020/03/13/covid-the-ethical-disease/> accessed 11 May 2020).
- 26 Andreas Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, 'Covid: the ethical disease', *Critical Legal Thinking*, 13 March 2020 (<https://criticallegalthinking.com/2020/03/13/covid-the-ethical-disease/> accessed May 11, 2020). In the midst of all the discussions occurring around the term 'Anthropocene' which has been chosen to refer to our new geological epoch and is meant to be evocative of the hubristic and damaging agentic capacity exercised by humans over centuries, the proposed 'virocene' shifts things around in a provocative way. What if indeed the agentic capacity of a virus such as SARS-CoV-2 far exceeded that of humans, individually and collectively, and contributed to shape our existence and force us to be more humble in our approach to other beings?
- 27 For a discussion of zoe and a distinction with bios see Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013) and *Posthuman Knowledge* (Cambridge: Polity, 2019).
- 28 At the time of writing this piece, the provincial government was still only recommending that individuals wear masks.

- 29 Indeed, the recent surge in cases in Finland, albeit very small compared to other countries, is leading authorities to reinstate border restrictions with some countries with whom they had reopened earlier in the summer as well as issue strong recommendations for mask wearing supported by distribution of free masks to those in need and tax deduction for the purchase of masks for others. To support this recommendation, the national railway company adorned the famous stonemason sculptures of the Helsinki train station with masks (<https://www.helsinkitimes.fi/finland/news-in-brief/17968-in-pictures-helsinki-railway-station-gets-a-mask-friendly-makeover.html>).
- 30 Molly Andrews, 'The COVID-19 pandemic and the failure of narrative imagination' European NetIAS Lecture, 24 June 2020. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GW7J9VjXAe0> accessed 22 August 2020).
- 31 Molly Andrews, 'The COVID-19 pandemic and the failure of narrative imagination' European NetIAS Lecture, 24 June 2020. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GW7J9VjXAe0> accessed 22 August 2020).
- 32 Rebecca Solnit, "'The Impossible Has Already Happened': What Coronavirus Can Teach Us About Hope", *The Guardian*, 7 April 2020.
- 33 Alberto Godioli, 'Stranger Things: Defamiliarization in the Time of COVID-19' Cultures of the Crisis series, 8 May 2020 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wTQmKJcKnpo> accessed 22 August 2020).